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# On The Street and On Campus: A Comparison of Life Course Trajectories Among Homeless and College Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Young Adults

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ON THE STREET AND ON CAMPUS: A COMPARISON OF LIFE COURSE  
TRAJECTORIES AMONG HOMELESS AND COLLEGE LESBIAN, GAY,  
BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER AND QUEER YOUNG ADULTS

by

Rachel M. Schmitz

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Sociology

(Women's and Gender Studies)

Under the Supervision of Professor Kimberly A. Tyler

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2016

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University of Nebraska, 2016

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This study examines the life course experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) homeless young adults and LGBTQ college students. Though both of these groups have in common their age (i.e. young adults) and LGBTQ identity, college students generally have more resources and are expected to fare better into later life compared to homeless young adults. Despite these disparities, all LGBTQ young people are likely at greater risk for negative health outcomes and social issues due to their status as sexual and/or gender minorities. Little research, however, has simultaneously examined these two groups, and how their life course experiences uniquely differ based on social environments (i.e. college vs. homeless). Using in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 46 LGBTQ young adults between 19 and 26 years of age, I examine how homeless young people and college students navigate their sexual and gender identities, social contexts and relationships. Findings reveal the importance of social context in identity development, such that college students largely found the college context to be conducive to identity growth, while homeless young adults viewed homelessness as a hindrance to addressing identity-related issues, as they needed to focus on survival. Furthermore, all LGBTQ young adults strategically managed their identities in distinctive ways depending on the social context and relationship, with college

students' tactics being tied to maintaining their reputations, while homeless young adults' motivations were linked to ensuring their physical safety on the streets. Finally, the majority of LGBTQ young adults conceptualized their identity-related challenges as making them stronger and more resilient by enhancing their social relationships and imbuing them with confidence and empathy. Homeless young adults viewed their challenges in homelessness as more transformative compared to their experiences with sexuality and gender-related prejudice and discrimination. These findings alert service providers and policymakers to the fact that programs need to be tailored to LGBTQ young adults based on their life course experiences. This study also highlights the importance of understanding LGBTQ young adults not as a monolithic social group, but one that is rich with both similarities and distinctions across social context, including the homeless and college environments.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Adolescence and the transition to adulthood tend to be fraught with uncertainty and complexity, at both the individual and structural levels (Arnett 2000). Young people struggle to exert agency within their life course opportunities (Clausen 1991) while social structures, such as families and education, work to shape young adults' beliefs regarding their future lives and relationships (Plotnick 2007). While primary markers of adulthood are perceived as milestones of pathways to growing up, including education, careers and family formation (Shanahan 2000), there is increasing heterogeneity in how people traverse life course trajectories and the ways that these experiences distinctly shape development (George 1993; McLeod and Almazan 2003). The tension between structural constraints and the individual's ability to exert agency over their life course trajectories is uniquely salient in the transition to adulthood as young people reside in a limbo-like status between adolescent development and the more established status of middle life.

Identity, which can be defined as one's sense of self, conceptualized internally and externally through social interactions, cultural contexts and overlapping, intersecting sources of oppression (Jones and McEwan 2000), is key to understanding how young people navigate their lives. More specifically, processes of unstable identity fluctuations, which characterize adolescence and young adulthood, are prominent in young people's establishment of sexual and gender orientations (Savin-Williams and Ream 2007). Approximately 6.4% of young adults aged 18-29 identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) (Gates and Newport 2012). As young people develop their sexual selves, a sense of family connectedness and support is crucial for maintaining positive

mental health, especially when youth do not subscribe to the norm of heterosexuality and fall somewhere in the LGBT spectrum (Needham and Austin 2010). The majority of studies, however, highlight the distinctive negative influences of parental rejection and family discord on these young people's mental health (Bouris et al. 2010; Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen and Lindahl 2013; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez 2010). Experiences of family rejection can make these youth nearly six times more likely to report elevated levels of depression (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz and Sanchez 2009), and sexual minority youth in the general population have disproportionately high levels of mental health issues compared to heterosexual young people (Marshall et al. 2011). Young people who identify as gay and lesbian also exhibit higher levels of suicide ideation when they are closeted from their parents or their parents were unaccepting of their sexual orientation (D'Augelli 2002). Same-sex attraction can also reduce the benefits of positive parental relationships for sexual minority youth, as they continue to report heightened engagement with risky behavior such as drinking and drug use (Pearson and Wilkinson 2013).

In addition to mental health issues, gay and lesbian young people who experience residential instability may be at risk for further negative outcomes, as a link has been established between same-sex attraction and running away (Waller and Sanchez 2011). LGBT youth become homeless at disproportionate rates compared to heterosexual young people (Woronoff et al. 2006), with 20% of homeless youth identifying as LGBT compared to only 5-10% in the general population (Center for American Progress 2010). Relatedly, nearly 40% of young people who use street outreach services are LGBT (Durso and Gates 2012). Homeless youth who identify as lesbian and gay are at greater

risk for numerous issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts, including victimization and substance abuse (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler and Cauce 2002; Tyler 2008). Sexual minority youth with a history of homelessness are also more likely to report mental health issues, such as depression, than heterosexual homeless youth (Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler and Johnson 2004) and their non-homeless LGB counterparts (Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter 2012). The stigma attached to LGBT identities can transcend numerous social contexts, including both those that are marginalized, such as homelessness, and those that are considered more normative, such as college campuses.

Experiences of discrimination and prejudice based on sexual orientation can be especially salient in the course of higher education as young people develop their identities and chart their future pathways (Perry 1999). Additionally, prejudiced attitudes regarding LGBT identities remain prevalent on college campuses, where heteronormativity, or the privileging of heterosexuality, dominates normative expectations (Wickens and Sandlin 2010). Sexual minority college students tend to endure more instances of harassment related to their sexual orientation from their peers (D'Augelli 1992; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco and Hong 2014), with approximately 36% of LGB college students reporting some form of on-campus harassment (Rankin 2003; Woodford, Kulick, Sinco and Hong 2014). Despite these challenges, young adults who identify as LGBT can find the college environment to be a crucial time of identity development and self-actualization regarding their sexual orientation (Bilodeau and Renn 2005; Stevens 2004). Therefore, the combined search for identity and experiences of harassment and discrimination has the potential to place LGBT college students at higher

risk for a number of mental health issues, such as depression and suicide ideation, compared to their non-LGBT counterparts (D'Augelli 1993; Westefeld, Maples, Buford and Taylor 2001).

While scholars have identified the unique experiences of LGBT college students (Sanlo 2004) and LGBT homeless young adults (Cochran et al. 2002) in separate research, there are few studies that explore how these two groups of young adults compare and contrast in domains such as identity development, coping strategies and family and peer relationships. While LGBT young adults in college and on the street may be similar in terms of chronological age, they typically navigate very disparate life course trajectories and pathways as a result of differential access to resources and opportunity structures (O'Rand 2006). For example, though the theory of emerging adulthood uniquely captures the time of exploration and self-actualization that ideally encompasses the period between adolescence and adulthood, it is very much a white, middle-class model of development that is often limited to the experiences of young people attending college (Arnett 2000, 2015). Thus, young people from marginalized social locations, such as homeless youth and LGBT youth, tend to be excluded from this conception of individual growth that emphasizes privileged backgrounds and social and cultural capital (Arnett, Kloep, Hendry and Tanner 2011). The present study seeks to fill these gaps in the literature by simultaneously exploring the distinctive life courses of both LGBTQ homeless and college young adults through their subjective interpretations of their experiences in the contexts of family, peers and identity formation. To do this, I qualitatively examine the following research questions: How do LGBTQ young adults navigate their current life course trajectories and family and peer relationships in various

social contexts? How do the experiences of homeless LGBTQ young adults and those enrolled in college compare and contrast along the lines of sexual and gender identity-related challenges?

In the following chapters, I situate my study within the realm of existing knowledge on LGBTQ young adults, outline my theoretical framework and describe the methodology. First, Chapter 2 synthesizes the extent of understanding surrounding LGBTQ homeless young adults and LGBT college students and the specific challenges they face in their social worlds. Next, Chapter 3 presents the life course perspective and demonstrates its utility in examining the social relationships and experiences of LGBTQ young adults. Then, Chapter 4 describes my data collection and recruitment strategies, as well as my plan to use narrative inquiry as an analytic tool. Chapter 5 presents the study findings to illustrate how LGBTQ young adults navigate their social contexts, identities and social relationships in unique ways. Subsequently, Chapter 6 outlines a discussion of the implications of this study's findings in relation to broader social issues, future research and service providers, as well as highlighting the study's limitations. Finally, Chapter 7 concludes by reiterating the importance of this study as it emphasizes the diversity of LGBTQ young adults and their life experiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Runaway and Homeless LGBT Youth*

Overall, young people with a history of same-sex attraction and/or relationships are considerably more likely to run away from home in relation to youth who report only opposite-sex experiences (Waller and Sanchez 2011). The majority of research on LGBT homeless youth utilizes a risk-based framework that emphasizes their on-the-street experiences while neglecting the influence of their family backgrounds and individual interpretations of their experiences. Primarily, the risks that lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) homeless youth face on the street are significantly exacerbated by their sexual orientation status (Cochran et al. 2002; Gattis 2013; Van Leeuwen et al. 2006). LGB-identified youth who are also homeless engage in more behavior that enhances their risk for contracting HIV, such as survival sex in exchange for food, shelter or other life essentials (Gangamma, Slesnick, Toviessi and Serovich 2008). Relatedly, gay and lesbian homeless youth are more likely to be treated for HIV (Rew, Whittaker, Taylor-Seehafer and Smith 2005) and experience higher levels of street victimization compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Cochran et al. 2002; Tyler 2008).

In addition to engaging in more at-risk behavior and undergoing more negative street experiences, LGBT homeless youth also experience more adverse mental health consequences (Cochran et al. 2002; Whitbeck et al. 2004). For example, LGB street youth were much more likely to exhibit symptoms for depression, post-traumatic stress syndrome and suicide ideation when compared to heterosexual homeless youth (Whitbeck et al. 2004). Concerning their life trajectories, LGB young people on the street

also have more pronounced histories of residing in a mental health facility (Noell and Ochs 2001), which could further contribute to their residential instability. Possibly as a means of coping with the harsh reality of street life and the added stigma of sexual orientation, LGBT homeless youth also report much higher levels of substance use and abuse (Cochran et al. 2002; Van Leeuwen et al. 2006). In a similar vein, LGBT young people with histories of homelessness also experience greater discrimination in homeless youth housing and other services based on their sexual orientation, which can further exacerbate the numerous other risk factors they face (Hunter 2008). Taken together, these unique issues faced by LGBT homeless youth, such as victimization and mental health problems, call for further research on their family relationships and how these social ties impact their health and well-being. The majority of research on LGBT homeless youth describes their experiences from an outsider's perspective and fails to account for the intricate role that sexual orientation plays in these young people's lives and how it shapes their social networks.

#### *Runaway and Homeless Young People and Family Relationships*

Familial conflict and discord are primary factors in shaping a young person's entrance into residential instability and potential homelessness (Kennedy et al. 2010; Thompson et al. 2010; Tyler 2006). Specifically, mixed, or blended families that include stepparents, extended family members and non-blood related kin have been shown to place youth at higher risk for homelessness by increasing household stress levels as family members adapt to each other (Mallett and Rosenthal 2009). Single-parent homes tend to experience higher rates of financial distress and limited parental monitoring, which can drive youth to homelessness (Finkelstein 2005). Young people living in



unstable, conflict-laden foster care and group home situations are also more likely to experience homelessness at some point in their lives compared to their counterparts living in a nuclear family, domiciled environment (Mallett et al. 2005; Thompson et al. 2010; Tyler and Melander 2010). Disruptions in family living situations such as divorce or death of a parental figure can also create pathways into homelessness for young adults (Kennedy et al. 2010).

Youth may also be pushed into running away and subsequent homelessness if they are repeated victims of physical, sexual or emotional abuse (Mallett and Rosenthal 2009; Tyler 2006; Tyler and Whitbeck 2004). One study found that 95% of homeless youth had suffered some form of physical abuse at the hands of a primary caregiver prior to leaving home (Tyler and Melander 2010). Specifically, approximately 69% of perpetrators who physically abused homeless youth can be categorized as a biological mother and/or father (Tyler and Cauce 2002). Youth are also at increased risk of running away at an earlier age if they experienced neglect or sexual abuse in their household (Ferguson 2009; Thrane et al. 2006). Experiences of personal maltreatment and victimization tend to be positively correlated with the number of instances a youth initiated running away (Tyler and Bersani 2008). These abusive experiences are often not isolated as singular experiences, but their negative effects reverberate throughout the young person's life.

Psychological issues such as depression and suicidal ideation may develop over time as a result of repeated familial abuse and maltreatment, thus diminishing a youth's capacity to cope with life's struggles (Ryan et al. 2000; Thompson et al. 2010). Specifically, it has been shown that familial sexual abuse is highly correlated with

thoughts of suicide among homeless youth (Yoder, Hoyt and Whitbeck 1998). Consequently, physical and sexual abuse in early childhood can lead a youth to utilize violence-laden survival strategies once on the street, thereby replicating a form of socialized violence (Kennedy et al. 2010). Additionally, young women who experience early childhood sexual abuse are more at risk of developing depressive symptoms, which can in turn make them more vulnerable to future victimization within the street context (Chen, Tyler, Whitbeck and Hoyt 2004). Witnessing domestic violence can also damage a youth's sense of efficacy even if he or she is not the direct target of violence, thereby solidifying the path to homelessness if a young person feels they must flee an abusive home (Tyler 2006). Given the increased risks that LGBT homeless youth face and the conflicted family backgrounds of homeless youth in general, more research is needed to understand the specific experiences of LGBT homeless youth and their multifaceted family dynamics.

#### *LGBT College Students*

Similar to, yet distinctive from, LGBT homeless young adults, sexual minority college students also face risks and challenges related to their sexual orientation in the unique social context of campus life (Rankin 2005). For example, approximately 74% of LGB students attending college labeled their campus climate as homophobic, while 60% of these young people opted to remain closeted so as to reduce their chances of peer and structural discrimination (Rankin 2003). More recently, Woodford and colleagues (2014) found that 36% of lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer (LGBQ) college students had experienced some form of sexual orientation-related victimization, such as verbal or physical assaults. While they can experience a wide variety of on-campus harassment,

LGBQ students are 17 times more likely to endure verbal derogation than any type of physical attack (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld and Frazer 2010). Encounters with campus homophobia can distinctively impact sexual minority college students, as they are significantly more likely to report both anxiety and depressive symptoms compared to heterosexual students (Woodford, Han, Craig, Lim and Matney 2014).

LGBT college students may also use substances as a means of fitting in, as one study found that gay men were much more likely to report drinking alcohol to avoid social exclusion when compared to heterosexual students (Longerbeam, Kurotsuchi Inkelas, Johnson and Lee 2007). Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGB college students report higher levels of drug and alcohol use, as well as more negative consequences related to alcohol use (Kerr, Ding and Chaya 2014).

In light of these unique barriers, LGBT young people also experience distinctive identity transformations during their college years (Stevens 2004). Processes of identity formation take on many unique forms and intersect with many social domains, making the concept of identity especially complex in the college environment as students simultaneously inhabit numerous roles and statuses (Abes and Jones 2004; Abes, Jones and McEwen 2007; D'Augelli 1991). Sexual minority college students may also express more fluid identities if they do not conform to heteronormative expectations of roles and statuses in college, resulting in a challenge to prevalent norms regarding gender and sexuality (Abes and Kasch 2007). For example, young adult undergraduates who increase their involvement in LGBT-related groups and activism on campus can experience an increasingly public sexual minority identity that develops over the course of their college experience (Renn 2007). Lesbian and gay college students also struggle to reconcile their

multiple identities with their sexual orientation, such that the college context prompts them to engage in processes of self-actualization that can result in experiences of identity conflict (Love, Bock, Jannarone and Richardson 2005).

### *LGBT Young Adults and Family Relationships*

Despite the struggles of college campus life and sexual orientation identity formation, peer and family social networks can serve as critical sources of support for all LGBT young adults in maintaining positive mental and emotional health (Goldfried and Goldfried 2001; Nesmith, Burton and Cosgrove 1999). Research has primarily highlighted the descriptive characteristics of LGBT young adults' family relationships, with little attention given to the intricate dynamics of how youth navigate familial and peer networks. For example, perceptions of general social support, including that from friends and family, can lower LGBT college students' levels of depression at the same time that it can improve their overall life satisfaction (Sheets and Mohr 2009). Increased feelings of family acceptance among LGBT young adults can also act as a protective factor against adverse mental health outcomes such as depression and suicide ideation (Ryan et al. 2010). Conversely, parental awareness of a young person's non-heterosexual orientation may increase their experiences of sexual orientation-related verbal abuse from their parents (D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks 2005), which may be why perceptions of friends' support are more predictive of a youth's disclosure of their sexual orientation (Shilo and Savaya 2011). LGB young adults are also more prone to suicidal attempts if their parents have actively discouraged them from displaying their gender nonconformity (D'Augelli et al. 2005). Based on the complex family dynamics experienced by LGBT young adults, further research is needed to unpack how young people interpret and

manage their family relationships in the context of their sexual identities and social environments.

*LGBT Identity as a Link Across Social Contexts*

Experiences of social harassment and discrimination have the potential to transcend differing social contexts in their critical influence on young people's mental health. For example, LGBT individuals often experience microaggressions, or interactional exchanges that derogate one's non-conforming gender or sexual identity, and these could occur in a variety of social settings. Sexual minority young adults in the general population (Nadal et al. 2011) and as students on campus (Woodford et al. 2014) specifically endure high levels of heterosexist microaggressions that adversely impact their mental health. The socially ubiquitous phrase "that's so gay" has been linked to adverse social and physical health outcomes for LGB college students, ranging from feelings of isolation to chronic headaches (Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz and Yu 2012). Transgender individuals face unique social stigmas that can range from transphobic discourse to disapproval and family rejection (Nadal, Skolnik and Wong 2012). Similarly, homeless LGBT young adults face discrimination related to their gender and sexual identities in shelters, which can inhibit their sense of safety in these facilities (Hunter 2008). In these ways, young people's LGBT identities can act as a link across unique social contexts.

Microaggressions and homophobic bias can also create a hostile academic climate for LGBT young people, especially when teachers and other school officials are complicit in these behaviors (McCabe and Dragowski 2013). Academic relationships are critical for marginalized youth, as lesbian, gay and bisexual adolescents without a

connection to a school official exhibit elevated levels of mental health troubles, such as suicide ideation (Seil, Desai and Smith 2014). Sexual and gender minority young people also endure distinct experiences of school victimization based on their sexual orientation, such as bullying and exclusion (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz and Sanchez 2011).

Specifically, LGBT homeless youth face greater difficulties in completing high school when they are disconnected from academic support systems (i.e. counselors) and their schools lack LGBT-friendly programs (Bidell 2014). School victimization can severely impede LGBT young adults' psychosocial functioning as well as their potential academic achievement (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card and Russell 2010). For these young people, school-related support, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, could be indicative of wider community resources (Hackimer and Proctor 2015) and social contexts that could be integral to the well-being of LGBT students as well as homeless LGBT young adults.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

As introduced by Elder (1998), life course theory is a valuable framework for assessing the situations and circumstances that shape young people's life trajectories, such as experiencing homelessness or attending college, and the effects of these turning points continue to influence young people's outcomes throughout their lives. This theory is understood through its recognition that "early transitions can have enduring consequences by affecting subsequent transitions, even after many years and decades have passed" (Elder 1998:7). In this way, an individual's life events create a chain of opportunities, disadvantages or some combination of the two possibilities, which result in multiplicative effects. For example, a young adult may reap further benefits of attending an elite school such as guaranteed employment after graduation (Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010), while conversely, youths may continue to fall behind if they prematurely drop out of high school and are confined to low-wage work, or experience bouts of homelessness (Whitbeck and Hoyt 1999). As such, positive or negative life events can either improve or exacerbate present conditions as well as future opportunities for young adults.

The tension between structural limitations and an individual's sense of personal control over their lives is also integral to a life course perspective of LGBTQ young adults' experiences. A young person's sense of agency, or the perceived ability to enact purposeful decisions to a degree within constraining structures, is closely tied to his or her level of identity development, such that young people with a more established sense of identity exhibit elevated levels of agency (Schwartz, Côté and Arnett 2005). Similarly,

agentic young adults feel responsible for controlling their own life course trajectory and believe that they have control over their decisions and outcomes by possessing the ability to overcome challenges on their life course pathway (Côté and Levine 2002). For sexual minority youth in particular, perceiving social support and connectedness to their peers and the broader community is significantly related to an enhanced sense of agency (Poteat, Calzo and Yoshikawa 2016). Therefore, understanding the varying life course pathways of LGBTQ young adults is key in exploring the unique ways that they make choices in a cultural climate that both constrains and resists non-normative gender and sexual identities.

Life course theory is useful for exploring individual transitions and trajectories that shape future outcomes through a lens that simultaneously considers the influence of social, historical and cultural contexts (Elder 1998). The social dynamic of “linked lives” of individuals helps to explain how family members and peer groups inhabit interconnected trajectories that bidirectionally influence one another (Elder 1994; Moen and Hernandez 2009). The quality of family relationships can have lifelong impacts, as disruptions and conflict in early family life between parents and their children continue to exert influence over this relationship well into the children’s adulthood (Whitbeck, Hoyt and Huck 1994). A family unit in discord can drastically alter a youth’s life, leading to detrimental consequences for his or her social and emotional development (Cavanaugh and Huston 2008).

Relatedly, processes of identity formation are not static and often shift in nature and purpose throughout life course trajectories (Caspi and Roberts 2001). Life course experiences also greatly hinge on individual social locations and the ways that these



statuses can influence outcomes and opportunities (O’Rand 2006), such as stigma and prejudice directed at sexual minorities and how this can limit life prospects (Meyer 2003). Family relationships are also integral to understanding life course processes among LGBT individuals as sexual orientation coming out trajectories can lead to complex family dynamics (LaSala 2010) and these negotiations can continue throughout the life course (Denes and Afifi 2014). For example, young people coming out as gay and lesbian to their family networks often strategically manage this process by carefully planning the timing, context and language used with family members (Newman and Muzzonigro 1993; Valentine, Skelton and Butler 2003). Family reactions to this process and levels of social support can also impact familial relationships through experiences of rejection or affirmation of the LGBT individual’s identity (LaSala 2010).

### **Life Course Theory and Homeless Young Adults**

Life course theory has been used in previous research to identify pivotal developmental stages in an adolescent’s life, and how adverse social, economic and environmental forces may ultimately result in a youth’s homelessness (Kennedy et al. 2010; Tyler 2006). Life course events occurring out of order based on socially normative expectations, such as giving birth to a child before graduating high school, can result in detrimental outcomes for the individual (Elder 1998; Hoffman, Foster and Furstenberg 1993). The damaging effects of these “off-time” life course transitions may be most salient for young people if they occur in formative developmental periods (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003). For example, youths’ family backgrounds and specifically timed “events,” such as instances of parental drug use or child abuse, can lead to unstable child developmental trajectories and a youth’s exit from a housed environment through

formal institutional removal or the young person's running away (Tyler 2006). Additionally, early exposure to familial violence and caregiver rejection can act as pivotal experiences paving the way towards young people's premature independence and homelessness (Kennedy et al. 2010). Research agrees that pathways leading to homelessness often begin in an individual's formative years of childhood and adolescence, thus setting the stage for adult life trajectories (Lee, Tyler and Wright 2010; Tyler 2006).

### **Life Course Theory and College Students**

The experience of college, especially for traditional students between the ages of approximately 19 and 25, can be a period of self-discovery and identity formation that presents unique opportunities for life course turning points, or changes in trajectories that have lifelong impacts (Elder et al. 2003; Tanner 2006). For example, emerging adulthood has been conceptualized as a process by which young people, primarily of traditional college student age, engage in processes of self-actualization as they reorient their life trajectories during a time of uncertainty to establish a sense of independence (Arnett 2000). Specifically for LGBT college students, the coming out process can act as a critical life course milestone that shapes their identity, social networks and developmental trajectories (Evans and Broido 1999; Rhoads 1994). Younger generations are also becoming more resistant to sexual and gender identity labels, and often opt out of claiming a particular identity and prefer to view sexuality and gender as more fluid components of themselves that defy categorization (Savin-Williams 2011).

Examining youths' family backgrounds and identity development through a life course perspective is also an effective framework for comparing trajectories of young

adults who share certain characteristics and yet are pursuing qualitatively different developmental pathways. Specifically, this study aims to examine the life course trajectories of two groups of young people who are similar in terms of chronological age, but inhabit disparate routes of development: homeless youth and college students. This research will explore the complex diversity of LGBT young adults by comparing and contrasting the experiences of these young people from their own perspectives, while also highlighting the importance of their linked lives.

## CHAPTER 4

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Sampling Procedure*

Participants for both samples self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or another non-normative gender and sexual identity and were between the ages of 19-26. This narrow age range was chosen based on the critical life course transition from adolescence to young adulthood, often termed emerging adulthood that represents a pivotal turning point in young people's lives (Arnett 2000). All data were collected in the Midwest. Though lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) refer to sexual identities, transgender (T) denotes a gender identity and queer (Q) can refer to both, I include these identities together based on their societal subjugation in reference to heterosexuality and gender-conformity (Jackson 2006). To promote inclusivity, additional sexual and gender minority identities were welcome to participate, such as asexual and pansexual, however the focus remained on LGBTQ young adults in accordance with the majority of previous research focusing on individuals with these identities (Ryan et al. 2010).

Distinct procedures were utilized to gain access to each population of interest. While there is potential overlap between these two populations in the form of college students experiencing homelessness, I screened out these individuals to maintain the focus of this study in examining distinctive social contexts. I recruited participants for the college student sample by advertising the study throughout campus bulletin boards and email listservs such as those distributed for the Women's and Gender Studies program as well as the LGBTQA+ Resource Center and Women's Center. To participate, young adults in the college sample had to be enrolled in an institution of higher education.

Homeless young people were recruited using a non-probability method of convenience and snowball sampling once key informants were identified, such as members of particular friendship groups (Creswell 2013; Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The definition of homelessness requires that the youth currently reside in a shelter, on the street, or independently because they had run away, had been pushed out, or had drifted out of their family of origin (National Center on Family Homelessness 2011). This portion of the sample was recruited from agency shelters and transitional living programs that provide services to homeless youth and young adults.

#### *Researcher Positionality*

Furthermore, the role of the researcher must also be considered within the contexts of the college and homeless environments and sexual minority identities. The sensitive subject matter of the interviews (i.e. sexual orientation) required careful consideration of how questions were asked and subsequently interpreted (Lee and Lee 2012). As a gender-conforming female graduate student whose sexual orientation was unknown to participants, I remained cognizant of how my positions of social privilege influenced the interviewing dynamics of LGBTQ-identified individuals (Levy 2013). To gain access to gatekeepers and key informants within these hidden populations, I strived to develop rapport with participants and allowed them to be active participants in the research process (Couch, Durant and Hill 2012) by developing my own sense of cultural competence in working with LGBTQ communities (Van Den Bergh and Crisp 2004). Boundary issues arose, however, when some participants inquired as to my personal life or requested favors such as car rides or money for transportation (the latter primarily from homeless young adults). This challenge prompted me to enact strategies that

maintained the relationship of researcher-participant when these boundaries became blurred, such as deflecting personal questions about my sexuality to pointed questions about the participant's own identity and providing respondents with service agency referrals when they asked for my advice on identity-related issues (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, Liamputtong 2006). Throughout the recruitment and data collection processes, I reflexively challenged my own assumptions about the marginalized groups of both LGBTQ young adults and homeless youth and my own status as the researcher so as to enhance the authenticity of the young people's stories (Reed, Miller, Nnawulezi and Valenti 2012).

#### *Data Collection*

I conducted all of the interviews. All study participants completed one digitally tape-recorded, in-depth face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour and a short demographic questionnaire. LGBTQ college students were interviewed at a private location that was convenient and comfortable for them, such as a reserved room at a public library or a small conference room. Homeless young adults were interviewed in agency shelters and transitional living programs that provide services to homeless youth and young adults, as well as private study rooms at public libraries. Study procedures were explained to all participants and informed consent was obtained prior to the start of the interview, whereby both the participant and researcher provided their signatures. All participants received \$20 compensation upon completion of the interview in exchange for their time.

#### *Conceptualization and Measurement*

Within the format of the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, respondents were asked a series of open-ended questions that revolved around the topics of LGBTQ identity and family relationships. The same questions were used for all participants, so as to compare and contrast the experiences of LGBTQ college and homeless young adults. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do LGBTQ young adults navigate their life course trajectories and family and peer relationships in various social contexts?

2. How do the experiences of homeless LGBTQ young adults and those enrolled in college compare and contrast along the lines of sexual and gender identity challenges?

Additionally, respondents were asked to fill out a short demographic form before the start of the interview. These research questions elucidate the unique experiences of LGBTQ young adults and how they compare and contrast across the disparate social contexts of the college campus and homelessness-related environments.

### *Ethical Concerns*

The institutional review board approved this study. Prior to all interviews, I carefully reviewed an informed consent form with all respondents and they all provided their signatures (or initials to preserve confidentiality) if they consented to the study requirements. To ensure confidentiality, all respondents were assigned pseudonyms in the interview transcriptions. These pseudonyms are used in the present study to ensure continued respondent confidentiality. Furthermore, all participants were told that they can stop the interview at any time or skip over questions they did not feel comfortable answering. LGBTQ college students were provided with resources available on campus

(i.e. counseling services), while homeless young adults were given a list of services and agencies available to homeless youth (i.e. street outreach, transitional living).

### *Data Analysis*

I performed all data analyses using the computer software MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis program. To begin, all interviews were transcribed verbatim (including pauses and filler words such as “uh” and “um”) to ensure that the true nature and meaning of the participants’ words were captured (Oliver, Serovich and Mason 2005) and Word documents of these transcriptions were uploaded into MAXQDA. Drawing from Charmaz’s (2014) constructivist grounded theory coding procedures consistent with my worldview and research design, I first utilized the method of initial coding to determine emergent themes and categories that corresponded with concepts of interest, such as LGBTQ identity formation and family relationships (Charmaz 2014). Next, I employed focused coding to hone in on the participants’ subjective interpretations of their life course experiences. The final themes emerged inductively from the data. The combination of initial and focused coding allows for a constructivist perspective to emphasize the participants’ understandings of their lived realities and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Charmaz and Belgrave 2002).

Validity was assessed by building evidence for a code or theme (e.g., LGBTQ identity formation, dynamics of family and peer relationships) from several respondents and through the collection of demographic information as well as the rich data from the in-depth interviews (Berg and Lune 2004; Creswell 2013). To examine intercoder reliability, a predetermined coding scheme and qualitative codebook was used to identify whether or not the same codes were assigned between text passages for both the LGBTQ



college student and homeless young adult transcripts (Boyatzis 1998). I also documented the chain of formulated interpretations throughout the data analysis process (Angen 2000) using an audit trail to illustrate how codes and overall themes were constructed (Padgett 2008). To enhance the credibility of the findings, participants had the option of being recontacted so that they may engage in the process of member checking, whereby I asked them to review the raw data and assess the accuracy of assigned codes and themes (Creswell and Miller 2000). Of all the participants, 18 college students (75%) and 10 homeless young adults (45%) provided feedback over email on both the accuracy of their interview transcripts and earlier versions of the themes that included brief, generalized descriptions of the major codes and subcodes. Member checking improved the validity of the raw data as well as the findings by allowing participants to ensure their intended meaning was captured and that my interpretations were legitimate. Finally, a collaborative data conference was held with other experienced qualitative researchers to assess the overall validity of the findings. All of these strategies enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of this study (Creswell 2013; Padgett 2008).

### *Narrative Inquiry*

Narrative inquiry was used to examine the experiences of LGBTQ young adults on their pathways to identity formation as well as the dynamics of their social relationships. A narrative analysis approach is ideal for exploring how individual lives are shaped by their social locations and social networks, as well as how these experiences can shift across the life course (Creswell 2013; Elder et al. 2003). Specifically, this analytical method allows for an examination of young adults' life course trajectories "as expressed by the unfolding of a specific sequence of events" (Franzosi 1998:520). In

terms of LGBTQ young adults, narrative inquiry helped illuminate the unique experiences of sexual minorities as they recount their processes of identity formation in the context of their social lives through a connected, chronological framework (Riessman 2008). Furthermore, narrative inquiry takes into consideration the distinctive contexts of individual stories and the ways that environments shape people's experiences (Loh 2013), which is useful for a comparison of the campus and street contexts in LGBTQ young adults' lives. This method focuses directly on the young adults' individual perspectives to demonstrate the vitality of the findings as a whole (Arnett 2005).

### *Respondent Characteristics*

My sample included 24 women (52%), 19 men (41%) and three (7%) respondents identified outside of the gender binary, such as bigender or genderqueer. Of respondents who identified as either a woman or a man, eight participants identified as transgender. As participants were allowed to self-identify however they chose, those who identified as transgender also identified as either a woman or man, so these gender categories are not mutually exclusive. Concerning sexual orientation, seven people identified as lesbian (15%), 11 were gay (24%), 20 were bisexual (43%), four were queer (9%) and four people identified outside of the LGBQ spectrum, such as asexual. One half of respondents identified with their sexual orientation for 1-4 years, 10 young people (22%) for 5-8 years and 13 people (28%) reported 9+ years. Ages ranged from 19 to 26 years. Thirty-two respondents were White (70%), five African American (11%), two Asian-American (4%) and seven bi-racial or multi-racial (15%). Regarding relationship status, 21 participants were single (46%) and 20 were in a relationship (43%). Table 1 provides participant demographics by their primary social context (i.e., college or homeless).

**Table 1. Respondent Demographics by Primary Social Context**

|   | <b>College<br/>(N=24)</b> | <b>Homeless<br/>(N=22)</b> | <b>Total<br/>(N=46)</b> |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Age</b>  |                           |                            |                         |
| Mean  | 21                        | 21                         | 21                      |
| Range   | 19-26                     | 19-26                      | 19-26                   |
| <b>Race/ethnicity</b>                                 |                           |                            |                         |
| White   | 21 (88%)                  | 11 (50%)                   | 32 (70%)                |
| African-American                                      | 0                         | 5 (23%)                    | 5 (11%)                 |
| Asian-American  | 1 (4%)                    | 1 (4%)                     | 2 (4%)                  |
| Bi/Multi-racial                                       | 2 (8%)                    | 5 (23%)                    | 7 (15%)                 |
| <b>Sexual orientation</b>                             |                           |                            |                         |
| Lesbian   | 3 (12%)                   | 4 (18%)                    | 7 (15%)                 |
| Gay   | 5 (21%)                   | 6 (27%)                    | 11 (24%)                |
| Bisexual  | 9 (37%)                   | 11 (50%)                   | 20 (43%)                |
| Queer   | 4 (17%)                   | 0                          | 4 (9%)                  |
| Other   | 3 (13%)                   | 1 (5%)                     | 4 (9%)                  |
| <b>How long identified as that sexual orientation</b> |                           |                            |                         |
| 1-4 years   | 16 (67%)                  | 7 (32%)                    | 23 (50%)                |
| 5-8 years   | 3 (12%)                   | 7 (32%)                    | 10 (22%)                |
| 9+ years  | 5 (21%)                   | 8 (36%)                    | 13 (28%)                |
| <b>Gender*</b>  |                           |                            |                         |
| Woman   | 13 (54%)                  | 11 (50%)                   | 24 (52%)                |
| Man   | 8 (33%)                   | 11 (50%)                   | 19 (41%)                |
| Transgender   | 4 (17%)                   | 4 (18%)                    | 8 (17%)**               |
| Other   | 3 (13%)                   | 0                          | 3 (7%)                  |
| <b>Relationship status</b>                            |                           |                            |                         |
| Single  | 11 (46%)                  | 10 (45%)                   | 21 (46%)                |
| In a relationship                                     | 10 (42%)                  | 10 (45%)                   | 20 (43%)                |
| Married   | 0                         | 2 (9%)                     | 2 (4%)                  |
| In a domestic partnership                             | 2 (8%)                    | 0                          | 2 (4%)                  |
| Other   | 1 (4%)                    | 0                          | 1 (2%)                  |
| <b>Region</b>   |                           |                            |                         |
| Urban   | 17 (71%)                  | 17 (77%)                   | 34 (74%)                |
| Suburban  | 7 (29%)                   | 5 (23%)                    | 12 (26%)                |
| <b>Family class status growing up</b>                 |                           |                            |                         |
| Working class   | 7 (29%)                   | 11 (50%)                   | 18 (39%)                |
| Middle class  | 13 (54%)                  | 10 (45%)                   | 23 (50%)                |
| Upper-middle class                                    | 4 (17%)                   | 1 (5%)                     | 5 (11%)                 |
| Upper class   | 0                         | 0                          | 0                       |
| <b>Parental education</b>                             |                           |                            |                         |
| Some high school                                      | 1 (4%)                    | 4 (18%)                    | 5 (11%)                 |
| Graduated high school                                 | 4 (17%)                   | 7 (32%)                    | 11 (24%)                |
| Some college  | 3 (13%)                   | 3 (14%)                    | 6 (13%)                 |
| Associate's degree                                    | 1 (4%)                    | 1 (4%)                     | 2 (4%)                  |
| Bachelor's degree                                     | 5 (21%)                   | 4 (18%)                    | 9 (20%)                 |
| Professional or advanced degree                       | 10 (42%)                  | 1 (5%)                     | 11 (24%)                |
| Other (GED)   | 0                         | 2 (9%)                     | 2 (4%)                  |
| <b>Public assistance growing up</b>                   |                           |                            |                         |
| Yes   | 6 (25%)                   | 15 (68%)                   | 21 (46%)                |
| No  | 18 (75%)                  | 7 (32%)                    | 25 (54%)                |
| <b>Public housing growing up</b>                      |                           |                            |                         |
| Yes   | 0                         | 7 (32%)                    | 7 (15%)                 |
| No  | 24 (100%)                 | 15 (68%)                   | 39 (85%)                |

\*Categories not mutually exclusive

\*\*Out of participants who identified as either a woman or a man

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **FINDINGS**

For both LGBTQ homeless young adults and college students, sexual and gender identities emerged as complex phenomena that required young people's careful consideration and negotiation. In many ways, young adults' primary social context, which included either being in college or being homeless, shaped the ways that they could develop and conceptualize their LGBTQ identity by facilitating or obstructing this process, resulting in the first theme of "Identity as Privilege." Similarly, young people were steadfast in how they revealed or concealed their LGBTQ identity by carefully considering how it would be perceived, which encompasses the second theme of "Strategic Identity Management." Finally, while all of the LGBTQ young people, regardless of social context, cited challenges and difficulties they had faced in their lives, they were also discerning in their experiences, whereby they reframed negative experiences into positive ones, embodying the third theme of "Identity as Life Enhancement." These three themes underscore the complex ways that young adults embrace their gender and sexuality, and how their experiences are influenced by social context, relationships and personal strength.

#### **IDENTITY AS PRIVILEGE**

The importance of identity and the influential nature of social context emerged as a central theme among both LGBTQ college students and LGBTQ homeless young adults. In developing their sexual and gender identities, young adults navigated their social contexts as a means of seeking out resources, support and opportunities that help them develop their self-concepts and coping strategies. For LGBTQ young adults,

however, particular social environments created unique experiences that shape their lives in varying ways depending on if they are integrated into a college campus context or if they are currently homeless and interacting with different service agencies. The following section highlights how social contexts shaped young adults' LGBTQ identities and the ways in which environment acts as a mechanism that largely privileges and supports identity development or hinders and creates obstacles to identity formation. For example, the majority of college students' descriptions of their educational context can be described as the following subtheme: "Campus Contexts as Conducive to Identity Development." While homeless young adults also recount complex encounters with identity formation, their social environment imposes complex barriers to introspection, which can be summarized as the subtheme "Homelessness as a Hindrance to Identity Development."

### **Campus Contexts as Conducive to Identity Development**

For LGBTQ college students, the campus context often represents a socially liberal atmosphere that is conducive to identity development across several different domains. Having access to LGBTQ-related resources and support networks is critical for young people in helping them develop their identities. While for many students the college experience is one that broadens their view of the world and exposes them to supportive social relationships, LGBTQ young adults' must also navigate the intricacies of the campus context when support and acceptance of their identities is not as readily available.

#### *Social Support and Access to Resources*

In addition to pursuing degrees in higher education, LGBTQ college students also use their time in college to develop their multiple intersecting identities, including gender and sexuality. For the majority of college students in this study, social support and campus resources specifically geared towards LGBTQ students and issues characterize their college experience. One such example is Charlie (pansexual demi-girl), who believes that her major in the college of Arts and Sciences has helped her to feel accepted in the classroom environment when discussing controversial issues:

I feel a sense of protection...I mean we're talking about the issues themselves and what the viewpoints are on either side and so I feel like it's a byproduct of the degree and the way it's set up by teachers for creating a safe space because I've had professors who I felt more comfortable around and I think that if anybody were to actually say anything, they would say something back and it totally wouldn't be tolerated.

Similarly, Gabriel (queer transgender man) shares a positive view of the college campus context in supporting his non-normative gender identity:

I really lucked out going to a liberal arts college and everybody is just very open minded and then I majored in [Arts & Sciences]...it is probably the best department to have support and people around you who understand that kind of thing and I just sent out an email to all my professors. A few of them who I felt really close to I talked to them in person and they were very supportive in helping me find any resources I need on campus and whatever to get everything the way it needed to be.

By finding support from and feeling accepted by their professors, these college students recounted positive experiences that helped them access resources and create a sense of belonging within the campus environment.

In addition to perceiving institutional acceptance of their LGBTQ identities, college students also emphasized the importance of peer support from classmates and friends they met on campus. Rylan (pansexual bigender) recalled how their transition into college allowed them to be open with their identity:

It's definitely a lot more open here [at college]. I'll talk to other kids and see what they are going through and we'll bounce things off one another and a lot of my friends are 'yeah, I think that's great you're being who you are.' I'm like 'okay, if these people accept me, why not just be me.' It has definitely had a hugely, hugely positive impact being here, being a college student.

Being surrounded by similar others and establishing relationships with other young adults who share their experiences is also critical for college students as it builds a sense of solidarity that can be key in helping young people feel accepted in social environments.

For example, Samantha (bisexual woman) describes her perception of peer support on campus in the following way:

But now that I am in college, it is completely different here because I feel like we have a really diverse campus and there are a lot of people like me here. I feel like I've met a ton of friends, like [friend's name] and all of her friends I hang out with.

Creating supportive social networks is especially important for LGBTQ college students as they navigate wider societal conceptions that marginalize non-conforming gender and sexual identities.

Broadly speaking, many LGBTQ college students perceived the college campus environment to be protective and inclusive of diversity so that they felt comfortable to express their gender and sexual identities without fear of blatant prejudice and discrimination. One such example is Natalie (bisexual woman), who stated, "I think that for the most part it is pretty good. It's better on campus than it is off campus for sure just because of the university setting. Like education tends to make you less homophobic, go figure." In another example, Phillip (gay man) emphasizes academic structures that protect LGBTQ identities and how this contrasts with the lack of legal protection he faces in the workplace in this particular region: "I think that being a student is probably better than if I was in the work force. I mean there's less challenges...well I mean the

university has protective codes, I mean. I feel safer here than I would elsewhere...”

Constructing the university campus setting as protective shows how LGBTQ college students can perceive wider institutional support from their college and utilize campus as a safe haven within the larger community.

Notably, several students specifically contrasted their experiences on campus to those they had in middle and high school, in that they struggled with social acceptance throughout their intermediate and secondary education years. Lucy (queer woman) described her transition from high school to college as transformative in allowing her to more fully embrace her LGBTQ identity:

We have a pretty accepting population and we've got groups and benefits and things like that so I think that it's nice to be a student at [university]. You're able to go to these places and feel okay where back in the day like in high school and stuff you didn't have those things, especially my high school being out in the country. I tried to get a gay/straight alliance group going and they [high school] denied that...so I think being in college it's a lot different because you experience an array of different people and different backgrounds...I think it's given me a different view and perspective about life....it's helped more than hindered me as a student.

Paul (gay man) shares a similar sentiment in the positive way he believes his transition to college shaped his life:

High school to college... oh man, that got even better. It just keeps getting better because at that point you know there's so many people on [university] campus who I can be friends with and I can be friends with guys and not have crushes on them but then there's a lot more gay people at [university] campus and so, you know, there's a lot better chance that if I start to develop feelings for someone that they might even reciprocate those...

Both Lucy and Paul's experiences illustrate how the dynamic life course transition into college can open up opportunities for LGBTQ college students in forming supportive peer and romantic relationships.

*Learning about Identity in College*



For many LGBTQ college students, the college experience also represented a crucial period in their lives when they were able to learn about their gender and sexual identities in an environment that encouraged critical thinking. Considering both the positive and negative aspects of analyzing her LGBTQ identity, Clark (queer woman) discussed the challenges she faced as she encountered more complex ideas surrounding identity politics:

And now, as I've been going through college I think I've had a lot more trouble because as I learn more, I sort of have to pause more and be like 'it's not quite that easy' or 'it isn't as simple as people make it out to be' or 'it's not just born this way.' There are things that we need to talk about when we talk about sexuality that we don't a lot of the time. Like class and race and gender.

For Clark, then, learning about her identity in college helped to broaden her view of the complexity of sexuality by encouraging her to incorporate more intersectional perspectives. Engaging in critical discourse in a supportive context, such as the college classroom, can help LGBTQ young people question their preconceived notions surrounding gender, sexuality and other socially marginalized statuses.

Additionally, experiences in college can help students establish a sense of solidarity in knowing that they are not alone. Alex (gay transgender man) summarized his moment of clarity during a class period in a diversity course:

About a year ago, a little bit more, I started taking Women's and Gender Studies classes and learning about what stuff meant, you know. So we learned about trans people and I'd be like 'oh that seems kind of familiar to my life experiences.' And that was pretty cool, just knowing that I wasn't so weird after all.

In addition to experiencing feelings of enlightenment in the classroom, other LGBTQ college students specifically sought out classes that related to their gender and/or sexual identity. For example, Rylan described how being more open about his identity helped him to feel more comfortable presenting in non-gender conforming ways (i.e. "I'm going

to get my nails done for the first day of class”) and pursue gender and sexuality studies: “I picked up an LGBT minor that we’re now offering here and one of my classes is by a professor that I really looked up to. He’s a trans male...so I’m going to be a lot more open.” By actively seeking out opportunities to learn more about themselves and broader social issues, LGBTQ college students like Rylan can enhance their own feelings of self-acceptance and social belonging. In these ways, the campus context creates a setting that is conducive for LGBTQ college students to explore the meaning of their individual identity and in so doing, learn more about issues related to social diversity.

### *LGBTQ Activism and Advocacy*

Opportunities for LGBTQ activism and advocacy on campus were also key in developing college students’ sense of their identities and their role in the larger LGBTQ community. Many students became involved in campus groups and activities that helped them engage in efforts aimed at improving the lives of LGBTQ individuals. Alex developed a passion for educating others about LGBTQ issues after participating in an LGBTQ speakers’ panel:

I’ll go to a panel and there will be a gay guy and maybe a lesbian girl and then me. Then I get all the questions because they’ll be like ‘oh my god, you’re trans?’ But I really, really like doing that because it gives me a chance to educate people that have no idea what being trans is about. So that’s really, really rewarding for me...educating people that want to know and want to make campus a more inclusive environment for you, that’s really awesome.

Another student, Steven (gay man) described his experiences on the LGBTQ panel as one that helps to push people beyond their comfort zones and challenge their beliefs:

It’s really cool community education and I really enjoy both getting to enhance the knowledge and insight of other people about the issues that face the

LGBTQQA community and then also seeing some of the uncomfortability is a little enjoyable as well. Like people don't know how to approach these kinds of things and they don't know what questions are too far. Generally when I'm on a panel, no question is too far. I don't really care what you ask me.

By engaging with opportunities for LGBTQ activism and advocacy on campus, college students work to develop their own identities at the same time that they are afforded the chance to engage in the fulfilling experience of peer and community education.

In addition to practicing LGBTQ activism and advocacy through campus opportunities, several college students also engaged with activities in the wider community as a way to expand their role as advocates. Gabriel, for example, strongly believed in helping other LGBTQ individuals, particularly trans people, and was eager to share his experiences if it had the potential to improve someone's life:

For me I don't think it's possible for me to ever not be open about being trans because I want to be there to help others. I know a lot of people that, you know, they just want to transition and be done. Like not ever bring it up again. But for me it's very important that I am there to kind of help others navigate what they're going through and kind of be a role model.

Despite the challenges that LGBTQ young adults face, college students like Gabriel reframed their experiences as having an important purpose, such as being "a role model" for other trans people who are struggling. Some students, like Steven and Alex, highlighted the importance of LGBTQ activism on the college campus, while others, like Gabriel, showed how extending that sense of advocacy to the broader community is personally fulfilling. Taken together, forms of LGBTQ activism on the college campus and the larger community is oftentimes a key source of meaning for LGBTQ college students.

*Managing Prejudice and Discrimination on Campus*

Some students involved in subcultures of the wider campus community noted that while the college environment as a whole is accepting of LGBTQ individuals, they remained cognizant of how particular campus groups may respond to non-conforming gender and sexual identities. Jake (bisexual man) is especially aware of the heteronormative nature of Greek life and he takes this into consideration when interacting with his peers:

In the Greek community you can tell it is pretty toxic. In [Midwestern state] from what I can tell it is pretty homogeneously heterosexual and what have you. I'm not out to any of my Greek friends, at least people I know are Greek, and I don't know if I would be necessarily comfortable with it, at least not right now. Maybe that will change but until then I can kind of sense toxicity with that part of campus.

Furthermore, some students distinguish across different majors and academic departments in terms of levels of acceptance and comfort with disclosing their LGBTQ identity. Bethany (bisexual woman) recalled how being around students with particular regional and political backgrounds enhanced her social unease related to her own identity:

I'm an [STEM] student so I'm around a lot of guys sometimes...but a lot of them are from rural communities. Like a lot of them are ag farmers which are from rural communities which are generally kind of conservative. And sometimes I'll hear something that they will say and it will kind of bother me.

These experiences highlight the multifaceted nature of the college campus context and how college students strategically navigate particular social groups and settings when they perceive the potential for prejudice or discrimination.

Taken together, these examples show how identity development is a particular type of privilege for LGBTQ college students dependent on the supportive nature of their campus context. The overwhelming majority of college student participants stressed the freedom they experienced to be themselves while at college and the wide variety of

resources they were able to utilize. It is important to note, however, that the campus context is not unidimensional, as there were LGBTQ students who described the challenge of navigating prejudice and discrimination within specific social circles. Despite these unique struggles, college students agree that the campus context is broadly conducive to identity development, which in turn can oftentimes conflict with the larger community's attitudes towards LGBTQ people and how underprivileged populations pursue identity formation.

### **Homelessness as a Hindrance to Identity Development**

While homeless young adults consider their LGBTQ identity to play an integral role in their lives and spend time considering its impact on their experiences, their social context of homelessness, which includes living on the streets, couch surfing (i.e., staying with multiple friends and/or family members for short periods of time) and residing in a number of different service agencies, acts as a hindrance to identity development as a whole. In sharp contrast to LGBTQ college students, LGBTQ homeless young adults must engage in concerted, deliberate efforts to explore their identity by seeking out resources and social support that are not as readily available as they tend to be on a college campus.

#### *Homeless Experience Overrides Identity Development*

Many LGBTQ homeless young adults stressed the importance of their identity at the same time that they acknowledged the distinctive challenges they faced in not having a regular place to live. However when considering how their LGBTQ identity shaped their experiences of homelessness, homeless young adults often described residential instability as a hindrance to developing their identity. In many ways, the search for basic

necessities such as food and shelter overrode young adults' ability to pursue identity-related activities, such as self-reflection and social support. Abby (straight transgender woman) responded in the following way to describe how being homeless has affected her gender transition:

It's been an annoying, aggravating process because since I don't have a regular place to go to, like an actual residence, it kind of slows down the [gender] transition a bit because I don't always know when I'm going to get my next meal. I don't always know when I'll be able to get the certain necessities that I need.

Similarly, Sawyer (lesbian transgender man) recounted a similar experience in balancing the struggles of being homeless and lacking social support and simultaneously transitioning to his preferred gender:

It just made it harder when I was living on the streets and had nothing...Cause everything was just so difficult, every aspect of life. And that only made it harder, trying to deal with it [gender transition], especially when you're being quiet about it. I never felt so alone before in my life.

LGBTQ homeless young adults, therefore, express the desire to explore and understand their identities, but they are unable to fully engage with identity development when they are struggling to meet even their most basic needs.

Combined with the challenge of procuring food and shelter, some LGBTQ homeless young adults discussed the difficulty of even finding LGBTQ resources they could utilize when they were living on the street. Bernard (gay man) also downplayed his LGBTQ identity when describing how his sexuality was not at the forefront of his mind when he became homeless:

It was more being afraid of being on the streets, more of where I'm gonna go, where I'm gonna sleep, how am I gonna get food. So I didn't know any communities, I didn't know anything about [city]. So that was just the scary part of it...the LGBTQ part didn't come in until I got to [youth service agency] and started coming out to my caseworker and she was trying to find supportive environments for me to go to and [people to] talk to, cause I didn't know where

the LGBTQQ support group was when I became homeless...I had no phone, I had no way to contact anybody and everything was just gone.

Even when services may be available for LGBTQ homeless young adults, they often have more pressing survival matters to attend to and may be unaware of such services existing if they have no means of communication.

Other young adults also felt that being homeless made it especially difficult to form any type of romantic relationship, which was further exacerbated by the prejudice and discrimination they faced because of their LGBTQ identity. For Bianca (bisexual woman), residential instability acted as a formidable obstacle to establishing meaningful partnerships:

Well, it's kind of hard to get attached to somebody if you have to go from place to place to place. It's hard to just be with somebody, worried about somebody else when you don't even have yourself together. It's just more stress especially with a child and you just going from house to house just staying with anybody because you don't want you and your baby out in the street, you know. So that's hard and then on top of that trying to deal with a relationship. That doesn't do anything but make it 20 times harder. So, yeah, I'd rather just be single until I can get myself together, till I can get things stable for me and my daughter and then I can worry about being in a relationship. But until then it's not going to happen.

Bianca's experience of homelessness was further exacerbated by her status as a mother, whereby her caregiving responsibilities, combined with her lack of housing, took precedence over her LGBTQ identity. In this way, it can be especially difficult for LGBTQ young people to develop social support networks when they cannot secure any type of permanent housing, let alone access to resources and opportunities for LGBTQ matters.

### *Creation of Homeless Social Support*

Despite the distinctive challenges LGBTQ homeless young adults face that prevent them from engaging with identity development, many respondents sought to overcome the barriers homelessness imposed upon them. One way homeless young adults coped with the struggles of not having a regular place to live was through the creation of social support networks they could draw from in times of need. Many young adults in this study experienced residential instability from a very young age and found ways to establish alternative networks of support beyond their nuclear and extended family.

Yolanda (bisexual woman) found that treatment centers were significantly more welcoming than her home life, even though she acknowledged that this was not the norm:

It was more like a family, and I know that's not normal, but almost everywhere I went, there was like, I went to [name of treatment center] treatment facility and there was only like 2 females that were straight on my unit and all the others were bisexual or lesbian and I felt like I was home. I felt like I had a family there because we all knew that we were different but at the same time we were the same. So, strangely enough, at every treatment center I felt like home.

Another young adult, Lawrence (gay man), recounted his positive experiences in juvenile detention because of the social support he experienced:

It was better. It was better than being at home...I got attention. People that you could actually talk to, I mean yeah they were all criminals and they made mistakes, but at least I pretty much got a better place to live, it was better than nothing.

Despite the challenges these youth faced as they transitioned across multiple detainment situations, they were still able to create sources of social support that filled a void in their lives as many were detached from their families. Similarly, many of these young adults found ways to create LGBTQ support networks with other detained youth, which underscores the agency they exerted in developing their identities when little to no organizational support structures existed. It is important to note, however, that despite receiving and creating support when lacking family connectedness, these created support



networks were often with other deviant youth, which could affect their ability to exit homelessness (Auerswald and Eyre 2002).

In many ways, experiences of homelessness created a sense of social solidarity by uniting people through a shared sense of struggle and conflict. Melanie (bisexual woman) emphasized that fellow homeless people were accepting of her LGBTQ identity and did not discriminate on the basis of gender or sexual orientation:

I think people are a lot more open in homelessness about it than... it seems to be the more upper class you go the more like judgmental they get. So like being down at the bottom, people are a lot more open because they have been there. They've been through things. You find ways to cope and everybody is just like 'okay yeah, you are who you are.' So there's not near as much judging when you are down on the bottom than when you're up higher.

Melanie's description of elevated social class as a barrier to acceptance stands in contrast to some college students' descriptions of higher educational levels being linked to more inclusive, less biased attitudes, such as in the case of Natalie ("Like education tends to make you less homophobic, go figure.") Like Melanie, Elliott (bisexual man) shared a similar sentiment in how he has found support through other homeless people and experienced more challenges related to being bisexual than from being homeless. When asked how being homeless has affected challenges related to his identity, he replied:

I wouldn't say challenges for being homeless. There are challenges but not as many because people are in the same predicament that you are because you're homeless... I've met other transgenders [people] or other bisexual or transgender couples who are homeless and the homeless... despite what other people think, we do kind of stick together because we can protect each other that way.

These young adults' experiences demonstrate the importance of created kinship among homeless communities, particularly when support from service agencies is not always guaranteed.

*Navigating Acceptance/Discrimination from Service Agencies*

When LGBTQ homeless young adults were able to locate and utilize various services, their experiences were mixed in terms of perceiving a combination of acceptance and discrimination from local service agencies. The majority of homeless young people described their interactions with service agencies as generally positive, especially when they were geared towards youth and young adults and/or emphasized particular supports for LGBTQ individuals. Tamara (gay transgender woman), for example, stressed that the youth service agency she frequented made her feel like she fit in and acknowledged her uniqueness:

They treat me normal, like I'm a human being as well. But then again, they know how I am, so, but everybody, every transgender [person] has their own individuality and I believe they have their own individuality that separates them from other transgenders [people], which they do.

Many of these young people simply wanted to be able to utilize homeless services without fear of prejudice or discrimination at the same time that they value organizations that acknowledge LGBTQ identity. In stressing the importance of LGBTQ groups for homeless young people, Kellen (gay man) described these organizations as safe places for youth like himself:

Well here they're trying to make it more accepting for those who come in...to show that it's ok, like you don't have to hide it, you don't have to worry about it, other people hurting you or anything for it. And trying to teach those who aren't as accepting to be more accepting, I guess. And it does help, because if you're ever in danger or anything, you have this place you can go to.

As these examples show, homeless service agencies, and specifically those designed for LGBTQ young people, can be crucial sources of support for youth who are doubly marginalized and in need of assistance.

Other LGBTQ homeless young adults, however, noted that there were certain service agencies that they avoided based on their own negative experiences with these organizations. Oftentimes, service agencies that exhibited prejudice and discrimination towards LGBTQ individuals were religious-based or widely known for their conservative political views. In some cases, adult homeless shelters appeared to accept LGBTQ individuals, but placed more regulations on their behavior compared to non-LGBTQ residents. Harris (gay man) provides an example of this type of treatment that he experienced at a local shelter:

The shelters are kind of open to it, but not really. They don't treat people differently, but they kinda disregard a lot of the LGBTQ people. They don't really agree with us, but they are open to letting us stay, but they don't let us do what we want, basically. Like, I couldn't stay with my boyfriend because it made them uncomfortable, I guess.

Similarly, Bernard (gay man) expressed his concern in utilizing Catholic-based services because he felt that the workers viewed his gender presentation and his sexual orientation negatively:

I believe it was more of religious views...that was the issue. I've had a couple experiences at some donation places not being so supportive as well as homeless shelters...so it was just some of the community support system, such as the shelters and organizations like [Christian-based organization] wasn't as, didn't feel so supportive and accepting, I got a lot of judgmental looks and I just didn't feel like I was safe to go to those areas without other people to come with me, and that was during the time that I was walking the streets.

Even though these young adults were in dire need of institutional support and services, in some instances they viewed it as preferable to avoid service agencies altogether if they perceived them to be discriminatory.

Not all young adults' encounters with homeless service agencies could be characterized as simply positive or negative, as some LGBTQ young people altered their

views of particular agencies after interacting with them. When asked about his experiences with religious-oriented organizations, Elliott replied:

Okay, Catholics don't really like... they're not really against, they just don't agree with it. Actually asking for help at the church while being homeless and the way we were [LGBTQ], we weren't really comfortable going to other churches but we did end up going into a Catholic church and a pastor actually creates groups for the LGBTQ and now that he is retired from the church he does sponsorships and goes and does meetings for us, you know, for everybody. And after that I kind of, I made a friend of course.

This type of interaction underscores the complexity of homeless LGBTQ young adults' relationship with service agencies and the influence of cultural assumptions regarding the idea that religion is inherently hostile towards non-conforming sexual and gender identities. While Bernard felt explicitly discriminated against from religious-oriented groups because of his non-conforming gender presentation and sexuality, Elliott experienced a welcoming environment in a Catholic church, despite his preconception that all Catholics were prejudiced against LGBTQ people. These experiences demonstrate the complexity of homeless young people's encounters with service agencies, particularly when those organizations followed a religious ideology.

### **Summarizing Identity as Privilege**

Overall, LGBTQ homeless young adults' experiences uniquely differ from LGBTQ college students in terms of their ability to engage in processes of gender and sexual identity development. Compared to college students, homeless young adults face greater obstacles to establishing their identities and they responded to these challenges in a variety of ways. The homeless environment largely acts as a hindrance to identity formation, and LGBTQ young adults must engage in deliberate efforts to overcome the barriers posed by lacking a stable residence. Many homeless young adults found that the struggle to acquire basic necessities often trumped a concerted focus on their gender

and/or sexual identity. However, young adults coped with these identity-related challenges of homelessness by constructing networks of social support and strategically utilizing services that were supportive of LGBTQ people and avoiding those perceived to be prejudiced. While both LGBTQ college students and LGBTQ homeless young adults both sought to develop their identities, social contexts played a key role in shaping their access to supportive resources.

## **STRATEGIC IDENTITY MANAGEMENT**

Though LGBTQ college students and LGBTQ homeless young adults are exposed to widely differing social contexts, they engage in similar tactics to strategically manage their identities. These strategies, however, do tend to vary depending on the social environment in which the young people are immersed as they adapt to their social surroundings. Despite these differences, the ways LGBTQ young people navigate their family relationships acts as a link across social context that highlights the complex similarities between homeless and college young adults. Furthermore, both groups of LGBTQ young adults express a strong desire and determination to maintain control over their identities by deciding when and how disclosure occurs.

### **Identity Suppression**

One key way that both LGBTQ college and homeless young adults strategically manage their identities is through processes of identity suppression, which can operate both internally and externally. Young adults typically engaged in identity suppression when they perceived the potential for prejudice or discrimination and sought to avoid various forms of bullying or victimization. Oftentimes, young people recounted middle

school and high school as times that posed significant challenges for them in terms of social acceptance and how they suppressed their LGBTQ identity as a way of coping with unaccepting environments. Renee, a college student, succinctly summarized her middle school troubles in the following way (bisexual woman):

I was not happy. It was the unhappiest time of my life...I was just like frustrated because I had crushes on these girls and, you know, but also with guys and I didn't want to tell anyone. I didn't tell anyone and... yeah, it was just a really bad time keeping it all bottled up.

In a similar vein, Kiley (bisexual woman), a homeless young adult, described the difficulty she faced in attempting to come out in school and being rejected by her peers:

Well that's kind of when I started to come out more, not as much, but I tried to come out...cause my gay friend made it seem like I was trying to hit on all my friends, cause it was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade when I was actually realizing that I was officially a bisexual. But I didn't really come out then, I was trying to, but I didn't, because everyone looked at me like I was weird and disgusting, so I just played it off like, 'oh no, I'm not, I was just joking' type thing. It was hard though, because people would look at me funny, when they heard the rumor or whatever and I just kept telling them, 'no, it's not true, it's not true.'

According to these young people, having to repress their identities as a means of garnering social acceptance was a distressing experience, especially while in middle school when they are already facing numerous other challenges typical in adolescence.

While their experiences of identity suppression were similar in their earlier lives, social context emerged as a key component in shaping how LGBTQ young people concealed their identity as they transitioned into adulthood. For LGBTQ homeless young adults, the homeless environment posed unique challenges, often forcing the youth to suppress their identity as a way of staying safe from harm. This strategy typically involved trying to pass as straight or cisgender in environments they viewed as threatening. Harris's words summarize the extreme danger some LGBTQ youth face on the streets: "It's tough, because you can't really come out because there are some people

that don't agree with it and they will kill you because of it." In describing how he manages his bisexual identity on the street to stay safe, Patrick (bisexual man) replied:

I'm pretty secretive about it. As in, I don't really assert myself as bi, I would assert myself as straight. More so, because it's more for my protection from people in the community that would want to hurt me...one time somebody had thought something about me and I had to literally defend myself, so, I don't like to have to fight over my identity.

Similarly, Kellen recounted how it was difficult to always know who would be accepting, so it was often safer to act straight:

I just had to be a lot more cautious because um, I don't know, you have a mixed homeless community, the homeless youth community is a mix of everybody from everywhere, and not everybody in some places are accepting...I guess you gotta act different than you would normally...more like you're straight, I guess you could say...pretended that you were interested in women or whatnot.

For these homeless young people, LGBTQ identity suppression can be a very real survival tactic that can mean the difference between safety and victimization.

While LGBTQ college students also faced threats to their identity on the college campus that led them to conceal their true selves, their experiences differed in that they feared distinctive types of social alienation and rejection, rather than outright physical victimization. In many ways, LGBTQ college students sought to blend in with their desired social circles, rather than have their identity mark them as different. Bethany, for example, recalled how she navigated her identity in particular social groups so as to maintain heteronormative standards:

Sometimes, like in certain situations, like girls, my sorority sisters like to talk about like relationships and stuff and sometimes I'll bring up like something that happened in a relationship that I used to have and I'll change the pronouns of the person I was dating. Like I'll either just say 'they' or I'll change it and pretend they were a 'he' even though they weren't. Sorority is kind of like a small town and if you tell one girl then all 90 other girls will find out. So I just don't want people to start looking at me differently until they've really gotten to know me and they know it doesn't make me anything different.

Related to classroom experiences, Carrie (bisexual woman) had to make a conscious effort to conceal her identity when asked to reveal more personal information about herself by an instructor:

There were a couple of moments where I like... I don't know, I had to answer questions differently with my professors and stuff because I didn't want that to be revealed or whatever. It's just hard to know. Some teachers I think are going to be more accepting than others and you just don't know which ones those are.

On the college campus, LGBTQ young adults must also engage in identity management by strategically identifying situations in which they felt more comfortable keeping their identity a secret.

From these LGBTQ college students' perspectives, maintaining stealth within their identities was a process they engaged in when the situational context demanded it, whereas LGBTQ homeless young adults described the effort of identity concealment as an omnipresent issue on which their safety hinged. LGBTQ identity appeared to surpass differing social contexts for both groups during the years of middle and high school, as all of the young adult participants described middle school in particular as a time of heightened social and personal distress. While LGBTQ young adults manage their identities in response to their wider social contexts, their identity strategies become more nuanced and complex within their personal and professional relationships.

### **Navigating Identity in Social Relationships**

LGBTQ young adults must utilize context-specific strategies to manage their identities as they transition between different environments, and they further refine and tailor these strategies as they navigate their identity in their multiple personal and professional relationships. Most notably, both college and homeless young adults faced challenges in determining how to disclose their identities to various family members



within their nuclear and extended networks. Harper (lesbian transgender woman), a college student, strategically determined a “need-to-know” system of disclosure within her family, as she stated:

I only came out to my best friend at the time, my brother, my mom, and then I haven't come out to anyone else because those are sort of the people that I've decided... that's my family, that's my immediate family unit it was very much of a fear of mine about sort of rejection so I only shared it with people that I had to share it with because I used them as confidants. I've done my part and the ball is in everyone else's court if they want to know because it's not my job to stop their bigotry.

In differentiating between her nuclear and extended family's knowledge of her identity, Harper further explains:

And like with my other family members... I could come out to them but that wouldn't do anything. That would just cause a lot of friction. It would just be something else to fight about, something fresh... I mean like all the old wounds are already scarred over with those relationships so they can be talked over and they don't have to be brought up but introducing something new could potentially sort of hamper that piece.

In this detailed explanation of managing disclosure within her family, Harper represents the complex ways that LGBTQ young adults engage in a type of cost-benefit analysis of identity disclosure.

LGBTQ young adults also described contending with the management of the flow of information related to their identity across different family members. For Julian (bisexual man), a homeless young adult, choosing not to tell certain people in his family afforded him the ability to control which family members knew about his identity:

Step-dad, I really don't care about him, but he's a homophobe anyways. That's one of the main things that's holding me back from telling him. He and I really don't like each other. If I were to come out and tell that and he doesn't know what happens in the family stays in the family, that sort of privacy thing, I feel he's going to tell everybody in [city] and beyond. I like my privacy and that's not just something I want everybody knowing.

Relatedly, many young adults also had to navigate the role of familial gatekeepers within their family who expressed a desire to disclose the young person's identity on their behalf, either with or without their permission. One college student, Sophie (bisexual woman), experienced forceful gatekeeping behavior from her sister, as she described in the following way:

She told me that it was important that I tell my parents. It was important to her. She was putting on me the fact that by not telling them, I was lying to them and that was bad and whatever. I was like, 'You know what? When it's the right time, I'll tell them. It's not really your place to tell me that now is the time.' After that, she unfriended me on Facebook and stopped talking to me. Ever since then, it's been strained between her and I. I don't think that she's told anybody else in my family. She's the only person in my family that knows.

From both Julian's and Sophie's accounts, it is clear that navigating identity and its disclosure within the family is an important aspect of LGBTQ young adults' lives in its influential role in family dynamics.

Friendship relationships also posed unique challenges for LGBTQ that were similar to, yet distinct from, their experiences with family members in regards to managing their identity. Melanie, a homeless young adult, experienced a form of gatekeeping from a close friend in middle school that was characterized by a mixture of support and disregard for privacy:

The biggest thing I remember is telling my best friend at the time, who was completely gay, how I felt and him supporting me a lot, but he had a really big mouth so he went and told everybody and then everybody kind of came at me at the same time but nobody really condemned me for it. They were just all like 'oh hey, cool.'

College students also used distinctive strategies in revealing their identities within friendships, such as Jake, who engages in a type of "pre-screening" when determining to which friends he discloses his identity:

It's been to my friends who are pretty progressive by and large. You don't want to come out to anyone who would think less of you or judge you. Not like I give a shit what they think but you don't want to negatively impact what could be a fruitful relationship beforehand if it might not necessarily be so after. I don't know...just the people that I am closest with are the people who I think would accept me unconditionally.

It is clear from these examples that identity poses similar barriers for LGBTQ young people, regardless of social context, as they negotiate their identity within personal relationships.

Though the majority of LGBTQ young adults emphasized their family and friend relationships when discussing how identity shapes their social worlds, a few participants elected to describe how their gender and sexual identities interacted with the workplace. Professional relationships can be especially important for young people as they work to develop their career trajectories, and the threat of prejudice and discrimination in the workplace is very real for LGBTQ young adults. In describing his coworkers' minimization of his transgender identity, Gavin (bisexual transgender man), a college student, expressed his frustration in the following way when he was not able to easily access his preferred style of work uniform:

I really only just recently even got the guy's uniform because the woman that is in charge of ordering the uniforms and everything, I would tell her repeatedly 'I want a guy's uniform, please order me one.' Like it's not that hard to order a uniform because you order them every month and every time she would refuse. She always will like use nicknames. Like she'll call me 'mama' which super frustrates me.

Homeless young adults also faced issues in the workplace when they interacted with prejudiced individuals, and the example of Bernard responding to homophobic customers highlights how young people can assert themselves in these situations:

Usually it's telling them to leave the hotel...we're very open to the whole community, not just including the LGBTQ, but more into even the homelessness type of community as well. So we're very non-judgmental and for

the safety of our guests and safety of our employees...I don't tolerate any guest coming in and making fun of me, well I'll allow them to make fun of me, I'll allow them to call me a fag, but anything to my other employees is something I'm very protective of and don't tolerate at all and I do ask them to leave the hotel.

Though these young people faced blatant prejudice and discrimination at their places of employment, the experiences of Gavin and Bernard show how young adults challenge homophobic reactions to their identity, and this type of agency is further expressed in how they conceptualize the role that identity plays in their lives.

### **Agency within Identity**

LGBTQ young adults face unique challenges in how they navigate their social realities, but this is not to say that they are simply at the mercy of prejudiced and discriminatory outside forces. In many cases, both homeless and college LGBTQ young adults actively confronted obstacles related to their identity by taking charge of situations and exerting agency surrounding their identity, such as within disclosure processes. Despite facing tangible obstacles to identity formation in the forms of prejudice and discrimination, these young people sought to establish control over if, when and how they disclosed their identity, thus highlighting their sense of responsibility over their desired life course trajectory and their agentic motivations (Côté and Levine 2002). One homeless young adult, Felicity (lesbian woman), bluntly described her attitude towards selective disclosure in the following way: "I just, you know, I feel like if I am gonna come out to someone, it should be my privilege to tell them and if I don't wanna tell them, I'm not gonna tell them." In the classroom context, Natalie, a college student, also exerted agency in how she mediates her LGBTQ identity through her presentation of self that she uses to draw from her privileged social statuses:

But for me nobody knows that I'm anything other than a heterosexual straight cisgender white girl unless I tell them. So I have a little more control in that way

and I will kind of gauge by the class whether or not it's appropriate to mention that. And I won't ever bring it up if it's not relevant at all.

These agency-laden approaches to disclosing (or not) their LGBTQ identity highlights how young adults sought to establish control within their lives, rather than act as passive observers in a society that continues to marginalize non-conforming genders and sexualities.

Several young people also described agentic processes that were more heavily tempered by structural constraints, such as perceptions of negativity that encouraged them to conceal or minimize their identities. As another means of establishing a sense of agency throughout processes of disclosure, other LGBTQ young adults attempted to downplay or minimize their own gender and/or sexual identity in relation to their other roles and identities. Charlie, a college student, represents this strategy in how she asserted that she does not allow her LGBTQ identity to define her:

So I guess I don't ever give it the opportunity to get to my relationships. I try and keep it, not like a hidden thing, but more of a 'I'm more than my sexuality and gender identity' kind of thing but also I mean I do hide it in a sense at the same time.

Similarly, another college student, Billy (gay man), argued that discovering his identity in middle school was par for the course and not at the forefront of his thought processes:

I don't really think it had any big bearing on it. I mean I don't really see it as having had much of an effect then because it wasn't really like something I gave too much thought towards. Because it was kind of one of those things I came to the realization of while I was going about my regular business, hanging out with my regular friends and everything. I didn't feel like it changed anything at least.

By relegating their gender and sexual identity to a status that does not define who they are, LGBTQ college students exerted agency in their lives and social relationships.

Homeless young adults also moderated the power they allowed their LGBTQ identities to have over their lives, but in many ways their outlooks tended to take on a

pessimistic tone rather than an empowering mentality that characterized the college students' descriptions of agency. When asked to describe the best thing about being LGBTQ, Yolanda was unable to identify a single positive aspect related to her identity, and instead replied, "I don't think there is a best thing, sadly. Cause no matter where you turn, there is some type of judgment. I mean, it's not really a gift, but it's not really a curse either. It's just life." In a related vein, Jackson (bisexual man), who was temporarily staying in a transitional living house, attributed his challenges in life to lacking a regular place to live rather than his bisexuality:

I think the challenge isn't my identity. It's the homeless part. I don't really see too much ... too many challenges that come with being bisexual, other than people won't shut the hell up about it. But being homeless is a little bit different because you don't have a permanent place to go home to. I mean, yes, I do have shelter over my head but it's only going to be for about another month or two.

In contrast to their college counterparts, LGBTQ homeless young adults framed their agency in a much more resigned way by downplaying their LGBTQ identity, which most likely relates to the saliency of the struggles they face within homelessness.

### **Summarizing Strategic Identity Management**

The types of strategies and agency LGBTQ young people exhibit as they manage the impact of identity within their lives speaks to the ability of young adults to frame experiences in ways that are advantageous to their social relationships and contexts. While both college students and homeless young adults found ways to exert agency within their identities, social context continued to shape their perceptions as college students adopted an empowered framework, while homeless young adults displayed pragmatic approaches to their LGBTQ identity. These experiences of agency are indicative of a broader pattern of resiliency that emerged among participants and transcended social context. Resiliency is defined here as the ability of young people to

positively adapt to conflict-laden life experiences, such as sexual and gender identity-related struggles, whereby protective factors, including self-confidence, work to promote successful development in the face of adversity (Russell 2005).

## **IDENTITY AS LIFE ENHANCEMENT**

Both LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults face distinctive challenges and experiences related to their gender and sexual identities, and social context often plays an integral role in how young adults perceive their lives. One aspect of LGBTQ young adults' life courses that appears to supersede differences across social context is that of identity acting as a form of resiliency and how it enhances their lives in meaningful ways. For example, LGBTQ young adults generally described their identity as a positive aspect of their lives that helped them navigate different types of relationships at the same time that it developed their sense of themselves in relation to other people and social issues. Overall, these young people conceptualized conflict as a type of resiliency that helped to shape them into stronger, more capable individuals.

### **Identity as a Relationship Modifier**

In many ways, LGBTQ identity provided a means of modifying relationships for young people that helped them to assess the value of connections they had with various people in their lives. For the majority of LGBTQ young adults, their identity helped them build up and strengthen relationships with particular people. Holly (lesbian woman), a college student, believed that her identity provided more opportunities for friendships as she welcomed opportunities to act as confidant for others who were struggling with their sexuality:

I think that it opens up a lot more doors for, not just for conversation, but even with females that are confused. They come to you more. They disclose a lot more

personal information...same with males. Anyone confused about their sexuality, I think that opens up opportunities for friendship because you like to confide in people that have similar situations so I think it builds stronger relationships.

In a similar way, Harris, a homeless young adult, was confident that his gay identity helped him to form relationships with people by opening lines of communication:

It actually made it a lot easier because then it's helping others to realize things easier once you get to know a lot of them that's been out there a lot longer. It's helped open up relationships a lot more... because now that others realize who I am, truly, it makes it easier for them to open [up] and it's easier for me to get closer to them.

By coming to terms with their identities, these young adults felt that they were able to build deeper relationships with people that were more fulfilling and authentic compared to social interactions where they remain closeted.

While identity could potentially create pathways to new relationships and solidify and strengthen those already established, LGBTQ young adults also perceived their identity as a type of relationship filter that revealed the true nature of their friendships and family ties. Sawyer, for example, a homeless young adult, believed that his non-normative gender and sexual identities granted him the ability to see people's true colors, as he describes in the following way:

It's made me be able to look at people, I can see through people now. I'm able to read people really well now, having that experience of people coming and going often and being really fake towards you. It's like I'm able to read that well now...it's made me realize the people who truly care, you know they can see past it. Cause I've lost friendships because of it, you know just people not accepting of it.

College students also expressed similar sentiments, such as in the case of Gabriel, who claimed that his identity allowed him to be more assertive in his social relationships:

I don't really put up with people who aren't accepting of me and I don't allow people to walk all over me so I think that it really helps me build more meaningful relationships. So I feel closer to everybody. I may not have thousands of friends,



but the handful of people that I do have, I actually know that they're going to be there for me.

In essence, these young adults valued the quality of their relationships over their quantity, and attributed their ability to form these meaningful social connections to their LGBTQ identity.

### **Developing Social Awareness and Empathy**

In addition to their identity opening doors for new and more meaningful relationships, many LGBTQ young adults also concurred that their identity provided them with experiences that helped them develop their own social awareness and sense of empathy towards others. As a homeless young adult, Sonya (bisexual woman), was deeply aware of others' suffering and she asserted that a bisexual identity enhances one's empathetic nature:

You love everybody. I feel like there's no hate towards another race. Like... as a metaphor, towards another person. Like we have bigger hearts than anybody else, because you can love somebody even knowing that somebody else doesn't like you for loving that person. Or you can just be who you are.

Heidi (asexual woman), a college student, believed that her identity shaped her ability to be more open to different kinds of people. When asked how her identity affected her social relationships, she replied:

I think it makes me a little more accepting of other people and of their experiences. I try to be less likely to assume that somebody in the street was a certain orientation...depending upon if I just looking at them. It's a process but I try not to do that. I try to use more inclusive language. I would say I'm more open and accepting of other ideas...I'm a "live and let live" kind of person.

These introspective processes stemming from the young person's LGBTQ identity developed their social awareness to the point that it extended into their social interactions and relationships as well.

Beyond a level of heightened introspection and awareness regarding social issues, LGBTQ identity also prompted young people to be more outspoken in their beliefs as they modified their social interactions. Carrie, a college student, recounted the shift in her reactions to prejudiced behavior after she came to identify as bisexual:

I definitely get offended more easily if somebody, I don't know, makes a joke or something that's kind of inappropriate...before I would kind of just shrug it off like it wasn't a thing and now I'm much more apt to like call them out on it and yell at them kind of thing. And that's not just in regards to sexuality too. I think it's just because I feel like I'm a member of a minority that I'm much more sensitive to people of other minority groups as well.

Furthermore, as a result of experiencing prejudice in her own life as a homeless young adult, Willow (lesbian woman) recognized the importance of accepting others and made it a point to encourage those around her to do the same:

I told everyone like life, well life can be easy, it all depends on how you like control your life...life is [too] short to judge anyone, like nobody has the right to judge anyone about how they feel or what sex they like. Judging is a big word, because if you don't know exactly what the person is about, you don't need to judge them for where they come from. If you understand them, then you understand them. But if you don't know anything about them, don't judge a person just because of how you feel about it, you never know what the person may be going through.

By sharing their beliefs regarding identity and social acceptance, these young people used their gender and sexual identities as a way to stand up for their ideals, which had additional benefits for their mental health.

### **Identity as a Boost to Personal Well-being**

As LGBTQ young adults described how their identity had impacted their lives and experiences, their stories touched upon a number of different aspects, ranging from the social and interactional to the more personal. One of the more intimate experiences they recounted was how coming out as their gender and/or sexual identity acted as a major boost to their sense of personal well-being. Thomas (gay man), a homeless young

adult, revealed that his LGBTQ identity helped to boost his level of confidence in himself, as well as his sense of independence:

I just confidentially knew who I was, so it was like, it was natural. I didn't have to go through no transitional like state or emotion. I just love who I am and fuck what anyone tells me is how I feel about it... But I'm there for myself now. That's the thing, because I don't wanna put my strength into other people. You have to be by your own side. That's confidence. That's what works.

In a similar way, Sophie, a college student, noted that confidence stemming from her bisexuality helped her to accept herself and build stronger relationships:

I think that generally, ever since I was honest with myself about being bi, I feel a lot more confident... When you feel like you have that secret and you're embarrassed by it, or that no one can know, it really takes a toll on your self-esteem. I think it's caused me to grow as a person, in a lot of different ways... it's given me a lot more confidence and I feel like people can see me for who I am.

By conceptualizing their LGBTQ identity as a source of confidence, these young people felt that they could be more true to themselves and comfortable in their own skin, which also imbued them with more pride in their identities and improved their overall sense of self-esteem.

In addition to equating LGBTQ identity as a confidence-booster, many young adults also described coming to terms with their gender and sexuality, on both personal and interactional levels, as freeing and liberating. When asked to describe how being queer has shaped her life, Clark, a college student, replied in the following way:

So I think it helps me be flexible because queer doesn't mean like I have to be only attracted to women always and I can't have any sort of desires or feelings outside of that. And so queer gives me the space to be able to be who I am... I think it makes it easier to be freer from shame.

Relatedly, Abby, a homeless young adult, attributed her mental clarity to the fact that she was transitioning and realizing her true self:

Life has actually become more clear. I've always wondered how my life was going to be like after transitioning and soon as I started and up to now it's become

a lot easier for me. It's become, so far, in most ways a better life for me. Everything I've seen myself doing in the past it was a little blurry back then but now it's much clearer because I'm actually taking action.

For both college students and homeless young adults, an LGBTQ identity has the potential to enhance their sense of purpose and meaning in life when they have the freedom to fully be themselves.

The struggle for authenticity also emerged as an important factor related to LGBTQ young adults' personal well-being. While identity as source of confidence and liberation were widely discussed as positive elements related to their gender and sexuality, a sense of authenticity was described as a more elusive goal for young people. In the following way, Carrie, a college student, explained the ambivalence she experienced when trying to balance her sense of authenticity and her personal privacy as she managed disclosing her bisexuality:

I'm a pretty open and honest person and I want to be honest about all of the aspects of my life but at the same time I don't think I should have to share something about myself that is so private...so it's a lot of conflict between wanting to be completely genuine and also like being respectful of my own privacy.

Lawrence, a homeless young adult, also endured conflict as he struggled with "lying" to his family by concealing his gay identity. When asked how this affects his family interactions, Lawrence replied, "It hurts. I don't like lying. I'm not a lying kind of person, I'm the most honest person that anybody could meet, but it's very difficult to lie to myself and lie to my grandparents, lie to my whole family...but pretty much I'm just saving their feelings." Though young adults like Natalie, a college student, described "authenticity" as one of the best things about being LGBTQ because "it's people who know who they are and are cool with that no matter what other people are cool with," the

majority of young people found being true to themselves and others was one of the major challenges they faced.

### **Conflict as Resiliency**

While LGBTQ identity symbolized numerous positive traits for young people, they still endured various challenges in their lives related to both their gender and sexual orientation, as well as their particular social context. All of the LGBTQ young adults in this study, inclusive of both college students and homeless young adults, recounted enduring some type of identity-related conflict, such as prejudice or discrimination. These experiences certainly impacted their lives and well-being, yet, according to the young people, these challenges were formative in that they helped them become stronger, more resilient individuals. Conceptualizing conflict as resiliency cut across social context, yet young adults' perceptions of the most salient *source* of their resiliency differed for college and homeless young people.

For both groups of LGBTQ young adults, conflict related to their gender or sexual identity helped them build up their own personal sense of strength. Kiley, a homeless young adult, interpreted the prejudice and discrimination she faced as a bisexual woman as positive life experiences:

I guess one of the things that I got out of it was becoming a stronger person because of being what I am, I can embrace a lot of hateful things from people and practically not let it get to me because you get a lot of crap when you're bisexual...you gotta put up with a lot of crap from people and I guess I just became a stronger person because of all the crap I've had to put up with.

Similarly, Paige (lesbian woman), a college student, believed that having an identity challenge to cope with in life is "healthy" and improves her social relationships:

I just think it's healthy to have had something, I mean everyone deals with something, but I think it's good to have something that is difficult in your life just because I think it keeps you from getting too complacent about things. And I

think that it makes you appreciate when you are able to be yourself more... I think it just makes me value my relationships more, because there have been challenges to all of them so I think the people who are still around are probably gonna still be around and it's nice to know that you can get through some things with them.

Overall, gender and sexual identity-related conflict as a type of resiliency-builder cuts across social context for LGBTQ young adults, yet resiliency stemming from conflict within one's environment distinguishes college students from homeless young adults.

While the idea of conflict as resiliency is important for both groups, LGBTQ homeless young adults underwent unique challenges related to their lack of permanent housing that was not shared among college students. Yolanda, for example, adamantly believed that her difficult experiences with foster care, being homeless and self-harm molded her into a more resilient young adult:

I wouldn't change any of the experiences I've been through because without all of those experiences I wouldn't be as tough emotionally, physically and mentally. I wouldn't be able to say, 'I've been through, I lived that, I'm still here.' I mean, a lot of people they ask, 'are you ashamed of the scars from your self-harming?' I'm not. They're scars of survival and war to me. They're the story of my life. Cause I want to help youth in the foster system and make them understand that no matter what they go through, they can do whatever they want and be whoever they want. So, I mean, if I hadn't gone through half the stuff I went through, I don't think I would be as bubbly, as strong, as wise, as tough exterior-type person. I think I would still be that weak, shy, not able to stand up for myself, person.

Similar to Yolanda, Bernard also experienced challenges related to both being homeless and LGBTQ, which became most salient to him when his mother refused to provide any aid to him when he first became homeless and sought out her help. Despite enduring parental rejection and being forced to cope on his own without familial assistance, Bernard described being grateful for this arduous experience as it strengthened his resolve and his relationship with his mother:

It made me love my mom so much more because it built who I was today to I got out of homelessness on my own. My mom purposely did that because she wanted to see if I could do it on my own, which she said I would feel so much better

doing it on my own...and I do respect her for it...saying no, and declining helping me at all. It built myself back up, matured myself, and got me to the position I am in today.

Homeless young adults' perceptions of their residential instability as a source of resiliency strongly contrasts with college students, as students did not attribute any challenges in their life to the campus context, but rather to their LGBTQ identity broadly.

### **Summarizing Identity as Life Enhancement**

In considering the impact of their gender and sexuality in their lives, LGBTQ young adults generally perceived their LGBTQ identity to be a positive influence that enhanced their well-being in relationships in multiple different ways. Furthermore, these favorable views of how their identity shaped their lives was similar for both college students and homeless young adults, which highlights distinctive similarities across social contexts. Though both groups construed LGBTQ identity-related challenges they faced as a source of resiliency that made them stronger, more competent people, homeless young adults often brought their homeless identity to the fore of their experiences as an integral component of their sense of resiliency.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION

Findings here underscore the complex roles that gender and sexuality play in the lives of LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults. Both groups of young adults shared experiences that emphasize the energy and effort they exerted in conceptualizing and managing their identities on multiple levels, including the individual, the interpersonal and the contextual or community. The social contexts of the college campus and homeless environment deeply influenced how LGBTQ young people could engage with their sexuality and gender, resulting in identity acting as a type of privilege. Furthermore, young people strategically managed their identities depending on their encounters with different people and social contexts. Finally, LGBTQ young people often conceptualized their identity and context-related challenges as positive life enhancements by improving both their personal coping abilities and their social relationships. The following section highlights the implications associated with each of these themes and how they extend upon the theoretical frameworks of life course and emerging adulthood.

#### **Implications of Identity as Privilege**

The theme of “Identity as Privilege” demonstrates the importance of social context within the lives of LGBTQ young adults and how these young people must navigate their environments in distinct ways when seeking out support and managing identity-related challenges. In comparing college students and homeless young adults, the campus context is largely conducive to identity development, as students are afforded a breadth of resources and opportunities they can utilize to construct their identities. Homelessness, on the other hand, overwhelmingly acts as a hindrance to identity



formation for LGBTQ young adults, and they must make concerted efforts to overcome these barriers and pursue identity development. In many ways, homeless young adults' experiences reflected a version of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, whereby they had to satisfy their more immediate needs of food, shelter and clothing before they could expand into self-actualizing identity work or self-transcendence through social engagement that was more readily available to college students (Koltko-Rivera 2006). This stark contrast between these two groups of young adults points to identity as a mechanism of privilege that is largely shaped by one's social context.

Despite the ways that social context created disparate experiences of identity development among LGBTQ young adults, similarities were also evident in how respondents viewed sexual and gender identity as an important aspect of their lives. For both LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults, social surroundings were key in determining how they expressed their identities openly or sought to conceal their identities if they perceived a sense of prejudice directed at their sexuality or gender presentation. Though social context acted as a source of privilege for college students in accessing support on campus, they remained aware of environments where the potential for prejudice existed, such as Greek communities. While college students perceive widespread campus support, they must still navigate the prevalence of heteronormativity that abounds in particular college contexts (Wickens and Sandlin 2010). Similarly for homeless young adults, social context shaped how they navigated different service providers at the same time that it prompted them to create social support networks in the absence of formal resources. In these ways, LGBTQ identity acted as a link across social

contexts that created both similarities and differences for college and homeless young adults.

A life course perspective considers the integral role of social context, as well as the interplay among individuals' social relationships and interacting identities (Elder 1998), especially the unique influence of gender and sexual orientations. My study demonstrated how LGBTQ young adults' social environments created distinctive social convoys for their transitions from adolescence to adulthood (Moen and Hernandez 2009). Findings here demonstrate the key role of young people's conceptions of their sexual and gender identities in their pathways to adulthood and how this transformative period is shaped by shifts in identity development (Torkelson 2012) and sources of inequality (O'Rand 2006). Social context perpetuated inequalities between college students and young adults, as college students experienced more ease and support in accessing resources, while homeless young adults faced many barriers in seeking assistance for identity development. Furthermore, this study expanded the scope of emerging adulthood to encompass a wider array of young people's life courses and their contexts, including LGBTQ young adults in college and those who are homeless, by emphasizing the empirical impact of the college environment (Arnett 2015) and that of homelessness (Ream and Forge 2014).

While this study captured a snapshot of LGBTQ young adults' lives at one point in time, it is also necessary to consider how their lives can shift as they enter into later life stages and experience formative life course transitions, such as graduating from college for students and establishing a stable residence for homeless young adults. Graduating from the uniquely protective environments of college campuses could act as a

pivotal turning point for some students if they transition into contexts that lack support and affirmation, such as the workplace where they have no legal protections for their identities (Ragins and Cornwell 2001). Homeless young adults could also lose vital support networks if they had been utilizing LGBTQ homeless youth resources and age out, secure stable housing or otherwise become ineligible for services (Maccio and Ferguson 2016). Additionally, it is important to consider the fluidity of sexual and gender identities and how LGBTQ young adults may or may not be able to sustain their identities in changing environments if they lose key sources of social and cultural capital (Pinto, Melendez and Spector 2008). For example, sexual and gender identity can shift across the life course as individuals experience changing social roles, relationships and self-concepts (Diamond and Butterworth 2008).

Differences across race and class also emerged when comparing LGBTQ young adults in distinctive social contexts. For example, half of LGBTQ homeless young adults identified as people of color, while only 12 percent of LGBTQ college students were non-white, highlighting the intersections of race and class. The LGBTQ young adults of color in this study did not often mention the influence of race/ethnicity in their lives, however its role can be instrumental in the well-being of homeless young adults in particular, as racial and homelessness-related stigma can doubly harm their mental health (Gattis and Larson 2016), creating an intersecting matrix of systems of oppression that adversely affect marginalized people (Collins 2009). Similarly for college students, racial microaggressions are a detriment to self-esteem (Nadal, Wong, Griffin, Davidoff and Sriken 2014), which can further interact with on-campus homophobic slurs (Nadal et al. 2011) for LGBTQ college students of color. Furthermore, more college students (42%)

than homeless young adults (5%) identified outside of the LGBT spectrum, such as queer or asexual, which could point to social class differences in having more opportunities to learn about and educate oneself about non-mainstream sexual and gender identities. Access to technology and informational resources are critical determinants in how LGBTQ young people can learn about their identity and issues related to their well-being (DeHaan, Kuper, Magee, Bigelow and Mustanski 2013). From this perspective, the college environment may not only be more conducive to identity development, but it can also expose college students to a wider variety of identity options from which they may choose, while homeless young adults may not reach that level of identity complexity as they struggle to meet their basic needs.

The notion of “Identity as Privilege” underscores the prominent role of social context in LGBTQ young adults’ life courses and their journey through emerging adulthood. By acting as a source of privilege and as a barrier to resources and opportunities for different groups of LGBTQ young adults, social environment can help determine processes of identity formation. Furthermore, it is essential to understand LGBTQ young adults not as a monolithic social group, but rather as a dynamic, complex subpopulation that can simultaneously undergo similar, yet disparate, experiences that can both unite them and create distinctive intragroup differences.

### **Implications for Strategic Identity Management**

The second theme, “Strategic Identity Management,” emerged as an important aspect in the lives of LGBTQ young adults that largely transcended social context as both college students and homeless young adults grappled with navigating their identities within their social networks. Social context continued to shape the strategies they used,

however, in that particular campus or homeless environments presented distinctive challenges to which the young people adapted in unique ways. In these ways, strategic identity management was a recurring concern for these young people as they were continually assessing their social surroundings and social relationships to find ways to protect themselves from prejudice and discrimination. Furthermore, young people were dedicated to maintaining control over their identities as a way to maximize the benefits of disclosing their identities or minimizing the risk of negative repercussions of disclosure.

For example, while LGBTQ college students suppressed their identities as a way to avoid bullying in school settings, homeless young adults often adopted stealth strategies regarding their sexuality and/or gender as a way to avoid street victimization, which could include extreme physical altercations. Participants in this study underscored the prevalence of LGBTQ-centered microaggressions present in young people's lives and the mental effort required to constantly be aware of subtle prejudice and discrimination in social interactions, including dirty looks and offensive humor. Microaggressions can vary across social context, however, as well as in their severity. Research shows the disproportionate levels of bullying and verbal harassment that LGBTQ college students face in campus settings (Woodford et al. 2014), however LGBTQ homeless young adults typically contend with much higher rates of physical and sexual victimization while on the streets (Cochran et al. 2002; Tyler 2008). Therefore, enacting a strategy of secrecy can be a very real survival tactic concerning their physical safety for LGBTQ homeless young adults, while for college students avoiding harassment was more conducive to their mental health.

The ways in which LGBTQ young adults manage their identities and navigate them within social contexts has vast implications for their mental health and social functioning. For example, young adults in this study faced varying levels of acceptance and rejection from their family, friends, peers and, in some cases, coworkers. Fear of discrimination and rejection was a primary motivating factor for both homeless and college young adults in determining if, when and how they disclosed their identity to their social networks. Research has highlighted the extreme importance of social acceptance in LGBTQ young people's lives, and how acceptance, or lack thereof, of one's sexual and/or gender identity can directly determine their mental health, including levels of self-esteem and depression (Ryan et al. 2010). While social support in relationships is key for all LGBTQ young adults, it can be especially critical for homeless young adults as their family relationships tend to be characterized by greater conflict (Tyler 2006) and problematic family ties can be influential in determining the resources and support they receive that can curb high-risk behaviors such as substance use and delinquent behaviors (Milburn et al. 2012).

Related to the broader implications of maintaining mental health among LGBTQ young adults in managing their identities, it can also be critical for these young people to be able to exert agency and control over social perceptions of their gender and sexuality. Regardless of social context, both LGBTQ homeless young adults and college students in this study often placed a high premium on taking ownership of their identity through acting as their own gatekeeper to disclosure despite contextual constraints that limited their ability to fully take control of social interactions. In many cases, though, homeless young adults faced more formidable barriers to exerting agency compared to college

students, which was often tied to their residential instability and lack of basic resources. A sense of agency can be key in promoting positive mental health among sexual and gender minority youth, as being out to more supportive people in one's social network can buffer the adverse effects of identity-related stress for these young people (Wright and Perry 2006). Glassgold (2007, p. 47) succinctly summarized the meaning and importance of agency in the lives of sexual and gender minorities: "Agency is an attempt to live as authentically in the world as we can, given its restraints and limits; and it occurs when we commit to meeting each limit with resistance, then finding a creative solution to transcend that limit." Some participants in this study also found the solution of identity concealment to be a source of empowerment, rather than one that harmed their mental health. Empowering LGBTQ youth and young adults can be a powerful mechanism in improving their lives if they are given the tools to confront sexuality and gender-related prejudice and discrimination (Craig, Tucker and Wagner 2008).

Processes of strategic identity management further extend upon understandings of LGBTQ young people's experiences through a life course perspective and using the concept of emerging adulthood. Particularly in considering young people's social networks, or "linked lives" (Elder 1994), LGBTQ young adults in this study emphasized the influential nature of social support or rejection that was most salient in the developmental periods of middle and high school. In this way, the intricate dynamics of family and peer relationships and the shifting quality of these relationships across the life course are key in determining how well they are able to cope with life's challenges (Moen and Hernandez 2009). Similar to the LGBTQ young adults in this study who found that establishing social solidarity with similar others was a critical source of

support (across identity and social context), other studies affirm this finding as they show that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth found the most sexuality-related support from other sexual minority youth (Doty, Willoughby, Lindahl and Malik 2010). Positive resources of social support are especially crucial for young adults as they attempt to successfully navigate the complex pathway to adulthood (Spencer and Patrick 2009).

### **Implications for Identity as Life Enhancement**

The third and final theme, “Identity as Life Enhancement,” underscored the LGBTQ young adults’ life course experiences, and social context acted as both a unifying characteristic and one that created divergent perspectives of personal strength. By conceptualizing challenges and conflicts as experiences that imbued them with resiliency, the young people in this study discussed how identity-related difficulties helped to improve their lives by strengthening supportive relationships, developing their social awareness and enhancing their overall personal sense of well-being. All too often, research over-emphasizes the risks and challenges that LGBTQ young people face, which can mask the potential these youth embody for experiencing healthy, well-adjusted development (Russell 2005).

Young people’s capacity for framing adverse life struggles as positive, resiliency-building experiences can potentially improve their mental health and promote healthy coping strategies (Fergus and Zimmerman 2005). Particularly for LGBTQ young adults, establishing a sense of resiliency in response to challenging life events can help them manage prejudice and discrimination directed at their gender and/or sexual identity. For example, respondents in this study emphasized the importance of being proud of their experiences and establishing self-confidence related to their sexuality and/or gender. This



finding is in line with previous research that shows the complex ways that LGBT youth navigate homophobia through various behaviors, such as the development of a sense of mature responsibility and pride-filled identities (McDermott, Roen and Scourfield 2008).

While both homeless and college young people framed life challenges as positive experiences, some respondents' perceptions of the most influential source of resiliency in their lives was closely tied to their primary social context. For example, several LGBTQ homeless young adults constructed their sense of resiliency from their experiences with residential instability and homelessness. Research highlights the fact that resiliency among homeless youth can be especially important in curbing dangerous lifestyle behaviors such as drug use and suicide ideation (Rew, Taylor-Seehafer, Thomas and Yockey 2001). Furthermore, in light of the extreme struggles for survival they face on a daily basis, resiliency among homeless youth can foster enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence (Kidd and Shahar 2008) and can act as a healthy coping strategy for managing the stressors of running away and becoming homeless (Williams, Lindsey, Kurtz and Jarvis 2001). Mechanisms of resilience utilized by homeless young adults, may also extend to other homophobic, heteronormative environments, such as the college campus.

In stark contrast to the LGBTQ homeless young adults in this study, LGBTQ college students shared overwhelmingly positive accounts of support and acceptance on the college campus, which helped to develop their sense of resilience in response to identity-related challenges. Therefore, the campus environment acted as a positive complement to college students' resiliency, so that it bolstered their belief that their gender and sexual identity enhanced their lives. Other studies support this finding, especially for trans students who experienced positive affirmation on their college

campus through perceiving inclusive language, health care and student ally groups (Singh, Meng and Hansen 2013). Developing resiliency and conceptualizing identity-related challenges as life enhancement is especially important for LGBTQ college students because of the persistence of heteronormative campus climates (Wickens and Sandlin 2010) and the unique risks they face in college that can lead to dropping out of college, such as feelings of social isolation and lack of institutional support for LGBT issues (Mancini 2011).

The theme of “Identity as Life Enhancement” also has significant implications for understanding LGBTQ young adults’ life course trajectories and their transitions through emerging adulthood. Though the accumulation of risk can create cumulative disadvantages across a person’s life, such as undergoing homelessness during the period of adolescence or enduring family rejection, experiences that work to counteract adverse life course events can potentially buffer these negative effects (Elder 1998; Kennedy et al. 2010). Relatedly, developing resilience and other positive coping strategies in emerging adulthood, as having adaptive resources in response to conflicts and struggles, such as effective problem-solving and rational thinking, has been shown to predict the successful transition into adulthood (Masten et al. 2004). Encouraging and promoting resilience and personal competency in young people can have profound effects in orienting their life course onto a healthy path, rather than only focusing on challenges and risks (Schoon and Bynner 2003).

This study showed that young people’s ability to develop resiliency in the face of adversity was highly contingent upon context and social environment, therefore it is necessary to consider how well a sense of resilience can successfully carry LGBTQ

young adults into middle and later life. While scholars highlight the ways that resiliency can buffer the negative effects of victimization for LGBT youth, contextual factors can diminish this relationship, such as in rural areas where LGBT-directed violence is higher (Kosciw, Palmer and Kull 2015). From a life course perspective, developing resilience can be a vital component to sustaining mental and physical health, as well as enduring pivotal, and possibly challenging, life course transitions, especially for sexual and gender minority young people (Saewyc 2011). For example, while homeless young adults were adamant in this study to conceptualize their struggles as positive, life-enhancing experiences, the question remains as to whether this heightened sense of resiliency can imbue them with tangible skills and opportunities that allow them to exit homelessness and improve their life conditions. Connections to broader, community-based LGBTQ support groups are especially crucial for young people in providing them with accessible resources throughout their life course (Allen, Hammack and Himes 2012) that are not contingent upon a particular social context, such as campus or homelessness.

### **Implications for Service, Policy and Law**

These findings have important implications for policymakers, service providers and lawmakers. On the college campus, educators and administrators must remain vigilant in making the classroom and wider campus context a welcoming, inclusive environment for LGBTQ young adults. Exploring the intricacies of the campus context is key in examining the nuances of LGBTQ college students' experiences, so that college officials can address more homophobic and heteronormative environments, such as fraternities (Worthen 2014). Furthermore, colleges and universities should work to implement more programs and resources for LGBT college students, as research has

identified the positive influence of programs, such as the LGBT Safe Zone, including increasing awareness of and support for LGBT-identified people and issues on campus (Evans 2002). Campus officials must also be aware of how LGBTQ college students' multiple, intersecting identities, such as sexuality, gender, race, class and religion, can create unique experiences for them and policies should be pursued that help to integrate students' identities and help them establish a sense of campus community (Poynter and Washington 2005). As college student participants in this study emphasized the importance of engaging in LGBTQ activism and advocacy on campus in developing their identities, college officials should continue to work to provide opportunities for LGBTQ leadership and advocacy that allow students to become involved and shape campus climate surrounding LGBTQ issues (Renn 2007).

Similarly, homeless service providers should take into account the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ homeless young adults in understanding how they tailor services and programs for these young people. For example, service providers should consider how agency ideology, particularly when it is religious-oriented, could create unwelcoming environments for these young people if they perceive prejudice and discrimination directed at their sexuality or gender. Homeless shelters are an example of one such site that can be perceived as hostile environments for LGBTQ young adults, especially if their rules dictate homophobic or transphobic regulations, such as prohibiting young people from sharing rooms/beds with their partners or not allowing trans people to use the bathroom reflective of their preferred gender (Mottet and Ohle 2006). Additionally, homeless youth shelters should be especially mindful of the disproportionate rates of victimization of LGBTQ runaway and homeless youth (Cochran

et al. 2002; Tyler 2008) and work to provide added protections and safeguards for these young people while they are in the shelter's care (Hunter 2008).

On a broader community level, lawmakers and policymakers in the United States and beyond must take steps to address the distinctive challenges that LGBTQ young adults encounter, as prejudice and discrimination experienced by LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults does not exist within a contextual vacuum. For example, broad reaching community education efforts aimed at LGBTQ issues, including hate crimes and microaggressions, can begin to bridge the gaps that exist between campus initiatives and homeless agency and service programs (Mayer, Mimiaga, VanDerwarker, Goldhammer and Bradford 2007). A more contextually comprehensive approach to improving the lives of LGBTQ young adults can more fully address their needs across multiple domains of emerging adulthood, including, among others, the complexity of family formation beyond a heteronormative model (Rabun and Oswald 2009) and the challenges they may experience in the workforce such as gender and sexuality-based discrimination (Willis 2012).

Structural changes to improve LGBTQ young adults' lives are required to address systemic failings that diminish or ignore the unique challenges these young people face and the impact of contextual factors. Though the majority of LGBTQ college students in this study cited the widespread support and access to resources for sexual minority individuals, the religious ideology of college campuses must also be taken into consideration. Many Christian colleges, for example, espouse alienating campus policies that on one hand are inclusive of LGBTQ identity and on the other are discriminatory against any type of non-heterosexual behavior, forcing LGBTQ students to live in fear of

negative academic repercussions, including expulsion (Wheeler 2016). Furthermore, federal regulations must work to expand protections to LGBTQ students, such as Title IX, which currently protects students from gender-based prejudice and discrimination in schools, but this law fails to prohibit harassment based on sexual attraction and identity (National Women's Law Center 2012). Structural support for LGBTQ college students on various types of campuses can encourage these young people's successful transitions into young adulthood and beyond.

In addition to structural changes within academic institutions to acknowledge the needs of LGBTQ college students, macro policies that provide support for gender and sexual minorities in the wider community can also benefit more at-risk young adults, including LGBTQ homeless youth. Health policy changes are required to be fully inclusive of a diverse range of gender and sexual identities that often face prejudice and discrimination (Mulé et al. 2009). Lack of adequate health care access and resources is especially salient for homeless LGBTQ young people; therefore public policy changes must address the nuances within this population such as unique family background, geographical region and variation across victimization and substance use (Keuroghlian, Shtasel and Bassuk 2014). Equitable access to quality healthcare is critical for LGBTQ young people as they emerge into adulthood and navigate life course transitions and turning points, including the pursuit of family formation and health maintenance (Hoffman, Freeman and Swann 2009).

## **LIMITATIONS**

This study has limitations that require consideration. First, both samples of LGBTQ young adults were recruited using convenience-sampling methods. This

recruitment strategy created a constrained sampling frame that captured a particular subset of LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults. For example, some college students were recruited from LGBTQ-related campus email listservs and social justice-oriented classes and majors, which could have primed these participants for thinking about their gender and sexual identities in contexts that expressly encouraged this type of critical thinking. Further, homeless young adults were primarily recruited from service agencies, so that this sample does not represent the experiences of homeless youth who do not use services and therefore are possibly at greater risk. Many of these homeless young adults were also involved in service agency-sponsored LGBTQ support groups, which highlights their desire to engage with processes of identity development. A number of studies have documented the difficulty of capturing representative samples of hard to reach populations, including the homeless and LGBTQ people (Abrams 2010). Future research should attempt to sample both college and homeless LGBTQ young adults using more diverse sampling methods to capture a wider breadth of these individuals' experiences.

The disparate knowledge of LGBTQ language and issues across the subsamples may also have influenced the data and how young people responded to interview questions. This was evident in this study in terms of young people's identities, such that college students expressed more variation in identifying outside of the more normative convention of the LGBTQ spectrum, such as being asexual, pansexual (romantic attraction without regard to gender categories) or a demi-girl (defined by participant as identifying mostly as feminine while also feeling comfortable expressing masculine traits). Additionally, many homeless respondents admitted that they were not familiar

with the LGBTQ acronym and had more difficulty understanding explanations of each of these terms. Disparities in knowledge and education surrounding identity-related matters could shape how LGBTQ young adults understand their own sexuality and gender and engage with identity development on individual, interpersonal and community levels (DeHaan et al. 2013).

It is also necessary to acknowledge the barrier of gaining access to participants and how this may have influenced the data. For example, social desirability bias could have affected how respondents' disclosed information based on the sensitive nature of the interviews concerning their sexual and gender identities and the social stigma attached to these statuses. In particular, the methodological format of face-to-face interviewing, compared to surveys, may have led to respondents' greater hesitancy in sharing more personal anecdotes, such as experiences of victimization or sexual activity. Additionally, the insider/outsider dilemma posed challenges in gaining the trust of participants when a researcher does not share membership with the population of interest (Levy 2013). For example, some homeless youth expressed their reluctance to speak with me because they viewed me as an authority figure, and therefore they were likely to mistrust my purpose and intentions. Gaining the trust of various gatekeepers to homeless young adult networks, such as service providers and leaders of homeless peer groups, however, enhanced the legitimacy of my study and my role as a researcher, and this prompted some youth to participate in my study. On the other hand, my role as a graduate student whose gender and sexual identities were unknown to participants allowed me to build rapport with college students as we inhabited the shared role of student and could commiserate on similar stressors we faced in pursuing higher education. In these ways, embodying



both an insider and outsider perspective in varying aspects simultaneously acted as a barrier and a facilitator to recruitment and data collection.

Another barrier to this study is the retrospective nature of the young people's accounts that were captured at one point in time and its limited definition of how young adults can experience sexual and gender minority statuses. The young adults' memories of past experiences may have been flawed by lapses in memory, misremembering the chronology of events and the exaggeration or minimization of life experiences (Hardt and Rutter 2004). Furthermore, LGBTQ young adults may misremember their coming out experiences, in particular, especially if this process led to traumatic events that they have blocked from or minimized in their memory as a coping strategy (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz and Smith 2001). Relatedly, this study only addressed how sexual and gender identity shaped young people's lives, as it was an eligibility requirement that participants claim a particular sexual and/or gender minority status. Sexual attraction, rather than identity, however, may be more indicative of experiences of prejudice, discrimination and overall well-being because of its potential greater visibility and public nature for young people (Johns, Zimmerman and Bauermeister 2013).

The cross-sectional nature of the data itself being collected in a single interview also warrants discussion. Capturing the breadth of one's life course in one interview is challenging in that it forces a respondent to recall a vast amount of information, including their early lives and the sequencing of life events. While this study is useful in providing a snapshot of LGBTQ young adults' lives, qualitative longitudinal research could help ease these concerns by allowing for a wider scope of their life course and how certain experiences may act as pivotal turning points. Researchers must be aware, however, of

the difficulty in tracking more marginalized populations, such as homeless youth, and the increased risk of attrition in pursuing qualitative, longitudinal studies (Maycock and Corr 2013). Despite these drawbacks, one-time face-to-face interviews allowed the young adults to conceptualize their life course trajectories from their own perspectives, rather than a researcher interpreting the young people's lives from an outside point of view.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study of LGBTQ young adults also points to numerous fruitful avenues for future research. For example, prospective studies would benefit from incorporating a participatory action research model to overcome some of the aforementioned limitations by enlisting LGBTQ college students and homeless young adults to act as researchers in collecting data from their peers. This method would allow participants an active stake in the research process and provide more opportunities for effecting real change in issues that marginalized groups are facing, such as health and social disparities among homeless populations (Yeich 1996) and LGBTQ individuals (Northridge, McGrath and Krueger 2007). For young people, involvement in participatory research could also act as a catalyst to their engagement with collective action and social movements in the wider society that enhances their sense of social responsibility (Fox et al. 2010).

Furthermore, future research should explore the experiences of LGBTQ young adults who simultaneously inhabit multiple, overlapping social contexts and how these environments shape their experiences. One such example of this would be young people who are both homeless and attending college, as research on this hard-to-reach population is nearly non-existent. College students in particular may be pushed to homelessness due to the inability to afford housing and other financial concerns related to

the growing costs of higher education (Ringer 2015). LGBTQ homeless college students, then, would encounter the dual stigma of residential instability and having non-conforming gender and sexual identities, highlighting the importance of examining how they navigate differing social contexts and environmental influences in their lives. Furthermore, wider regional context is also important to consider in its unique impact on LGBTQ young adults, such as how their experiences vary in more politically conservative states that legally allow discrimination based on sexual and gender orientation in rental housing (Lauster and Easterbrook 2011) and employment (Sears and Mallory 2011). A lack of legal protections can exacerbate the challenges faced by LGBTQ young people, particularly those who are homeless and/or in college.

By simultaneously exploring the life course experiences of LGBTQ emerging adults who are in college and those who are experiencing homelessness, this study qualitatively illuminates the distinctive ways that social context can shape young people's experiences and perspectives. While both LGBTQ homeless young adults and LGBTQ college students strongly emphasized the importance of sexual and gender identity within their lives, their primary social contexts of either the campus or homelessness impacted how they were able to engage with identity development. By acting as a source of identity-related privilege, social context worked to act as either a hindrance or a facilitating factor in how young adults could focus on their gender and sexuality. The influential role of social context oftentimes encouraged the LGBTQ young people to manage their identity in unique ways, which was also closely tied to their social relationships.

Strategies concerning how LGBTQ young adults managed their identities in various social contexts and relationships emerged as a formative aspect of their lives, particularly as they navigated pathways to adulthood. Understanding how LGBTQ young people of various social backgrounds and social contexts traverse identity-related challenges and develop effective coping strategies is essential in highlighting the diversity of this population. Furthermore, strategically managing one's LGBTQ identity can endure across the life course and shift over time, contexts and relationships, so these strategies may require continual assessment and modification. Though these young people experienced a number of different challenges in navigating and managing their identities, they did not always view these experiences as negative or debilitating, but rather often construed them as intrinsically rewarding.

The majority of research on LGBTQ young adults tends to emphasize the risks and dangers that they face as a result of cultural and social prejudice and discrimination. This study shows, however, the ways that LGBTQ young people, regardless of social context, can work to overcome these issues and develop resiliency in the face of adversity. Exploring how LGBTQ young adults conceptualize their identity as a life enhancement can broaden explanations for how they can successfully transition into adulthood and later life. Emphasizing resiliency in tandem with a risks-based framework can help scholars, service providers and policy makers in enhancing the lives of marginalized populations. Taken together, the findings from this study provide a more complete, nuanced picture of sexual and gender minority young adults through a life course exploration of their social contexts, relationships and identity development trajectories.



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

7/10/2015

<https://mugrant.unl.edu/era/om/irb/viewPrintedMessage.php?ID=443291>

May 28, 2015

Rachel Schmitz  
Department of Sociology

Kimberly Tyler  
Department of Sociology  
717 OLDH, UNL, 68588-0324

IRB Number: 20150515214FB

Project ID: 15214

Project Title: On the Street and On Campus: A Comparison of Life Course Trajectories among Homeless and College Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young Adults

Dear Rachel:

This letter is to officially notify you of the approval of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Final Approval: 05/18/2015. This approval is Valid Until: 05/17/2016.

NOTE: Recruitment at UNO/UNMC may not take place until facilitated review is complete.

- \* Date of Approval: 05/18/2015
- \* Date of Full Board review/meeting: 04/29/2015
- \* Date of Chair review/acceptance of revisions: 05/18/2015
- \* Risk Classification: Minimal Risk
- \* Form Review: Expedited upon continuing and informational/minor changes (Expedited category 9)
- \* Funding: N/A
- \* Waiver Approval: Consent documentation under 45 CFR 46.116(d)(1-4)
- \* Subpart Review: N/A

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- \* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- \* Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- \* Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- \* Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or

<https://mugrant.unl.edu/era/om/irb/viewPrintedMessage.php?ID=443291>

1/2



7/10/2015

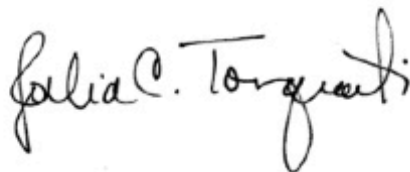
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\* Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

For projects which continue beyond one year from the starting date, the IRB will request continuing review and update of the research project. Your study will be due for continuing review as indicated above. The investigator must also advise the Board when this study is finished or discontinued by completing the enclosed Protocol Final Report form and returning it to the Institutional Review Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,



Julia Torquati, Ph.D.  
Chair for the IRB





NEBRASKA'S HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER

Office of Regulatory Affairs (ORA)  
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

June 29, 2015

Rachel Schmitz  
Sociology  
UNL - Via Courier**IRB # 482-15-XI****TITLE OF PROPOSAL:** On the Street and On Campus: A Comparison of Life Course Trajectories among Homeless and College Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Young Adults**DATE OF REVIEW:** 06/29/2015**DATE OF FINAL UNMC ACCEPTANCE:** 06/29/2015

The University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects has completed its review of the above-titled protocol. Please be advised that the UNMC IRB has accepted approval from the University of Nebraska - Lincoln (UNL) Institutional Review Board.

For the record, patients eligible for the study will be identified by UNMC and referred to UNL. It is understood that *the* UNL IRB is responsible for oversight of the above-titled research project including approval of any protocol amendments,

Finally, please be advised that acceptance by the UNMC IRB of the UNL IRB approval is valid for a period of five years from the initial date of review. If the study continues beyond the five year period, the project must be resubmitted in order to maintain an active status.

Sincerely,

Signed on: 2015-06-29 17:09:00.000

Gail Kotulak, BS, CIP  
IRB Administrator III  
Office of Regulatory Affairs

## Appendix B



DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

711 Oldfather Hall  
Lincoln, NE 68588-0324  
(402) 472-3631  
FAX (402) 472-6070

**PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

“LGBT Young Adults Research Study”

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young adults. You were selected as a possible participant because you identify as LGBT or another sexual or gender minority. Participants must be between 19 and 26 years old to participate. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

My name is Rachel Schmitz and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This study is being conducted for my dissertation research and its purpose is to understand LGBT young adults’ experiences with their identity and their social relationships.

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Answer 5 screening questions to determine study eligibility.
- Participate in one face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour.
- Be audiotaped during the interview.
- Be recontacted after the study is complete to review the findings if you choose to do so.

Upon completion of the face-to-face interview, you will receive \$20 cash for your participation in this study. The interview will take place in a private location agreed upon by the investigator and the participant, such as an office or reserved room at a public library.

The study has minimal risks for participants. You may be asked to recall memories that may cause mild psychological distress if you have had unpleasant experiences regarding your LGBT identity. Another risk of participating in this research is that there is a chance of your sexual or gender identity being disclosed if there were to be a breach in confidentiality. During the interview, I will ask you questions about your life while growing up, your family and peer relationships and how you came to identify as LGBT. You can skip any of these questions if you do not want to answer them, but if you don’t complete the interview through to the end, you will not receive the \$20 cash.

Upon completion of the interview, you will be provided with a list of services and agencies available to young adults. Some of these services are free and others may have a fee depending on your ability to pay. Payment for psychological services is the responsibility of the participant.

Participants will benefit from the study by being afforded the opportunity to share their personal experiences. More broadly, participants will help us understand the unique experiences of LGBT young adults.



Everything you tell me will be confidential. The only people who will ever see your answers will only have an ID number; they will not know your name and your name will never be used in any written report. Data obtained from your responses will be encrypted and firewalled and stored on my personal computer that is password-protected. Only the project leader (PI) will access the data. Electronic and paper copies of the transcripts, the MP3 interview audio recordings uploaded from a digital recorder onto my personal computer and demographic questionnaires will be kept for a period of three years after data collection is complete. After five years, electronic copies of these materials will be deleted from my personal computer and all paper copies will be destroyed. All consent forms, demographic questionnaires and any paper copies of the transcripts will be stored in a locked file in the PI's office. If you choose to provide your information to be recontacted to review the findings, a master list with your contact information will be kept in a separate locked file.

**Freedom to Withdraw:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the PI or the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you would like to be in this study after reading this consent form, please check the boxes below and sign on the line with your name or initials only, which implies you are giving your consent to participate. Please feel free to ask me any questions about the study before we begin.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator or to report any concerns about the study, you may contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board, telephone (402) 472-6965.

The primary researcher conducting this study is Rachel Schmitz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at [raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com) or at 402-937-1734. The primary investigator's faculty advisor for this project, Dr. Kimberly Tyler, can be contacted at [ktyler2@unl.edu](mailto:ktyler2@unl.edu) and (402) 472-6073.

**Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:**

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your checking the boxes below implies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Participant Initials: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I agree to be audiotaped for the duration of the interview (check box if you agree)

I agree to be recontacted to review the findings once study is complete (check box if you agree)

## Appendix C



You are invited to be in a research study exploring lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college students' experiences. We are seeking LGBT college students between the ages of 19-26 to participate. You will receive \$20 in exchange for your time.

The goals of this study are to understand LGBT college students' experiences with their identity and their social relationships.

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Answer 5 screening questions to determine study eligibility.
- Participate in one face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour.
- Be audiotaped during the interview.
- Be recontacted to review the findings if you so choose.

Please contact the primary investigator Rachel Schmitz (UNL) at [raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com) or at 402-937-1734 (call/text) or the project advisor Dr. Kimberly Tyler at [ktyler2@unl.edu](mailto:ktyler2@unl.edu) or 402-472-6073 for more information regarding the study or if you are interested in participating. IRB Protocol Number: 15214

Thank you very much for your time.

LGBT College Students  
Rachel Schmitz  
[raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com)  
402-937-1734

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Rachel Schmitz  
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402-937-1734

LGBT College Students  
Rachel Schmitz  
[raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com)  
402-937-1734





## Appendix D

Subject line: Young Adult Research Study

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) young adults. This study seeks individuals who identify as LGBT or another sexual or gender minority and currently don't have a regular place to live. Participants must be between 19 and 26 years old to participate. Please ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

My name is Rachel Schmitz, a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and I am the primary investigator of this study collecting data for my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to understand LGBT homeless young adults' experiences with their identity and their social relationships. This study is entirely voluntary.

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Answer 5 screening questions to determine study eligibility.
- Participate in one face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour.
- Be audiotaped during the interview.
- Be recontacted after the study is complete to review the findings if you choose to do so.

Upon completion of the in-person interview, you will receive \$20 cash for your participation in this study. The interview will take place in a private location agreed upon by the investigator and the participant, such as an office or reserved room at a library.

Please contact the primary investigator Rachel Schmitz at [raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com) or 402-937-1734 (call or text) or the project advisor Dr. Kimberly Tyler at [ktyler2@unl.edu](mailto:ktyler2@unl.edu) or 402-472-6073 for more information regarding the study or if you are interested in participating.

Thank you very much for your time.

IRB Protocol Number: 15214

Subject line: Young Adult Research Study

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

You are invited to be in a research study exploring the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college students. This study seeks individuals who identify as LGBT or another sexual or gender minority and are enrolled in college. Participants must be between 19 and 26 years old to participate. Please ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

My name is Rachel Schmitz, a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and I am the primary investigator of this study collecting data for my dissertation. The purpose of this study is to understand LGBT college students' experiences with their identity and their social relationships. This study is entirely voluntary.

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Answer 5 screening questions to determine study eligibility.
- Participate in one face-to-face interview lasting approximately one hour.
- Be audiotaped during the interview.
- Be recontacted after the study is complete to review the findings if you choose to do so.

Upon completion of the in-person interview, you will receive \$20 cash for your participation in this study. The interview will take place in a private location agreed upon by the investigator and the participant, such as an office or reserved room at a library.

Please contact the primary investigator Rachel Schmitz at [raschm02@gmail.com](mailto:raschm02@gmail.com) or 402-937-1734 (call or text) or the project advisor Dr. Kimberly Tyler at [ktyler2@unl.edu](mailto:ktyler2@unl.edu) or 402-472-6073 for more information regarding the study or if you are interested in participating.

Thank you very much for your time.

IRB Protocol Number: 15214

## Appendix E

**University of Nebraska – Lincoln  
Research Study**

If you are between the ages of 19-26

**AND**

you are enrolled in college,  
and identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or  
transgender, you may be eligible to participate &  
could receive \$20 in exchange for your time.

Please call/text Rachel at **(402) 937-1734**  
for more information.

IRB Protocol Number: 15214

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Research Study**

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## Appendix F

## List of Services for College Students at UNL and UNO

### UNL

- **Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)** – 402-472-7450
- **Women’s Center Counseling** – 402-472-9428
- **LGBTQA+ Resource Center** – 402-472-1652  
- Consultation and assistance on LGBTQA+ issues; inclusive place to spend time and do homework; assistance with bias incidents on campus.
- **LGBTQ At The U Support Group** – 402-472-7450  
- A confidential and safe group to support students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, asexual, or may be questioning their sexual orientation. No registration required.
- **Men at Nebraska** – Contact Felipe at [womensprograms@unl.edu](mailto:womensprograms@unl.edu).  
- Join men, women, and people of all genders in discussing different forms of masculinity in our society and within our lives.

### UNO

- **UNO Counseling Center** – 402-554-2409
- **Community Counseling Clinic** – 402-554-2727  
- Available services include, individual, group, marital and family work with children. Also, couples counseling related to personal, familial, crisis, special concerns/needs, professional, and career/vocational issues.
- **Women’s Resource Center** – 402-554-3884
- **Gender and Sexuality Resource Center** – 402-554-2890; [jhitchins@unomaha.edu](mailto:jhitchins@unomaha.edu)  
(Director)



## List of Services for Homeless Young Adults in Lincoln and Omaha

### Lincoln

- **CEDARS Street Outreach** – 402-560-9356  
- Provides street-based assistance to runaway, homeless, and at-risk youth in Lincoln, Nebraska. Without pressure or judgment, Street Outreach staff members support homeless youth as they work to leave the streets.
- **The Bay** – 402-310-5215  
- A place for the kids of Lincoln to come and pursue their passions - whether that be skateboarding, art, music, or whatever else. The most important thing about THE BAY is helping kids reach their full potential.
- **The Gathering Place** – 402-476-7398  
- Serves free evening meals to homeless and near-homeless individuals and families living in our community. Meals are served Monday through Friday from 5:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.
- **Matt Talbot Kitchen and Outreach** – 402-477-4116  
- Devoted to serving homeless and near homeless men, women, and children, MTKO provides meals twice daily, everyday of the year. Outreach and advocacy programs include such services as on-site monthly health clinics, basic and emergency needs, life skills training, transitional housing, case management, nutrition counseling, and vision care.
- **People's City Mission** – 402-475-1303  
- Emergency shelter provides overnight shelter, three meals daily, shower and laundry facilities, case management, and referrals. The Family and Women's Shelter serves single women with or without children, married couples with children, and single fathers with children. The Men's Shelter serves single men. Guests staying longer than thirty days must be actively participating in a self-sufficiency program. Youth programs are offered for children ages 6 weeks and older staying in the shelter with their families.
- **Fresh Start Home** – 402-475-7777  
- Transitional housing, basic and emergency needs, and supportive services for homeless women without children in their custody, 19 years or older, for 24 women at a time, for up to one year.
- **Center Pointe** – 402-474-4343  
- Adult and youth treatment programs offer outpatient treatment services for youth 13-18 and adults 19 and over with substance use disorders or co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders; services are provided based on client need and many include individual, group, and family counseling and psychiatric services; expected stay depends on client need, but generally 6-8 months.
- **The HUB** – 402-471-8526  
- Providing unconditional support and programming for young people, as they become productive, independent, active members of the community.
- **Bridge to Independence** – 402-471-9331  
- Bridge to Independence provides stable support for young people as they cross from foster care to adulthood.

## Omaha

- **National Runaway Safeline** – 1-800-RUNAWAY
- **Youth Emergency Services (Y.E.S.)** – 402-345-5187  
- Serves homeless and at-risk youth by providing critically-needed resources which empower them to become self-sufficient. Helps youth in crisis get back on their feet in whatever way by meeting their immediate needs for food, shelter, clothing and safety, and creating a support system which helps them flourish.
- **Jacob's Place Transitional Living** – 402-457-7000  
- Resource for youth ages 17-20 who struggle with a lack of housing, support, education and independent living skills because of multiple out-of-home placements.
- **Open Door Mission** – 402-422-1111  
- Offers 816 safe, shelter beds to homeless men, women and children, serves over 2,000 hot, nutritious meals and provides preventive measures to more than 275 people living in poverty.
- **Siena Francis House Homeless Shelter** – 402-341-1821  
- Shelter providing food, shelter, clothing and hope to homeless men, women, and children.
- **Stephen Center Emergency Shelter** – 402-731-0238  
- Works with homeless men, women and children.
- **Together** – 402-345-8047  
- Offers a variety of services such as food pantry boxes, temporary transportation, ID and birth certificate services and short-term rent assistance.
- **Project Everlast** – 402-384-4670  
- Promotes community resources to improve a foster youth's opportunities and networks for housing, transportation, health care.

## Appendix G

## Screener Questions for Eligibility to Participate in LGBT Young Adults Research Study

**1. What is your current age?** \_\_\_\_\_  
(Must be between 19-26 to participate)

**2. How do you currently define your gender?**

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?**

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Are you currently enrolled in college?**

- Yes
- No

**5. Do you currently have a regular place to live?**

- Yes
- No

## Appendix H

### **LGBT Young Adult Demographic Questionnaire**

This form will give me background information about you. Please let me know if you have questions or comments about any of these questions. You may skip any question that you do not feel comfortable answering.

**1. How do you currently define your gender?**

- Man
- Woman
- Transgender
- Additional details about your gender: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**2. What is your race?**

- White or Caucasian
- African-American or Black
- Latino/Latina or Hispanic
- Asian-American or Asian Pacific Islander
- Native American or American Indian
- Bi- or Multi-racial: \_\_\_\_\_
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**3. What is your current age?** \_\_\_\_\_

**4. Which of the following best describes the area you in which you live?**

- Urban
- Rural
- Suburban

**5. Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?**

- Gay
- Lesbian
- Bisexual
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**6. How long have you identified as that sexual orientation?** \_\_\_\_\_

**7. What would you say best describes your family class status while you were growing up?**

- Working class
- Middle class
- Upper-middle class
- Upper class
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**8. What is the highest level of your parent or parent's education?**

- Some high school
- Graduated high school
- Some college
- Associate's degree
- Bachelor's degree
- Professional or advanced degree
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_
- Don't know/unsure

**9. Did your family ever receive any public assistance, such as welfare, Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) or food stamps (SNAP) while you were growing up?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**10. Did you and your family ever live in public housing or a housing project when you were growing up?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**11. What would you say best describes your relationship status?**

- Married
- In a domestic partnership
- In a relationship
- Single
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**12. How did you hear about this research project?**

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**13. Is there anything else that you would like to share about yourself?**

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## Appendix I



**Interview Questions for LGBT Young Adults**

1. Please describe your relationships with your parents while you were growing up.
2. Please describe your relationships with your siblings and other family members while you were growing up.
3. How did you come to identify as (insert LGBT identity here)?
4. During what time of your life did you come to identify as (insert LGBT identity here)?
5. If you have come out, how did your family react to you coming out as LGBT?
6. If you have come out, how did your friends react to you coming out as LGBT?
7. If you have not come out, can you tell me why you are making this choice? How does it affect your social interactions?
8. How would you describe your experiences while in middle school and high school? (i.e. with family, friends, peers, teachers, school officials).
9. Can you please describe your current family relationships (i.e. support, conflict, etc.).
10. Can you please describe your current relationships with friends and peers.
11. How do you feel your sexual orientation/gender identity has shaped your relationships or ability to form relationships? Can you give me some examples?
12. Please describe your experiences as an LGBT young adult.
13. What challenges have you faced being LGBT? How does being (insert a student or homeless) affect these challenges related to your identity?
14. How have you responded to these challenges?
15. What do you see as the best thing(s) about being LGBT?
16. How would you describe the community acceptance towards LGBT young adults/people?
17. What do you see in your future?
18. What advice would you give to other LGBT young adults?
19. Is there anything else you would like to add that we didn't cover in the interview or that you would like to add to your responses?
20. Can you please tell me why you wanted to participate in the study and be interviewed?