

UNDERSTANDING GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE

by

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ABSTRACT

Gay/Straight Alliances aimed at providing sexual minority youth and their allies with support, social events, and activism and education opportunities have proliferated in high schools in the United States over the past two decades. This study employs a qualitative, grounded theory approach to examine how sexual minority youth and their allies navigate gender, sexuality, and social movement participation. A year and a half of observation and 16 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with Gay/Straight Alliance members in a high school setting in the southeastern United States. The study reveals that, through the lens of frame analysis, the G/SA is analogous to larger and more organized social movement organizations. The findings also suggest members often struggle and engage with issues surrounding sexuality, including its origins, coming out as a process, and judgments and evaluations surrounding sex and desire. Additionally, the findings address elements of gender conformity and non-conformity.

Keywords: gay/straight alliance, sexual minority, adolescents, gay, lesbian, gender, frame analysis, social movements

Science! true daughter of Old Time thou art!

Who alterest all things with thy peering eyes.

Edgar Allan Poe, Sonnet - To Science

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LIST OF ACRONYMS / ABBREVIATIONS

DoS	Day of Silence
G/SA	Gay/Straight Alliance
GLBSU	Gay Lesbian Bisexual Student Union
GLSEN	Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
SMO	Social Movement Organization

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

*Teenagership: your teenage years, since a term like 'Adulthood' or 'Childhood' doesn't exist for this age range.
From <http://www.urbandictionary.com>*

Adolescence, the period in the human life cycle roughly corresponding to the teenage years, occupies a liminal space in between childhood and full adulthood. Not yet allowed the freedoms conferred upon those who have reached the age of majority, yet expected to show increasing maturity in behavior, the adolescent operates in a social milieu rife with contradictory messages. Furthermore, we lack an analogous term that names the adolescent similar to the labels that can be claimed by children and adults (i.e. childhood, adulthood). Despite being stuck in a transitory life stage and the at times confusing expectations placed upon them by adults, teenagers participate and interact inside of a unique culture that takes the dominant adult culture and at times turns its head (Cosaro and Eder 1990).

An essential part of the adolescent experience is learning how to navigate the processes involved in the various situated social identities individuals must occupy simultaneously. Teenagers must learn to enact gendered, raced, and classed performances that are successfully interpreted by others and allow them to maintain membership in specific social categories (e.g., middle-class, Latina, female). While gender, race, and class have long been considered the triumvirate of social statuses that must be considered in social theory and analysis, gender scholars have long recognized that gendered performances are constructed intentionally (or

sometimes unintentionally) to implicate the individual as homosexual or heterosexual, and hence gender, sex, and sexuality are frequently inextricably tangled (West and Zimmerman 1987).

Despite sociological understandings of the connection between sexuality and gender, sexuality in adolescence has often been considered by researchers only as a perilous endeavor abundant with deleterious consequences (Raymond 1994; Tolman 2006). Fortunately, adolescent sexual identity and sexuality is enjoying an increase in attention and serious treatment by scholars examining the lived experiences of social actors located in various contexts (e.g., Pascoe 2007; Payne 2010).

As homosexuality has become more visible in our culture, the acknowledgment that sexual minority youth must contend with navigating their sexual identities within a dominant culture that stigmatizes this aspect of their identity has gained traction (Raymond 1994). The increased visibility of sexual minority adolescents has no doubt been influenced by the emergence of Gay/Straight Alliances (G/SAs) that have proliferated in U.S. schools over the past two decades. These clubs serve as a site for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and questioning youth to give and receive support from each other and their straight allies and promote education and activism surrounding sexual minority “rights.”

The G/SA club is a fertile yet understudied environment in which to revisit questions that have previously been asked in research on the adolescent experience, as well as opening the possibility for exploring aspects of adolescence that have gone largely ignored. For example, what are the obstacles and barriers, if any, that impede the G/SA members in fulfilling their club's mission? How do adolescents participating in a club focused on supporting sexual minority youth define, understand, and judge sexuality and sexual behavior? In what ways does

the coming out process impact the social and emotional health of G/SA members? How do G/SA members conform to and/or resist normative judgments of femininity and masculinity? In order to investigate these aspects of G/SA members' lived experiences, this study employs a qualitative, grounded theory approach while integrating both my symbolic interactionist and feminist perspectives into the analysis. However, before delving into my own research agenda, methods, and applicable theoretical frameworks, an examination of what is currently known about adolescents in the U.S. is in order.

Kids in the Hall: Public High Schools in the United States

An essential and obvious first step in studying adolescents is finding them. This process is simplified in large part by compulsory schooling and the public education system in the United States. The public high school setting provides an ideal place for accessing a large number of older adolescents of varying social backgrounds. According the U.S. Department of Education (2011), enrollment in U.S. public schools reached 49.3 million during the 2008-09 school year. Further, the number of students enrolling in the U.S. public school system is increasing; enrollment is projected to increase to 52.7 million by 2020-21. Comparatively, only around 10 percent of all elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in a private school setting. The southern United States has had the highest proportion of public school enrollment since the early seventies and this trend is expected to continue through 2021. A breakdown of students enrolled in the public school system reveals that 15 million are currently attending high school (grades 9-12).

As the racial and ethnic make-up of the United States as a whole has shifted, the racial and ethnic make-up of the population of students in public schools has reflected these changes. The U.S. Department of Education (2011) reports that as of 2009, 55 percent of public school students were white (non-Hispanic), 15 percent were black (non-Hispanic), 22 percent identified as Hispanic, and an additional 8 percent fell into the “other” category (Asian, Hawaiian, Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, American Indian, or two or more races). In comparison, in 1972 only 22 percent of the public school population was a racial or ethnic minority. This increase in minority students has primarily been brought about by the increase in Latino(a) students enrolling in U.S. public schools.

In addition to the number of students enrolled, and the racial and ethnic make-up of the student body, the size of the schools themselves are another factor that can influence the high school environment. Moderate sized high schools (600-899 students) are considered to be the optimal environment for providing the best academic and social contexts (U.S. Department of Education 2003). Despite this finding, many U.S. high schools maintain enrollments outside the recommended size range. Data available from the 1999-2000 school year show that the distributions of small, moderate, and large sized schools were not evenly distributed across locations. Central city and urban fringe/large town schools tended to have a high percentage of schools with 900 or more students (44 percent and 37 percent respectively). Further, 51 percent of schools located in small towns fell into the category representing schools with less than 300 students. Additionally, the U.S Department of Education (2003) reports that there is a positive relationship between the size of the school and the tendency of teachers to report problems such

as tardiness, apathy, dropping out, absenteeism, and drug use. Teachers at larger schools were more likely to report the above as serious problems within their schools.

Students' perceptions of their school's social and learning environment are another important factor to consider in examining the high school context. In 2002, the Department of Education (2005) surveyed 10th graders on their school experiences and learning environment. The findings from the study revealed that the large majority of high school students surveyed felt that their instructors praised their efforts in regard to academics, and did not feel "put down" by their instructors. However, a sizable percentage (53%) also reported that students in their school got away with misbehaving. When these responses were broken down further, it was revealed that students from high-minority schools and low -minority schools did not differ significantly in their responses.

The Department of Education (2005) survey also asked students whether disruptions by other students interfered with their learning. Overall, 53 percent reported that disruptions by others did not interfere with their learning. Interestingly, students in low-minority schools were less likely to report that student disruptions interfered with their learning (44 percent) than were students in high-minority schools. Moreover, the vast majority of students in both types of schools reported that students made friends with students of other racial or ethnic groups and did not feel "put down" by other students. However, students from high-minority schools more often responded that fights occurred between different racial and ethnic groups than did students from low-minority schools.

The Department of Education (2005) report on student perceptions of school climate did not include any data comparing girls' and boys' responses nor on the experiences of sexual

minority identified youth. The omission of sexual minority youth's perceptions of their school climate is striking given that the school experiences of this population have been found by advocacy groups, such as the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Education Network (GLSEN), to contain extremely high levels of harassment at school. A school climate study conducted by GLSEN found 9 out of 10 LGBT students were victimized by sexual orientation based bullying in 2009 (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz 2010).

Teen Code: Adolescent Peer Culture

Early theories of development centered on behaviorist assumptions and viewed children as having largely inactive participation in their own development (Corsaro 2005). Typical of these approaches is social learning theory which posits that children become socialized into society by imitating adults and gravitating toward behaviors that are rewarded by influential others (e.g. parents) (Howard and Hollander 1997). More recently, and in line with the interactionist approach, Corsaro (2005) has proposed a model of peer culture among children and adolescents that locates peer culture as an integral part of the socialization process. According to Corsaro (2005), children and adolescents take adult practices and directives and adapt them in ways that fit into their own peer culture. Sometimes practices or directives are accepted, sometimes resisted, and other times changed into something else. In this approach, children and adolescents are seen as active agents in their socialization not mere cultural dopes. A small body of research has begun to examine the ways in which children and adolescents develop a peer culture (Corsaro and Eder 1990; Voss 1997; Corsaro and Nelson 2003; Hadley 2003).

Much of the current social psychological research on gender and adolescence examines the meaning adolescents assign to their relationships and social circumstances and how they incorporate them into their lives. This research follows the peer cultures approach in that it views children and adolescents' social worlds as worthy areas of study.

Steinberg (2006) has noted that youth culture is produced through the ways young adults and adolescents negotiate the information and media available to them inside the pre-existing ideological principles held by society. Moreover, as youth find increasing degrees of agency in regards to creating their own culture, adults in positions of authority often react negatively to this agency as a response to the erosion of the adolescent's childhood innocence. Often, the result of this conflict is that many youth create subcultures that are at direct odds with the expectations for behavior held by parents, educators, etc. However, Goldstein (2006) notes that assuming "that youth culture is deviant or hostile without really exploring how, why and where it comes about prevents teachers and others who work with young people from engaging in serious exploration of how youth culture challenges and sustains larger cultural norms and shapes young people's identities" (p. 3).

Youth culture, rather than being seen as one homogenous culture that all youth participate in, is more aptly viewed as a series of subcultures, or cliques, as they are often referred to in high schools. Hebdige (1979) noted members of various subcultures commonly adopt elements such as fashion and music to symbolize their membership in the subculture. Hebdige's assertion applies especially well to youth subcultures. As Goldstein (2006) commented, the media, music, and fashion simultaneously define youth culture and are defined by it. Different types of youth subcultures abound in high schools. For example, Steinberg, Parmar, and Richard (2006)

mention emo, punk, alternative, skateboarders, industrial, reggae, hip-hop, retro, paintballers, Goths, the Black Panther Party, and Third Wave feminism as just a few of the areas that cliques can be organized around in youth subcultures.

Often, as Bettie's (2000, 2002) work has illustrated, the subculture with which adolescent high school students identify is related to gender, race, and/or class. The young women Bettie (2000) interviewed invested a considerable amount of time and energy into performances that simultaneously took on elements of gender, race, and class. The Mexican American and white girls in Bettie's (2000) study utilized "a symbolic economy of style that was the ground on which class and race relations were played out" (p. 14). According to Bettie (2000), hairstyles, clothes, lip liner, lipstick, and shoes were used by the young women in her study to signify membership in a certain group. For example, the Mexican American women used very dark and bold lip liner and lipstick while the mostly white "preps" used clear or pastel lip gloss.

A major component of understanding youth culture lies in identifying the events that mark the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Hoffman (2006) identified several contemporary practices that are used in the United States to signal this tradition. First, one of the earliest indicators of the move from late childhood to adulthood is the issuing of a driver's license, which many youth obtain shortly after their sixteen birthday. Obtaining the license is a process rather than one single and sudden event. Future drivers usually obtain a learner's permit to practice driving, pass a written test, and finally a driving test before they are officially bestowed with a driver's license. At this juncture, the adolescent acquires a status that separates them from all other adolescents not old enough to drive and without a license. Moreover, taking responsibility for insurance, car maintenance, and accidents promotes a feeling among

adolescents that they are in fact now adults. Hoffman (2006) also identifies a list of other practices that are used by many segments of U.S. society to mark the coming of age of individuals, for example, getting a job, Sweet Sixteen parties, quinceaneras, bar mitzvahs, religious confirmation, becoming an Eagle Scout, establishing one's own residence, attending college, getting personal mail, coping with the death of a peer, and living through unstable or trying times (e.g. 9/11).

Hoffman (2006) discussed the activities contemporary US high schools construct to serve as rites of passage for their students. "As early as the 1930s, August Hollinshead noted that the high school was the only formal social institution in the community that seemed to contain rituals marking students' passages from adolescence to adulthood" (Hoffman 2006:61). Among these rituals are senior week, graduation, and, of course, the prom. According to Best (2000), proms figure centrally in the high school experiences of many adolescents. Planning for proms often begins early in the school year and continues for the course of the year. Moreover, the cost of going to the prom has become rather exorbitant in the last several decades. Best (2000) cites a survey from a 1996 prom magazine that reported the average high school couple spends \$800 per prom. The high costs for today's adolescent prom-goers are comprised of evening gowns, tuxedos, flowers, limos, fancy dinners, pictures, and prom tickets (Hoffman 2006).

High school students may receive the message from parents, teachers, peers, movies, television, and prom magazines that going to the prom is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and must be attended at all costs. In this way, prom is constructed as an extremely significant rite of passage of adolescent high-schoolers (Hoffman 2006). Of course, many adolescents either lack the financial resources to go to the prom or are so disengaged with their school community that

they do not go. These adolescents must find other means and rituals to signal their passage into adulthood.

Bettie's (2002) study of high school adolescents in the American Southwest illustrates the way that class and race/ethnicity influence the markers one uses for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Bettie (2002) spent an entire academic year observing, interviewing, and just "hanging out" with high school girls at one high school. For many of the Mexican Americans girls Bettie became acquainted with, attending college was not a realistic goal due issues such as family finances and the lack of college preparation courses. Therefore, for many of these girls/young women having a baby was seen as the one outlet available to them to really mark their passage to adulthood.

The meanings given to identities derived through youth subcultures are not wholly dependent on the youth themselves. School administrators, teachers, and staff imbue adolescent identities with meanings that are often inaccurate and unintended by the participants. The meanings that adults assign to youth identities are also shaped by the gender, race, and class of the individual adolescent. Oftentimes, this occurs regardless of the similarity between the behaviors displayed by the youth with behaviors displayed by youth from other race, ethnic, and class backgrounds. For example, in Ferguson's (2001) study of children in elementary school she found that although Black and white boys in the same class often exhibited that same problematic and disruptive behaviors in school, it was often only the Black boys who were labeled as "bad" or "unsalvageable" by teachers and administrators (p. 4).

Bettie (2000) found a similar phenomenon among the population of high school girls that she studied. Although there was no evidence that the young Mexican American women Bettie

studied were sexually active at rates higher than their white counterparts, it was nevertheless assumed that the Mexican Americans were more sexually active. This was assumed primarily based on two factors: 1) the style of dress that the working-class Mexican Americans adopted and 2) when working-class Mexican American women became pregnant they were more likely to keep the baby and as a result the evidence of their sexual activity was more visible. As Bettie (2000) writes:

In spite of the meanings that working-class girls themselves gave to their gender-specific cultural markers, their performances were always overdetermined by broader cultural meanings that code women in heavy makeup and tight clothes as oversexed – in short, cheap. In other words, class differences are understood as sexual differences. (P. 17)

When Bettie (2000) approached some faculty members who taught vocational courses to solicit help in reaching girls who were not college bound about their plans after high school she was told, “they’ll all be barefoot and pregnant” (p. 12). On the contrary, when she actually interviewed these young women she found that many did not plan on marrying until their thirties and/or thought that men were “dogs.” In summation, gender, race and class often work together to influence the perception adults have of adolescents, which in turn is likely to influence the treatment the adolescents receive from adults in positions of authority (e.g. teachers).

Sexipedia: (Hetero)Sexuality and Gender

As Rich (1980) argued, heterosexuality becomes a dominant organizing principal in our social relationships by invoking patterns of thinking and behavior that impede women’s

relationships with other women and coerce women into relationships with men. Furthermore, Crawley, Foley, and Shehan (2008) have invoked Foucault's concept of surveillance to explain the ability of heteronormative practices to invade our lives. Through gender surveillance, our value to society is judged on our ability to be "...good 'men' and 'women,' not just good citizens" (Crawley, Foley, and Shehan 2008:91). West and Zimmerman (1987) also addressed the connection between doing gender and heteronormativity: in order to know which individuals we are allowed to be sexuality attracted to, gendered performances must unequivocally inform us of each person's sex. So learning the sexual expectations for women and men is a significant aspect of doing gender in childhood and adolescence, and nearly all of these expectations assume that the nature of any sexual activity will be entirely heterosexual. In concurrence with the theoretical work on gender and heteronormativity, several themes, or sexual scripts, have emerged in research on gender in adolescence that not only paint all sexual relationships as heterosexual, but also women as ornamental, passive objects seeking affection and men as active subjects seeking sex.

Women and Girls as Attractive Objects

Throughout the literature, an emphasis on feminine attractiveness emerges as a prevalent theme in the study of gender and sexuality. Thorne (1993), using participant observation in two elementary schools for a total of 11 months, noted in her observations that girls as young as fourth and fifth grade were already beginning to use make-up. While this use mostly consisted of lip gloss, it was revealed during the donning of costumes for a Halloween party that several of the sixth grade girls were already experts in full make-up application.

In addition to cosmetic use, Eder and Parker (1987) found evidence that girls' extracurricular activities pushed them towards emphasizing their appearance. Eder and Parker (1987) conducted participant observation for 12 months, conducted 10 full-length interviews, and video and audiotaped groups of students conversing. At the middle school where the authors observed, the most sought after activity for girls was cheerleading. In order to make the cheerleading squad, girls had to adhere to certain appearance requirements: clean and neatly styled hair, "cuteness," not overweight, etc. In addition to achieving the cheerleader look, girls were required to project a cheerleader personality. A large part of this personality meant smiling and looking happy even when one was in pain, in a bad mood, or trying to concentrate.

Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) have discussed the requirement in various cultures that women must hide their feelings of distress or displeasure and appear happy and content at all times. The requirement to smile during instances when they do not actually feel happy might result in girls and young women ceasing to express their thoughts and feelings, a phenomenon that Taylor, Gilligan and Sullivan (1995) claim creates an increased risk of psychological problems for girls.

Martin (1996) found that the 32 adolescent girls in three high schools (one public, two private) with whom she conducted formal structured interviews often cited physical appearance when asked about something they had accomplished. For example, one girl, when asked by Martin (1996) "can you describe an important goal you achieved?" responded, "My hair's my accomplishment 'cause I never thought I'd get it this long" (p. 42). Moreover when asked to describe themselves, the girls often focused only on appearance related characteristics and rarely mentioned other interests, skills, hobbies, etc. The boys in Martin's sample, however, rarely

mentioned appearance spontaneously and seemed unsure of how to respond when asked to describe their own physical appearance.

Boys will be Boys

Research across middle childhood through adolescence has repeatedly shown an acceptance of boys' aggressiveness by not only adults but peers as well. Research focusing on early adolescence has not found this aggression to necessarily be sexual, but by the time adolescents reach high school age many young men's aggression often extends to sexual behaviors. Thorne (1993) observed that boys were normally allotted much larger areas than girls on the playground. Moreover, boys often took it upon themselves to invade the play areas of girls and disrupt their activities. Although playground monitors in the school where Thorne observed generally intervened on the behalf of girls in these situations, they also expected that any boy entering the girls' space had disruptive intent and would send them away before they could interfere with the girls' play. The effect of the playground monitor's actions of assuming all boys were bent on disruption may have communicated to the girls and boys that "boys will be boys," thus naturalizing and reinforcing the boys' aggressive behavior.

Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) found that among middle school students, boys' aggressiveness seemed to be engendered by their engagement in physically aggressive sports such as football. The boys in Eder and colleagues' study took principles from their sporting activities and incorporated them into other areas of their social life. As Eder and colleagues (1995) observed, one of the requirements of popularity for boys was not only athletic prowess

but also the ability to physically overcome others in fights and the ability to maintain a stoic and tough outward appearance.

In examining older adolescents, Martin (1996) found that the aggressiveness found in younger boys had extended to sexual aggression by high school. It was expressed by both the young women and men that she interviewed that boys and men were naturally sexually aggressive. The girls and boys both expected boys to act aggressively.

Girls Want Love, Boys Want Sex

Related to the idea that boys are aggressive physically and sexually is that boys and men always desire sex. On the other hand, girls are thought to lack sexual desire and are thus charged with refusing sex with boys (Martin 1996). When girls consent to sexual relations with boys it is expected they will do so out of love and affection, not because they might physically enjoy it (Martin 1996; Tolman 1994). Girls and young women who consent to sex outside of a serious relationship are often castigated by being labeled as “sluts” (Tanenbaum 2000; Payne 2010). Tolman (1994) posited that the requirement that girls must control boys’ sexual urges leads them to ignore their own feelings of physical desire. Similarly, Martin (1996) found that the young women she interviewed had little expectation that sex would feel good to them. Sex, to these high schoolers, was something done out of love to keep a relationship intact or to make it more serious. Thus, sexual relations and expectations in adolescence may create a lack of sexual subjectivity in women.

Childhood and Adolescent Heteronormativity

Lastly, the literature on gender in childhood and adolescence often reveals that these social worlds are highly heterosexualized. In Thorne's (1993) study, she found that even among fourth and fifth graders words like "faggot" were used by peers to sanction individuals whose behavior was seen by others as inappropriate for their gender. Similar usages of homophobic name-calling and harassment appear in the data collected by Martin (1996), Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995), and Fine (1987). Thurlow (2001) has posited that this type of name-calling serves to reinforce heteronormativity by casting individuals with alternate sexual identities as inferior. Moreover, as Wyss (2004) has noted, the school system itself often contributes to the enforcement of heteronormativity when teachers, staff, and administrators allow name-calling centering on sexuality to go unpunished and ignored.

Research on high school aged adolescents has found heterosexuality to be intimately linked to popularity in school. Duncan (2004) found that when surveyed, fifteen year-old young women were most likely to choose "lesbian" as a characteristic that a popular female would be least likely to have. Moreover, Duncan (2004) noted that young women associate the term "popularity" with having social power, having a good sense of style and fashion, and being successful in attracting boys.

Research on adolescents has also found that young women and men take steps to avoid having their friendships (mis)interpreted as homosexual. Eder et al. (1995) found that the middle school adolescents she studied sometimes took measures to ensure that others did not interpret their close friendships with members of the same sex as sexual ones. For example, one

adolescent girl in Eder and colleagues' study made sure to specify that although she signed notes to her friends "love you dearly" she did not mean "love you queerly."

Another aspect of heteronormativity in adolescence is that research on early adolescent romance has repeatedly found that heterosexual romantic relationships function as a way to increase status among peers (Eder and Parker 1987; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995; Tanenbaum 2000). For girls, the ability to appear attractive to boys increases their standing among their female peers (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995). Also, being in a romantic relationship acts as a buffer that allows adolescent girls to experiment sexually without being labeled a "slut" (Tanenbaum 2000). Conversely, boys gain status among peers by proving their sexual prowess with girls. As hegemonic masculinity and its subsequent heterosexual mandate are prevalent in early adolescence, it is imperative for boys to show they are "real men" via their aggressive sexuality toward girls (Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995).

In conclusion, the social worlds of adolescents uncovered by previous research have revealed an environment where gender is highly attached to sexuality. In these social worlds, heterosexuality is valorized while any alternate sexuality is condemned. Moreover, women are seen as lacking sexual desire and serve the purpose of acting as the sexual gatekeepers and adding beauty to the scenery. Men, on the other hand, are seen as physically and sexually aggressive and value sex over intimacy.

High school adolescents are positioned in a social location where they are increasingly expected to present themselves as adults. In fact, many high school events, such as the prom, are meant to serve as dress rehearsals for these young women's and men's performances as adult members of society (Best 2000). One important aspect of presenting oneself as an adult is the

appropriate doing of gender according to one's sex category. As West and Zimmerman (1987) noted, the competence of adult women and men in our "society is hostage [to the] production" of gender (p. 126). Moreover, doing gender refers not only to a process of interaction with the self, but also to a process of interaction with others. Due to the pervasive nature of heteronormativity in our society, an extensive part of learning to do one's gender relies on gendered interaction. Therefore, gendered interaction in adolescence is an area of social life that has profound implications for the ways in which adults in society construct their everyday lives.

Sexual Minority Youth in High Schools

Scholarly efforts to outline accounts of homosexuality have unfortunately focused on the experiences of upper-class white gay men and largely ignored the actuality that no universal "gay" experience exists (Raymond 1994). Membership in the adolescent age demographic, also a subordinate social category, has resulted in a dearth of knowledge about the experiences of this particular sexual minority population. As adolescent sexuality has historically been ignored by all but a few brave academics (e.g. Deborah Tolman), the lack of understanding regarding the experiences of adolescent sexual minority youth has only been exacerbated. However, as G/SAs and other clubs marketing to sexual minority youth and allies have proliferated, researchers have begun to build a body of knowledge in this area.

The experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth have been found to include high levels of victimization (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz 2010). For example, a report published on behalf of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network revealed 85 percent of LGBT students surveyed over a ten year period reported having been verbally

harassed, 40 percent physically harassed, and 19 percent physically assaulted. Further, 60 percent disclosed they did not always feel safe in their schools. The study also found victimization had a positive relationship with symptoms of depression and anxiety and a negative relationship with self-esteem and grade point average (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz 2010).

A number of studies have indicated that G/SAs have favorable effects on sexual minority youth (Dietz and Dettlaff 1997; Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer 2006; Walls, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, and Bartkiewicz 2010). For example, in individual interviews and focus groups with seven G/SA members, Lee (2002) found evidence that club involvement aided students in interpersonal relationships, made them feel safer at school, improved school performance, and assisted them in becoming comfortable with sexual orientation. Likewise, Goodenow, Szalacha, and Westheimer (2006), using data from the Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, found that the presence of support groups for sexual minority youth lowered not only the rates of victimization but also the suicide attempts of sexual minority youth as compared to schools without support groups.

The extent to which it is the presence of G/SA clubs or involvement in them that drives positive outcomes for sexual minority students has been examined by Walls, Kane, and Wisneski (2010). The authors surveyed over 300 sexual minority youth between the ages of 13 and 22 about their high school experiences with safety, victimization, and educational outcomes at school. Their findings suggest that the mere presence of a G/SA club in the school was a protective factor for a significant number of students even if they did not have any direct involvement in the club.

Very little research so far has focused on the experiences of straight allies in sexual minority support groups. Goldstein and Davis (2010) published a profile of heterosexual allies compiled through a survey of 46 straight allies in one college G/SA. They found the majority of allies:

...joined the alliance primarily to serve as an advocate for human rights, to support LGBT friends, or to learn more about the experiences of LGBT individuals. Although most were not members of high school gay/straight alliances, the majority reported exposure to discrimination faced by LGBT individuals as well as previous acquaintanceships or close friendships with individuals they knew to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. (P. 489)

Moreover, the authors note that a large part of the difficulty in studying straight allies involves the impracticality of using categorical labels to identify sexual orientation (Goldstein and Davis 2010). Likely, this difficulty is partly responsible for the paucity of knowledge on straight allies.

Summary

Numerous sexual scripts and expectations for normative gender performances are endemic in contemporary adult culture. Using Cosaro's (2005) model of peer culture requires an investigation of how those same scripts and expectations are incorporated and/or rejected by adolescents. The G/SA is an especially well suited location for this type of inquiry given that these groups are designed with the goal of promoting acceptance and improved school climate for youth who are often at odds with cultural assumptions regarding appropriate sexual behaviors and gendered performances.

A growing body of research has taken into account the character of adolescent peer culture across a variety of contexts. This research has revealed a strong heteronormative influence in the lives of adolescents. Women and girls continue to be judged on their ability to appear appropriately feminine, boys and men are expected to be physically and sexually aggressive, love is considered a feminine pursuit while sexual conquests reside in the masculine domain, and heterosexuality remains the dominant system for organizing intimate relationships. However, as heterosexuality's grip on social relations has slowly eroded over the past several decades and sexual minority students have grown more visible in our high schools, contemporary research has also begun to address some basic questions concerning LGBTQ adolescents and G/SA organizations in high school settings. Overall, G/SAs have been found to have a favorable impact for sexual minority students on outcomes like school attendance, grades, and self-esteem.

The present study engages with several questions germane to the social worlds of adolescents in a high school G/SA and the ways normative sexuality and gender are negotiated. Specifically, I identify the obstacles and barriers that create difficulty for the G/SA members in fulfilling their club's mission, examine how adolescents participating in a club focused on supporting sexual minority youth define, understand, and judge sexuality and sexual behavior, discuss the ways the coming out process impacts the social and emotional health of G/SA members, and consider how G/SA members conform to and/or resist normative judgments of femininity and masculinity.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Grounded Theory

This study was designed to collect data using qualitative field methods and, in doing so, employs the grounded theory paradigm to build theory through the continuous comparison of observations. Simply put, the purpose of grounded theory is to “ground” the theory in the data. Once data are collected, observations are divided into categories that are then tested against more observations. As this process continues, the categories become more finely tuned and connected to each other. Eventually, theory emerges from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

According to Barry Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), sociological research methods are too often applied with the intent of verifying an existing theory rather than generating a new theory that is capable of explaining empirical observations at hand. Further, they point out that for a theory to fit (as opposed to being forced upon the data), and to work (to provide explanations of behavior), it is most fruitful to derive the theory through examination of the empirical data. Glaser and Strauss (1967) point out that due to the lack of theories grounded in data, many of the theories currently held up for verification “do not fit, or do not work, or are not sufficiently understandable to be used and are therefore useless in research, theoretical advance and practical application” (p. 11). In addition to remedying the persistence of useless theory, grounded theory has an added advantage in that it is useful to those outside of the discipline of sociology as a result of employing categories that have emerged directly from the empirical observations rather than employing esoteric and discipline specific jargon.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) position comparative analysis as the mechanism through which theory is generated. Although comparative analysis is certainly used for a variety of purposes in sociological research (e.g. verification of evidence, making generalizations), Glaser and Strauss stress its utility as their primary vehicle for theory production. The use of comparative analysis to construct theory, Glaser and Strauss (1967) claim, “puts a high emphasis on theory as process; that is, theory as an ever-developing entity, not as a perfected product” (p. 32). Hence, this focus on theory as a process leads to the avoidance of submitting underdeveloped and premature theories for empirical validation; a shortcoming Glaser and Strauss view as rampant in sociology and the social sciences.

In outlining the actual process of grounded theory, Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) provide a succinct summary of the manner in which theory building occurs. The first part of the process involves entering the environment under study and determining what is actually going on. In doing so, the researcher is confronted with a situation analogous to encountering a stranger. When presented with a situation where one must interact with an unknown person, concepts that can safely be discussed with no prior knowledge about the new person are required. Such concepts have the additional advantage of supplying the participants in the interaction with information about each other. In such interactions, stereotypes are employed as one gradually learns small bits of information about the stranger. Eventually, the stereotypes become useless and obsolete as the stranger becomes a genuine acquaintance. In research situations, Schwartz and Jacobs (1979) point out that stereotypes, or preconceptions, are used as sensitizing concepts. These sensitizing concepts “are not firm research orientations. They are used in order to be

abandoned and are invoked only to help find aspects of others' lives that confirm, deny, or transcend your initial preconceptions" (p. 28).

During research investigations drawing upon grounded theory, data collection, analysis, and theory development generally occur concurrently and influence one another. There are two important purposes implicit in this strategy. First, by allowing the levels of analysis to cross boundaries, they are able to validate each other in the course of the research process. This part of the process is very similar to that which is employed by the layperson in encountering everyday social situations. Second, the process that the researcher proceeds through in treatment of the data advances from the general (i.e. observation) to the abstract (i.e. outline of descriptive categories). This results in the production of a highly abstracted theory as an end product (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979).

Although I further explain the analytical process involved in using grounded theory in social research in Chapter 3, a brief example here is useful to illustrate the influence the grounded theory process has on my analysis. During open coding of my data, I came across not infrequent mentions of pregnancy by the G/SA members. Subsequently, I began dividing these elements into positive, negative, and neutral statements regarding pregnancy in adolescence. At the same time, I was examining observations on the coming out process. Eventually, I made a connection between teenage pregnancy and coming out as homosexual. The reception of some G/SA members' parents to the revelation of their child's sexual identity was celebrated, as the parents believed homosexuality would preclude their child from becoming a teen parent. My data revealed aspects of the relative devaluation of the social categories of teen parent vs. teen homosexual. Had I not been employing grounded theory, the connection between judgments of

teen pregnancy and homosexuality would not have been an element I knew to look for or part of any theory I was testing.

As evidenced by the foregoing discussion, grounded theory is by its very nature an inductive process of theory construction. That is to say that observations precede the assignment of theoretical explanations to the data. Although my study does not attempt to test theoretically based hypotheses, as would be the case if it followed logico-deductive orthodoxy, several theoretical frameworks guide my methodological design and analysis of the data. These frameworks include symbolic interactionism, the social constructionist perspective on gender, and feminist theory.

Symbolic Interactionism

When Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) published their manuscript outlining the use of grounded theory as a strategy for qualitative field research, they did so in part as a response to the need to provide a systematic method for examining the questions concerning the production of meanings in interaction raised by Herbert Blumer (Schwartz and Jacobs, 1979). Therefore, it seems natural to turn to the symbolic interactionist perspective developed by Blumer in any study employing grounded theory in the analysis.

According to Herbert Blumer (1969), symbolic interactionism centers around three simple premises. First, individuals act towards things (objects, other people, etc.) based on the meanings those things have for them. Second, the meanings things have for individuals are not derived from intrinsic properties of the things, nor do they come about through psychological processes inside the individual, but rather arise through social interaction between the individual

and other social actors. Third, although the meanings of things are produced through social interaction, these meanings are modifiable through a constant process of interpretation. That is, meanings are mutable, not stable.

The symbolic interaction perspective is tied into the grounded theory paradigm by two shared assumptions. First, society is both created and sustained through patterned interaction between people. Second, human action and interaction is determined by individuals' understandings of meanings (Schwarz and Jacobs, 1979 p. 29). These assumptions are evidenced in symbolic interactionism's main tenets and in the process of coding and analysis utilized in grounded theory.

In addition to the ease with which symbolic interaction can combine with grounded theory to produce a coherent research methodology, the symbolic interactionist perspective is also especially well suited for the present study as it focuses on identity, a concept often cited as central in the understanding of adolescent experiences. As has been consistently noted by researchers in the field of human development, adolescence is a crucial time in the development of identity (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Erikson 1968). According to Seaton (2007), "[d]uring this period, adolescents develop the ability to think abstractly about their place in the world and evaluate their capacity to become efficacious young adults" (p. 2).

Traditionally, the works of psychologists, such as Erickson, have dominated the theory of identity development, including gender identity. As Heilman (1998) has noted, Erickson's now classic theory of identity development has been rightly criticized by feminists for focusing too much on the individualistic aspects of identity development and as a result ignoring the part that others play in the development of the subject's identity.

Symbolic interactionism moves away from Erickson's overly individualistic explication of identity. According to the symbolic interactionist perspective, identities, once engendered by social interaction, become an important part of the self. As Blumer (1969) posited, individuals become objects to themselves and proceed to interact with the self. Moreover, as noted by Hewitt and Stokes (1975), individuals have a vested interest in maintaining their identities as shown by the common use of disclaimers to guard themselves against an identity challenge.

In a discussion of the general concept of identity in symbolic interactionism, Vryan, Adler, and Adler (2003) have noted several different types of identities: situational, social, and personal. An individual's social identity encompasses such statuses as gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, etc. A social identity is one that defines us as being like some group and consequently unlike others. According to Vryan, Adler, and Adler (2003) "[o]ur social identities are more transsituational and enduring. They, and their relations in our salience hierarchies, last as long as we and others identify us with a category or group of others, and as long as our positions in socially structured relationships remain stable" (p. 370).

Stryker (1968) postulated an identity theory unique to symbolic interactionism. According to Stryker (2008), the number of identities an individual possesses is limited only by the number of "organized systems of role relationships in which they participate" (p. 20). The development of identities is the result of other individuals treating us as "social objects" and by us subsequently internalizing the classifications made by others. "Identities are then self-cognitions tied to roles, and through roles, to positions in organized social relationships" (Stryker 2008:20). Further, Stryker emphasizes the transsituational nature of identities and notes that identities can be organized into a hierarchy based upon their importance to the individual. The

more importance placed upon a specific identity, the greater the chance that identity will become primary in a given situation.

The Social Construction of Gender

Erving Goffman's early work *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) set the premise for the understanding of gender as something that is done rather than something intrinsic to individuals. Goffman focused on the ways in which human interaction is analogous to the theatre – social life has a front stage and a backstage, individuals rehearse their performances in the backstage, and an individual's identity is dependent upon their successful performance as judged by their audience (Stewart 2003). Following Goffman's dramaturgical propositions, in order to maintain a gendered identity an individual must convince the others with whom s/he is in interaction of the legitimacy and the genuineness of their gendered behavior. An individual is able to retain their gender identity as long as they commit no grievous error in their performance to make the audience doubt them.

Harold Garfinkel's (1967) work in ethnomethodology also greatly contributed to the social constructionist formulation for understanding gender. Garfinkel (1967) uses the "term 'ethnomethodology' to refer to the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (p. 11). It is with these "accomplishments" that ethnomethodology is particularly interested. Simply put, ethnomethodology is the study of the methods regular people use to get through their everyday social circumstances. Especially pertinent to ethnomethodology's contribution to the social constructionist perspective is

Garfinkel's (1976) case study of Agnes, a male-to-female transsexual. Agnes's circumstances highlight the methods employed in the accomplishment of gender, and hence, imply gender cannot be viewed as an innate or static trait.

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) built on the work of Goffman and Garfinkel in their framing of gender as something that is done through interaction, rather than something that simply exists. West and Zimmerman's (1987) purpose was "to propose an ethnomethodologically informed, and therefore distinctly sociological, understanding of gender as a routine, methodological, and recurring accomplishment. [They] contend[ed] that the doing of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production" (p. 126). Further, West and Zimmerman (1987) brought attention to the idea that gender is a phenomenon that is done by individuals through interaction with others. Simply put, gender is not a something that goes on purely inside the individual, but rather emerges from social situations.

Like symbolic interactionism itself, West and Zimmerman's (1987) explication of gender focuses extensively on the way gender identity is produced through interaction with *others*. The power of actors in the social milieu to influence how one does gender and the gender identity they develop rests on West and Zimmerman's explication of accountability. According to West and Zimmerman (1987):

"to 'do' gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behavior *at the risk of gender assessment*. [italics in original] While it is individuals who do gender, the enterprise is fundamentally interactional and institutional in character, for accountability is a feature of social

relationships and its idiom is drawn from the institutional arena in which those relationships are enacted. (P. 136-37)

Simply put, the doing gender perspective is useful to the study of gendered interaction in adolescents in that it avoids the overly individualist work of previous scholars studying the lives of adolescents.

Since the original publication of “Doing Gender” by West and Zimmerman (1987), debate surrounding the authors’ conception of gender as a primarily interactional process has ensued. To briefly summarize the main argument – gender and other social statuses are to a great extent structural in nature and viewing them as interactional ignores the very real constraints placed upon an individual’s behavior. In response to this criticism, West and Zimmerman (2009) further emphasized the feature of accountability in social interaction. That is to say that individuals are not entirely free to act in whatever manner they choose, as they will still be held accountable for their actions. Expanding on that sentiment, people engage in behavior at the risk of jeopardizing their membership in social categories. Moreover, West and Zimmerman (2009) insist that “...interactional organization remains the primordial scaffolding of everyday life, whatever other organizational forces impinge on it” (p. 115).

A second major criticism leveled against the concept of doing gender is one shared by many theories of gender developed in the social sciences. Feminist theories of gender have historically neglected the appropriate way to conceptualize the relationships between gender, race, and class. Attempting to address this original oversight, West and Fenstermaker (1995) extended the ethnomethodological perspective presented in “Doing Gender” by suggesting that race and class too are interactional processes that are done simultaneously with gender.

Broadening this argument further, any status that can be considered a social status (e.g., sexuality) is produced through interaction. Simply put, in many and varied contexts individuals are held accountable for their behavior not just at the risk of gender assessment but also at the risk of their other social identities.

As an example, West and Fenstermaker (1995) draw on Colen's (1986) study of West Indian women employed as domestic workers. Colen's (1986) interviewees recounted the unyielding requirement of the middle-class women they worked for that uniforms must be worn by maids at all times. For at least one respondent, this applied even during time spent taking the children to the beach where such uniforms were highly impractical. The wearing of the uniform allowed the other occupants of the beach to read the domestic worker's class performance as "lower-class woman." Notably, the middle-class women employing domestic workers were able to accomplish class partially through the hiring and visible placement of these workers.

Despite the just criticism applied to West and Zimmerman's (1987) and West and Fenstermaker's (1995) theoretical work on gender, race, and class and their production through interaction, this perspective continues to influence thinking and research in the field of sociology. For example, Jurik and Siemsen (2009) note that "Doing Gender" is the number one most frequently cited article in the history of the journal *Gender & Society*. Moreover, West and Zimmerman (2009) have admitted that their "...original idea has taken on a life of its own..." (p. 113).

Feminist Theory

Feminist theory, while being much broader in scope than symbolic interactionism and the social construction of gender, does contain several unifying concepts according to feminist scholar Mary Klages (1997). First, the majority of feminist theorists would agree that gender is not an innate property of individuals; rather it is produced through, and accrues to, individuals via social institutions and interactions. Feminist theorists tend to take an interest in the ways that these meanings get produced and assigned to sexually dimorphic bodies. Second, feminists see the meanings placed upon these sexually dimorphic bodies as resulting in a hierarchical order where, all things being equal, men are always located in a social position above women. Third, most feminists generally posit that something should be done in regards to points one and two above. What and how points one and two should be addressed is generally where feminist theory splits into several different branches.

In utilizing a feminist perspective in my research on gender in adolescence, I follow the recommendations of scholars such as Carr (1998) and Thorne (1993) that warn against stripping the subjects of agency in the process and practice of gender. Anderson (2005) has noted that when feminist and gender scholarship first began to be defined as separate areas of academic study, much of the research focused on the effects of sexism on women. Simply put, women were seen mostly as victims - as beings who had gender done to them rather than as active participants in it. Fortunately, as the discipline has progressed, greater emphasis has been placed on women's agency and the ability to resist the doing of gender, or alternatively, having gender done to them. The feminist treatment of agency has been grounded in several differing conceptions of what is meant by the term. As Yancey Martin (2003) has written:

Scholars in the social sciences and humanities use the concept of agency in varied ways ranging from action based on rationality and/or goal achievement to simply acting or doing something...Some gender scholars imply that people who exercise agency relative to gender consciously intend to practice it/or are aware of practicing gender when they do. Others suggest that they do so in nonintentional ways or ...unconsciously. (P. 355)

Martin's (2003) position is that while individuals can and do on occasion practice agency in the arena of doing gender, oftentimes the doing of gender by both women and men is unintentional and non-reflexive.

In regards to the fit of symbolic interactionism with feminist scholarship, Mary White Stewart (2003) has noted the inherent appeal the symbolic interactionist perspective has had for feminist academics and researchers. According to Stewart (2003), "This perspective ...uncovers subtle and intimate processes of becoming gendered and doing gender" (p. 761). Moreover, feminist scholarship has greatly enhanced its understanding of gender by means of employing the social constructionist view of gender contained in the symbolic interactionist perspective. Especially pertinent to advancing an understanding of gender useful to feminists is the position of symbolic interactionists in focusing "on the ongoing interaction between self and society, viewing them as mutually influential, and. ...[viewing] the self as a process rather than an entity" (Stewart 2003:73).

Summary

In summation, I draw on symbolic interactionism's focus on the meanings interactions have to the individual, the social constructionist positioning of gender, race, class, and sexuality as accomplishments, and feminist theory's emphasis on gender inequality as frameworks that serve as a place to start my analysis of the experiences of high school G/SA members. The categories and concepts uncovered in previous research on gender using these perspectives serve as sensitizing concepts in the theory development in this study. However, special care is taken not to rely too heavily on one perspective over the others or at the expense of the realities constructed by the participants.

CHAPTER 3: DATA AND METHODS

My research design adheres to Blumer's (1969) methodological suggestions for symbolic interactionist scholars that the researcher must enter the distinct world of the individuals under investigation in order to understand their unique social situation. Blumer (1969) writes:

...the empirical social world consists of ongoing group life and one has to get close to this life to know what is going on in it. If one is going to respect the social world, one's problems, guiding conceptions, data, schemas of relationships, and ideas of interpretation have to be faithful to that empirical world. This is especially true in the case of human group life because of the persistent tendency of human beings in their collective life to build up separate worlds, marked by an operating milieu of different life situations and by the possession of different beliefs and conceptions for handling these situations. (P. 38)

In order to gain firsthand knowledge of the social world of adolescents in a high school G/SA, I developed a two-part data collection design consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Moreover, my use of two different methods of data collection allows for separate vantage points from which the reality of adolescents' social worlds can be viewed. This use of multi-method research strategies, or triangulation, has been advocated by many scholars, such as Denzin (1978) who "[concludes] that no single method [of data collection] will ever meet the requirements of interaction theory...Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed" (p. 28).

As noted previously, the study of gender and sexuality in high school settings has been examined from numerous angles and in varied contexts, but the impact and influence of sexual

identity on adolescents' understandings of sexuality, gender, and gay rights has only begun to emerge as heterosexuality's dominance as the legitimate sexuality identity has deteriorated. For example, Dugan and Yurman (2011) remark upon the paucity of research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth and note that of the research that does exist on these populations, much of it is focused on identity development or school climate. The dearth of knowledge concerning sexual minority youth and their allies is steadily being remedied as these populations have become more prominent and visible in schools and society in at-large. It is this growing body of scholarship that my research contributes to.

Evolution of Research Focus

Although the G/SA undoubtedly presents an interesting environment in which to study gender, the decision to select the G/SA for study was not academically driven from the outset. When I began my research, Palm Terrace High had only been open for four months. As such, the extracurricular groups and organizations at the school were primarily in incipient stages and had low membership counts and few regular meetings. The media specialist at Palm Terrace was generous enough to compile a list of the current organizations, their estimated membership, and the email addresses of the faculty advisors. Only two groups (outside of sports teams) had a membership large enough to provide a fruitful environment for data collection: The Keyettes, an all-girls service organization, and the G/SA. Initially, I tried to make contact with both of these groups, but only the G/SA faculty sponsor was amenable to allowing me access to meetings and students.

During the development of my proposal for this research project, I was primarily interested in cross-gendered interactions in romantic relationships and friendships. My initial research questions were intentionally general and vague. For instance, I was curious about what gendered interactions among high school adolescents looked like, what about gendered interactions adolescents found rewarding (or unrewarding), and in what ways adolescents made sense of/attached meaning to gendered interactions. The decision to focus my efforts on the G/SA shifted my investigation in that it presented a serendipitous opportunity to ask questions not only about gender but about the contributions of non-normative sexual identity on the experiences of adolescents. Further, as I proceeded with data analysis, I began to notice elements of these students' experiences that I had not considered in my research proposal. For example, I did not anticipate engaging with issues surrounding social movement organizations (see Chapter 5). Although I did not entirely abandon my interest in gender in adolescence, the major research questions I asked of my data vary significantly from those listed in my original proposal (see Chapter 1 for a complete listing of final research questions).

Accommodating the shifting focus of my research questions was both anticipated and uncomplicated given that I intended for my research to be inductive from the outset. In order to facilitate the grounded theory approach as a methodological framework for my research, I selected methods that were both exploratory and flexible. Observation and semi-structured, in-depth interviews were chosen as my primary methods of data collection. Exploratory methods like observation and interviews are most useful in gathering information on experiences and issues that have not been previously subjected to detailed analysis (Babbie 2003). Since I focused specifically on the lived experiences of the members of one particular previously

unstudied G/SA, and little research to date has focused extensively on G/SAs in general, my project distinctly required exploratory methods. Moreover, since I wanted to make sure my methods conformed to the experiences of the club members, not the other way around, it was imperative that the methods used also be negotiable.

Setting and Participants

The participants in my study were members of the G/SA at “Palm Terrace” High located in a suburban area in the southeastern part of the United States. According to official school estimates, Palm Terrace High has an overall enrollment of 2095 students and is comprised of 23 percent of students identifying as Black (non-Hispanic), 60 percent identifying as Hispanic, 10 percent identifying as White (non-Hispanic), and 2 percent identifying as Asian. An additional 4 percent identify as multiracial. The G/SA was comprised of approximately 45 percent Hispanic/Latino(a) identified members, 45 percent white identified members, and 10 percent Black identified members. In comparison, the U.S. population hovers at 13 percent Black, 72 percent White, and 5 percent Asian (US Census Bureau 2011). Further, the US Census Bureau (2011) reveals 16 percent of the US population identifies as Hispanic or Latino(a).

The members of the G/SA span grades 9-12 and have an age range of 14-18 years. Of the regular club members, there were three freshmen, four sophomores, seven juniors, and six seniors. In regards to the gender of club members, there were slightly more girls than boys. The small deficit in boys is likely attributable to the near complete absence of any straight identified boys in the club. The girls in the G/SA identified as straight, lesbian, or bisexual. However, all

but one of the boys identified as gay, bisexual, or transgender. See Appendix A for a complete breakdown of interviewee's demographic characteristics.

The membership of the G/SA hovered at around 20 members during the year-and-a-half I collected data. It was not uncommon for new members to join mid-year, nor was it uncommon for existing members to dropout. Students who left generally did so for one of four reasons: 1) the G/SA meetings were interfering with the activities of other clubs they belonged to, 2) their parents were not aware they were a part of the G/SA and forced them to quit when they found out, 3) students felt the G/SA was not active enough and left the club because they felt their participation was not affecting any real change or positive outcome, and 4) they transferred to a different high school.

According to the faculty sponsor, the G/SA at Palm Terrace High was the first G/SA in the county in which the school was located. The initial formation of the G/SA was not without opposition from school administration. When the club first attempted to become an official organization, the school's principal told them they were not allowed to form. Due to pressure from parents, and a letter from the ACLU, the principal eventually relented. However, it was tacitly understood by the G/SA's untenured faculty sponsor that the administration would move to abolish the club given the opportunity.

It is important to note that the G/SA was unofficially affiliated with the drama club (which had grown exponentially by the second year of data collection). These two clubs tended to share after school meeting space, and although there was a core group of G/SA members, membership between these two groups was somewhat fluid. For example, the G/SA tended to have twice the number of "members" on days when food was being served or guest speakers

were present. Moreover, the activities of these two groups were often interconnected. For example, when the drama club performed a one-act play featuring a homosexual relationship between two characters, the G/SA members acted as ushers, concession stand workers, and passed out flyers about upcoming G/SA events. Additionally, these two groups were generally supportive of each other's activities and events. For example, some G/SA students attended the state drama competition to support the drama club even though they were not performing themselves. Alternatively, several drama club students actively participated in the G/SA's annual Day of Silence.

As the name of the club implies, students could join the G/SA regardless of their sexual orientation. In fact, the G/SA mission statement specifically stipulates that students are not required to reveal their sexual identity. Therefore, I did not directly ask students to disclose this information. However, most of them revealed their sexual identity without being directly asked whether they were gay, straight or bisexual. As the members publicly claimed sexual identities were subject to change, I updated my categorization of each member's sexuality based on their most recently known identification. Therefore, by the time I finished data collection, the G/SA was comprised of ten homosexual members (5 girls, 5 boys), four bisexual members (3 girls, 1 boy), five straight members (4 girls, 2 boys), and one undisclosed (boy).

I asked general questions about parents' occupations and education levels, and family background and circumstances. In terms of occupation, 9 percent of parents were employed in a sales field (e.g., appliance, cell phones), 19 percent were currently unemployed, 19 percent were employed in blue-collar fields (e.g., auto mechanic), 25 percent were employed in low paying service-sector jobs (e.g., cashier, cleaning service), and 23 percent were employed in

professional positions (e.g. banking executive). Despite collecting this type of information from the G/SA members, assigning social class was not a straightforward or static process.

Research has long documented the relationship between class and school performance (see Rothstein 2004). Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds typically fare less well in school than their more privileged peers. In the state where Palm Terrace High is located, a standardized test is administered yearly to students in grades 3-11. The results of these tests are used to assign letter grades to individual schools. The purpose of this grading is to hold schools accountable for student learning. Examining the academic performance of the general student body at Palm Terrace High as measured by school “grades” indicates an overall low level of placement in the social class hierarchy. In both 2008 and 2009, Palm Terrace High received a school grade of “D” on an A-F grading scale. The low scores on standardized testing at Palm Terrace High are perhaps unsurprising given that the school estimates that 34 percent of the students are ESOL students with limited English proficiency.

Arguably more important than what school district or census statistics tell us about students’ social class are the behaviors students undertake to signal class position to others. Using Bettie’s (2003) understanding of social class as a performance in addition to an ascribed status, I argue that the large majority of students in the G/SA at Palm Terrace are middle-class performers in many of the contexts in which I observed and interacted with them. However, assigning social class labels to the G/SA members proves to be especially tricky in that their class-based performances were not always consistent in every situation.

For instance, I observed all of the students in the G/SA interact confidently and effectively with members of the Palm Terrace faculty, a behavior that I read as part of their

middle-class performance. Moreover, they generally expressed the belief that the faculty and administration had their best interests in mind. Every student I spoke with was able to identify several favorite teachers. The most often cited characteristics of favorite teachers were that they were academically demanding, and/or were approachable for help with concerns academic or personal in nature. When I asked about undesirable teachers most students identified at least one when pushed. However, the only explanations for why these teachers were undesirable had to do with their treatment of, or attitudes towards, non-heterosexual students. Additionally, every club member I asked was planning on pursuing a post-secondary education of some sort. Responses regarding the specifics of these plans included public and private universities, community college, and art and design schools. Regardless of specific plans, most students acted like continuing their education past high school was an obvious and realistic choice. Moreover, nearly all the G/SA members were involved in several extra-curricular groups including drama club, art club, wrestling, tennis, photography club, and marching band.

Despite the ability to interact well with institutional authority figures, high educational goals, and involvement with campus life, several factors and behaviors led me to question the middle-class label I had applied to the majority of the G/SA members. Firstly, in privately speaking with the faculty sponsors of both the G/SA and the drama club, it became clear that several of the members did not have the grades necessary to pursue their educational goals. Secondly, several of the participants also revealed serious financial crises, such as parents' unemployment and home foreclosure that would likely impact the monetary feasibility of their post-secondary education plans. When I asked these participants how they planned to pay for school, they generally shrugged and made vague references to scholarships and financial aid.

Thirdly, the participants did not uniformly scorn teenage pregnancy, a condition that Bettie (2003) found anathema to the middle-class performances of girls in her study. For the participants that discussed sex and pregnancy with me, the standard attitude was that getting pregnant in high school made things difficult and was undesirable for that reason, but a pregnancy did not affect the desirability of someone as a friend. When one of the G/SA officers became pregnant, this acceptance was played out in the group members' willingness to maintain friendships with her and the supportive manner in which the pregnancy was discussed.

There was only one participant who outwardly maintained a working-class performance the majority of the time. Ryssa was suspended from school on several occasions; once for fighting. Additionally, she would often skip school during the day and only show up for the G/SA meeting afterwards. She was often loud, disruptive, overtly sexual, and often used slang and pronunciations that were very dissimilar to the others members' speech. Perhaps most interesting are the reactions she received from the other members of the G/SA. Although the other members treated Ryssa as a good friend, she was often considered the group clown. Her disruptions and outbursts in the meetings were tolerated with humor by the others members and generally viewed as a source of entertainment.

On the other end of the social class spectrum, one participant, Veronica, could be considered upper-middle, or upper class. Her parents were both Olympic athletes, her father held a doctorate in astrophysics, she had a 4.0 GPA, expected to attend an Ivy League school, and was a star tennis player. However, her class performances did not vary significantly from the middle-class performances of the other participants. In fact, I only found out the above information through questioning her during the interview.

My final understanding of the participants' social class and class-based performances can be summarized thusly:

1. During G/SA meetings and events, the overwhelming majority of the participants chose to engage in middle-class performances.
2. At least half of the participants would not be classified as middle-class using their parents' income, educational level, or occupational prestige.
3. Members did not openly challenge the legitimacy of each other's middle-class performances.

While the foregoing discussion makes it difficult to apply social class in the analysis of the data, it nevertheless opens up an interesting discussion of the ways in which participants from incredibly diverse backgrounds seek to undertake middle-class performances.

Observation

After obtaining IRB approval (see Appendix B), I began collecting data at Palm Terrace High. To familiarize myself with the school environment, I spent three weeks unobtrusively observing in settings where students congregated, such as the cafeteria during lunch and benches and stairs in and around common areas before and after school. I also attended several sporting events and one theatre production. This period generally served as time to practice my observational skills and work on becoming comfortable in the school setting. I tried to minimize my visibility to students during this time and not to align myself publicly with any of the faculty, staff, or administration. These goals were somewhat hampered by two factors: 1) I was required to wear a very large, brightly colored visitor nametag which made students curious as to what I

was doing in the school, and 2) faculty often approached me and wanted to talk about my research. I attempted abandoning my nametag on two occasions and both times was confronted by the school security guard.

I began attending the G/SA meetings in February of 2008 and continued to observe and participate in club functions until June of 2009. I spent a total of 54 hours observing G/SA meetings, events, and informal activities. At my first meeting, I explained to the group that I was a graduate student working on my dissertation and interested in getting to know about their experiences with life and high school in general. I stressed that I was not there specifically to learn about gay and lesbian teenagers but was interested in anything and everything they wanted to share with me. At this point I also began passing out parental consent forms.

From February 2008 through June 2008, I mainly remained a passive fixture at the club meetings. I did talk to some of the students before and after the meetings, but for the most part, I only observed and took notes during the proceedings. When the new school year started in August of 2008, I began to take a more active part in the meetings. This shift in my observational strategy occurred as a result of two factors. First, by the second year most students knew who I was and realized I was basically innocuous. Subsequently, they began including me in their conversations and meeting activities. By the second meeting of the 2008-2009 school year, I had earned myself the nickname “Megatron,” which was exclusively how I was addressed by the G/SA members, the drama club members, and the faculty advisors from both clubs for the rest of the year. Second, the club was really struggling to organize successfully and plan any events. It was necessary for me to become further involved at this point because the club was in danger of failing, which would have left me with nowhere to continue collecting data. I tried to limit my

involvement to participation in club events and helping secure outside resources. I was very careful not to take control of their meetings or set any agendas. To this end, I solicited the support of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Student Union at the nearby university. The organization sent an undergraduate student officer to work with the Palm Terrace High G/SA to develop their club.

Interviews

During the last six months I participated in the G/SA at Palm Terrace High, I interviewed 16 of the 20 regular members. Two of the regular members declined to participate due to concerns regarding their parents' ignorance of their homosexuality and membership in the G/SA. While the parental consent form did not identify the student as being a member of the G/SA, nor reveal sexual identity as a focus of my study, these students would have faced serious repercussions if they were outed as gay. Therefore, even though I felt my study did not present a significant threat to them, I respected that they had legitimate safety concerns and did not push them further for an interview. However, I did spend a significant amount of time with these two students and although I could not record or transcribe anything they said to me, their experiences continue to influence my analysis through field observations.

All of the interviews took place after school, generally after the regular G/SA meeting. Two of the members were interviewed after school on a non-meeting day. Before beginning each of the interviews, I went over the assent forms with them and explained their rights as research participants, confidentiality issues, and made sure they were aware I was audio taping the interview for later transcription. The only concern that was raised by interviewees was fear that

anyone else's name they mentioned would be revealed in my writing. This typically came up mid-interview when they were talking about a friend's homosexuality that was not yet public knowledge. In these cases, I assured them that all names would be changed to pseudonyms.

Each interview lasted from 45 to 60 minutes. Two interviews had to be interrupted and finished at a later time as the participants' parents arrived early to pick them up. In both of these cases, the interview was finished within a week of the first segment. All interviews were audio taped on a digital voice recorder and later transcribed for analysis.

The interviews were semi-structured in that I was working off a list of pre-developed questions that were the same for each interviewee (see Appendix C). The questions were developed based on a review of the relevant literature and modified based on my year of observation prior to beginning the interviews. The questions in the interview schedule were quite broad and left a lot of space for the participants to determine for themselves what exactly I was asking them. For example, after asking basic demographic and background questions, I often began by saying, "tell me about your friends?" Significant variance exists in each of the interviews as I allowed the direction of the interview to be heavily influenced by the participant's responses. Moreover, even though I asked questions about the same general topics in each interview, I did not always ask the questions in the same order. The goal was to make the interview more closely resemble a conversation (albeit a one-sided one) rather than an interrogation.

Entrée and Rapport:

I spent a significant amount of time and effort managing the way I presented myself to the G/SA members. During the time I collected data at Palm Terrace High, I was 27-29 years of age. I believe I look to be a bit younger than I am, a characteristic I tried to capitalize on. Given the age and education gap between myself and the participants, I was very conscious that I might appear to them as a teacher or parent, a situation that I strenuously tried to avoid.

Perhaps the most obvious manner in which I managed my appearance to students was through my style of dress. I tried to wear clothes that would be familiar to the participants as somewhat similar to what their friends might wear. Typically, this meant I wore distressed jeans, a “girl” fit t-shirt, and sneakers. The t-shirts I selected generally had some type of design meant to be pretty (e.g., chrysanthemums) or cartoonish animals doing cute things (e.g., hamsters on a trampoline). Rather than just wearing athletic tennis shoes, I usually wore Van’s slip-ons or high-tops. On days when it was cold, I usually wore a hoodie over my t-shirt.

It happened on occasion that participants commented upon my apparel, but as these comments seemed to be generally positive, I believe my clothing choices had the desired effect. Based on participants’ reactions, there is one instance where my clothing may have been interpreted as trying too hard to fit in. The day I wore a shirt that read “only vampires can love you forever” I had six participants comment upon it. Although these comments were positive as well, they were suspiciously numerous and accompanied with explanations of the Twilight books and movie that seemed to imply the club members did not believe I had an understanding of vampires and their appeal. I resisted lecturing the members about the disturbing elements in the

Twilight series (e.g., being stalked by a boyfriend is not sexy) and resolved not to wear this shirt to the G/SA meetings again.

After a time, I began to look so much like one of the students that I was often mistaken for one by other students and staff as the following scenario from my field notes illustrates:

I'm waiting in the hallway next to the theatre for Elise to show up to do an interview with me. The cast list for the spring musical has just been posted and the drama students are gathering to meet. A student I have never seen before approaches me, the conversation goes like this:

Student: Are you here for the Drama Club?

Me: Not exactly.

Student: You're Brittany, right?

Me: No, I'm Megan.

Student: Oh, I thought you looked like someone else. But you're in the musical?

Me: No, I'm not a student here. I'm from the University.

Student: Oh, are you like a freshman there?

Me. No, I'm a graduate student.

Student: Oh, okay (wanders into the theatre after giving me a strange look)

Interestingly, even after I revealed myself to be from the University, the student immediately jumps to the conclusion I must have just finished high school the previous year and be a *new* college student, rather than considering that I might be an employee from the University or some other representative.

In addition to managing my clothing choices, I also paid attention to my language, interaction style, and vocabulary use. Most often this simply meant laughing at participants' vulgar and sexually inappropriate conversations rather than behaving scornfully or reprimanding

them as school staff or faculty were known to do. Subsequently, I sat through conversations centered on topics like, “things you can find in a kitchen that can be used as condom substitutes,” or “slang terms that describe anal sex.” However, I did not actively participate in these types of conversations other than by laughing. I could have chosen to more actively participate in these types of conversations, but I was apprehensive that something I said would be repeated to a parent or school staff member and threaten the school’s willingness to allow me to conduct my research.

Additionally, I was careful not to comment, blink or look shocked when profanity was used. I also let them hear me use profanity such as saying things like, “Fuck!” when I ran into a desk. Moreover, I was careful not to use academic or sociologically specific jargon (e.g. ethnomethodology, heteronormativity, etc.). The goal was to allow them to become comfortable enough with me that they would act like they normally would even when I was observing and feel comfortable being honest during the interviews rather than giving me sanitized versions of their experiences. An incident during the second year of observation shows my success in this area:

I’m sitting around with several students before the meeting starts. There are three new people there today that I have not met before. As Ryssa is telling a story she uses the word “fuck” several times. I notice that the new students keep giving me worried looks every time this happens. Finally, Ryssa reveals her plans to skip school the coming week. One of the new students lightly shoves her, says “ssh” and gestures to me. Several students simultaneously chime in that I’m “just Megatron,” not a teacher and won’t tell on them or care if they skip school (field notes).

Although I answered general questions about my research project (e.g., How many interviews are you trying to get?), I never discussed my research questions or goals in-depth. I felt this was necessary to avoid influencing the data I collected during interviews and informal

conversations with participants. Fortunately, no one ever asked me specific questions so it was easy to avoid disclosing too much information about my study.

Despite the participants' obvious comfort and familiarity with me, I was regarded with a certain amount of deference based on my status as a graduate student. I was generally expected to be an expert of sorts on a wide variety of topics that I actually knew nothing about. Participants often seemed baffled when I told them I did not know the answers to their questions. The majority of the participants I interacted with had no understanding of sociology as a discipline and often confused sociology with psychology. In fact, during two of my interviews, I got the impression that the participants believed I was a psychologist with the ability to diagnose mental illness. The following exchange illustrates the foregoing:

Aleister, Taylor, and I are in my car on the way to pick up pizzas for the meeting. Somehow the conversation turns toward seafood. Taylor says his family never eats seafood, and he never ate it growing up, and now he just feels like it's something he can't eat. Aleister remarks that there must be some kind of psychological term for when you can't eat certain types of food. He asks me what it's called. I shrug and say I have no idea but agree there probably is some term out there that would describe it. Aleister then tells me that I should know all these things because I'm in graduate school. I reply that I'm not a psychologist. Aleister looks at me funny and then the conversation turns to the graduation ceremony (field notes).

Extricating Myself from the Group

After spending nearly a year-and-a-half participating in the G/SA at Palm Terrace High, ending my involvement became problematic. By the end of my data collection activities, I had come to be regarded as a permanent part of the group. This issue came to my attention shortly before the end of the school year. In discussing plans for the following year, the student from the local university helping to organize the Palm Terrace High G/SA revealed that he would only be

attending their meetings quarterly once the new school year began. This announcement was met with very vocal disapproval bordering on panic. Finally, one of the participants called out, “But you’re going to be here, right Megatron?” Everyone fell silent and stared at me waiting for an answer. After several seconds of uncomfortable silence, I told them that although I would not be there for every meeting, I would still come back to visit. Conveniently, completion of my data collection coincided with the end of the school year; otherwise I believe I would have felt compelled to continue attending every meeting indefinitely.

At issue here is an ethical dilemma rather than a methodological one, as I had interviewed all the willing, regular G/SA members and reached saturation in my data. After the participants magnanimously accepted me into their group, and generously gave their time to be interviewed, it seemed exceptionally calculated and exploitative to end all involvement with them because I no longer needed them for my study. Additionally, I found that I had grown genuinely attached to them. Conveniently, as the school year ended, the various parties and year-end events brought feelings of closure to the members and me.

Data Analysis

Strauss and Corbin (1998) have proposed that research designs utilizing qualitative methodology and methods in sociology are not well served by the researcher’s adherence to a predetermined and rigid design for data analysis. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), research designs must be flexible and allow for considerable creativity on the part of the researcher. However, there are several types of coding and processes for analysis that I utilized as part of my analytic strategy. These include: open, axial, and selective coding, and line-by-line

microanalysis. Although line-by-line analysis and open coding often serve as the first procedures in analyzing qualitative data in grounded theory approaches, they are not confined to the beginning of the analysis nor do the other procedures such as axial and selective coding necessarily get used in a linear fashion. Keeping this point in mind, I now turn to a description of the various procedures mentioned above that I used in my analysis.

My analysis of the data began with the process Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to as microanalysis, a combination of open and axial coding. Open coding refers to the “opening” up of the text undergoing analysis in order to identify and label concepts and categories along with their properties and dimensions. A good starting point in the open coding process is to proceed by means of a line-by-line microanalysis. In line-by-line microanalysis, each statement is looked at separately and specific words are focused on. This part of the process largely relies on the researcher asking questions that eventually lead to the identification of concepts that are implicit in the data. Simply put, the concepts are already in the data, but it is the researcher’s responsibility to find them.

Once concepts were identified and labeled, the process of axial coding began. Axial coding refers to coding around a category; in other words, relating categories (concepts) to other categories and subcategories. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), “The purpose of axial coding is to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding. In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena” (p. 124).

Another important feature of axial coding is that it does not begin where open coding ends. It is only natural that the researcher will begin forming relationships between categories as

soon as they are identified. However, as open coding proceeds these relationships must remain open to reinterpretation in light of newly identified categories. Thus, open and axial coding are often processes that occur simultaneously.

After reaching a point of theoretical saturation – the point when no new categories or relationships seem to emerge out of the analysis – the researcher proceeds to the stage of selective coding. Selective coding refers to the process by which the researcher begins to integrate and refine categories, thus actually building theory from the data. One of the essential parts of selective coding is to identify and name the central category, or the category that is able “to pull the other categories together to form an explanatory whole” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:146). Once the central category has been identified, the researcher can begin to refine the theory, which includes: reviewing for internal consistency and logic, filling in poorly developed categories, validating the theoretical scheme, dealing with negative cases, and building in variation (Strauss and Corbin 1998:156-60).

My analysis of the data focused on drawing out themes that emerged surrounding the general topics of social movement participation, sexuality, and gender. The context in which I interviewed and observed members ensured that much of my data directly and indirectly engages with these three topics. Chapters 4-6 present an analysis of the emergent themes applicable to my topics of interest. Chapter 4 addresses issues of social movement participation and the challenges and difficulties for G/SA students taking an interest in the social movement process. Chapter 5 examines the G/SAs experiences with sexual identity and feelings/beliefs on sex and sexuality. Chapter 6 details the members' participation and judgments surrounding gender performance and conformity.

CHAPTER 4: FRAMING THE G/SA AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

Youth and Social Activism

Social movements, or groups of individuals participating in organized activities designed to effect social change, have come to be synonymous with youth. This is a relatively recent development as the social movements that arose during the industrial revolution were primarily associated with working class adult men despite the heavy participation of members of younger generations (e.g. students). With the advent of the social movements that proliferated in the 1960s, youth increasingly came to be defined as major participants and catalysts behind social movements and collective actions (Feixa, Pereira and Juris 2009). According to Cornel West (2004) some of the most important social changes in the past several decades have been organized and executed by young people. West (2004) writes, “in past moments of national division, young people have played a disproportionate role in deepening the American democratic experiment” (p. 174). The social movements of the present era have retained much of the involvement of youth but now tend to incorporate youth cyberculture and the Internet in addition to the youth countercultures that were present in past decades (Feixa et al. 2009).

The current involvement and participation rates of youth in social movements has had mixed reviews. For example, while 50 percent of the membership of Amnesty International is made up of 14-25 year-olds, the organization still identifies recruiting young people as one of their major deficits (Amnesty International 2006). Moreover, in an analysis of high school students, Metzger and Smetana (2009) found that participants rated traditional forms of political participation (e.g. voting) as more obligatory than the more radical social movement activities.

Also of interest is that activist activities of the past, such as the street protest, appeal less to the current generation of youth than “causes that offer fun, participatory, relatively easy and interesting ways to be active” (Amnesty International 2006:25). Findings such as these are particularly interesting since, at the same time, others researchers have suggested that one of the defining characteristics of today’s youth is that they openly reject current political institutions (Rossi 2009).

In spite of the changing character of the types of activities youth are willing to engage in, Dunham (2001) reported that 72 percent of youth surveyed in the United States participated in some type of community activity or political group. Amnesty International (2006) lists the top issues that youth in America are involved in: human rights, peace/anti-war/disarmament, environment, education, politics, community development, women’s rights, racism, HIV/AIDS, animal rights, sexual identity rights, social welfare, political party, poverty, death penalty, children’s rights, civil rights, student union, ethnic minority issues, globalization, religion, health, sustainable development, clean water, migration/trafficking/refugees, indigenous people’s rights, law, alternative media, international solidarity, employment, and trade unions.

Whatever the current state and character of youth involvement in social activism may be, the students involved in the G/SA at Palm Terrace were intentionally participating in the modern gay rights movement. When asked about her vision for the G/SA, the club president, Lula, focuses on describing awareness and supportive activities rather than the more social functions of the club.

Megan: So what were the top three things you wanted to do with the G/SA club this year?

Lula: Um, well we were planning on guest speakers to talk to everybody on, you know, how you shouldn't hide who you are and stuff like that and also um, there was a death about a year ago – a kid got murdered.

Megan: Locally?

Lula: Yeah.

Megan: Not at this school though?

Lula: Right. And you know, me and Patrick were talking about that the other day and you know, I mean, um, we just want to let people know you shouldn't hide who you are and even though I have a friend whose parents are really religious and he's scared to come out because of it.

For the club members, although social activities were considered enjoyable, and often planned, they tended to see them as peripheral to the official activities of the G/SA. When discussing their goals for the club, the social activities were rarely discussed in-depth by the members themselves.

Background of the G/SA

The first Gay/Straight alliance was founded in 1988 with the purpose of combating bullying behavior experienced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. According to the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org) as of 2008, there were 4,000 Gay/Straight Alliances registered in the United States. G/SAs currently exist in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Although individual club mission statements may vary, the overarching goals of registered G/SAs are to reduce physical and verbal harassment, allow LGBTQ students to feel safer in the school environment, increase LGBTQ student attendance rates, and promote belonging. The formation of G/SAs in U.S. schools can be considered an extension of the

modern gay rights movement, which is generally considered to have begun with the Stonewall riots in 1969.

The G/SA at Palm Terrace High was based on three broad platforms: activism, support, and social activities. The activism portion of the club was designed to effect change by promoting awareness/education in the local school community regarding gay rights and modifying the behavior and views of students, faculty, and administration in the school district. The supportive function of the club was created in order to provide a safe place for students to be open about their sexuality and to provide comfort and assurance to students struggling with issues of acceptance by parents and/or other friends and family. The social aspect of the club involved the planning and implementation of various social and networking activities (e.g., group barbeques, camping trips, and parties).

The G/SA members got their first experience with activism before the club was even formed. Initially, the students were barred by the administration from organizing because the principal did not approve of a “gay” club on the school campus. After one student’s mother intervened, the administration received a letter from the ACLU explaining that under the 1984 Federal Equal Access Act, any school that allows one extra-curricular club must allow all others. Originally, this act was designed to establish students’ rights to form religious extra-curricular groups. The irony of exploiting legislation set to promote religious activities to legally support the existence of G/SAs was not lost on the G/SA members as seen in the following discussion that occurred before one of the first meetings I attended.

Three of the G/SA kids (Patrick, Matt, and Robert) are explaining to me the trouble they had in forming their group. Patrick is telling me about the law that allows for G/SAs to form in schools. Apparently, this law is the same one that allows religious clubs, like Students for Christ. All three of the guys start laughing. I ask how the kids in the

Christian club feel about that. None of the guys are sure if they know about it yet. Robert suggests they should tell them just because it would be funny. Everyone laughs again, including me (field notes).

Frame Analysis and the G/SA as a Social Movement

Inasmuch as the GS/A can be considered an organization participating in a social movement, frame analysis can be employed as a useful lens through which to view the narratives constructed by group members. The sociology of social movements has relied extensively on the frame analysis originally postulated in Goffman's (1974) work, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of the Experience*. As a symbolic interactionist, Goffman saw frames as a way through which instances are imbued with meaning and hence serve to manage and steer behaviors. This view was later expounded by Benford and Snow (2000) who suggested that from the framing perspective, social movements are not just created through structural circumstances but through the meanings that develop in an interactional context among members of the movement. Simply put, "movement actors are viewed as signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (Benford and Snow 2000 p. 613). Moreover, social action frames can be considered collections of meanings that motivate and make valid the missions, events, and behaviors of social movements (Benford and Snow 2000:614).

The frames that guide social movements are created through a set of three core framing tasks: diagnostic framing, prognostic framing, and motivational framing (Snow and Bedford 1988). During the diagnostic framing task, movement participants identify and define the problem(s) they are seeking to address and place blame for the problem on specific individuals

or groups. According to Benford and Snow (2000), while general agreement usually exists among movement participants as to what the problem is, less consensus is typically reached about who is to be held culpable. This lack of accord has the tendency to lead to rifts inside social movements.

During the prognostic framing task, tactics and campaigns are created to address the problems identified during the diagnostic framing. The prognostic framing that occurs inside a social movement organization (SMO) often involves justification of the organization's own solutions and questioning of the practicality or morality of the organization's antagonists (Benford and Snow 2000). Benford and Snow's (2000) review of studies examining prognostic framing revealed that it is during this core task that SMOs tend to diverge from the other SMOs participating in the same movement.

The last core task, motivational framing, is the point at which lexicon is constructed that provides the impetus for collective action to occur. Through this process, "vocabularies of motive" are created that serve as a "call to arms" for movement participation (Benford and Snow 2000). For example, in their study of transgender support groups, Schrock, Holden, and Reid (2004) note the manner in which motivational framing is used to attract new group members by promising them long-term emotional benefits through discourse elaborating a collective identity.

The core framing tasks contained within the frame analysis paradigm were all evident in both my interviews with G/SA members and my field notes from observation.

Diagnostic Framing: Identifying the Problem and the Culprits

The members of the G/SA shared a common understanding of the issues and problems that they were working to remedy through G/SA events and activities. The most articulated problem was the lack of ability to be open about their sexuality, or their views on sexuality, and still avoid negative interactions with individuals and groups hostile to homosexuality. The desire to avoid open hostility even led members to hide the existence of their organization from people who might be opposed to it. Significantly, this works directly against the official stated purpose of the G/SA's mission as one of the major goals is the dissemination of information on gay rights and supportive services. The following segment from my field notes taken during a G/SA activity highlights this issue.

Tonight the G/SA hosted the play put on by the drama department. When the house opened for admission, the G/SA passed out flyers and programs to each person as they came in. There was a lot of running back and forth by the G/SA from the door to get into the lobby and the entrance to the auditorium. The main purpose being to ensure none of the G/SA kids gave flyers to parents/adults suspected to be against homosexuality or the G/SA. There was a lot of fear that some parent would "say something" to the G/SA kids. Although the point of tonight is to spread awareness about the G/SA, the kids don't want everyone to necessarily have the information. When the new principal approaches there is much back and forth whispering about whether he should get a flyer since no one has told him there is a G/SA at the school. They decide to give him one and then freak out thinking it was the wrong decision.

The sum of these negative types of interactions, or fear of them, led to participants feeling that they were not being allowed to express their identities, hence barring them from self-expressions to which they felt entitled. Or as one G/SA member, Alexia, articulated, "I feel that if you're gay, and you're in love with someone else, you should be able to be married, and be together, and be happy, and just be who you are. Fuck everyone else!"

While the problems that were experienced by the G/SA students were commonly agreed upon, blame for these problems was attributed to a variety of antagonists including parents, faculty, other students, and religious ideology. Family, most often parents, created a significant amount of anxiety for the G/SA members in expressing their feelings in regards to sexuality. In the following narrative, Patrick describes for me the process he went through when he began to come out and the reaction when his parents found out.

Patrick: I guess because now that everybody knows...it was hard for me to tell everybody at first because my sister would start making like homophobic jokes, but I felt comfortable telling her at first because she's my sister and I wanted to be really close, but then she started blackmailing me. She would be like "oh, go do this or I'm gonna tell mom and dad." My dad's you know, South, and the whole homo thing just doesn't work and I was scared to tell him cause he would like always make homophobic jokes, like bashing. And my mom, like, her whole family is like religious, so either way I didn't win. My MySpace was like the only way I could show I was gay, but I knew my parents checked it, and one day I forgot to pull anything down, cause I knew when she was going to check it, so she saw it. So she said "oh, if you're gay I'll still love you" but I didn't believe her. I think she was just saying that. I said "no, I'm bi, I'm bi, I'm bi." I thought that would be better than being gay. So she kept saying "oh, it's just a phase, it's just a phase." So like last year when I was still 17 she kept saying "oh, you're too young." I told her, "no I'm not. If I want to be gay I'll be gay." And I didn't know it at the time, but the whole conversation, like, she had my dad on speakerphone and he was listening. She was just, oh like, trying to trick me into admitting stuff for my dad to hear.

There are several particularly salient issues in regards to the culpability of family in Patrick's description. First, his sibling's use of knowledge of his sexual identity to blackmail him shows a common feature occurring with sibling relationships and the coming out process in my data. While the majority of G/SA members reported more hostility, or fear of hostility, in coming out to their parents than to their siblings, sibling reactions were often far from ideal. The most common difficult sibling situation was by far the threat to tell the parents. Sometimes, the siblings promised not to tell in exchange for the G/SA member swearing off homosexuality.

A second interesting feature of Patrick's narrative is his description of being forced to admit to his mother that he was not heterosexual. While no other G/SA participants reported being forced, or coerced, by their parents to admit they were not heterosexual, over half of the club's openly gay members reported they first came out as bisexual because they believed it would be met with less hostility by their families than coming out strictly as gay or lesbian.

Lastly, for many of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual G/SA members, coming out to their parents was met with some amount of denial. As the case with Patrick's mother, many parents insisted their child's divergence with heterosexuality was merely a transitory or experimental phase. Moreover, some parents even resorted to pretending they did not know about their child's sexuality in the face of what should have been obvious signs. For example, Bridget was unsure if her dad knew she was a lesbian even after she was expelled from her Christian school for being gay.

In the attempt to avoid hostile interactions with family members about their sexuality, many G/SA members admitted to intentionally hiding their identities from their family – as was the case with Bridget who reported, “my dad, he's very strict, like everything is by the bible. I have to hide a bunch of stuff from him.” In fact, Bridget's father did not know she was a member of the G/SA club. She frequently was forced to lie about her after-school activities in order to attend the G/SA meetings. Bridget was assisted in this subterfuge by the school drama teacher who agreed to “cover” for her should her dad show up looking for her in the theatre department.

Bridget's father also exerted a fair amount of control over Bridget's social activities that interfered with her ability to practice her sexuality since he refused to let her spend time with her girl friends he perceived were lesbians.

Megan: What kind of rules does your dad make that you think are strict?

Bridget: Like he has to meet my friends before I go out, and he has to know who I'm gonna be with, what time I'm gonna be home. I mean most parents do that, but like ... he judges my friends, like he gets to choose who I hang out with. And my grandma, cause we live with her right now, she just pushes her judgments on to him so it's like very difficult just to talk to him and have like her out of the conversation for once. They both, it's just, everything's gotta be by the bible. I understand it, I mean, I'm Christian and stuff, but you just gotta have leeway and stuff, yeah.

Megan: So what friends did you have that your dad won't let you hang out with anymore?

Bridget: Well, I did bring a couple of my friends over and they had like, crushes on me. So like, when I would sit down or something they would come over and sit on me and stuff. When they left my dad was like, "I don't want her back over here. I don't want any of your friends doing that."

Another much discussed category of people who caused problems for the G/SA members were the school's faculty members. While every G/SA member I interviewed easily identified teachers or administrators with whom they felt comfortable discussing their sexuality and believed to be allies of the G/SA, there was a contingent of teachers who were vociferous in their opposition to homosexuality. The following two interview excerpts with Lula and Ryan illustrate the types of experiences that hostile teachers made problematic.

Lula: I know there are a few teachers here that are, you know, homophobic.

Megan: Give me some examples of how you know that they are homophobic.

Lula: Well, I had a teacher last year every time we brought it [G/SA] up would, you know, talk crap about homosexuals and how they should die and stuff like that.

Megan: Like she actually said that in class that gay people should die?

Lula: Yeah.

Megan: The teachers who are not okay with it [homosexuality], have you had any negative experiences in class or anything?

Ryan: They would make small remarks about gay people, like “they’re disgusting.” Like I have a teacher down here that I like just saw and she’s religious, and I did a project that was something like “All About You” so I put “gay” and she put everybody’s project up there except mine.

Megan: Do you think she did that because she disapproved or because she thought she had to protect you?

Ryan: Oh, I think she did it because she disapproved. Everybody in the class already knows I’m gay.

Megan: And you think she is aware that everybody else already knows?

Ryan: Yeah, I do.

In addition to problems with openly homophobic teachers, the G/SA students also had some difficulty with straight teachers regardless of whether they were openly disparaging of homosexuals, as was the case with Patrick.

Patrick: The majority of my friends are girls. I have some guy friends but of course they are either bi or gay, but some are straight. I tend not to deal with straight people, I mean straight guys, as much. I can’t work well with other guys. I don’t know why. I prefer girl teachers, I can’t stand guy teachers.

Megan: Can you think of specific examples with teachers you have had?

Patrick: Just the look they [guy teachers] give you when they know you’re gay. They kind of ignore you a little bit and treat you different than the girl teachers. And I’ve always had this attitude with these guys that I’m working with.

Megan: If they’re straight you mean?

Patrick: Yeah, if they’re straight. Like Mr. Sowka, I’m fine with.

Megan: But Mr. Sowka’s not straight.

Patrick: Ah, no [laughs].

When G/SA members expressed difficulty interacting with straight teachers, gender seemed to play a significant role. This difficulty was only verbally identified by gay young men, and only occurred with teachers who were straight men. One explanation for this phenomenon is, as Connell (1987) has suggested, that since power is located in the domain of masculinity there is little reason for women to “subordinate other forms of femininity” (p. 187). Thus, gender and sexual boundaries are oftentimes more flexible for women. Straight women teachers, therefore, may not feel apprehensive, threatened, or challenged when interacting with their homosexual students.

Although the majority of G/SA members made a habit of surrounding themselves with peers who were sympathetic and supportive, interactions with antagonistic peers at times became unavoidable for them as exemplified in the following lengthy exchange with Patrick.

Megan: Okay, so why don't you start just by describing for me what it's like to be in high school.

Patrick: Um it's okay...well, I guess if you're straight....cause when I didn't come out, well I was out but not as out as I am now, like if people asked I would say “yeah,” but when not everybody knew I didn't get as much grief as I do now. I didn't get as much phone calls, I get a lot of restricted phone calls, notes, threats...But now since I'm in the twelfth grade, and this started in the middle of ninth grade, I'm getting used to it – it's getting better...

Megan: When you get restricted phone calls do you ever answer them?

Patrick: I do answer them because it could be someone I know, cause some of them have their phones set to restricted. So I answer it but sometimes they're people doing voices, “hey baby, blah, blah, blah,” so I just hang up. If they keep calling, I just let it go straight to voicemail.

Megan: How often would you say that happens?

Patrick: About ten times a week, well it used to, now it's down to about three a week.

Megan: Why do you think it has decreased?

Patrick: I guess...I don't know if they grew up, or realized they can't really do anything, they're just wasting their breath. Some people now are just people who have hated me for a while because I'm gay...I don't even know them.

Megan: You said you have gotten threatening notes too?

Patrick: Yeah, I got a couple that said like "be straight" or something...I don't even remember, I just crumpled them and threw them away.

Megan: How did you end up with them? Did someone hand them to you?

Patrick: No, no, no, I had a locker before, and I don't know they maybe watched me go to my locker and saw my locker number and they just slid it in there. Or they would text me, leave voicemail just threatening to beat me, gay bash me.

Accounts of these types of negative interactions were always described in ways that cast the offending peers as the aggressors, as in the instances above recounted by Patrick. However, the G/SA members did not always passively accept harassment from peers as evidence in the following interview with Christina.

Megan: How would you describe what it's like to be in high school?

Christina: Um, just like any other person in high school, bad things sometimes happen. Uh, you meet people, you talk to people and you do your work.

Megan: What are the bad things that you would say sometimes happen?

Christina: Uh, I don't know, it depends. Friends...heh...friends, fight with each other. People make fun of other people – all the time.

Megan: Specifically, can you think of something that has happened to you that you would say is a bad thing?

Christina: Um, I guess something bad that happens is if someone harasses you. I almost got into a fight once on the bus with a dude cuz he was calling my best friend a lesbian. And then he started throwing pens and crap at me and I was just like, "this is annoying" so I threw it back at him and then he got mad and said he was gonna punch me or something like that. But then, he had no thumbs so, I don't know how that was going to work.

The majority of the participants in the study located at least part of the blame for the obstacles the G/SA was facing in religious beliefs. Three fourths of the G/SA members interviewed brought up issues of religion and the complications religious ideology created for them in expressing their sexuality. Moreover, as my interview schedule did not require me to ask anything directly about religion, the participants themselves were always the first to bring it up in the discussion. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from my interview with Bridget:

Megan: Is there anything else you think I should have asked about that I didn't?

Bridget: Umm, when it comes to being gay and religious and stuff, it's really hard because it does say in the bible that if another woman lays with another woman, or a man with another man that you're gonna be killed. It's not gonna be portrayed as "go out and kill somebody," because before that it contradicts itself by the commandment, thou shall not kill. I was thinking about that the other day. And it's just that being gay and being in a very religious home is more difficult. You could be cast out of your house, and lose touch with everybody, and have them turn their back on you. It's just very difficult.

Oftentimes, the discussions of religion focused on an extracurricular group of Christian students at the school. The G/SA students often talked about this other group as though they were intentionally and directly working against the mission of the G/SA as the following field note taken during a G/SA meeting illustrates.

Day of Silence activities are being discussed. Several of the students are in favor of creating a "wall of hate." The wall will be a big paper banner that anyone will be allowed to write on about experiences where they felt hated, isolated, or outcast. The faculty sponsor has reservations for fear that inappropriate things will end up on the banner if it is not heavily monitored. She is also afraid the principal won't approve the activity for exactly that reason...Several students begin giving examples of the kinds of things they would put on the banner...Rico states that the wall of hate would totally piss off the Christian kids.

The positioning of the Christian club as the major foil of the G/SA was also present in the interviews.

Megan: Like, give me an example of a time when there was a conflict between the gay kids and other students or a teacher.

Patrick: Well, there's like a lot of gay people that sit together at a table at lunch in the cafeteria, well actually outside the cafeteria. Well one day, someone told me that the Christian group was gonna come with the bible and waive it in front of the gay and lesbian people and start citing things. So I got really mad and I sat there that day to make sure it didn't happen. I mean, if it did, there isn't anything I could do, but I still would have.

Megan: Well, if it did happen what would you have done?

Patrick: I probably would have yelled at them. I don't know if I would have gotten in a fight, but I just wouldn't have sat there and let them do that.

Megan: Who told you that was going to happen?

Patrick: The people that sit there [gay table]. One of them [Christian kid] told one of the gay people and then they told me so...I sat there, but nothing happened. I guess they didn't have the nerves.

Megan: Do you have any friends in that group?

Patrick: In the Christian group?

Megan: Yeah.

Patrick: No, I don't like to deal with the Christian people that are tied to the bible. Like, "this is what you have to do." I can't stand that. I heard of a church right here, Life Light, that the pastor's cool with gay people, but I don't know.

For at least one participant, religion and the educational system worked together to render her sexual identity problematic. Bridget previously attended a Christian school and was expelled after she came out as bisexual. The following narrative illustrates Bridget's feelings about being expelled and her explanation for why the administration chose to remove her from the school.

Bridget: It was really bad when I left there because I started in kindergarten through seventh grade. Ten years of my life it was like my second home and it just like crushed me that they took me out.

Megan: Why do you think they made the decision to take you out rather than...

Bridget: They just... I kind of think they think it's like a disease or something. It's ridiculous and they just don't want other people, like, I don't know how to say the word. It's like around people like that. To see what they do and for them to talk about it and think it's okay.

Another prominent narrative attributed the obstacles experienced by the G/SA members was the current trend of ostensibly straight girls pretending to be either lesbian or bisexual as a way to make themselves attractive to straight boys. According to the G/SA members, these girls believed that watching two attractive women engage in sexual activities, and possibly being asked to participate, was the ultimate fantasy of straight men. The G/SA members did not view this behavior as a legitimate claim to homosexuality or bisexuality. In the following exchange, Lula articulates this phenomenon and explains why the G/SA members do not view these girls' claims as legitimate.

Megan: Earlier you said when you got to high school and everybody was gay.

Lula: Yeah [laughs].

Megan: Explain that.

Lula: Like oh, cause if you ask anybody, cause like me and Patrick we call it our "gaydar," me and Patrick have pretty good idea who's gay and who's not. So like you can usually tell if a guy is gay, but like lately, there is a lot of bisexual girls that are doing it just for attention.

Megan: So you don't think they are really attracted to women?

Lula: No. They are just doing it because guys like it.

Megan: But how are you sure they aren't really bisexual though?

Lula: Because, me and Adriadne used to mess around and be like, "oh, if you're gay do this, do this" and they'd be like, "no, that's nasty." So, I'd be like, "do you like girls or not?"

Megan: Okay, let's say for example I said I didn't believe you were a lesbian, would you kiss a random girl in front of a bunch of people at school to prove you were even if the girl was not attractive to you?

Lula: I'm mean, I don't know...if she was like real ugly then or if she had something [like a disease] I'd be like, "no."

Megan: But then people might think that you are not really gay then?

Lula: True, but...

Megan: I guess I'm just wondering if there are other reasons you think these girls aren't really bisexual.

Lula: It's just that lately, a lot of girls just want to do it because guys like it and most of the girls never did anything with a girl, let alone been with a girl, or had like any of that experience.

So for Lula, in order to have a legitimate claim to bisexuality or homosexuality, an individual must be able to prove that they have previously engaged in, or are willing to engage in, sexual behaviors with a person of the same sex. There were, however, implicit exceptions to this standard in that several of the younger members of the G/SA had not yet formed a relationship with a member of the same sex (or opposite sex) that resulted in any physical sexual activity. By visibly aligning themselves with the G/SA and its mission, these members were able to avoid being seen as not legitimately gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

It could be suggested that the G/SA members, by denying these girls' claims to bisexuality, were unintentionally causing the social movement to lose a potential source of support. Arguably, accepting these girls as members of the same "team" could minimally result in furthering a school wide relaxation of what was considered acceptable sexual behavior. Rather than looking at the onset of bisexuality as a factor contributing to popularity (at least for girls) as a positive development, the G/SA members identified it as creating additional problems and

obstacles for implementing the club's mission. This position was justified and elaborated on by Ryssa in the following instances.

Megan: Why does it bother you when straight girls act like they're bi?

Ryssa: Well, cuz, they're not really bi, and one minute they say they are, but then, like, the next minute they're saying, "oh, gays are disgusting." So it's like...well um, they think that it's gross and disgusting to be gay.

Megan: Why do you think the principal didn't want there to be a G/SA club?

Ryssa: I don't know...like maybe cuz he thought it was gonna be like a place for gay kids to hook-up...

Megan: You mean like a sex club or something?

Ryssa: Yeah, like a sex club.

Megan: Why would he think that?

Ryssa: Cuz, like, for some reason people think gays are all about sex 24/7. I mean, I do think about sex, but I'm not tryin' to hook-up with everyone in the club.

Megan: Where do you think the idea that gays are all about sex comes from?

Ryssa: Well, I guess, like, tv and movies, stuff like that...and when like, cuz girls pretend to be lesbians and make out with each other...

Simply put, not only were these "fake" bisexual girls viewed as working against the mission of the G/SA by verbally expressing their disgust about homosexuality when not directly trying to attract boys, their displays of sexuality resulted in furthering the stereotype that LGBT students were oversexed.

Prognostic Framing: Solutions, Strategies, and Tactics

Recall that prognostic framing takes as its central task identifying strategies and activities to combat the issues identified during the diagnostic phase. The types of events, activities, and campaigns undertaken by the Palm Terrace G/SA in the prognostic phase reflected the major goals of the organization. One of the major goals of the G/SA was increasing the visibility of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and highlighting the difficulties these students face resulting from their sexual and gender identities. Toward that end, the biggest G/SA event of the year at Palm Terrace High was the Day of Silence. The Day of Silence is observed every year by G/SAs around the country. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) provides ideas and materials that individual G/SAs can use to organize their events locally. As the name implies, participants of the event take a vow of silence for one day to draw attention to the harassment the LGBT students often experience. Typically, GLSEN chooses a recent victim of a hate crime to serve as a symbolic mascot for the Day of Silence.

The Palm Terrace G/SA members had some difficulty planning their strategy for Day of Silence events in large part due to the unaccommodating administration. Unlike most other extra-curricular groups at the school, the G/SA was compelled to have nearly all of their official activities approved by the principal well in advance of the event. The G/SA officers crafted a proposal for their activities based on ideas presented on the GLSEN website, club member suggestions, and advice from the club's faculty advisors. Many of the activities described in the written proposal were disapproved by the principal or diluted to such an extent they seemed pointless. The following excerpt from my field notes is a list of activities the Palm Terrace G/SA wanted to implement for their Day of Silence.

- 1) Make and wear Day of Silence shirts
- 2) Make and hang posters advertising the Day of Silence
- 3) Allow students to participate in the vow of silence
- 4) Make a “Wall of Hate” on which anyone could record their experiences of oppression, physical victimization and/or intimidation
- 5) Air public service announcements on the school’s daily video announcements
- 6) Shortly before the end of the school day, students who had taken the vow of silence would meet in the outside common area to break the silence while physically breaking through the “Wall of Hate” (which was to be made of paper)

The principal claimed that the vow of silence, the biggest part of the day’s activities, would interfere with instructional time. Moreover, he believed it was a ploy on the part of the students to engage in insubordination towards their teachers since students who had taken the vow would be able to refuse to answer questions if called upon during class time. The G/SA members understood this fear and also acknowledged that other students not involved in the Day of Silence, G/SA, or gay rights would use the vow purely as an opportunity to disrupt class time. The solution the G/SA proposed was a letter written by the club members and faculty sponsor to the rest of the school faculty explaining the purpose of the Day of Silence and the vow they had taken. The letter would also respectfully ask that they not be called on in class and forced to break the vow. The principal finally relented and gave the go ahead for the vow of silence but continued to stress that it was up to individual teachers if they wanted to honor the student’s vow or not.

The principal also saw no problem with allowing the students to wear Day of Silence shirts, putting up posters advertising the day throughout the hallways, or broadcasting a Day of Silence public service announcement on the daily video announcements at the school. However,

he was reluctant to allow the Wall of Hate to be made, even with the assurance that what was written on it would be monitored by the G/SA faculty sponsor. The activity he was most stringently against was allowing the G/SA members to assemble in the open space outside of the classroom buildings during the last five minutes of the school day and break their vows of silence while running through the Wall of Hate. He only agreed to okay this activity if it did not occur until after the school day was officially over.

While the principal's decisions regarding the Day of Silence proposal can be seen as logical and practical concerns for maintaining order and preserving the learning environment at the school, the G/SA members did not believe this was his main motivation. After the following discussion at one of the meetings, I asked several G/SA members during the individual interviews about the principal's attitude toward the club.

At the meeting today we talked about the plans for the DoS. Last week Patrick finished writing the proposal and gave it to the principal. The principal gave the proposal back to Ms. Melba with his decisions..... He also felt it was necessary to circle several typos with a colored pen. Several comments were made suggesting the principal was against the G/SA.

Megan: Do you think the principal supports the G/SA?

Lula: I don't know. I think he's, like, afraid that some parents and some teachers might not like it. I mean cuz Mrs. Melba said he called the school board after he found out about us and they were like, "yeah, we support it [the G/SA]," and he was okay with it a little bit after that.

Megan: Why do you think the principal won't let us run through the Wall of Hate before the end of the day?

Patrick: I know he says it's cause it would be....like, make it hard for people to concentrate, but I don't think that's why.

Megan: What do you think is the real reason then?

Patrick: He doesn't really approve of the whole gay thing.

While some of the club members attributed the principal's actions to homophobia, others had a more nuanced view in that they believed he was pressured by homophobic teachers and parents. No one I spoke with was convinced, however, that he was purely concerned with following school policy.

During my second year with the G/SA, the local university Gay Lesbian Bisexual Student Union (GLBSU) got involved to help the members organize effectively and expand their club activities. One of the goals of the GLBSU was outreach to local high school G/SAs. Palm Terrace was one of the first high schools they successfully gained access to, and their efforts were so successful they considered the Palm Terrace G/SA a sort of pilot project. At the end of the year, the G/SA club began planning, with the help of the university GLBSU, how they could assist other schools in their district and surrounding counties in forming an effective G/SA.

As the G/SA was heavily intertwined with the theatre department at Palm Terrace High, it is unsurprising that official G/SA events began to incorporate the official activities of the theatre. During the second year I was at Palm Terrace, the theatre department put on an original play written by the school's theatre director. One of the major storylines of the play revolved around the romantic relationship of two male high school students. The director of the theatre department suggested to the G/SA that it would be appropriate for them to sponsor the play as a way to raise awareness about gay rights and hate crimes and to promote their club.

During the evening of the play, the G/SA member acted as ushers, concession workers, and passed out information about the club. Moreover, the members choose to sit together in one

section during the play, further enhancing their visibility as a group and drawing attention to their approval of the play's content. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates the group's efforts to form a cohesive unit during the play in a way that communicated to the public their existence and views.

The members of the G/SA without parts in the play sit together (Patrick, Lula, Bridget, Aleister, Alejandro, Charmaine, Ryan, Ryssa and me). Most of them have seen the play during the rehearsal so they know when the parts they are most excited for are coming up. Right before the scene where Donnie and Jon kiss, they all grab hands. I'm exempt from this because I'm sitting on the end pretending not to pay any attention to them. When the kiss happens they all cheer loudly and clap. A few actually stand up (Ryssa and Lula). There is some sporadic cheering from other people spread out around the auditorium. At the end of the play the house lights come on. When I turn to look at the G/SA kids, most of them are crying. There is a group hug and everyone expresses how sad the play is (one of the gay characters was brutally beaten because it was found out he was gay). The group stays together until most of the audience has left the auditorium.

Aside from the officially sanctioned activities of the G/SA, the members engaged in other actions aimed at making homosexuality and their relationships more visible. One of the most significant aspects of their relationships that they grappled with in terms of public strategizing was sexual/romantic displays of affection. In some venues, the G/SA members enjoyed openly declaring their sexuality through same sex displays of affection as in the following situation described by Aleister.

Megan: When you have been showing affection to each other outside of school have you ever, you know, had anyone look at you funny or make any kind of comment?

Aleister: Yeah, we were holding hands once in the movie, and I guess they were tourists or something, and when they walked by I heard them say, "those two guys are holding hands!" And after them I was like, "yeah, we're gay!" But they didn't say anything, they just walked away.

Megan: Do you think they were shocked and surprised, or disgusted....?

Aleister: Yeah, they were like shocked, like “oh my god!” We kissed in the movies but it was dark so nobody saw.

Megan: When you are in a situation where you get to shock somebody like that do you enjoy it or do you find it uncomfortable?

Aleister: I don't know why, but I laugh and enjoy it.

In was generally easier for G/SA members to engage this strategy when they were in an environment mostly comprised of strangers. Although they expressed the desire to show affection in other circumstances they were very cognizant of potential repercussions when doing so in certain places, such as school. This was the case with Patrick and his boyfriend, Alejandro. However, Patrick, an officer of the club, felt more strongly about the importance of visibility and acknowledgment of his relationship than Alejandro.

Patrick: We did go to the movie with Lula and her boyfriend. There he would hold my hand and everything but he wouldn't do it at school.

Megan: But you guys kissed today...

Patrick: Well, that was because it was in the G/SA meeting, but I mean like going to lunch and like before and during school.

Megan: Do you think people would say something to you if you were holding hands at school?

Patrick: [shrugs]

Megan: Do straight couples hold hands at school? I mean do teachers...

Patrick: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Megan: ...come up and say something to them?

Patrick: They do, but they do it anyway. I don't think they would say anything, but he [Alejandro] always says he doesn't want to start anything. But I told him to bring up the gay hate thing and to show, you know that's what it's really about.

Also evident in Patrick's narrative is the feelings of security fostered by the G/SA. Patrick freely kisses his boyfriend in a classroom on the school grounds while surrounded by people. However, since it occurred during the G/SA meeting, an otherwise hostile space turned into a place where physical expression of his sexuality was permissible. Of further interest was the fact that during the kiss various other students who were not members of the G/SA were present. These other students were members of the drama club and due to the heavy interaction between the G/SA and drama club members, there was a tendency to consider all students involved in theatre de facto members of the G/SA.

Motivational Framing: Slogans, Myths, and Mantras

During motivational framing, language is created that describes the movement with the intent of recruiting new members and encouraging current members to stay engaged with the movement. As a way to secure interest and increase the club's membership, the G/SA utilized motivational framing to lend legitimacy only to those students who were willing to officially, or un-officially, affiliate themselves with the club. The members commonly referred to themselves and their affiliates as "the gays." Students outside of the club who claimed to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual were generally negatively judged and mistrusted. In order to be accepted by the members of the G/SA, and by extension the theatre department, students at Palm Terrace had to either join the group or become friends with one of the members. Students who did not do either were met with varying levels of hostility, as the G/SA members viewed them as trying to take-over their status as "the gays." One of the frequent topics of discussion at the G/SA meetings was

the existence of students judged to be illegitimately claiming homosexuality. The following field note taken during the beginning of my second school year with the group is typical of these types of exchanges.

Since there wasn't any pressing business to do at today's meeting, Ms. Melba announced we would have a group discussion. Ryssa suggested we talk about people that pretend to be gay but aren't. There are a lot of students at the school that sometimes say they are gay/lesbian. Everyone agreed with Patrick's statement that these kids (mostly girls) aren't "real gays," and several people were in favor of confronting them. Ms. Melba was definitely against any confrontations with other students. She reminded the kids that the new principal didn't even know about the club yet and they were supposed to be operating "on the down low."

As a way to market and publicized their group's standing as "the gays" of Palm Terrace, a "gay table" was instituted in the lunch room. It was widely insisted by the G/SA members that all of the "real gays" at Palm Terrace sat at this lunch table at least some of the time. The table was not large enough to accommodate all of the members and their close associates at the same time. Additionally, there were three different lunch periods and not all members had the same lunch schedule. Despite these complications, "the gays" took turns to make sure some representatives were at the table for each lunch in order to maintain their visibility to legitimize their claim of being the official "gays." The following excerpt describing the importance of the gay table is taken from my interview with Patrick.

Megan: So, earlier you said a lot of gay kids sit at a certain table at lunch. Tell me about that.

Patrick: Oh yeah, it's like the gay table. I don't sit there every day. I try to sit there, like, some of the time.

Megan: Who sits there every day?

Patrick: I don't know, like, well I guess it's like different people a lot of the time. Cuz, it's oh, kind of just where a lot of the gays sit when they feel like it. I go there, like, like the whole thing earlier with the Christian kids. It's like people need to know we're here.

Megan: The gays?

Patrick: Yeah.

The club members became so attached to the idea that they were "the gays" that even the straight members of the club began to define themselves as such. Nowhere was this more apparent than when the club members were asked to separate themselves into two groups.

Today we played the gay history trivia game. The plan was to divide the group into gays vs. straights for fun. The kids had a lot of difficulty separating themselves into these two groups. Some of the kids are gay but haven't come out totally; no one was sure what team to put them on. Then most of the straight kids wanted to be on the gay team. So, almost everyone was on the gay team. Finally, they organized themselves into two teams: girls and boys. This created one tense moment because there was some uncertainty of what team Taylor, the transgender member, should be on. He placed himself on the boys' team, and everyone was fine with that. Mr. Sowka, Ms. Melba, and I were allowed to form a third team. The kids named us the "been there, done that's." We lost the game miserably. The girls won.

Simply put, the motivational framing work done by the G/SA was so effective that in order to legitimately define oneself as gay, or part of "the gays," a person need not actually be attracted to members of the same sex. Rather, they had only to make a commitment to the club, or align themselves with its members and/or mission.

A second act of motivational framing engaged in by members of the G/SA involved the outreach activities they were planning with other area high schools. As mentioned previously, Palm Terrace High was the first school in the county to have a G/SA. A major goal of the club was to assist other high schools, and possibly middle schools, with forming G/SAs of their own. The G/SA members began thinking of their G/SA as the "motherhood of the gays" and took pride

in this standing. Robert, one of the bisexual members of the club, coined this phrase at one of the G/SA meetings and the other members begin using it regularly. As in the following exchange in my interview with Patrick:

Megan: Why do you think it's important to do outreach with other schools?

Patrick: Well, we are, like, the mothership. I think it's like, oh, I don't know, sort of a...

Megan: A what?

Patrick: ...a responsibility.

Simply put, in addition to being able to legitimately claim homosexuality, or bisexuality, members of the G/SA were able to feel a sense of accountability and a commitment to the social movement that extended beyond their own club and school. The club's new status as the gay mothership was one of the major selling points in their plans for recruitment of new members.

Summary

Analysis of the G/SA at Palm Terrace High through the lens of frame analysis revealed activity in each of the core framing tasks outlined by Snow and Benford (1988). During diagnostic framing, participants identify the issues they are working to change and assign culpability to specific persons or groups. The diagnostic framing of the social problems addressed by the G/SA included the inability to feel comfortable in expressing their sexuality, and the manner in which family, teachers, peers, and religion contributed to the inability. The prognostic framing stage gives rise to strategies and tactics the group believes will ameliorate the problems identified during diagnostic framing. Prognostic framing activities engaged in by the Palm Terrace G/SA involved Day of Silence activities, outreach to other schools, theatrical

productions in conjunction with the theatre department, as well as other unofficial behaviors like same-sex displays of affection. Lastly, the motivational framing process requires group members to develop ways of articulating the movement that promote and expand member participation. The G/SA used motivational framing to attract new recruits and members by promising them a legitimate claim to homosexuality and a chance to effect change not only in the school, but in the rest of the district (i.e. the gay mothership).

The central usefulness of applying frame analysis to High School G/SA clubs is arriving at in-depth understandings of the deviations in perceptions of club mission, appropriate activities, and growth between and among current and potential G/SA members. For example, Palm Terrace G/SA members located blame for their inability to openly express their sexual identity on several different culprits. The focus of club activities and events may well be affected by the identities of those perceived as responsible. Without the recognition that the identity of the responsible party might not be unanimously agreed upon by all members, there is a risk that the strategies the group undertakes might only reflect the diagnostic frames of the club's executive officers. Should this happen, the ability of the club to recruit and train members could be seriously impacted. There are implications here not just for individual G/SAs, but also for organizations and activist groups that engage in advocacy efforts with local G/SA clubs nationally and the larger gays rights movement. As has been expressed by international advocacy organizations, involving youth in social movement organizations is an on-going challenge (Amnesty International 2006). Connecting with youth activists and keeping them active in the movement will be critical to future advances.

CHAPTER 5: SEX AND SEXUALITY IN THE G/SA

While adolescence is widely recognized as a period of development that culminates in the transition to adulthood, and sex and sexual identity are important processes in the coming of age, contemporary society continues to demand that adolescents avoid sexual activities. Discussions of adolescent sexuality are typically fraught with cautionary tales of teenage pregnancy, STDs, and other negative consequences (Irvine 1994). However, adolescents continue to develop sexual identities, experience desire, and engage in sexual behaviors. For example, the National Survey on Sexual Health and Behavior revealed in a national probability sample that 48 percent of females and 73.5 percent of males aged 14-17 had masturbated. In regards to oral sex, 5 percent of females 14-17 had received oral sex from a female, 18 percent received oral sex from a male, 7 percent had given oral sex to a female, and 21 percent had given oral sex to a male. Among males aged 14-17 in the sample, 24 percent had received oral sex from a female, 2.5 percent had received oral sex from a male, 15 percent had given oral sex to a female, and 2 percent had given oral sex to a male. Moreover, 21 percent of males and 23 percent of females in this age group had had vaginal intercourse at least once. Of further interest, 8 percent of females and <1 percent of males aged 14-17 had had a penis inserted into their anus. Among males, 5 percent had inserted their penis into their partner's anus (Herbenick, Reece, Schick, Sanders, Dodge, and Fortenberry 2010).

There are some surprising findings in these most recent statistics on adolescent sexual behavior. As recently as 1994, Raymond (1994) reported that women “lag behind men in both the amount of sexual experimentation and their age at first same-sex experience.” While the statistics presented above run counter to Raymond's assertion, an in-depth analysis of the nature,

causes, and consequences of this trend are beyond the scope of my present research. However, these findings do imply that adolescents are experimenting sexually, and the members of the G/SA were no exception.

Whether it was because I was interviewing club members in a context where their sexuality was salient, or the members were generally hyper-aware of issues surrounding their sexuality, every interview I conducted contained explanations of sex and/or sexuality despite the fact that I never brought the issue into the interview until after the interviewee did first. The narratives articulated by the club members regarding sexuality can generally be broken into three main groups: discussion of the origins of sexuality (specifically homosexuality/bisexuality), coming out stories, and other issues surrounding sex and desire.

As the G/SA operated in a school that fell under the abstinence-only education umbrella, it is not surprising that frank discussions involving sexual orientation were largely absent from any official curriculum or school activity. In fact, the G/SA faculty sponsor told me that they were not allowed to even discuss sex with the students in any capacity. As Brianna, one of the G/SA members, explained:

Brianna: We need better sex education. But the only sex education I ever got was Respect and that just tried to scare you into not having sex. They talked about safe sex for like two seconds.

Megan: Respect, is that name of the program?

Brianna: Yeah, it was like, I looked it up and it was started by a bunch of Baptists and stuff, so that's why they'll let it in schools. It teaches abstinence and when it teaches safe sex it basically says "oh, STDs, STDs." It basically tries to scare you and make you promise not to give your virginity until you're married.

Fortunately, there was no clear way to enforce a prohibition against club members discussing sex and sexuality, and the faculty sponsors were reluctant to attempt it, so these issues were frequently a topic of conversation in the meetings and my interviews.

Origins of (Homo)sexuality

Recent research on the public's beliefs about the origins of homosexuality have demonstrated a lack of consensus on this issue. For example, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and Press revealed that 32 percent of participants believed people are born homosexual, 14 percent believed homosexuality is a result of the way people were brought up, 40 percent believed homosexuality was a lifestyle choice, and the remaining 14 percent chose not to answer the question (Pew 2003). According to Wilcox (2003), the scientific community remains divided as well on whether homosexuality has its underpinnings in genetic factors or environmental influences. The answer to this question has the potential to either hurt or hinder the gay rights movement. As Haider-Markel and Joslyn (2008) explain:

If homosexuality comes to be largely viewed as a result of genetics, our results predict greater support for gay and lesbian civil rights. Perhaps the predominance of genetic explanations may even reduce the stigma associated with homosexuality. Or, the future could be much different. If homosexuality is not a personal choice or a result of environmental forces but rather caused by a specific gene, the next step may not be tolerance but intervention. (P. 308)

It is unsurprising then, given the critical impact the resolution of the question of the origins of homosexuality could bring, that this topic would be a prime area of concern for members of the G/SA.

In arriving at an understanding of what it means to be homosexual and determining what causal factors lead to same sex desire, the G/SA members demonstrated some confusion and ambivalence in their narratives. This was the case for gay, bisexual, and straight members. The following lengthy exchange with Elise illustrates several of the issues the members commonly grappled with.

Megan: Do you think it's possible to change someone from gay to straight?

Elise: It depends upon what made them gay in the first place – if they were born gay or anything like that. It's just...it depends upon your family and if you want to change, and if they want you to change. I've tried myself for my family's sake. It's just... it doesn't work.

Megan: Like, it wouldn't ever feel right to you to date a guy?

Elise: It's just like lying to yourself. I mean, I've like dated guys before, but now it just wouldn't work out. I could never see myself doing anything with them.

Megan: Do you think that people are gay because it's something physiological or genetic? Or do you think it's from experience? Or some combination of both?

Elise: I don't think it has anything to do with genetics. I was talking to my friend about that earlier. Her grandmother's gay, her mom's gay, and her dad is bi. She's bi and she just keeps thinking it's genetics. But I don't think it is because there is nowhere in your DNA that says, "this is gay DNA." And especially experiences, like, it's just hard to explain cuz, no I don't think you can get it through genetics. It depends how bad the experience is and if you felt that way before it happened. Like, if it made you open up a little more. It depends on the situation.

Megan: How do you feel about the argument that all humans are actually born bisexual.

Elise: I think it's kind of true because everybody has to have had some experience with the same sex somehow, someway – whether they were drunk or not [laughs]

Megan: Do you think being drunk is an excuse?

Elise: In a way yes, and in a way no. It depends how drunk you are.

Megan: Like, if I got drunk and made out with a girl would you be like...

Elise: You still did it, you're guilty.

Megan: So you think that in some way, shape, or form everyone has some sort of feelings or experience with the same sex?

Elise: Yeah.

Megan: So what makes a person officially gay?

Elise: Well you don't have to self identify cuz no one has labels. It's just your feelings inside. If you like girls, but you don't want the label of gay, that's okay, you just like girls.

When asked whether someone could be changed from gay to straight, Elise's answer of "it depends what made them gay in the first place" implies she believes that there may be more than one reason a person is sexually attracted to others of the same sex. However, when asked directly about homosexuality and genetics, she immediately rejects biological explanations in favor of "experiences." Elise continues to describe her belief that she "doesn't think" homosexuality is a result of genetics. The more she continues the less sure she seems to be that biological explanations are without merit. Later, Elise quickly accepts my suggestion that everyone is essentially bisexual. Elise's suggestibility here implies she is still searching for a best fit explanation for homosexuality. While all of the members of the G/SA I interviewed were forthcoming in our discussions concerning what made some people gay or bi, nearly all of them exhibited confusion and some hesitancy to commit to one explanation.

Of further interest in this interchange with Elise is the indirect way she references the stigmatized category of gay. While she may not be sure what causes sexual orientation, her

verbalization that she doesn't think someone can "get it" through genetics and that when someone becomes intoxicated and has a sexual interaction with a same sex participant they are "guilty" implies she clearly understands normative social judgments regarding minority sexualities.

Another prevalent theme in my interviews that Elise touches on is that nearly everyone has some degree of attraction to members of their same sex. Albeit, as she pointedly suggests, possibly only when they are intoxicated. Elise was far from alone in her assertion that "everybody has to have had some experience with the same sex somehow." In fact, other members of the G/SA expressed this idea in far more detail and without me directly asking about it, as in the discussion below with Lula.

Lula: And for like some reason, I believe that everybody is attracted to the same sex somehow but the way they make it seem is that they don't want to make it public but just for the few people that want to know.

Megan: You just said something I find very interesting, that you think that in some sense everybody is attracted to someone of the same sex in some way.

Lula: Yeah, uh huh.

Megan: How did you come up with that idea?

Lula: It's just, I kind of thought about it because a lot of girls that I know, they say "I wouldn't do anything with a girl but sometimes I see a girl and I feel somewhat attracted to them."

Megan: Like more so than just recognizing whether or not someone is hot?

Lula: Yeah, like actually being physically attracted, yeah. So like a couple of guys I know will be like "no" but I'm like "yeah, whatever you're attracted to another guy somehow." But yeah, so that was pretty much it and then I came to the conclusion that all people find some type of attraction to the same sex but it doesn't necessarily mean that you are gay or lesbian or anything.

Megan: What would be the point then when someone would be considered gay or lesbian?

Lula: I think it really matters how you would wanna be with somebody. Like your more physical attraction and the way you see people. I mean it really just matters if you're happy or not with the type of person you're in love with.

It is striking that Lula, and other members of the G/SA, are so quick to subscribe to the view that everyone has an element of bisexuality or homosexuality in their sexual desires considering their rejection of the many straight girls in their school who they charge pretend to be bisexual or lesbian to attract attention from boys. If they reject the girls' claim that they are sexually attracted to other girls, why would the G/SA members then argue that everyone is gay? One possibility is that the G/SA members intuitively recognize that insisting that sexuality is a continuum is counter to prevailing norms and understandings of sexuality. As Raymond (1994) points out, "much research has shown the correlation between strong beliefs in sex roles and anti-homosexual attitudes; similarly, cultures and ideologies that tend to be "sex negative" generally enforce anti-homosexual measures and are more likely to treat sexuality as dichotomous rather than continuous" (p. 124). For the G/SA members, rejecting the gay/straight dichotomy may be one way they feel efficacious in subverting the dominant heterosexist culture.

An alternative and less abstract explanation could be that current members of the G/SA do not want others outside of their established group to define appropriate sexual scripts, make judgments surrounding sexual identity, or compete with group members' standing as the official Palm Terrace "gays." As discussed in Chapter 4, by participating in the G/SA, members were able to appropriate the label "the gays" and use that status in developing their social identities. Allowing outsiders to achieve the label through external means carries the potential of diluting the social power that accrues with group participation.

The internal struggle of the G/SA members to account for the origins of sexuality is not only interesting in and of itself, but it serves to highlight possible trajectories of the gay rights movement. As the G/SA at Palm Terrace High has all of the markers of a burgeoning social movement, the club members' explanations surrounding sexuality are fertile ground for the development of the future gay rights agenda. With so much at stake in the resolution of the genetic vs. environmental argument surrounding sexuality, it should be comforting that the high school adolescents preparing to take on the next wave of this social movement continue to be hesitant and ambivalent in their judgments of the origins of sexuality. With the popular mainstream explanations posing substantial risk to the rights of sexual minorities (e.g., genetic engineering or increased social intervention), adolescents in the G/SA are strategic in not firmly holding to any of the current explanations of sexuality.

Coming Out Stories

Discussions of how G/SA members came out as gay or bisexual to family, friends, and the public in general were a common topic of conversation in both my interviews and among the members during meeting times. Raymond (1994) explains, “coming out – the process of acknowledging to oneself, to other gays and lesbians, and to heterosexuals that one is gay or lesbian – is probably a lifelong process” (p. 128). In fact, other researchers and theorists have recognized that a continuum of “outness” exists among sexual minority youth and have sought to develop models outlining the often lifelong process of coming out (e.g., Cass 1979; Coleman 1985) or further understand coming out as a transformative process (Guittar 2011). In their narratives of coming out, it was implicitly recognized that coming out is actually an on-going

process rather than just one point in time. In fact, during the time I was collecting data, students from the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Student Union from the local university came to a G/SA meeting to do a Q & A panel during a meeting. One of the topics of discussion was the fact that coming out is a process, and as a result, the G/SA members received explicit information encouraging them to view coming out as a process rather than a single event. This is not to say that certain instances of revelations of sexual identity are not considered important points of demarcation in the lives of young gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. As Rossi (2010) notes in an analysis of coming out stories, coming out to one's parents is “a momentous event in the lives of gay and lesbian young adults” (p. 1175). Moreover, coming out to peers is another salient event in the lives of young adults and often occurs prior to disclosing to parents (Rossi 2010).

Since researchers have long noted the problematic aspects of the development of adolescent sexuality (e.g., Tolman 2006), it follows that coming out to parents would be a highly charged, emotional experience. While all the G/SA members who had come out to their parents could readily recall anecdotes about the experiences, those whose parents were supportive generally recounted this part of the coming out process in positive terms. Take for example, Lula's comments about coming out.

Lula: Um, because I'm really open. Like, I'm not afraid to hide who I am. So like, most people look up to that, especially people that can't come out of the closet yet. They like, sometimes they ask me like how I did it and stuff like that, and I think it's because I had more understanding parents. My parents kind of understood it.

Megan: Tell me more about that experience with your parents.

Lula: The first time I told my dad that I liked girls he was like, “Yes!” and then my mom, she's bisexual, and she has more understanding, she has a lot of gay friends. So she kind of just understood it. You know, just whatever made me happy.

Megan: Why was your dad like, “yes!” when you told him?

Lula: Cause like, that meant no guys.

Megan: Does your dad distrust guys more than he would your girlfriends?

Lula: Yeah probably. Plus, there was like the whole pregnant issue and all that stuff so.

Incredibly, not only did Lula's parents support her decision, she actually describes her father as being excited, or possibly relieved, regarding her homosexuality. For Lula's family, sex and gender appear to trump sexuality in order of importance. The designation as a teen parent is clearly viewed as a more stigmatizing category than being gay in this household.

Although some of the homosexual and bisexual G/SA members had not come out completely to their parents, their reasons for not doing so were not always associated with fear of their parents' reactions or ostracism from their families. Christina's description of her parent's knowledge of her sexual identity perfectly illustrates this theme.

Megan: So you mentioned in the meeting last week that you're bisexual?

Christina: Yeah.

Megan: When did you realize that that was part of who you were?

Christina: Um, well at 12 years old that's when I really found it out. That's when I was like, "oh, it's okay to like girls...and I do like them!" It was kind of a thing for me, so I'm pretty much okay with myself. Um, I'm also, like, agnostic but kind of like open about it with my friends, but as long as my parents don't find out so that they're not like...

Megan: You don't want them to find out you're agnostic?

Christina: Nooo, because then they'll get, like, upset with me. When I'm out of the house then, yeah.

Megan: Do they know you're bisexual?

Christina: Um, kinda and kinda not.

Megan: But you think they would be more upset about the agnosticism than...

Christina: Yeah, because my mom would be okay with me and my sexuality, I just don't like to be open about it so they're not like, "oh, if she has a sleepover with a girl," and this and that. But other than that no, cuz my mom watched a Lifetime movie once about a lesbian girl and her mother, and she was crying and she's like, "Christina, if you're gay..." and she was like all emotional, "it's all right with me!" But I think she would be devastated if I didn't believe in God and stuff.

Although Christina quickly admits she has not come out completely to her parents, she does reveal that they "kinda" know. The aspect of her identity she is not comfortable disclosing to her parents has nothing to do with her sexuality, but rather with her religious beliefs. Christina appears confident her parents would be accepting of her bisexuality, she believes they would be "devastated" by her agnosticism. Further, her explanation for not being completely open with them about her sexuality has little to do with their anticipated level of acceptance but hinges on her desire not to be inconvenienced by her parents monitoring her sleepovers with her girl friends or girlfriends.

While not fully coming out to her family in Christina's case appears to be rather benign, being forced to hide their sexual identities was significantly more stressful for other G/SA members. My interviews and experiences with the G/SA members were illuminating in regards to the consequences of feeling forced to hide homosexual or bisexual attraction. Take for example this poignant exchange with Ryan.

Ryan: I didn't say anything. I'm not, I know some people should, I mean I know people tell me that I should tell somebody, but I just don't because I think that makes it worse. I don't know why, I'm not that kind of person. I like to deal with things by myself.

Megan: So how did you deal with it then?

Ryan: Just keeping it inside, not telling anybody, just dealing with it.

Megan: Do you think there's like any effect on you by keeping it inside like that?

Ryan: Um, like eighth grade was when I wasn't out at all, and I started hearing people talk about gay people. My mom started to ask me, and I started to get all emotional, but I didn't let it out to anybody. I actually went to Ridge View in eighth grade, I don't know if you know what that is. It's...I don't know what to call it, we call it Ridge View. But I started cutting myself so I went there...

Megan: Like a treatment place?

Ryan: Yeah, so they arrested me.

Megan: For cutting yourself?

Ryan: I was at school. Cause someone said I brought razor blades to school. I didn't, but they got me anyway and started asking me questions. I never did tell anyone I was gay...

Megan: Was the cutting related to that in any way?

Ryan: No, it was just the stress, and now I think about it and I'm like "how stupid," what good really came of it?

Megan: Stress from?

Ryan: The gay thing, wanting to tell someone but scared what their reaction might be.

Megan: So if you can remember back then, at times when you would actually be cutting yourself, what would you be thinking about?

Ryan: [long pause] The only way to make myself feel better...[long pause]

Megan: Did it make you feel better to do it?

Ryan: Yeah. I can't explain it, nothing good ever came out of it.

Megan: But at the time did it feel like it was helping?

Ryan: Yeah, a lot.

Ryan's brush with self-harm was not the only such occurrence among G/SA members that I came across during my research. The following excerpt from my field notes provides further details.

Today at the meeting we are talking about the Day of Silence and whether it will be allowed at all this year. The students explain that last year Jesse chose the Day of Silence to come out at school. He had a “freak out” in the courtyard between classroom buildings and announced he was going to kill himself from having had to keep his homosexuality a secret from everyone for so long. He allegedly blamed the Day of Silence activities for forcing him over the edge.

Jesse was technically a member of the G/SA, although nearly all of the other members expressed at some point that they did not like him. Further, they would generally exclude him from club plans by not reminding him when meetings would be occurring. After interviewing Jesse, I could understand why he was not popular among his peers. He told me several blatant lies during the interview (e.g., that he was the editor of the G/SA newsletter) and lacked the ability to engage in normal social interaction (e.g., always wanted to give me a hug). While it might be expected that as members of other marginalized groups, the G/SA members would be sensitive to other minority groups (in Jesse's case, the socially inept and possibly mentally ill), the G/SA members treated him instead with derision and occasionally open hostility. Perhaps the G/SA members wanted to distance themselves from Jesse's strangeness, or maybe they lacked the patience to tolerate his varied annoying habits. Whatever the reason, it reveals that some homosexual youth cannot expect support from their gay, bisexual, and straight allied peers during the coming out process.

Coming out to peers, especially at school, presented as another highly charged situation in the coming out process of G/SA members. The decision to come out to peers has been found by previous researchers to be fraught with concern over rejection and loss of friendship (Pilkington and D'Augelli 1995). As Rossi (2010) has noted, the increasing importance placed on friendships with peers during adolescence results in a heightened fear at the thought of the loss of the positive regard of these friends. Nevertheless, the majority of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual

G/SA members had taken the risk to come out to select friends. The results of their revelations concerning sexual identity to peers had mixed results. Bridget explains how her decision to come out as bisexual to a good friend resulted in a betrayal that led to her expulsion from private school.

Bridget: I told one person, I thought she was like, my best friend, and she said she understood what it was, but, I mean, when you're at a Christian school they keep you very sheltered about what you learn. She didn't really understand I guess, so she went to her mom and her mom like freaked out and went to the principal.

Megan: And then what happened?

Bridget: That's all she wrote. I got kicked out.

Megan: Do you think that was fair?

Bridget: No, I don't. At the time, I didn't really understand what I was going through and I think they should at least try to help you. Like...it's not like helping wise, but I don't know how to say it, they just should talk to you about it and ask if you're gonna try anything at the school. If not, then you should be able to stay and they can just be watching you. They should at least talk about it, cuz they don't talk about it at all.

Although Bridget describes this experience as particularly painful, and mourns the loss of a lifelong friend, she locates the responsibility for her friend's betrayal on the school's administration and inflexible Christian values. She describes her friend as not understanding what the word "bisexual" meant due to her sheltered Christian upbringing. Bridget does not believe her friend intended to expose her and have her kicked out of school but was merely seeking clarification about bisexuality from her mother. I later asked Bridget, "your friend that didn't know what bisexual meant, what do you think she thought it meant when you told her?" To which she responded, "I don't really know. I mean, I kind of explained it to her but I think she was kind of still confused, you know?" It is conceivable that acknowledging that the loss of

this friendship was intentional and resulted from her disclosure of bisexuality is simply too painful for Bridget to bear so she shifts the blame away from the former friend.

In some instances, coming out to peers was a choice that was made for the G/SA members by being publicly outed by suspicious peers. This was the case for Lula.

Megan: When you came out, how old were you?

Lula: I was in seventh grade, so 12 maybe?

Megan: Can you remember why you decided to do it then?

Lula: Um, I don't know like, when I was younger I just can't remember me liking guys. You know, like all the little girls always had crushes and stuff like that and I didn't like guys. And then you know back then like *nobody* was gay and then all of the sudden you come to high school and everybody's gay. But in middle school, somebody actually confronted me about it and she was like, "oh, you're a lesbian blah, blah, blah." So it got me really angry and I ended up hitting her and I got suspended. So then a couple of months later it was all over the school. So then eventually I was like, "yeah, I am" [gay]. So after that I was the only lesbian at that school.

Megan: And what was that like?

Lula: Seventh grade, like oh, you know, you always worry about what people think about you when you are younger. I actually was kind of like mad every day. I didn't want to go to school. But then eventually my dad talked to me about it and he was like, "it doesn't matter, you have to know who your real friends are – they won't care," you know. So I just went about my life.

Lula first responded to accusations from classmates that she was a lesbian with hostility, but she subsequently chose to embrace the sexual identity. Moreover, Lula attributes her lack of shame surrounding her sexual identity to her supportive father, underscoring the importance of the reactions of parents during the coming out process.

The experiences of sexual minority youth during the coming out process can have a great impact on their future choices and experiences. Raymond (1994) posits that "many gay and lesbian adolescents identify the feelings of isolation from family and peer group as primary

causes of suicidal behavior” (p. 127). My data suggest that G/SA members who have family support are far better situated to make the transition from adolescence to adulthood; especially in regards to their developing sexual identities. Further, as Ryan’s and Jesse’s experiences highlight, hiding same-sex sexual attraction from family and peers for fear of rejection has negative consequences as well. Understanding how family support during the coming out process affects the experiences and perceptions of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth is especially urgent given the known high risk of this population to attempt suicide. Research has consistently found gay and lesbian adolescents to have higher rates of attempted suicide than their heterosexual counterparts (Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, and Bloom 1998). For example, using the Adolescent Health Survey database, Remafedi and colleagues (1998) found that 28 percent of bisexual and homosexual males and 21 percent of bisexual and homosexual females had attempted suicide compared to 15 percent of heterosexual females and 4.2 percent of heterosexual males. Consequently, the coming out narratives collected in my research with the G/SA are of potential use to professionals seeking to ameliorate adolescent suicide rates and create supportive programs and services for sexual minority youth.

Sex and Desire

As Raymond (1994) observed, sexual minority youth must simultaneously participate in at least two subcultures: adolescence and homosexuality/bisexuality. It is apparent, of course, that many of them have additional subcultures outside of these two that they must contend with as well (e.g., race, class, gender). However, dealing with the additional element of homosexuality, a stigmatized social category, requires sexual minority youth to develop creative

ways to deal with their developing sexual identities and desires. While adolescence is generally understood as a time of development and change where the individual enters as a child and emerges as an adult, we still “have no clear social place for sexually active youths, especially girls” (Rowland 1994:130). As both Tolman (1994) and Fine (1988) have posited, adolescent girls are well versed in male sexual desire and the necessity to control boys’ sexual impulses but lack a clear understanding or acknowledgment of their own sexual urges and feelings. Moreover, as countless others have noted (e.g., Horn 2005; Payne 2010; Tolman 2006), displaying sexual desires and/or behaviors places adolescent girls in a socially devalued category.

The previous research on adolescents, sexuality, and gender raises important questions for how sex and desire are understood and experienced by members of the G/SA. Of particular interest to me was the way in which being a participant in a group that exists in part to subvert compulsory heterosexuality would work around the dominant cultural judgments on adolescent sexuality. Simply put, to what extent does violating established normative boundaries regarding the appropriate sex of sexual partners lead to additional crossing of other boundaries of sexual behavior?

There was a marked difference in the interviews between the narratives of girls and boys in regards to sex and desire. The boys I interviewed did not articulate strong narratives surrounding sexual desire or sexual behavior. They did talk about sex, often indirectly, and mostly in the form of jokes. Patrick told me the following joke one day at a meeting: Two straight guys and one gay guy are sitting on bar stools. How do you know which one is gay? The one sitting on the stool turned upside down.

The views on sexual behavior expressed by the girls (lesbian, bisexual and straight) had clearly identifiable characteristics in common that were not present in the boys' narratives. One common element in my interviews with the girls in the G/SA was a heavy emphasis on the dangers involved in engaging in sexual intercourse.

Megan: So what are your views on people your age having sex?

Bridget: Well, if you're gonna do it, use a condom and be safe. But I'm waiting until I'm married, or at least, it's gonna be kind of different because...

Megan: Depending what state you live in?

Bridget: [laughing] Yeah, exactly. But I'm at least gonna wait until I'm out of high school. That way I can have my education, I'm already gonna be in college. So I can stay focused – but also, it depends who the person is, and just what thoughts are going through your head, what type of relationship it is and stuff like that.

Megan: How will you decide when to...?

Bridget: That is a very difficult question. Um, well, when you're married. At least I think, maybe after, uh I don't know. I can't answer that because it's different for many different people.

Megan: Other than the obvious, pregnancy and STDs, do you think there are risks to having sex too early?

Bridget: Just...you could be prone to ahh, be a sex addict or something. Once you do it once you're just gonna want to keep doing it cause it's there. And just, I don't know, just cuz it's not ...you're too young, you're too young.

Megan: So if people do it too young it could in some way be damaging?

Bridget: Yeah, if they do something wrong and something happens, like something breaks, or rips, or something you could be damaged. I don't know if you would be damaged for life, but it probably would hurt.

Megan: Are you talking about when condoms break?

Bridget: Yeah, that too. I had a friend who was pregnant and she had a miscarriage. It was sad. I cried for a couple of days straight.

In this one brief segment of the interview, Bridget manages to invoke pregnancy, losing control and becoming a “sex addict” after one incident of intercourse, and internal injuries, as dangers of teenage sex. Even more interesting in this exchange is that despite her self identification as a lesbian, she interprets my question about sex to be about heterosexual sex. Although it is conceivable that something could “rip” during sex between two women if objects are inserted into the vagina or other orifices, those sexual interactions would be precluded from causing pregnancy.

It was not just the lesbian identifying members of the G/SA that framed sex, and specifically heterosexual sex, in ways that described it as risky and dangerous. The straight identifying young women in the G/SA also discussed sex in terms that were fearful. This theme was best articulated by Jessica in her explanation of her plans to become intoxicated prior to her first experience with heterosexual intercourse.

Megan: Why did you pick 21 [as the age she wants to have sex]?

Jessica: Cuz, like, then I'm free to get drunk and do it on accident. Then, like, forget about it.

Megan: So, when you turn 21 and you can legally drink, you're going to get drunk and have sex?

Jessica: Yes, that's the plan so far.

Megan: Why do you think you need to be drunk?

Jessica: Cuz, like, I don't want to feel it. Like, my mother told me how painful it was.

Megan: So, it's not something you're looking forward to?

Jessica: No.

Megan: Do you think after the drunken first time it will be better?

Jessica: [pause] possibly [pause]

Megan: Do you know any women who talk positively about sex with men?

Jessica: Not really.

Martin (1996) found in her interviews with adolescent girls and boys that “girls' expectations of sex range[d] from romantic images portrayed by the media to fear that it [would] hurt, be painful, or scary, with the majority (well over half) falling into the latter category” (p. 68). As Tolman (1994; 2006) has repeatedly argued, the outcome of research on girls' sexuality usually finds mostly negative narratives of sex and sexuality. Moreover, these narratives are often coupled with discussions of the social sanctions enacted against girls who engage in and/or enjoy sex. It is particularly interesting that my research shows this same finding across categories of sexual identity for girls. Payne (2010) has posited that the label of “slut” is “just as impactful for lesbian youth as it is for their heterosexual peers” (p. 318). As Payne (2010) explains:

The high school slut is mythic. Stories about her spread at lightning speed and provide a mechanism for sharing, bonding, and belonging in the American high school social arena as students participate in the passing of salacious details of the latest slut story. Research suggests that slut and its derivatives are among the most common and the worst possible pejoratives hurled in the high school arena (Thurlow 2001) equivalent in regulatory power to *fag* and *dyke*. [emphasis in original] (P. 317).

For the large majority of girls in the G/SA that I interviewed, membership in an organization that subverted heterosexist social norms did not appear to open avenues for further subversion of sexist social norms. In fact, it may be that having placed themselves in one stigmatized category (gay, lesbian, bisexual, or straight ally), the girls in the G/SA were reluctant to place themselves in an additional stigmatized category by appearing to be too sex positive. Additionally, the girls I interviewed were quick to sanction the behavior of other girls by labeling them sluts. For example, Bridget's remarks about girls who wear sexually suggestive clothing were a typical sentiment expressed by my interviewees.

Megan: What do you think of those girls [who wear tight clothes and make-up]?

Bridget: Hoochie. But I don't make judgments. I do think it, but I don't say it out loud. I mean some of my friends do that and I'm just like, "dude, put a jacket on. Like, why are you displaying to everybody? You're just trying to get attention." And that's not the right way to go about getting attention.

Labels like "hoochie" were not strictly reserved for girls who appeared sexy or were sexually active. This becomes evident when Christina discusses her boyfriend cheating on her with another girl.

Christina: Yeah, she has a car so she can like drive him around everywhere, you know? Cuz like, here you have to have a car to like get anywhere. Yeah, he likes her because she has a car, and she's pretty, and she's a ho.

Megan: Do you think she's a ho?

Christina: Ummmm, well she knew what she was doing and she disrespected me.

Despite the fact that Christina herself is sexually active (with both girls and boys), she is still able to appropriate the label "ho" to use against girls who violate the heterofeminine norm of niceness. The "ho" in this narrative earns her label by disrespecting another girl by having sex

with her boyfriend. It is not the sex itself that is seen as transgressive but having sex with someone else's boyfriend. As Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) found in their study of adolescent middle schoolers, girls who exhibited assertiveness often fell victim to accusations of slutiness by their peers. The girls in the Palm Terrace G/SA proved not to be an exception to this finding.

The G/SA members were aware of the abounding stereotypes that hypersexualized those embracing gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. Participation in sexual activities with members of the same-sex often earned G/SA members reputations of being oversexed. While most times they argued against the accurateness of those assumptions, at other times they chose to embrace them. Natalia's entertaining description of lesbian sexuality is illustrative of this point.

Megan: So, I'm gonna way back up to the beginning of the interview when you said that it's harder to find a girl to date than a guy.

Natalia: Mmm, hmm.

Megan: Why? Explain that.

Natalia: Cuz most people are still in the closet.

Megan: Okay, so a smaller pool of available women to choose from?

Natalia: Uh, huh. And also a lot of the girls – a guy, surprisingly enough, even though they say guys are more perverts than girls, once you meet a lesbian, you'll know all the lesbians because they've slept with each other. It's just like the "L word" said. I swear, I met this one girl who was like crazy for me, but man, on the first date she tried to like push me against the wall and make out with me. I was like, I mean she was a gorgeous girl, and she was really nice, but then she turned out to be a slut herself, cuz, man she slept with every girl she could freaking find! She would find them all over the Internet and sleep with them. But, a lot of the other lesbians have been in long term relationships, or they've been around with all the other lesbians. Once you meet one, you'll know all the others.

Megan: Do you think that because at this point the community of lesbians is relatively small? Or do you think there's something different about lesbians that make them...

Natalia: They're like, I don't know, I guess lesbians just aren't afraid to go out and have crazy sex with each other. I was telling my friend this and she thought about it for a minute and she was like, "Natalia, I just had an epiphany. What you said about how lesbians just don't care and they mostly care about sex is so true." And I'm like, you know, cause it's just one of my friends, and I was like "oh, she's bisexual!." And she was like, "my ex-girlfriend was just sleeping with me, and so did my other ex, and then I realized they all kind of know each other. And that's all they talk about is how many girls they've messed around with."

Although Natalia actually invokes the term "slut" to describe lesbians, she subsequently describes them as not "afraid to go out and have crazy sex with each other." On close examination, Natalia is turning what has long been a label used to place someone in a devalued social category into a label with a far more positive meaning. As the G/SA members had already bought into the movement to reclaim the word "queer" (a favorite saying at meetings was "cheers, queers") it is perhaps unsurprising they would use this strategy to reclaim other sentiments as well.

When I was preparing to begin my research at Palm Terrace High, I was operating under the assumption that issues surrounding race and ethnicity would be especially salient to the participants in my study in terms of sex and desire. I was naively anticipating that the students at Palm Terrace would be aware of racial and ethnic identities and the manner in which those identities were impacting their lived experiences. However the G/SA students I interviewed rarely made any mention of race and ethnicity in their discussions of sex and desire. One exception was Natalia, who contributed the following scant information on Latina sexuality:

Megan: What do you think the ideal age is to have kids?

Natalia: Um, well, not as young as 51 percent of Latina women are having them. Supposedly, according to the statistic that I looked up online, 51 percent of Latina women have kids by the age of 20, and that's horrible.

Megan: Where did you find that statistic?

Natalia: It was on this website, I think the Candies Foundation or something.

Megan: The shoes?

Natalia: Yeah, the shoes and the underwear and stuff like that, they have a teenage pregnancy thing. Like all the statistics were normal, but the only racial statistics was the Latin one. It was so random. Like, wow, that's pretty bad. But I believe it.

Megan: So it was higher than any other racial or ethnic group?

Natalia: Oh, they didn't have any other racial/ethnic group statistics except for that one.

Megan: oh, okay. [I checked, she's right]. What would be your explanation for that? Like, why is that happening?

Natalia: Well, I go online and I research things a lot and at one point I wanted to be a gynecologist. I looked up things online and I realized that a lot of people don't really know much about sex or anything. And if they do, it's like really stupid.

Megan: So you think that the pregnancies are a result of not knowing how to practice safe sex?

Natalia: Yeah, definitely.

Megan: Is there any reason why you think Latina women are more likely to get pregnant at a young age? Like, why would they know any less about sex than other ethnic groups?

Natalia: Umm, I don't know....

In her research with high school girls, Bettie (2003) also encountered the high rate of childbirth among young Latina women. The Mexican-American girls at the school she studied were more likely to be perceived as too sexually active than the mostly white "prep" girls. Bettie (2003) suggested that it was not that the prep girls were less likely to have sex, but that they were more likely to use birth control regularly, more likely to have abortions, and less likely to have a baby as part of the rite of passage to adulthood. The Mexican-American girls in Bettie's study not only lacked information on birth control, but also expressed that they did not believe in birth control or abortion. While Natalia had not yet formulated an explanation as complete as

Bettie's for the high rates of pregnancy at an early age among Latinas, she does recognize the issue exists and has begun looking for causal factors. It is likely that with time, Natalia's understanding of the manner in which culture and social class intersect to create this phenomenon will broaden considerably.

I suspect that the G/SA members were more fully conscious of the consequences of their racial/ethnic identities than they expressed in their interviews for two reasons. First, they were aware that I was interested in their experiences because they were members of the G/SA. This knowledge might have led them to foreground their experiences with sexuality, sex, and desire in ways that revolved their status as sexual minorities (or sexual minority supporters in the case of straight students). Second, I was given plenty of natural opportunities at club meetings to demonstrate my sympathies with the gay rights movement, but similar opportunities did not present to communicate that I was also an equally strong supporter of racial/ethnic minority rights. Thus, they may have been hesitant to bring discussions of race/ethnicity into the interviews for fear of offending me. Thus, explanations for the lack of discussion concerning racial/ethnic identities and judgments, behaviors, and consequences of sex remain speculative.

Summary

The G/SA members were fairly open and frank in their discussions of sex and sexuality in interviews, during meetings, and in casual conversation. Given the average ages at which adolescents become sexually active in the United States, it is unsurprising that the G/SA members had thought at length about sexuality and sexual identity and had sexual experiences upon which to draw. The most common thematic elements of the narratives involving sex and

sexuality expressed by G/SA members surrounded discussion of the origins of sexuality (specifically homosexuality/bisexuality), coming out stories, and issues surrounding sex and desire.

In accounting for the origins of sexuality, G/SA club members invoked a mixture of biological, sociological, and psychological factors. Even more interesting than the wide variety of perspectives of the catalysts driving same-sex attraction was the tendency of members to switch back-and-forth between genetic and social explanations. It is clear that the majority of members have not solidified their beliefs on the antecedents of homosexuality. This is perhaps unsurprising given that any explanation they adhere to could have unpleasant social consequences in the form of intolerance or genetic tinkering.

For the club members identifying as homosexual or bisexual, coming out stories were prominently positioned in their narratives. G/SA members recounted both tragic and heart-warming anecdotes surrounding coming out to friends, family, and acquaintances. Understanding the coming out experiences of homosexual and bisexual adolescents is important, as this process is implicated in the feelings of isolation that are experienced by many gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

Despite the school district's prohibition on discussing sexual activities during extracurricular groups, the G/SA members frequently discussed matters concerning sex on an on-going basis. Although many of the members of the G/SA did not identify as straight, heterosexual sexual scripts continued to be invoked on regular occasions. For example, girls could still be socially sanctioned by being called "sluts," and sex was often referenced as a type of dangerous behavior that was physically painful for women and resulted in pregnancy.

Tolman (2006) elegantly outlines the importance of investigating the types of narratives about sex and sexuality that appear in my interviews with G/SA members:

At a time when chastity rings costing three hundred dollars appear as the “latest item” on the Style page of the New York Times (Rosenbloom 2005), when it is anathema even to suggest that girls see sex therapists, although they describe their sexuality in ways that would, in adult women, merit treatment by (or plastering over with) the latest medications, we need to ask how (all forms of) sex education treat, cover up, or reify hegemonic and other masculinities and femininities. The more we explore and document how gendered conceptions of sexuality and hegemonic constructions of gender operate in the real lives of girls (and boys) as they develop, the more we can deploy research as a tool of resistance to the ways that compulsory heterosexuality makes girls (and boys) vulnerable to unhealthy relationships, threatening their ability to explore sexuality. (P. 85)

Despite the fact that members of the G/SA are participating in a group that makes a concerted effort to subvert compulsory heterosexuality, hegemonic masculinity, and preferred femininity, oftentimes they fall prey each of these social expectations. A deep understanding of why, how, and in what context this occurs is essential to advance the mission of G/SAs and other gay rights activist groups. Without this understanding, heterosexuality and all its accompanying baggage will continue to jeopardize the movement.

CHAPTER 6: UNDERSTANDING GENDER IN THE G/SA

Pascoe's (2007) research on developing masculinity in a high school setting exposed the ways in which sexuality often becomes explicitly tied in with the process through which gender is produced. According to Pascoe (2007), adolescent boys (and sometimes girls) participate in very outward displays of heterosexuality to legitimate their masculinity and to assert their dominance over their social environments. "By symbolically or physically mastering girls' bodies and sexuality, boys...claim masculine identities" (Pascoe 2007:87). Sexuality has also been similarly indicated as part of the process through which young women lay claim to feminine identities. As Tolman (1994) has asserted, adolescent girls recognize not only their feelings of sexual desire but also the social imperative for them to police these dangerous proclivities. The adolescent girls in Tolman's (1994) study were "beginning to voice the internalized oppression of their women's bodies; they knew and spoke about, in explicit or more indirect ways, the pressure they felt to silence their desire, to dissociate from those bodies in which they inescapably live" (p. 338).

The connection between these two ostensibly binary concepts (masculine/feminine, homosexual/heterosexual) render gender performances problematic for homosexual adolescents in particular. How can homosexual adolescents perform gender in a normative way if the performance depends in large part on the actor's ability to do heterosexuality? For many homosexual adolescents, and their straight allies, this may be a non-existent problem if they do not desire to enact normative gender performances in the first place. The research on this issue has had mixed results with scholars such as Pascoe (2007) identifying young women in the G/SA

as subverting traditional gender norms with intentionality, and others such as Payne (2010) finding that lesbian adolescents tended to adhere to heteronormative scripts.

As is to be expected during adolescence, a phase during which gender becomes intensified, both the boys and girls in the G/SA at Palm Terrace encountered issues surrounding doing gender and dealt with them in a mixture of traditional and progressive ways. At times, their methods of accommodation were internally inconsistent and counterproductive to their overarching political goals. The most interesting aspects of gender in the G/SA dealt with the ways the members alternatively conformed to and resisted gender, whether crossing gender boundaries elicited denigration or encouragement from parents and peers, and how feminist activism over the past several decades has led to changes in the pathways open to this group of adolescents in terms of doing gender.

Conformity or Resistance

While sociologists, and other social scientists, may continue to debate the fine details of gender, it has long been understood that gender is not a part of an essential biological nature with which humans are born. As early as the mid-twentieth century, Simone de Beauvoir (1952) was writing, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (p. 267). That gender is a social construction has been well established by gender theorists (see Garfinkel 1967; West and Zimmerman 1987; Butler 1990) and researchers (see Thorne 1993; Eder, Evans, and Parker 1995, Bettie 2000; Pascoe 2007). Aside from the way gender is understood and conceptualized in academia, everyday people define and act upon their own definitions of gender and its origins. Although essentialist thinking continues to define the mainstream understanding of gender, the

members of the G/SA appear to implicitly understand that there is some agency involved in their gendered performances and that they are not strictly ruled by biology.

Many members of the G/SA did not adhere to traditional styles of femininity or masculinity. For these members, essentialist understandings of gender would seem to imply that their gendered performances are unnatural, however the members themselves seemed to take pride in their ability to do gender in unexpected ways. Several of the girls in the G/SA made references to themselves as “tomboys,” as was the case with Elise.

Megan: So do you think guys or girls make better friends?

Elise: Well, for me, being a tomboy and stuff, I don't really like to go out and get my nails done, and my hair done, and stuff like that. I'd rather go out and play football or something.

Megan: Last week at the meeting you were talking about how people said you dress like a guy. Tell me about that.

Elise: Yeah, most of the time. They're just like, “why don't you wear tighter shirts, or wear pretty shoes, or wear make-up?” I like can't even put on Chapstick for like 5 minutes. It just doesn't feel right.

Megan: So you just like to be comfortable?

Elise: Yeah, I like baggy stuff most of the time. I mean, I do like tight jeans once in awhile.

While Elise rejects traditional femininity, she lacks a framework to understand gender that does not rely on the masculine/feminine binary. As a result, she invokes the “tomboy” status, which is essentially that of “like a boy,” or “fake boy.” Her description of what it means to be a girl is somewhat disparaging as she lists the activities she associates with femininity. Notice also, my original question in this exchange asked about whether boys or girls made better friends, and she clearly is making the case that it is boys. The end outcome is that Elise elevates attributes

associated with masculinity (being comfortable, doing fun things like football) at the expense of those associated with femininity (spending too much time on appearance, dressing in uncomfortable clothing). This situation was a common entanglement for the girls in the G/SA who were trying to reject normative gender performances. Their own gendered performances, combined with their explanations for them, were inherently sexist. Simply put, resistance on the individual level ends up being conformity of sorts to the larger gender structure.

A contingent of the girls in the G/SA claiming to be tomboys did not always adhere to the more masculine style of dress and grooming espoused by Elise. For these girls, the term “tomboy” might be less about a desiring to be like a boy and more about finding a way to describe themselves that communicates their strength and independence – two characteristics not generally associated with traditional femininity.

Similar circumstances involving resistance to normative gender expectations occurred among the G/SA boys I interviewed. For the G/SA boys, there was a definite preference to be friends with girls over boys, as was the case with Ryan.

Megan: You said most of your friends are girls. Why did you think that is, other than not liking straight guys? I mean you could have a lot of gay or bisexual guys as friends.

Ryan: I don't know, I guess you can relate with them. I don't know, I find it easier to talk to them.

Megan: What kind of things do you talk about?

Ryan: Well, of course the guys, and the gossip, and things you wouldn't normally talk about with a straight guy or a friend.

Ryan felt most comfortable spending time with girls. It is unsurprising that he would prefer girls' company over that of straight boys given the past hostility that characterized his interactions with heterosexual boys. When I pressed him further on a separate occasion about

why he did not spend more time seeking out the company of gay or bisexual boys with similar interests, he admitted the possibility of a romantic relationship often seemed to add a dimension to the interactions that made it hard to relax. Hanging out with girls was just easier because he did not have to worry his actions would be misinterpreted as flirting or constantly wonder if his guy friend was coming on to him. Patrick, whose friends were also almost exclusively girls echoed Ryan's sentiments.

Megan: So, when you do things with your friends, what kinds of things do you do?

Patrick: The mall, go to the parks sometimes, when I get my hair done I always bring my best friend, you know, for a second opinion.

Megan: Yeah.

Patrick: Buying clothes, buying shoes.

Megan: So, shopping?

Patrick: Yeah, and guy looking, I guess.

Patrick's and Ryan's responses were fairly typical for the G/SA boys I interviewed. What is absent in their descriptions of the fairly feminine activities they engage in, is the disparagement of more masculine pursuits. So while they chose to engage in behaviors that are often considered to be in the domain of femininity (e.g., shopping), they did not appear to take issue with the types of interests that are often characterized as masculine (e.g., sports). This finding is surprising given that the G/SA girls who preferred to enact more masculine gender performances were highly critical of femininity.

Observing the boys in the G/SA, particularly those openly identifying as homosexual, construct gender performances that could be read as gay and masculine at the same time was

fascinating. In these instances, gender nonconformity was used as a tool to assist G/SA members in achieving a specific sexual identity. For the boys identifying as gay, giving off a gender performance that others would understand as “gay guy” was especially important. Patrick shared with me how he made sure people knew he was gay after he came out.

Patrick: I started wearing rainbow stuff, you know like acting gay.

Megan: How do you act gay?

Patrick: I guess some people say the way I sound, hand movements, attitude, and my appearance. Um, I started walking purposely kind of like I was gay, and then, um...

Megan: Like, how does a gay person walk?

Patrick: Um, they kind of have, like, a sway.

Megan: A sway?

Patrick: Yeah, I guess it's a sway.

Patrick was very interested in dating other boys, and he wanted to make sure there was no confusion as to the sex of the dates he wanted to attract. During a conversation after one of the meetings between Patrick, Ms. Melba, and me, Patrick expressed his frustration in his uncertainty if another student at the school, Jose, with whom he had been flirting, was actually gay. Patrick initially thought Jose might be gay based on his choice in clothing, mannerisms, and his friendliness toward Patrick (heterosexual boys often would not associate with him). Patrick struggled to interpret if Jose's somewhat feminine gender performance was intended to convey a gay masculinity. Despite Patrick's description of “acting gay,” it was clear from this encounter that he tacitly understood that the way a person does gender is not concretely tied to their sexuality. Using the way someone does gender to signal or interpret sexual identity accurately becomes essential when a person's physical safety is at stake. As Patrick explained to me, you

cannot just ask a guy if they are gay without fearing the possibility they might be straight and “beat you down” for asking.

Elements of the way students did race/ethnicity at times created confusion surrounding gender and sexual identity. This was the case for Patrick (white non-Latino) who mistakenly took one of the new students, Juan (Latino), as gay based on his comportment.

Megan: How do you know who’s gay?

Patrick: The gaydar.

Megan: How does the gaydar work? Does it work 100 percent?

Patrick: No, it’s not 100 percent but most of the time it’s right. It’s like 95 percent right.

Megan: But then sometimes it’s been off before, like you thought someone was gay...

Patrick: Yeah, it’s been off. The guy that’s in drama, Juan, that Spanish guy, he’s straight, he has a girlfriend. I was like, “whoa,” I thought he was really gay. Like the tone of his voice and the way he sounds...

Juan had recently moved to the United States from a Spanish-speaking South American country. He spoke very limited English, which created several instances of confusion with other students. For example, he once attended a G/SA meeting by accident because he thought it was a drama department meeting. When another student asked if he was gay, he did not understand the question and initially responded in the affirmative. Juan was also a very meticulous dresser, had very fluid body language, and was extremely polite. The other G/SA students had difficulty reading Juan's performance as “Latino masculinity” and assumed he was gay for a good part of the year.

Another major reason Patrick employed a noncomformative gender performance was political. Patrick believed it was his obligation to be openly recognized as gay to demonstrate his

gay pride. While he sometimes declared his homosexuality through symbols (e.g., rainbow bracelets, G/SA shirts), he also relied upon his gendered performance to accomplish this task. Most students at Palm Terrace were able to recognize the rainbow attire as a statement of gay pride, but these items were also worn by the straight allies in the G/SA (who were mostly girls). Patrick did not want to be mistaken for merely a supporter of gay rights but as a legitimate member of the gay community. Living openly as a homosexual was clearly not the path of least resistance for Patrick, but he felt it was the right thing to do. The take-away from Patrick's experiences is that gender can be a useful tool in the construction of a sexual identity.

Despite the fact that the members of the G/SA frequently used gender to establish sexual identity in a way that was contradictory to normative gender expectations, it was also sometimes the case that they attempted to conform to aspects of masculinity and femininity. Recall Elise's earlier assertion that she does "like tight jeans once in awhile." For the girls, gender conformity commonly took the form of adherence to a feminine style of dress and grooming. For the G/SA boys, taking up one of the hallmarks of masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, was one of the main ways they conformed or resisted. As Pascoe (2007) stressed, one of the main features of straight masculinity is demonstrating the ability to "get girls." The most popular boys in the high school where Pascoe (2007) conducted her research were able to establish a reputation for being desirable to girls.

If anyone at River High was a "stud at sports" and a "stud with the ladies," it was Chad, a tall, well-muscled, strikingly good-looking senior football player of mixed white and Latino heritage. Chad spent much of his interview describing how he was "*that guy*" on campus: "I'm Chad Rodgers. I play football. I'm going

to college. All that kind of shit. Bad-ass, you know?” He said that because of this other guys were envious of him. When I asked him why this was the case, he answered confidently, with a bit of a sneer, “Probably 'cause they can't get girls..” (P. 87).

G/SA members, being generally aware they occupied a subordinate social status based on their sexuality and sometimes gender, were not always willing to placidly accept this stigmatized social standing. By very publicly establishing cross-sex friendships, boys in the G/SA were able to participate on some level in the hegemonic masculinity operating in the school by demonstrating their ability to “get girls.” The following conversation with Ryan is a prime example of this situation.

Megan: So earlier you said you kind of fit the stereotype that gay guys are friends with a lot of girls. Why do you think girls would want to be friends with gay guys?

Ryan: Uh, I have this thing with my friend Jen. I'm her “gay boyfriend.” I don't know how to explain it...I think there is a song about it.

Megan: There's a song about it?

Ryan: Yeah, I don't know how to explain it, I guess maybe I do everything a boyfriend would do with her except kiss her. You know, be there for her. Whatever she needed, I'd give. I hear a lot of guys say “oh, I wish I was gay because gay guys get a lot more...boobage and butt than straight guys.” I know I like playing around with girls.

Megan: Like they don't mind if you touch them because you're gay?

Ryan: Oh yeah, and sometimes they are like “oh, what do you think?” I had this girl in eighth grade like pull out her boobs and ask what I think. I was like, “put them away!” I get a lot of that, and I get a lot of guys just hating me for it.

So while Ryan was gay, disliked by many of the straights boys, and subjected at times to bullying from other students, he was still able to make a legitimate claim over the hegemonic masculinity functioning in the school. Whether he desired girls or not, they desired him. In fact,

he considers himself so good at getting girls that one of the reasons the heterosexual boys hate him so much is that they are jealous of his ability. Additionally, Ryan implies that he might also desire girls, another prominent feature of masculinity, when he reveals that he knows he likes “playing around with girls.” Although I observed Ryan hanging out with many girls, I very rarely saw him touching them in any way or engaging in behavior that I considered akin to “playing around” sexually. I do not doubt that Ryan had real friendships with girls and enjoyed spending time with them, but I also speculate that his implication that he desired girls had more to do with escaping a subordinated masculinity than any physical desire on his part.

Adolescents, those in the G/SA included, are being faced with some of the same challenges in gender equality that feminist activists have faced for decades. Sometimes, the G/SA members get caught up in the two-and-only-two gender system, along with the devaluing of feminine characteristics. However, they are considerably open to change and disruption to the traditional gender order and accepted feminine/masculine ways of doing gender.

At the end of my time collecting data at Palm Terrace, I agreed to give a presentation during one of the last G/SA meetings on sex/gender/sexuality. I had been asked by Ms. Melba earlier in the year to function as a guest speaker at one of the meetings but hesitated to do so on a topic that was so closely aligned with my research. Since I was done with my interviews, and there were only a few weeks left in the school year, I finally relented. The talk I gave was nearly identical to the lecture I used to explain the social construction of gender in the undergraduate university courses I had been teaching on sex and gender. The lecture material draws heavily on Lorber's (1994) *Paradoxes of Gender*, including discussions of third genders and intersexuality. I had always found it necessary to prepare myself for the inevitable resistance on the part of my

students to the idea that gender and sex are not entirely dictated by biology. At my G/SA presentation, however, the exact opposite happened. Not one student argued with any of my assertions during the presentation, and the discussion that ensued afterward tended toward coming up with examples confirming everything I had said. It was evident that I had supplied them with a way of framing sex and gender (and by implication sexuality) that was not only new to them but immediately recognized as useful.

As I had finished collecting data at this point, I have no idea how this information was used. Obviously, understanding gender as a spectrum of infinite possibilities rather than a dichotomy positions the G/SA members in a better place for constructing their own gendered performances in ways that are intentionally subversive. However, as Lucal (1999) noted, since nearly everyone else in our society sees gender as a two-and-only-two system, each person will be placed by others in one of these two categories. That is to say, even if member of the G/SA were to create “new” genders through their performances, their performances would still be read by outsiders as either masculine or feminine and hence reinforce the current dichotomy. Nevertheless, G/SA clubs may be an important place to monitor for the beginnings of feminist change. Given that G/SAs are proliferating throughout the country, activists interested in disrupting the current gender order would be wise to partner with these organizations.

Breaking the Rules: Sanctions or Support?

While it can be argued that participation in the doing of gender is in a sense flexible since there are countless ways to do femininity or masculinity, even in places that do not enact official gender specific rules, individuals are still held accountable for heteronormative gendered

performances (West and Zimmerman 1987). While women may do masculinity, and men can certainly do femininity, these performances are generally considered transgressive. Prior research has examined the circumstances during which transgressing gender boundaries is socially acceptable and the sanctions applied when boundaries are violated outside of allowable circumstances.

Kimmel (2008) has identified participating in and watching sports as an instance where men are allowed to express emotions usually reserved for women. According to Kimmel (2008), “sports legitimize our emotions, and enable us to express a fuller range of emotions than we ordinarily do in our daily lives” (p. 129). But Kimmel (2008) is careful to point out that while sports may be one area that allows men to transgress gender boundaries, even to the point of the public shedding of tears, it is also a way for men to communicate with each other without expressing their feelings on important issues in their own lives. So while sports allows for a certain amount of gender transgression, that transgression often serves to facilitate the gender imperative that men do not show emotion or talk about their feelings.

Men and boys may also cross gender boundaries in a way that is usually considered acceptable if they are only engaging in an imitation of femininity. Pascoe (2007) argues that the adolescent boys in her study would exhibit grossly exaggerated performances of femininity as an attempt to create a caricature to use as a foil against their own masculinity. These efforts were largely undertaken to legitimize a claim to the boy's own masculinity by demonstrating the vast difference between their everyday presentation of self and their “feminine” caricature.

The power to cross gender boundaries with impunity is not a power equal to everyone. In their examination of gender boundaries at a summer day camp, McGuffey and Rich (1999)

revealed that high-status boys (i.e., athletically skilled boys who approximate hegemonic masculinity), had the power to transgress gender boundaries by defeminizing activities previously considered the domain of girls only. After one of the highest status boys learned to play hand-clapping games with the girls before going home at the end of the day, the other boys began taking up hand-clapping as well. In addition to the participation of high status boys in the activity, the hand-clapping games were further defeminized by changing some of the lyrics to incorporate swear words and sexual innuendo.

While men and boys of the highest status are privileged in that they get to define the boundaries of masculinity, research has also found that women and girls have more leeway to cross gender boundaries without penalty than do most men and boys. Young women and girls who achieve a certain degree of athleticism and carry themselves with a bravado generally associated with men are at times able to achieve a social standing similar to that of a man or boy (McGuffey and Rich 1999; Pascoe 2007). However, Pascoe (2007) has noted that girls who cross normative gender boundaries in a way that elevates masculinity over femininity are more socially accepted than girls who do so for political reasons of resistance. Simply put, when girls transgress boundaries they need to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and compulsory heterosexuality at the same time if they want the support of their larger peer networks.

Gender boundaries are crossed all the time, but not all instances are subject to the boundary exemptions discussed above. The social sanctions for those who cross into femininity are often immediate and severe. For example, in their study of middle school adolescents, Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) noted how boys who rejected participating in aggressive behavior were called names like “fagopolis” by the boys. On occasion, they were even treated with extreme

cruelty by the girls. McGuffey and Rich (1999) found that girls in the summer camp they researched were often treated as incompetent by the boys if they attempted to engage in activities considered part of the boys' domain. This was the case even if the girls had expert knowledge and skills. Researchers have also uncovered a significant threat of violence towards gender transgressing adolescents as was the case for Pascoe's (2007) non-normative research participant, "Ricky."

By virtue of their involvement with the G/SA, the members of the club were publicly violating established gender norms that make heterosexuality compulsory. Even the straight allies in the group, by aligning themselves publicly with the gay rights agenda, were situated in a position where their own gendered performances could be called into account. Further, the members were often willing to violate (or accept in others) other components (e.g., clothing, physical comportment, recreational activities) of normative gender performances for personal and/or political reasons.

My interviews and fieldwork revealed several salient moments where G/SA members were either sanctioned or supported by their peers or family regarding their transgressive gender performances beyond simply being a member of the G/SA. Moreover, there were also instances where the members themselves were given the opportunity to either embrace or punish other students for gender transgressions.

The G/SA members not infrequently referenced occasions where they, or their friends, were criticized by others for their transgressive gender performances. This was the case for Brigit whose grandmother disapproved of her friend Lilah's aggressive physicality.

Bridget: ...My friend Lilah – they don't like her at all cuz she's a short firecracker and likes to punch people and stuff.

Megan: Did they witness her punch someone?

Bridget: Oh yeah, me. My grandma was like, “I don’t like people punching in my house.”

It may well be that Bridget's grandmother would not have appreciated boys punching in the house either. However, according to Bridget, it is the fact that Lilah is a “firecracker” that does not sit well with her grandmother. Bridget's family was extremely conservative and religious and sought to preserve traditional notions of how a “lady” should act. Ladies do not punch each other. Bridget was not open about her sexuality to her family and was concerned the failure of her friends to do femininity in a way acceptable to them would only increase their suspicion that she was a lesbian. As a result, Bridget no longer invited her friends to her house.

Christina, who identified as bisexual, ran up against similar judgments from her ex-boyfriend’s mother when she did not act appropriately feminine.

Christina: I had to deal with so much stuff from his mom because his mom didn’t like my image. Like, she didn’t think I was pretty enough for him, she didn’t think I was thin enough for him. Oh, it was horrible; she treated me like crap.

Megan: Did she say those things to you?

Christina: She told me once that I need to lose weight – to my face! Ugghh, it was horrible. And then she made me feel, like, so unpretty. She’s like, “oh, her pants are this and that. Why is she dressing this way?” or “her hair looks like a mess.” It was horrible. His mom was ruthless.

By any standards, Christina was an attractive young woman, but she preferred to dress in loose fitting pants and plain cotton shirts that did not overtly show off her figure. On most days, she also did not spend much time on her hair and make-up. This lack of a time commitment and concern for her appearance did not please her ex-boyfriend's mother. At the time I interviewed her, Christina had recently broken up with her boyfriend after he cheated on her. According to her, the girl he cheated with was very “girly” and had the approval of the boyfriend's mother.

Christina held the mother partially accountable for the break-up since she believed she encouraged her son to cheat.

It was not strictly adults who sanctioned G/SA members for not conforming to gendered expectations. Lula explained how criticism and “talking” by other girls at her school caused her to spend less time hanging out with boys and being a tomboy.

Lula: I used to kind of like hang out with guys all the time and stuff. Like I was kind of a tomboy...

Megan: and then...

Lula: Um, talking.

Megan: Like, who was talking? What do you mean?

Lula: Like other girls would talk like, “oh she hangs out with a lot of guys.”

Lula's presentation of self was set up to convey femininity, and nothing about her at the time we met was what I would classify as tomboy. She wore fitted jeans, clingy or tight shirts, jewelry, make-up, and styled her hair in a way that was obviously time consuming and feminine. Her voice and mannerisms were also noticeably feminine. As far as her interests, she expressed no desire to involve herself in activities associated with masculinity. The only outwardly transgressive behaviors I observed her in were membership in the G/SA, the wearing of rainbow accessories to symbolize gay rights, and openly declaring herself to be a lesbian. Additionally, when I first began my data collection she was actually pregnant (she later miscarried) and had a boyfriend. While her insistence on a public lesbian sexual identity even while dating a boy is fascinating, the important point in this instance is that she that she reportedly discontinued her tomboy activities due to pressure from her peers.

Despite experiencing, and at times accepting, sanctions from adults and peers for transgressing gender boundaries, some of the G/SA members were quite willing to engage in divergence from gender norms. For example, this enthusiastic description by Christina about video games and other activities she likes to do with friends was typical of the attitudes espoused by G/SA members who allowed for increased flexibility in gender.

M: What kind of video games [do you play with your friends]?

Christina: Oh, any kind. We play like, well, when you have a bunch of people you want to play party games like Super Smash Bros., or, um, Guitar Hero, or Rock Band. Lots of people do that. Um, then I like to play Gears of War, or some of the more violent games just cuz I like to do that more with the guys kind of thing. Um, I guess I could say I'm a little bit of a tomboy cuz I love Gears of War, Resident Evil, and all of the shooter games that most girls are like, "what?" Or the fighting games, and I sit there and really play it and the girls are just kind of like button mashing.

Megan: Why do you think the girls react like that to the fighting games?

Christina: Mmm, cuz most girls aren't interested in stuff like that. But, I mean, if they try to be, I don't know, I guess I'm a gamer so... I don't know why they react that way. It just doesn't interest them. But I have gotten a little more in touch with my girlie side. Like, if I hang out with my girlfriends, I'll definitely play with makeup. Or we dress up and stuff, but then I also try to incorporate playing video games in there too. Like my friend, she'll always come to my house and watch the L Word, or go on her Myspace, because everyone loves Myspace, or Facebook, or any social network site. Or, um, maybe try and find music because we all love music – definitely one of the defining factors. Then I'll try to convince her to play video games, but if not, then she'll like play with my makeup, or she'll grab any of my dresses, cuz she's like, "aww, you can get such nice dresses!" She tries on my dresses, and then she sees I bought a petticoat, so she puts the petticoat on under the dress on then takes pictures. Um, yeah, and then I'm like sitting there playing video games going like, "play with me!"

Unlike Bridget's negative judgments about femininity discussed earlier, Christina was much more forgiving and understanding of her friends' interests. When I asked Christina to elaborate on what makes a good friend she included a discussion of the importance of being open to differences.

Christina: It doesn't matter what [my friends] like, as long as they don't mind what I like. You know? As long as they're open. Like, oh, you know, "that's not my cup of tea, that's cool, that's okay that you like it though." Cuz I do have friends that don't like anime. Surprise, surprise! I actually have a friend who's kind of like totally opposite to me but it's strange because we're like the best of friends. She hates anime! She hates video games! She loves to do hair, and listen to all that crappy hip-hop music, and loves to date tons of guys and stuff.

A significant part of Christina's outlook on tolerating differences (including modes of doing gender) hinged on reciprocity between parties. Christina was willing to be mostly accepting of her friends' interests and styles as long as they were not judgmental of hers.

When a new student transferred into Palm Terrace mid-way through my second year there, the G/SA students, along with their faculty sponsors and the drama department, were given a prime opportunity to support gender transgression. Taylor, the new student, was born biologically female and identified as a masculine boy. He looked no different than many other high school boys his age, but the name-tag all students were forced to wear outed him as a biological female in one of the most awkward ways possible – changing for gym class in the men's locker room. Noticing that Taylor's name-tag read "Rebecca," the other boys correctly deduced that Taylor did not have a penis. These boys proceeded to threaten Taylor, but a faculty member intervened before the situation could escalate to violence.

Mr. Sowka, the drama teacher, somehow heard about the incident and effectively insisted that Taylor be given a new name-tag with the name he preferred to go by. Additionally, Mr. Sowka was extremely vocal in expressing his outrage that Taylor had initially been forced to wear the "Rebecca" name-tag even though he had tried to explain to the school's staff that Rebecca was not a name he used any longer. The G/SA members and drama students were

encouraged by Mr. Sowka and Ms. Melba to support Taylor and make him feel welcome, if not in the school, at least in the drama department and G/SA.

I observed no resistance to Mr. Sowka and Ms. Melba's request regarding Taylor. I did, however, witness plenty of occasions upon which Taylor was supported and made to feel part of the group. For example, the day we had the end of the year party, Aleister, Taylor and I went to pick up pizzas for the group. On the drive over, Taylor expressed his frustration that he was being forced to wear a white gown for at the upcoming graduation ceremony. The school policy was that the graduating boys wore blue gowns, and the girls wore white. Taylor was very embarrassed that he was being forced to wear a white gown. Aleister was quick to jump into the conversation and agree that Taylor should not be forced to wear the white gown and that the school policy of different gown colors was stupid anyway. Aleister even offered to go with Taylor to speak with school administrators about getting a blue gown. Taylor appreciated Aleister's offer of assistance but declined, as he did not believe speaking with the administration would be effective in changing the policy.

Taylor's status as a transgender student appeared to give him almost celebrity status among the G/SA members and drama students. Everyone wanted to be friends with him, and his perspective on any issue dealing with sex, gender, or sexuality was listened to with rapt attention. Despite being directly invited to join the G/SA by Mr. Sowka, Taylor hesitated at first. His reasoning being that he did not identify as gay since he dated only girls. However, the other students were so enthusiastic in trying to convince him that he eventually joined. Taylor admitted to me that he did not join the club for political reasons but because it was a fun way to spend time with his friends and be involved in the school. I observed Taylor hanging out with nearly

every sub-group of students in the G/SA and drama department at some point. While it was extremely comforting to know that Taylor was being treated with respect, and I was proud of the G/SA members for their openness, it was still the case that he experienced continued hostility in the larger school environment.

In short, the G/SA members may have been more willing than most to accept diversions from traditional performances of femininity and masculinity. However, as much as they supported their peers in resisting gender, the extent to which the G/SA members understood gender as something more than a two-and-only-two system was limited. For example, when attempting to divide themselves into two teams for a trivia game, great difficulty was encountered in creating a gay team and a straight team. Their solution to this problem was to divide into a boys' team and a girls' team. The degree of support the G/SA members will lend to gender nonconformists in the future will be tested when their peers begin questioning the very categories of girls and boys.

Improvement or Stagnation?

Past research on the effects of doing gender has revealed some severe negative consequences for both girls and boys. For example, Martin's (1996) examination of adolescents' emergent sexuality as they transition through puberty found that girls (but not boys) described themselves and their bodies in overly critical terms, objectified their own bodies, and had difficulty identifying goals and accomplishments not related to appearance related aspects of their bodies. When asked by Martin to "describe an important goal you achieved," one of her

participants replied, “I love my hair. [she giggles]. My hair's my accomplishment 'cause I never thought I'd get it this long” (p. 42).

While research such as Martin's (1996) focused on the negative outcomes of the gender dichotomy on the lived experiences of girls, there is also ample evidence boys are negatively affected in a number of ways. Recent research by Kimmel (2008) has identified “guyland” as a particularly anomic lifestyle spanning the late teens through mid-twenties. For young men engaged in the guyland milieu, a set of unhealthy behaviors tend to manifest.

They lie about their sexual experiences to seem more manly; they drink more than they know they can handle because they don't want to seem weak or immature; they sheepishly engage in locker room talk about young women they actual like and respect. These are the guys that want to be good in school but don't want to be seen as geeks; the guys who think they can't be cool and responsible at the same time; the pledges and pledgemasters whose hazing rituals are frequently disgusting, sometimes barbaric, and occasionally lethal. (Kimmel 2008:19)

At the outset of my research, I was prepared to encounter frequent self-objectification and a lack of any real interests or goals from the girls in the G/SA. While I understood that the possibility existed that membership in the G/SA had primed the girls with alternative ways to do gender successfully, I was convinced the long-standing, widespread cultural messages about femininity would be too powerful for the majority of them to avoid. Towards the end of my interviews, I directly asked my participants about their proudest accomplishments. The responses I received were unexpected in light of much of the previous research on gender. None of the girls I interviewed referenced any accomplishment surrounding her appearance. Often, as in the

exchange below with Christina, the girls cited accomplishments surrounding their extra-curricular activities.

Megan: What would you say is an accomplishment that you're proud of?

Christina: I won a contest in downtown Bledsow for a painting I did. It was a little black boy kissing a little white girl under a mistletoe on the cheek. They were so cute.

Another frequently cited area of accomplishment for the girls I interviewed was academics. For many of these young women, their grade point average was a point of significant pride.

Megan: What's something you're really proud of accomplishing?

Bridget: Umm, well I'm really good at doing my schoolwork well and putting all my effort into it.

Megan: What's your gpa?

Bridget: Around 3.6. There's no way I could get 100s on everything. I'm trying to keep it as close to 4.0 as possible.

In instances where the girls referenced accomplishments that involved the body, they focused on what their bodies could do, not how they looked.

Elise: I did play softball and I was one of the best on the team. I did want to do that professionally, but stuff happened with my mom and also I had to go away from the school, so it wasn't really close to the district.

The boys in the G/SA focused on similar accomplishments. Patrick, as G/SA president, cited being a founding member of the club and the ongoing work they were doing to create a positive environment in the school for gay students and their straight allies. Aleister spoke to me at length about his interest and accomplishments with set design, sound, and lighting for drama productions.

Summarily, there was not any qualitative difference between the kinds of achievements girls and boys were proud of. Given that all of the students I asked were able to quickly come up with accomplishments they took pride in, it appears that some small improvements are being made in the way gender affects girls' lived experiences. Since I only collected data in the G/SA, and by extension the drama department, I have no way of knowing whether this effect holds for the wider student body at Palm Terrace.

For men and boys, showing emotions (other than anger) and being masculine are contradictory endeavors. In fact Kimmel (2008) cites "boys don't cry" as the number one rule of the guy code he compiled through interviews with high school and college-aged young men. Among the G/SA members, there were clear indicators that the prohibition that boys and men do not cry held less influence than has previously been found by other researchers. When the drama department put on a play that included a love story between two basketball players that ended in the tragic death of one of the lovers as a result of the beating he received from a homophobic group of students, the boys and girls in the G/SA allowed their emotions to show in a very public way. As the play ended and the house lights came up, the G/SA members sitting together stood up for a standing ovation while tears were running down all of their faces. They then proceeded to huddle up into a group hug where the crying continued for several minutes. No one was called names like "sissy" or "wimp." Even if some of the students witnessing this emotional display were thinking it, they were not comfortable enough to say it loud enough for the G/SA members or me to hear.

Although I identified some instances where the constraints placed upon G/SA members based on their gender seemed to be less stringent than found in previous research, the members

themselves were at times quick to acknowledge that their gender limited their lived experiences. At one point, Alexia gave me a paper she had written for her English class discussing the many ways depictions of women in magazines and other mainstream media cause body dysmorphia and other harmful effects to women's self-esteem. By the time this paper was given to me, nearly every other member of the G/SA had read it and appeared to agree with its main argument. The girls in the G/SA were especially vocal in promoting Alexia's ideas and voicing how her paper paralleled their own experiences.

During my interview with Taylor, he stated that he felt he had “dodged a bullet” by being born female but avoiding all the associated baggage that is part and parcel of doing femininity. Taylor believed he was in a unique position to understand the experience of being a girl, but also not subjected to the same negative outcomes as women and girls. Taylor also believed that “men have it easy” compared to women. Taylor did admit that he had many negative experiences when other people were aware he was transgender, but that many times, people accepted his performance of masculinity as indicative of possessing biologically male genitalia. During the instances he was accepted as a guy, Taylor felt a much greater amount of personal freedom.

The members of the G/SA had some leeway to cross normative gender boundaries that other research suggests students who were not part of the drama department enclave do not have. Unfortunately, the G/SA members cannot exclusively interact with other members, drama department students, and supportive faculty. The flexibility in doing gender for these adolescents is realistically very limited until these changes can be applied in a wider social context.

Summary

As sexuality is tangled up with gender, and gender performance is often used to convey and interpret sexual identity, studying a group formed to promote acceptance of sexual identities beyond heterosexuality is a fascinating vantage point from which to examine gendered performances and consequences. The G/SA, and by extension the drama department, served to create a space where individuals were free to modify and interpret gender in ways not normally seen as normative.

The G/SA members consciously resisted doing gender in traditional masculine and feminine ways some of the time. At other times, they unwittingly participated in the established gender order. Despite the members' attempts at subversion, masculinity was privileged over femininity and heterosexual masculinity in particular was favored. The rigid two-and-only-two gender binary that operates in most social interactions proved to be a significant obstacle for the G/SA girls and boys in doing gender in new, less oppressive ways.

It was widely recognized by the students in the G/SA that peers, parents, and other adults had the opportunity and motivation to sanction them for not participating in traditional femininity and masculinity. In fact, the members revealed several specific instances where they had been pressured to change their gendered performances. Furthermore, they reported complying with this social pressure on occasion to ease their social interactions. All of the G/SA members were open and accepting of differences in the ways that their peers choose to perform gender, with the caveat that the girls aiming to achieve a more masculine style of doing gender had the tendency to disparage feminine pursuits.

The gender structure that remains in place in our society, with its associated expectations for women and men, is not an equitable and benevolent system. It is easy to find instances when researching gender where individuals are harmed through their participation (or non-participation) in this system. However, there are some signs that the work that has been done by feminist activists over the past five decades has had some positive effects. The girls in the G/SA spent less time objectifying themselves and dwelling on physical appearance and beauty than has been found in other settings. Moreover, they frequently listed accomplishments that resulted from their physical strength and intellectual or artistic skills. These girls did convey feelings of efficacy in their lives as evidenced by their narratives of achievement.

Despite evidence of some improvement for young women in general and adolescents whose sexual identities and gender performances fall outside of establish patterns, there is still much work to be done. G/SAs are obviously designed with the political goal of improving conditions for students who do not identify as heterosexual. However, because sexuality and gender are so tangled together, gender becomes implicated in this agenda *ipso facto*.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As I concluded my research at Palm Terrace High, I reflected upon the differences between my time there and my own high school experience. The G/SA members and drama department students made me feel far more welcome and judged me much less harshly than my own high school peers. The Palm Terrace G/SA attempted to create an atmosphere where all people felt comfortable and worthy of membership. It appears this attitude extended not just to students but to any person present at meetings and events (e.g., graduate student researchers). At a time when bullying is finally starting to be recognized for the damage it inflicts upon adolescents and not just accepted with a “kids will be kids” attitude, educators and parents would be well advised to examine the social situations their children are drawn to in school. If clubs like the G/SA are well situated to foster an anti-bullying environment, schools should seek to replicate the dynamics that make this possible. Moreover, school districts, administrators, and faculty should be fighting to ensure these clubs are formed and thriving so that the students in their schools feel safe.

The findings gleaned from my research with the Palm Terrace G/SA serve to inform our understanding of the high school experience for students associated with G/SAs and reveal the necessity of having these types of organizations. G/SAs create a niche in the larger student body where LGBTQ students and their allies can feel secure in working through and establishing sexual identity and gendered performances. Further, it is clear from my findings that although G/SAs are essential to ensure positive high school experiences for many students, significant barriers exist that threaten the continued existence of G/SAs and impede them in their mission. Lastly, there is much more we do not know about gender, sexuality, and the possibility for social

change fostered by G/SA organizations than we do know. Although my research is limited in answering many outstanding questions about this group, it exposes several areas where there is a dearth of knowledge and suggests several avenues for future research.

The Ongoing Influence of Normative Gender and Sexuality

Despite the positive effects that may accrue in school environments with a G/SA club, it is important not to view the G/SA and its members through the proverbial rose colored glasses. A major goal of this analysis was to examine the social environment of this group using Cosaro's (2005) concept of peer culture. That is, I was interested in what ways adolescents in the G/SA resist, conform, or adapt practices and directives surrounding gender and sexuality that are transmitted through mainstream adult culture.

There were clear indications that the G/SA members were willing to resist normative gender and sexuality on numerous occasions. For example, group members' insistence that humans are inherently bisexual. However, members' were only willing to commit to this perspective to the extent that it did not interfere with their status as the "gays" at Palm Terrace. When girls at the school not affiliated with the G/SA began making claims of bisexuality and homosexuality, the concept of bisexuality as a natural human state was promptly ignored. So despite initial resistance to gender and sexual norms, there was evidence that individuals in the group sometimes did conform to normative assumptions about gender and sexuality when resistance was at odds with their other efforts or social identities.

Resistance also became problematic in the case of the girls who took great pride in their self described "tomboy" identities. The girls identifying as tomboys often negatively judged

traditional femininity and considered other girls who dressed too seductively as “hoochies.” Simply put, although the group members outwardly expressed the desire to accept individuals with all types of gender performances and sexual identities, those who chose to conform to traditional practices were on occasion sanctioned. In these instances, conformity to gender non-conformity appears to be required of group members. This set of circumstances limits individual expression of gender in much the same way other contexts make choosing to practice gender in a non-normative way problematic.

Lastly, there were indicators that G/SA members accepted traditional and long-standing sexual scripts. The most notable example of this acceptance involved members’ narratives surrounding marriage as a future goal. Many of the members, whether lesbian, gay, straight, or bisexual, listed marriage as something they expected to participate in as adults. Most members referenced their marriage goals in vague, non-specific language as they were listing what they expected to do once they had finished high school. It was clear that members understood marriage as a practice that most adults eventually participate in. There was no discussion in the members’ narratives alluding to resistance to the institution of marriage based on a rejection of the basic value systems and social implications that are involved in the traditional concept of marriage in our society. This is somewhat surprising given the participation of many adult activists over the past several decades in vocally rejecting marriage for these reasons.

Although there is plenty of evidence that members of the Palm Terrace G/SA are creating their own peer culture that has not merely been handed to them by socializing agents (e.g. parents, teachers), it is not the case that G/SA members have created a culture where “anything goes” in terms of gender performances and sexual scripts. This is especially disappointing in

light of the following section outlining the members' efforts to create a space in their school environment where individuals feel free to practice and tryout new gender performances and sexual identities. That is not to say that the G/SA members' efforts in this area are completely ineffective, but merely that there are aspects of creating a social niche that are problematic for this group and deserve further consideration.

A Clique of Their Own

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the members of the G/SA have it easy given the very real consequences group membership has had on their social lives and family relationships. However, during the time the members spent in G/SA meetings and involved in drama department activities, they were well insulated from the most damaging of these consequences. In evaluating the high school experience of the G/SA members, especially in terms of their ability to express their sexual identities and construct gendered performances, the presence of the G/SA itself, and the drama department by extension, can be seen to have a profound impact on the members' ability to feel safe and secure in the school environment.

Previous research has suggested that one of the key elements of popularity for adolescent girls is retaining a heterosexual identity (see Duncan 2004). Similarly, Pascoe's (2007) research on masculinity in high school found that most boys were also socially stigmatized for deviating from heterosexual masculinity. My findings were somewhat inconsistent with previous research in that deviating from heterosexuality did not seem to affect the girls' social standing negatively. In fact, the G/SA members insisted that numerous straight girls in the school claimed to be lesbian or bisexual as a way to enhance their appeal to boys. The boys I interviewed did

acknowledge some significant unpleasant interactions perpetrated by straight boys in the larger student body, but they had no complaints about their G/SA and drama department peers. The G/SA members and drama department students also did not appear to discriminate in their choice of friends based on non-normative gender performances. As was the case with Taylor, the transgendered student discussed in Chapter 6, transgressing boundaries sometimes made students more popular within this group.

Similar to the way Taylor was sought after for friendship because he was different, existing outside the boundaries of what other students and faculty would consider normal was elevated as a sought after characteristic by G/SA members. In the following exchange, Jessica describes her friends' weirdness in a positive way. Moreover, she identifies her friends' behavior as weird only as judged by outsiders.

Jessica: My school friends, they are weirdos, but I love them.

Megan: What do you think makes them weird?

Jessica: Like basically, like, random outbursts of anything that they do. It's great.

Megan: Do you actually think they are weird, or just other people think that?

Jessica: If I was other people, yeah maybe, but I think they are normal.

Jessica's reaction to idiosyncratic behavior outside of the mainstream demonstrates one of the main reasons the G/SA is a safe and secure environment for its members. It is a chance for those who would be judged as deviant to redefine their deviance. Rather than relinquish their claims of difference, be they related to sexual identity or not, they want to be seen as different but in a way that makes them feel worthy of friendships and social standing. While the G/SA members may have struggled to attain feelings of positive self-regard and self-esteem in their

interactions with outsiders in the larger student body, inside the G/SA it was less difficult for them to achieve. That the G/SA members were able to embrace their various identities and personality characteristics during club interactions alone justifies the presence of the high school G/SA.

Unpleasant experiences did occur between G/SA members and other students and groups in the wider student body, such as the club's ongoing enmity with the Christian student group discussed in Chapter 4. However, as long as the members were able to insulate themselves against these negative interactions, they spent little time concerning themselves with what went on in the student body as a whole. Despite the importance other research has found high school students place on school sanctioned heteronormative events, most notably prom and homecoming, the Palm Terrace G/SA members made very little mention at all of these types of events. The only recorded reference to prom in my data occurs in the notes I took during one of the G/SA meetings when the idea of having a "gay prom" was discussed.

During her research with high school students, Pascoe (2007) noted the power of heteronormative events sponsored by the school. Even the girls who normally eschewed femininity (G/SA members, basketball players) relented and wore dresses to the dance. Contrary to the members of the G/SA at the school where Pascoe studied, the members of the G/SA at Palm Terrace seemed to have come to the conclusion that heteronormative events like homecoming and prom were not being marketed to them. Hence, they made limited attempts to participate at all in these types of activities.

Another important feature of the club was the G/SA's welcoming attitude toward new members. New members of the G/SA were allowed to join at any time during the year, and there

was no approval process or prerequisites for membership. Also notably absent from the G/SA proceedings was any type of initiation ritual for new members. As hazing of new members is a long-standing tradition in many sports, social clubs, and organizations, the lack of hazing activities within the G/SA is somewhat unusual. In a nationally representative study of high school students, Hoover and Pollard (2000) found that the large majority of students surveyed (91 percent) belonged to at least one extracurricular group and of those students 48 percent reported being hazed.

The absence of hazing in the G/SA can be theorized to result from at least two processes. First, as Kimmel (2008) argues, young men in particular may be willing to endure hazing in order to earn a place in the social order. Earning this place allows a young man “to feel worth, to feel powerful, to be validated as a man” (p. 116). The boys in the G/SA club already understood they were socially located in a place outside the mainstream popularity hierarchy. Having already experienced this rejection, G/SA boys were perhaps not eager to recreate a parallel hierarchy within their group that could put them at risk of a subsequent rejection. Second, LGBTQ high school students have repeatedly been found to experience high levels of bullying behavior (GSLEN 2009). It is not shocking that the members of the G/SA club would be more empathetic towards others regarding the experiences of pain, degradation, and humiliation that are most often tied in with hazing activities. Given that sexual behaviors are often the mechanism through which hazing achieves degradation and humiliation, G/SA members may be even less willing to engage in those types of activities, as their sexuality has already been labeled as deviant by many others. Moreover, the G/SA members were largely aware that the administration suspected their organization as being a “sex club,” and the hazing and initiation

rituals commonly enacted by other groups in high school and college (e.g., tea-bagging, elephant walks) would undoubtedly be disallowed in this high school's G/SA setting. Simply put, while the football team may be allowed to “teabag” new players while their coaches look the other way, there is no way the same blind eye would be turned toward the G/SA members teabagging their new members.

In summation, the G/SA members at Palm Terrace High were able to create an environment where they felt comfortable trying out behaviors and claiming identities that they would be hesitant to practice initially in a larger school-wide setting. This type of experimentation included trying out different gender performances, developing new experiences to replace school sponsored heteronormative events, adopting new sexual identities, and generally acting in ways considered “weird” by outsiders. As club members became familiar and at ease in their new identities and performances, they gradually began allowing them to leak out into more public settings. The G/SA club served an important function as a safe place for members to use as a transitional stage in making their private identities public. Moreover, the lack of hazing and initiation rituals allowed this benefit to be extended to all new members on the first day of membership.

Wanted: Mentors in the Mundane

The G/SA members constantly wrestled with keeping up the momentum necessary to actually sustain their club. Lula, the club president, gave voice to concerns over the club's continued viability as a stable, organized group.

Megan: So what do you think is going to happen with the G/SA for the rest of the year?

Lula: I'm hoping it won't go downhill, but from the looks of it, it probably is.

The G/SA club had three primary functions: social, support, and activism/awareness. The primary difficulties for the members were located in the activism/awareness function of the club. Unfortunately, this was also the function that connected the high school G/SA most closely with the larger social movement advocating equal rights for everyone regardless of sexual identity. Social events commonly took the form of informal gatherings at a member's house for a barbeque or a meet-up at a certain place and time (e.g., skating rink). Since most of these events required little beyond what occurs between any plans made between friends, the members implicitly understood how to organize these activities and any obstacles were easily avoided. The most often referenced barriers to these events were that some members did not have money to attend activities that were not free and some were forced to lie to their parents about the activity being a G/SA event.

The supportive function of the club was also easily employed during each G/SA event and meeting. In fact, supporting other members in coming to terms with their sexual identities, coming out to friends and family, and many other issues that oftentimes had little to do with the G/SA mission seemed to come naturally to the members. With the exception of Jesse, who was not considered a "real" member of the club (see Chapter 5), I observed no instances of intolerance or bullying behavior during interactions among G/SA members. Further, during my one-on-one interviews, none of the members described interpersonal relationships with other G/SA members that revealed any non-supportive behavior. What was expressed time and again was that the G/SA was a place where members felt safe and able to be themselves without reservations.

The activism/awareness function of the club was to promote anti-bullying efforts and the larger gay rights agenda. Although the members had access to resources like GSLEN and the statewide G/SA networks, they were unsure how to proceed in actually implementing the ideas suggested by these types of entities. A major part of their difficulty was the lack of experience in organizing and event planning, especially in a newly formed group without history and tradition to draw upon. Another significant aspect of the club's difficulty in instituting public awareness events was the opposition of the faculty, administration, parents, and peers they expected to face. Many of the ideas that were suggested for awareness events were thrown out immediately based on the perception that the activities would never be approved in the first place. Lula's explanation of why the survey research project suggested by Patrick would be unlikely to happen is indicative of this line of thought.

Lula: Yeah, Patrick actually came up with it [research survey], and I think he'd seen like a show or something where they asked the teachers about it [their attitudes on homosexuality]. I'm not too sure how well that's gonna go because I know there are a few teachers here that are, you know, homophobic.

My experience as a quasi-member of the G/SA led me to believe that Lula and the other members were correct in their assessments of the likelihood they would be able to easily gain permission to carry out many of the activities they desired to engage in. For example, the G/SA was excluded from the school-wide fair to recruit members for extracurricular clubs and activities with the rationale that the parents of many of the younger high school students would be shocked and angered by the existence of the G/SA.

As the G/SA began to fall into a state of disrepair during my second school with the club, I became increasingly concerned the club would disband. Not only would this be detrimental to

my ability to collect data, but it would have been extremely unfortunate for the members who relied on the club for support and those who fought so hard to force the administration to allow the club in the first place. Reluctant to overly involve myself in the club's organization based on the real possibility I would be imposing my own agenda on my research subjects, I reached out to the nearby university's Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Student Union. The university club sent one of their officers, Kevin, who immediately recognized where the group was struggling and developed a plan for assisting the G/SA members to organize their club.

The first issues Kevin addressed were organizational in nature. He began requiring the president to create an agenda for each meeting. He also helped the members clarify their club's mission and set priorities for the social, support, and activism/awareness functions separately. Committees were formed and committee chairs selected to head up the initiatives under each of the club's main functions. At first, the club members had difficulty with many of these activities. For example, the president was often unable to create an agenda without the assistance of Kevin. Kevin quickly figured out that if Patrick was given sole responsibility to put together a meeting agenda, he would become extremely stressed about what to put on it, and the end product would not be useful. The following excerpt from my field notes is a typical example of the club members' organizational difficulty.

Kevin asked Patrick to start the meeting. Patrick spent several minutes digging through the folders and notebooks in his book bag before finding the agenda. It was on loose leaf, and there was only one copy. Patrick seemed hesitant on how to call the meeting to order. Kevin stepped in to begin the meeting and gave everyone a verbal list of the day's agenda items.

Slowly over the course of the year, the club's officers and members began to improve their organizational skills, in no small part at Kevin's coaxing and demonstrations. Moreover,

Kevin began working with the members to develop strategic plans for implementing G/SA events with the consent of the school's administration. Much work was done on looking for compromises to the aspects of planned events that the administration was most opposed to. Additionally, prior to approaching the school's administration to obtain permission for G/SA activities at the school, the members began focusing on the best way to approach the administrators (e.g. written document vs. verbal appeal).

The university organization of which Kevin was a part recognized that high school G/SAs were worthy clubs to assist in terms of fostering future collegiate members for their own organization. In addition, Kevin's group figured out that many high school G/SAs were experiencing difficulty with public awareness and activism events similar to Palm Terrace's. What the Palm Terrace G/SA needed were mentors. However, they did not necessarily need mentors to help them work through issues with their developing sexual identities, support them in coming out to family and friends, or advise them in handling situations with high school bullies. The student members of the G/SA were able to provide that type of mentoring to each other without much external assistance. What they needed mentors for the most was guiding them in becoming an active and influential part of the larger gay rights movement.

During this process, Kevin started preparing the G/SA members for the following school year when he would not be as involved with the day-to-day activities of the club. The students were initially frightened by this situation, but once they realized they would have contact with Kevin when engaging in outreach activities with other local high schools trying to form their own G/SAs, they were somewhat mollified. What Kevin was doing with the Palm Terrace G/SA

was training the student members to do with other high school groups exactly what he had done for them.

The distinction between the need for mentors to help LGBTQ students with personal and social issues surrounding their sexual identities and mentors to assist with basic organizing efforts is an important one. Mentoring of the first type at first glance seems like it would have more of an impact and be a more desirable role than assisting with the more mundane aspects of G/SA activities that mentors of the second type take on. However, understanding the greatest needs of the students in G/SA clubs from the students' own perspective is paramount in helping these groups emerge into a powerful part of the gay rights social movement.

I do not intend to downplay the importance of mentoring projects and other social initiatives that are more focused on helping youth come out or come to terms with their own and others' sexuality because these types of outreach activities are undoubtedly needed in our high schools. For example, the It Gets Better campaign (www.ItGetsBetter.org) that collects user created videos from celebrities, politicians, activists, and private citizens designed to send the message to struggling LGBTQ youth that life does get better has inspired over 25,000 YouTube videos that have reached millions of teens worldwide. However, these types of initiatives are far less effective without active local G/SA clubs, which often struggle with the less glamorous aspects of participating in a social movement. It is unlikely most would-be mentors envision teaching high school students how to duplex print a brochure as an essential part of mentoring. However, that is exactly the kind of assistance some high school G/SA members need.

Next Steps: Directions for Future Research and Practice

My time spent with the Palm Terrace G/SA revealed elements of these students' lives that are interesting and indicative of the treatment of gay students and allies by parents, peers, and the school system. However, much research still needs to be done if we are to fully understand the experiences of these students in high school and beyond. Moreover, as my study focused exclusively on one high school G/SA, the findings are not generalizable to a larger population. Given that the Palm Terrace G/SA was a recently formed club at a newly opened school, there is ample reason to suspect the experiences of the members of this particular G/SA may vary significantly from other groups. Further, there are many facets of the G/SA experience, sexual identity, and gender in our high schools of which we have only scratched the surface. Simply put, there is easily enough research left to be done to occupy scholars in these areas for at least the next decade

There has been some quantitative research undertaken with G/SA participants (see Chapter 1). However, these studies have generally focused on the extent to which non-heterosexual students have experienced bullying and harassing behaviors. For example, the Gay Lesbian & Straight Education Network issued a National School Climate report after surveying over 7,000 high school and middle school students throughout the country (Kosciw et al.2010). The findings of this report are useful in understanding the extent of the bullying of LGBT students in our schools. Additionally, the report notes a negative association between experiences with bullying and harassment and the presence of a G/SA club. What this report does not tell us is through what mechanisms G/SAs are able to ameliorate negative school climates. Simply put, what activities undertaken by the G/SA are most influential in impacting positive high school

experiences? My research at Palm Terrace does assist in an in-depth understanding of the various functions of the club and identifies the way the G/SA can be viewed as part of a social movement via frame analysis. It does not address whether the public awareness and activism function of the club is more effective than the social and support functions in improving life experiences for the G/SA members in high school and beyond. Designing nationwide quantitative studies to measure the priorities of G/SAs, school climate in schools with G/SAs, social and psychological outcomes for G/SA members, and the relationships between these variables, is a logical next step in furthering our understanding of G/SAs in high schools.

My research also does not investigate for differences between the nature and consequences of sexual identity-based bullying and bullying based on other statuses (e.g. poverty, disability). Simply put, do the circumstances matter? If bullying is always about a person or group with more power taking advantage of a person in a vulnerable situation, which I believe it is, is sexual identity just one more thing in a list of excuses to victimize others? Further, are the outcomes of bullying for the victims similar regardless of why they were bullied? We do know that gay teens are at a greater risk for suicide (Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, and Bloom 1998), but we do not clearly understand the factors that mediate, moderate, and confound the relationship between sexual identity-based bullying and outcomes like suicide. It may also be useful to examine these same factors in instances of bullying not related to the victim's sexual identity as a comparison.

Once the nature of the relationship between bullying, LGBTQ student experiences, and G/SA clubs is more fully understood, research based curriculum and programming needs to be created to address these issues. The effort to create such curriculum is already underway (e.g.

Safe Space, safespace.glsen.org), but in order to achieve the maximum desired effects, such programs must evolve in response to new knowledge. Further, any existing or future programs aimed at improving school climate must be subject to rigorous evaluation and revision as needed. The Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network has already begun this process by undertaking an evaluation of the Respect for All initiative that exists under the auspices of the New York City Department of Education (Greytak and Kosciw 2010). This initiative trains secondary school faculty to more adeptly handle harassment of LGBTQ students. GLSEN is currently facilitating an on-going study of this initiative.

As research begins to inform curriculum designed to make schools safer for LGBTQ students, the need for outreach into school districts without G/SA organizations or faculty training on creating safe school environments for LGBTQ students becomes apparent. The outreach that must happen is one way students in G/SA organizations can begin agitating for improved conditions in school settings. What is the best way to approach school administrators to begin forming a G/SA or promoting educational programs for faculty, students, and parents? Students in newly formed G/SAs like the one at Palm Terrace are unlikely to know the answer to that question and addressing this outreach issue is just one of the important ways mentors can help incipient G/SA clubs get started in the right direction.

A last fruitful area of research surrounding G/SA's and other similar organizations involves extending studies into collegiate groups. While research has been done on groups focusing on gay rights both at the high school and college level, no qualitative studies to date have taken a comparative approach in examining the differences in involvement and perspective of students who joined these organizations prior to college enrollment and those who did not.

Conclusion

Studying the Palm Terrace G/SA provided insight to my research questions surrounding the G/SA's adherence to the characteristics of social movements as defined by frame analysis, examined experiences relating to sexual identity development, and investigated the way gendered performances are undertaken and interpreted inside the G/SA.

Understanding the existence and activities of the G/SA as part of the larger social movement for gay rights illuminates several factors salient to the continued progress of this movement on the part of younger activists. Looking at the Palm Terrace G/SA through the lens of frame analysis makes it possible to see how the G/SA is not purely a social club but one with an emerging agenda and strategy. Through diagnostic framing, G/SA members identified the barriers and obstacles preventing them from openly expressing their sexual identities outside of the G/SA. During the prognostic framing stage, members identified activities they believed would further their club's mission. Kevin, the club's mentor from the local university was heavily involved in guiding the members in this stage of framing. Lastly, the G/SA members employed motivational framing in their efforts to cultivate buy-in from other potential members and recruits from the larger student body.

Although I avoided directly questioning G/SA members about their sexual behaviors or identities, both of these issues were commonly referenced by the students in my interviews. A primary concern of the G/SA members was understanding and defining sexuality. Many members struggled philosophically with the origins of sexuality and desire, especially in regards to homosexuality. Moreover, the gay, lesbian, and bisexual members of the G/SA also positioned “coming out” stories as salient features of their social experiences with sexuality. The coming

out process was sometimes liberating but oftentimes fraught with difficulty and negative reactions from parents and peers. The members' coming out narratives highlight the effects of supportive vs. non-supportive reactions from family, friends, and school personnel. Regardless of the sexual identity of the member being interviewed, discussions of sexual behavior evoked descriptions of sex as risky and dangerous. The girls in particular were cognizant of avoiding the label of slut that has long been used to sanction girls whose actions cross the boundaries associated with appropriate femininity.

While I allowed G/SA members to reference matters concerning sex and sexuality before broaching these subjects myself, I was more direct in my approach toward gender. The students' discussions of differences/similarities between girls and boys and acceptable/unacceptable ways to do femininity and masculinity reveal contradictions between the members' philosophical views, G/SA mission, and actual practice. The G/SA members would likely be offended at the suggestion, but some of their beliefs and behaviors served to reinforce hegemonic masculinity and exaggerated femininity.

Overall, my findings demonstrate the importance and impact of G/SAs for adolescents in advocating for social causes, enacting gendered performances, and understanding sexual identity and desire. For the G/SA members at Palm Terrace, gender and sexuality both influence and are influenced by the goals and activities promoted by the club. Therefore, fostering an environment that encourages the free expression of sexual identity and individual choices for constructing gendered performances is paramount in ensuring the effectiveness of the G/SA as an emergent social organization. Further, as the G/SA students struggled with organizational policies and processes for club expansion and outreach activity, the need for mentors has never been greater.

In summation, my goal throughout the research process was to give voice to the student members of the Palm Terrace G/SA in a way that contributes significantly to the academic body of knowledge on gender, sexuality, and social activism among adolescents. Using the findings accumulated on the above topics, I have striven to address the implications of these findings that defend the need for G/SA clubs as well practical considerations for club organization. Lastly, I have outlined a research agenda for the further facilitation of expanding knowledge on G/SA clubs, experiences of LGBTQ adolescents and their allies.

**APPENDIX A: DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF G/SA
MEMBERS**

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of G/SA Members

Name	Year	Race*	Ethnicity	Sex	Sexual Identity**	Formal Interview
Lula	Senior	White/Asian	Latina (Puerto Rican)	F	Lesbian	Y
Patrick	Senior	Indian		M	Gay	Y
Alexia	Fresh	White	Latina (Puerto Rican)	F	Bisexual	N
Bridget	Soph	White		F	Lesbian	Y
Ryan	Senior	White		M	Gay	Y
Christina	Junior		Latina (Puerto Rican)	F	Bisexual	Y
Ryssa	Soph	Black	Latina (Dominican)	F	Lesbian	Y
Brianna	Junior	White		F	Lesbian	Y
Elise	Soph	White		F	Lesbian	Y
Jessica	Fresh	White/Black		F	Straight	Y
Natalia	Junior		Latina (Puerto Rican)	F	Bisexual	Y
Veronica	Senior		Latina (Venezuelan)	F	Straight	Y
Matt	Junior	White		M	Undisclosed	N
Robert	Junior	White		M	Bisexual	N
Rico	Senior		Latino (Cuban)	M	Straight	N
Aleister	Junior		Latino (Puerto Rican)	M	Gay	Y
Alejandro-	Senior		Latino (Cuban)	M	Gay	Y
Charmaine	Fresh		Latina (Dominican)	F	Straight	Y
Taylor	Junior	White		F/M	Straight***	Y
Jesse	Soph	White	Latino (Puerto Rican)	M	Gay	Y

*When asked about race, most of the Latino(a) members reported their ethnicity/nationality.

**Designations of sexual identity were based on the identities members adopted inside the G/SA meetings. During the time I was there, several students changed their sexual identify. In these cases, the most recent self-identification is used.

***Taylor dated women, so his relationships were heterogendered. He did not consider himself homosexual.

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board**
FWA00000351, Exp. 5/07/10, IRB00001138

To : **Megan Duesterhaus**

Date : **February 06, 2008**

IRB Number: **SBE-08-05394**

Study Title: **Gendered Interaction in Adolescence**

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by **expedited** review by the UCF IRB Vice-chair on 2/5/2008. **The expiration date is 2/4/2009.** Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The category for which this study qualifies as expeditable research is as follows:

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a **consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms.** Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2 – 4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form **cannot** be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at <http://iris.research.ucf.edu>.

Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies. The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracy Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 02/06/2008 03:06:10 PM EST

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX C: SCHEDULE OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) How long have you been at this school?
- 2) What year are you in school?
- 3) How old are you?
- 4) What is your racial and/or ethnic background?
- 5) Tell me about your family. Who do you live with? Do you have siblings? How old are your siblings? What do your parents do for a living? What kinds of things do you talk about and/or do with your family?
- 6) Tell me about your friends. How would you describe them? What kinds of things do you talk about? What kinds of things do you do together?
- 7) What kind of experiences (if any) have you had with dating? What kinds of things do people who are dating do together?
- 8) What are the hardest parts about being a high school student today? What kind of difficult situations have you experienced?
- 9) What are the best parts about being a high school student today?
- 10) Why did you join the G/SA? What do you hope the club will accomplish?
- 11) What do you plan to do after high school? What are your plans for college, career, family?
- 12) What is your biggest accomplishment so far? What are you the proudest of?

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