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Abstract
As today's discursive frames available to queer young adults reflect a stressful, shifting historical context for sexuality from 'struggle and survive' to emancipation, they still are confined by U.S. sexual norms assuming the authority of 'truth' while demanding heterosexuality. Consequently, sexuality and gender are linked inextricably as heterosexuality relies on the gender binary and the gender binary relies on heterosexuality. Via gender, queer, and situated learning theories this qualitative study decouples such mutual reinforcement to explore how queer young adults – who are already positioned outside of obligatory heterosexuality – learn, unlearn, or relearn gender in queer majority spaces. Research occurred during investigator facilitated gender group sessions comprised of college-aged queer young adults and also drew on individual interviews, private online journal entries, and periodic surveys. Through this work young adults had a safe space to learn about and perform gender, but were limited by previous heterocentric knowledge and language. This research raise vital questions and concerns about the hegemony of heterosexuality and the gender binary, how context affects learning, and how college students benefit from a non-judgmental space to grapple with questions of identity. Additionally, it points out the usefulness of queer and gender theories in educational research in combination with situated learning theory as well as on their own.

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GENDER (IN)QUERY:

YOUNG ADULTS LEARNING, UNLEARNING, AND RELEARNING GENDER IN A QUEER MAJORITY SPACE

Erin G. Cross

A DISSERTATION

in

Education

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In

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Gender (In)Query:

Young Adults Learning, Unlearning, and Relearning Gender in a Queer Majority Space

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Erin G. Cross

Dedicated to those who were taken too early…

Liz Weaver

Art McClelland

Kate McClelland

B. Chris Trace

…and those who paved the way.

Robert McClelland, Sr.

Laura McClelland

Hilda Grunau

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ABSTRACT

GENDER (IN)QUERY:

YOUNG ADULTS LEARNING, UNLEARNING, AND RELEARNING GENDER IN A QUEER MAJORITY SPACE

Erin G. Cross

Katherine Schultz, Ph.D.

As today's discursive frames available to queer young adults reflect a stressful, shifting historical context for sexuality from 'struggle and survive' to emancipation, they still are confined by U.S. sexual norms assuming the authority of 'truth' while demanding heterosexuality. Consequently, sexuality and gender are linked inextricably as heterosexuality relies on the gender binary and the gender binary relies on heterosexuality. Via gender, queer, and situated learning theories this qualitative study decouples such mutual reinforcement to explore how queer young adults – who are already positioned outside of obligatory heterosexuality – learn, unlearn, or relearn gender in queer majority spaces. Research occurred during investigator facilitated gender group sessions comprised of college-aged queer young adults and also drew on individual interviews, private online journal entries,

and periodic surveys. Through this work young adults had a safe space to learn about and perform gender, but were limited by previous heterocentric knowledge and language. This research raise vital questions and concerns about the hegemony of heterosexuality and the gender binary, how context affects learning, and how college students benefit from a non-judgmental space to grapple with questions of identity. Additionally, it points out the usefulness of queer and gender theories in educational research in combination with situated learning theory as well as on their own.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES xii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1

Questions and Significance 4

Study Organization 7

Language Note 8

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS 10

Literature Review 11

Theoretical Frameworks 20

Synthesis 32

Implications and Summary 35

CHAPTER THREE: STUDY DESIGN 37

Methodology 38

Challenges and Misgivings 51

Summary 55

CHAPTER FOUR: GENDER GROUP: THE RULES 57

People 59

Framing Gender Group 64

Learning 83

Summary 89

CHAPTER FIVE: JAY: NEGOTIATING SPACE, LANGUAGE, AND LEARNING 91

Jay 92

Space 96

Learning 105

Summary 111

CHAPTER SIX: BEA: A PROGRESSIVE JOURNEY 112

Bea 113

Gender Makes a Difference 117

Agency 122

Summary 129

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION 130

Findings 131

Future Research 137

Implications 140

Summary 141

APPENDIX A 144

APPENDIX B 145

REFERENCES 147

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1 Initial Participant Demographics 62

Table 4.2 Final Participant Self-Identification 89

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

My gender at birth was *homo*, as is every human being's gender. Modern U.S. society, however, engenders a hegemonic masculine/feminine binary beginning as soon as a child's skin is cleaned after birth by placing either a pink or blue bracelet on her/his/hir[1] arm to designate the child as female or male based on the presence or lack of a penis.[2] Gender, then, is the first binary to which we are exposed, and it sets the foundation for life roles and how people view difference (Lloyd, 1999; Lorde, 1984; Paetcher, 2007; Sedgwick, 1990). As a result, most individuals learn to respond to distinction(s) out of a gender-based, dualistic, hierarchical, and patriarchal consciousness (Lorde, 1984). Such consciousness reinforces the gender binary and spawns an "ideology which *demands* heterosexuality" (Rich, 1993, p. 228; emphasis in original). Thus, although sexuality and gender are separate systems, they are inextricable as "gender affects the operation of the

---

[1] I will use "her/him/hir" and "he/she/ze" throughout this dissertation, as I cannot assume a person's gender unless it is specified and therefore employ female, male, and transgender pronouns. If a person's gender is known, however, it will be reflected in pronoun use. Such application follows Bornstein (1995).

[2] This does not hold true if a child is intersex or has atypical sex anatomy. In this case, doctors traditionally performed surgery to make the child's genitals appear as either female or male to 'fit' into the binary gender system and therefore avoid the possibility of stigmatization. Recently, however, there is a growing trend toward patient-centered care which advocates for informed patient decision making instead of immediate surgery (for more information, see the Intersex Society of North America's website <http://www.isna.org/drupal/>).

sexual system, and the sexual system has…gender specific manifestations" (Rubin, 1984, p. 33).

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978/1990) asserts the current sexual and gender regime began in the late nineteenth century with the use of the term 'heterosexuality' as a reaction to the coining of the term 'homosexuality.' Katz (1995) agrees, stating that in medical journals of the 1890s "psychiatrists first described the 'homosexual'" but gradually also "referred to the 'heterosexual' – but as a pervert!" (p. 12). Consequently,

> heterosexuality began [the twentieth] century defensively, as the publicly unsanctioned private practice of the respectable middle class, and as the publicly put-down pleasure-affirming practice of urban working-class youths, southern, blacks, and Greenwich Village bohemians. By the end of the 1920s, heterosexuality had triumphed as dominant, sanctified culture (Katz, 1995, p. 83).

Sedgwick (1990) concurs, and posits that in the early twentieth century

> every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or heterosexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications…It was this new development that left no space in the culture exempt from the potent incoherencies of homo/heterosexual definition (p. 2).

The heterosexual definition, then, manufactured a new ahistorical[3] cultural ideal of the erotically correct based in marriage and reproduction, a

[3] Katz (1995) argues that despite its recent invention, heterosexuality has been assumed to be "as old as procreation, as ancient as the lust of the fallen Eve and Adam, as eternal as the sex and gender difference of that first lady and initial gentlemen" (p. 13).

politicized norm working to affirm the superiority of men over women and heterosexuals over homosexuals. Put differently, "presumptive heterosexuality…functions within discourse to communicate a threat: 'you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be'" (Butler, 1990/1999, pp. 147-148). Rich (1993) argues further that society's "great unacknowledged reality" around sexuality is that it is trapped "in a maze of false dichotomies" (p. 248). In today's hegemonic, heterocentric society (Bornstein, 1995; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Wilchins, 2004), then, young adults discovering their sexual and gender identities usually are not given many options to explore beyond taking on an identity on the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy (Britzman, 1997) or braving the mostly uncharted territory beyond.

Rich's (1993) "unacknowledged reality" was always in the background of my life. From the time I was in nursery school, I regularly was reminded to 'play like a girl' so boys would like me. My father called me his 'little boy with indoor plumbing,' and my mother was dismayed at my refusal to wear dresses, skirts, or make-up because I should want to look pretty to have boys to like me better. Acting 'like a girl' was imposed on my personal reality of wanting to escape from such torture, despite my gender non-conformity being obvious to all who knew me. Before puberty, I think I 'got away with' being a tomboy because dating was not yet an issue and this allowed my father to have his 'little boy' for at least a few years. Once I entered middle school, however, it became painfully clear to me that my tomboy ways were

no longer acceptable as many adult conversations turned from my prowess on the softball field to my 'biding time while waiting for the right boy.' At that point, I could not understand why I could not be a standout athlete without worrying about what any boy might think because my only reality was heterosexuality, even if I was not a stereotypical girl primping and playing dumb to land a boy. I never fully became what one would recognize as a typical girl in terms of gender expression or roles, but I did fulfill its major requirement – I dated boys, because I *had* to be straight.

After reaching adulthood and eventually coming out as lesbian, I often wondered what adolescence and my undergraduate years would have been like if I escaped the "maze of false dichotomies" (Rich, 1993) for longer than my tomboy years. If heterosexuality was not enforced, would I have been able to break free of being a culturally defined 'girl?' What would my gender have, and potentially still, looked like if I did not feel I had to unlearn some of my more masculine tendencies to attract boys? As I have become more comfortable with my gender and sexual identities, these personal conundrums have evolved into larger questions about how queer young adults gain knowledge of gender.

I. Questions and Significance

Although my personal experiences brought me to this work, I believe this research possesses more than personal import. As youth are coming out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer at 12 years old and sometimes younger

(Denizet-Lewis, 2009) and are being barraged by conflicting information from media, home, school, and other sources, it is vital to examine sexual orientation's relationship to gender as it is fraught with societal and individual implications (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009). Schools must no longer assume all students are heterosexual, and as a result adhere to traditional binary gender roles, to determine behavioral expectations (Dubowsky Ma'ayan, 2003; Kumishiro, 2000) as such heterosexism makes queerness invisible and gives non-heterosexual students no opportunities to explore their identities (Britzman, 1997). Moreover, as queer youth attempt to explore their sexuality at earlier ages, many do not consider, or chose not to, explore their gender because schools, and U.S. society as a whole, try to eradicate feminine characteristics in boys and men and masculine characteristics in girls and women[4] (Wyss, 2004). As a result, college becomes the first place for a growing segment of queer young adults to learn about gender outside of it usual dichotomous confines, both in and out of the classroom.

This endeavor is my attempt to give voice to, and provided a rare[5] safe space for college age queer young adults to learn, unlearn, or relearn about their gender without the influence of compulsory heterosexuality in the

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[4] It is important to note there are some youth ages 18 and under who do explore their gender identities. For a comprehensive study, see Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz (2009).

[5] Although just over 150 college campuses in North America have an office dedicated to LGBT students (2006 Self Study, 2009), few provide programming, discussions, and/or resources around gender issues (Beemyn, 2005).

context of a group created specifically for the purpose of this research. Specifically, the research questions I ask are:

- What beliefs, knowledge, and experience about gender do queer young adults bring to gender group and how do these beliefs change over time? What sense do they make of gender and gender identity and their relation to sexuality and sexual identity over time through participating in this group?

- How do queer young adults learn, unlearn, or relearn their gender and gender identities in a gender group when compulsory heterosexuality is not enforced? How do queer young adults negotiate such a space and what are the mechanisms involved? What are the affordances and constraints of such a space? Of the negotiations? Is it even possible to establish such a group?

For this dissertation project, then, a group was established that was intended to be a safe space for queer young adults to learn about and perform gender. The research also raises vital questions and concerns about the hegemony of heterosexuality and the gender binary, how context affects learning, and how college students benefit from a space which was set-up to be non-judgmental in nature to grapple with questions of identity. Additionally, it brings together the individual and collective potency of queer, gender, and situated learning theories in a strong, but not complete, theoretical framework as the theories not only work well collectively, they also stretch each other to examine experiences at the edges of knowledge. As a result, the research demonstrates the usefulness of queer and gender theories in educational

research to examine the learning process. Moreover, such utility is magnified when they are combined with situated learning theory to ground investigations outside of the classroom.

II. Study Organization

This chapter's purpose is to introduce the importance of examining queer young adults' gender journeys as well as explain how the study was developed. The following few chapters further contextualize the study, theoretically and methodologically. Chapter Two presents the current state of research concerning queer young adults and details queer, gender, and situated learning theories which serve as this dissertation's guiding conceptual frameworks. The research design and methodology are described in Chapter Three. As a trio, the first three chapters outline the research objectives, theoretical foundations, and study methods that ground this dissertation.

Research findings are explored in Chapters Four through Six. Chapter Four paints a portrait of gender group participants and highlights their struggle for and against rules. Chapter Five is a case study of Jay's use and choice of spatial negotiation mechanisms while Chapter Six illuminates Bea's experience with discovering the importance of gender in her life and her resulting sense of agency. Together, the findings chapters work to explore the lived experiences of the queer young adults through the cohort as a whole and individuals through two case studies as they co-created, negotiated, and

learned about gender in a space specifically created to not enforce hegemonic heterosexuality. Finally, Chapter Seven discusses the investigation findings, implications, and points to future research.

III. Language Note

It is important to recognize the vast diversity among queer young adults and how they understand their desires in the United States as well as around the globe (Cohler & Hammack, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007), but for the purposes of this study a smaller swath of college aged young adults is examined. As a result, I speak specifically of young adults with same-sex desire as 'queer,' firmly placing this work in academia where the term has gained acceptance and where my research took place. At times more precise terms like 'bisexual,' 'lesbian,' and 'gay' are used when participants employ them or when I cite previous research using such definite language. Finally, I use 'sexual minority' at times to assert expressly when I am talking about young adults' sexual orientation not gender, as the latter sometimes can be included under the rubric of 'queer.'

Another linguistic concern is around pronouns, which in English are either feminine or masculine. To alleviate this dichotomous tension I will use "her/him/hir" and "he/she/ze" throughout this paper, then, as I cannot assume a person's gender unless it is specified by the person and therefore will employ female, male, and transgender pronouns. As Butler (1990/1999) asserts

> language has a dual possibility: It can be used to assert a true and inclusive universality of persons, or it can institute a hierarchy in which only some persons are eligible to speak and others, by virtue of their exclusion from the universal point of view, cannot 'speak' without simultaneously deauthorizing that speech (p. 153).

If a person's gender is known, however, it will be reflected in pronoun use (such application follows Bornstein, 1995).

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review and Conceptual Frameworks

My dissertation study explores how queer young adults learn, relearn, or unlearn their gender and gender identities when obligatory heterosexuality is minimized. I view learning as a fundamentally situated, sociocultural process in which the context where knowledge is developed and organized cannot be detached from, or secondary to, learning and cognition (Engstrom, 1987; Lave, 1988; Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984; Wenger, 1998). As such, the data for my study will be obtained from convened gender meetings at Orin College,[6] because group norms will not subscribe to or enforce compulsory heterosexuality. By using group sessions as my field site, then, I can concentrate on the participants' gender "journeys," the "learning experiences and the events, people, and situations that impacted on participants learning" about gender (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). It is through such curtailing of required heterosexuality that frees queer young adults and their learning process about gender and gender identities that interest me.

Following Butler (1993), in this study gender is conceptualized as "the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects which it names" (p. 2) which "congeal[s] over time to produce the

[6] Orin College is a pseudonym.

appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990/1999, pp. 43-44). Thus, gender should be seen as a descriptive, fluid variable, which shifts and changes, not as a constant reality. Similarly, gender identity denotes a person's inner sense of self in terms of society-based gender norms and/or her/his/hir own framing of gender. Since both gender and gender identity are not stable, it is important to interrogate their meanings regularly on a personal, as well as more global scale.

This chapter is divided into four sections. First, the relevant literature on queer young adults, the links between sexuality, sex, and gender, and college will be described to situate my research. Then, the theoretical frameworks used will be explained before integrating the theories and research. Finally, the implications of my theoretical stance are offered.

I. Literature Review

Queer Young Adults

My research builds on existing scholarship about queer youth where, on the whole, they have been treated as a "separate species" (Savin-Williams, 2005b). Studies about 'gay' youth,[7] began in the 1970s and were done mostly by mental health and medical researchers on easy to lure subjects -- male runaways and prostitutes (Savin-Williams, 2005b; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). Due to the participants' life experiences, a monolithic portrait of gay

[7] In the 1970s 'gay' was an acceptable overarching term for what is now mostly referred to as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally (LGBTQA) community. At this particular point, however, almost all research studies did focus on 'gay youth' meaning young gay males (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007).

young adults emerged: wretched, unwanted, risk prone young men. In other words, they were trouble(d). Despite being flawed methodologically, these early investigations began to raise awareness and determine professional guidelines about gay young adults in the social service and education communities (e.g. Jones (1978) in counseling; Malyon (1981) in social work; Martin (1982) in psychiatry). Concomitantly, Cass (1979) and Troiden (1979) developed the first stage based models of gay identity development providing decontextualized labels and frameworks which bolstered the 'problem' of gay young adults.

To date, many studies still analyze queer young adults and their behaviors using psychological frameworks depicting them as "victims of harassment and internalized homophobia, accompanied by serious mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49). For instance, a large number of studies have looked at queer youths' mental health and suicide risk (e.g. Almeida, et al., 2009; D'Augelli, et al., 1998; Garofalo, et al., 1999; Murdoch & Bolch, 2005; Remafedi, et al., 1991; Rosario, et al., 2002; Rotheram-Borus, et al., 1997), sense of personal safety (e.g. Hunter 1990, Pilkington & D'Augelli, 2005), risk behaviors (e.g. Rosario, et al., 1997), and sexual identity development (e.g. Bell & Weinberg, 1981; Rosario, et al., 2006). Amid the delineation of queer youths' struggle, however, is a "as a triumphant model of resilience in a heterosexist world" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49). In other words, after

surviving the negative consequences of being a sexual minority, a person developed a great deal of hardness to continue living in a heterocentric world. This 'struggle and success' narrative is typified by Meyer's (2003) work linking minority stress to the compromised mental health of queer young adults where the extent to which a person can manage such intrinsic prejudice determines her/his/hir positive development. Success through struggle, then, became 'coming out,[8] which became a rite of passage (Herdt & Boxer. 1996) that was and is, in many instances, empowering. It is problematic, though, in that it is intertwined with, and dependant on, dominant culture's larger discourse on homosexuality because of its reliance on normality being equated with heterosexuality.

More recently, Cohler and Hammack (2007), Blackburn (2007), Savin-Williams (2005a), and Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds (2002) focus on contextualized emancipation narratives which reveal

> the increasing fluidity in self-labeling among youth with same-sex desire, depathologizes the experience of sexual identity development among these youth, emphasizes the manner in which sexual minority youth cope with issues of minority stress (so significant as a factor accounting for personal distress among these youth), and extends the concept of normality…to the study of sexual minority youth (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 49).

As a result, Savin-Williams (2005a) asserts some same-sex attracted youth can be healthy, resilient, come out in a more accepting environment, shun labels,

[8] In Cass' (1979) model, coming out is akin to synthesis and in Troiden's (1979) model, it is akin to commitment.

and indeed, are 'de-centering' sexuality as the basis of their personal identity since society is becoming more accepting of non-heterosexual identities. This is evidenced by the steady increase in how 'warm[9]' Americans feel toward "GAY MEN AND LESBIANS, that is, homosexuals" (American National Election Studies 2004; capitalization in original).

Normalizing emancipation narratives coexist with struggle and success narratives in today's world, however, as the "current discursive frames to which youth possess access through a variety of media sources, in fact reflect the tension of a shifting historical context for sexual identity" (Cohler & Hammack, 2007, p. 51). In other words, today's queer young adults are bombarded by mixed messages from print, online, and television media as well familial, school, and other relevant sources as U.S. culture continues to grapple with sexuality. Therefore, they are likely to be exposed to both narratives and thus be, and/or be seen as, both victims and agents (Blackburn 2004).

Sex, Gender, and Sexuality Links

To understand sex, sexuality, and gender today, one must begin by noting that mind/body dualism traces its roots to Descartes during the Enlightenment. For Descartes, the mind was the seat of identity, so the body was left to be just another thing which was not a part of the mind (Descartes,

[9] The American National Election Studies biennially asks its respondents to rank how warm they feel toward a number of groups in society by placing them on a "feeling thermometer," ranging from 0 (ice cold) to 100 (burning hot), so the larger the score the more accepted a given group is.

1998). This clear separation still affects us, and indeed, enabled academics to assert the dissimilarity between sex and gender. On the other hand, it also meant the distinction automatically was viewed as strictly dichotomous. By the mid-twentieth century, Western theorists mostly saw sex as a biologically determined binary and gender as the femininity or masculinity of a person, which in the U.S. also created a parallel social dichotomy with two genders mirroring the two sexes (Bornstein, 1995; Wilchins, 2004; Paechter, 2007).

Non-academics soon came to use 'gender' and 'sex' interchangeably, however, seeing the former as the politically correct term (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). So when we 'do' gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987) through behaviors, attitudes, actions, and thoughts, we show ourselves and others how we are feminine and/or masculine. In the U.S., this mostly means embodying one's assigned sex[10] (Paechter, 2007). As a result, females construct femininities and males construct masculinities which are related to and built from and/or against elements of the femininities and masculinities in their respective communities. As a whole, these individual processes add to and help create local gender discourses.

Gender discourses add to and complicate the discursive frames available to queer young adults as sexuality and gender are coupled implicitly as they depict

[10] This is not the case for transgender individuals and those who embrace the relatively recent development of body altering technologies. Furthermore, children are more likely to reflect their assigned sex as such body modification advances usually are not available to them.

> sex as the determinant of gender identity that flows naturally into a particular mode of heterosexuality and that mandates certain rational gender roles embraced happily by individuals with uniformly positive gender-role identities (Hawkesworth, 1997, p.657).

Put differently, women are expected to be feminine and sexually attracted to men, men are expected to be masculine and sexually attracted to women, and everybody should be content (Wong, et al., 1999). Ridgeway and Correll (2004) go one step further by asserting unconscious sex categorization – the sociocognitive process of labeling others as female or male – activates inflexible, dichotomous gender stereotypes leaving no room for other possibilities. Hence, today's stereotypes depict lesbian women as more masculine than heterosexual women and gay men as more feminine than heterosexual men as they do not fit into societal standards (Katz, 1995; Kite & Deaux, 1984; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Wilchins, 2004; Wong, et al., 1999).

Like other children, questioning and queer youth are not immune to the influence of such stereotypes that mark what gender identities are permitted or not permitted to exist, or to the acknowledged pressure of gender socialization from caretakers, peers, and media (Lippa, 2000). In fact, a majority of gay men attributed their first sense of feeling different to gender inadequacies and effeminate tendencies, not sexual desire (Troiden, 1979). Moreover, Dubowsky Ma'ayan (2003) argues assumptions about gender and desire lead to behavioral expectations upheld in schools as forms of social

control creating heightened feelings of difference or even shame (see also Kumishiro, 2000).

The stigma attached to deviation from prescribed gender norms is pervasive and powerful, especially when blurred with sexuality as it is in the U.S. (Almeida, et al., 2009; Dubowsky Ma'ayan, 2003; Lucal, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). Wong, et al. (1999) investigated the interrelationships among gender stereotypes, conformity to gender stereotypes, and *perceived* sexual orientation and found men who do not act 'like men' were thought to be queer, especially by other males. Furthermore, they found "one of the most severe ways of punishing males is to accuse them of being homosexual" (Wong, et al., 1999, p. 29). Focusing on self-attributed gender related traits and interest preferences using three different quantitative measures, Lippa (2000) discovered lesbian interests correlated to the degree in which they were male and gay interests correlated to the degree in which they were female. He proposes the correlations may be a result of a compromise between "gender atypical dispositions and the countervailing force of gender socialization" (Lippa, 2000, p. 923) which can be damaging for queer young adults. As a result, as queer young adults explore their sexuality, many do not consider, or chose not to, delve into their gender identities because schools, and U.S. society as a whole, try to eradicate feminine characteristics in boys and men and masculine

characteristics in girls and women[11] (Wyss, 2004). Thus, college becomes the first place for a large segment of queer young adults to learn about gender outside of the usual dichotomous confines, both in and out of the classroom.

The discourses around gender to which queer young adults are exposed, then, are tied intimately to those around sexuality. Female babies will be given pink hair accessories while male babies will be given blue hued sporting equipment; female pre-teens will begin to babysit while male pre-teens take out the trash; female young adults will be told to wear make-up while male young adults will be told they should take wood shop; all in the never uttered name of reinforcing assumed, and desired, heterosexuality.

College

Although just over 150 out of approximately 4,150 college campuses in North America have an office dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (2006 Self Study, 2009), very few provide programming, discussions, and/or resources around gender issues (Beemyn, 2005) unless they are specifically charged to do so (e.g. Gender and Sexuality Center at the University of Texas, Austin, Center for Sexualities and Gender Diversity at the University of Southern Maine, or Gender and Sexuality Resource Center at State University of New York, Oneonta). Historically, many campuses had a long established Women's Center before a lesbian and gay affairs office was created and thus gender issues were still seen as

[11] It is important to note that there are some youth ages 18 and under who do explore their gender identities. For a comprehensive study, see Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz (2009).

"women's issues" (Schoenberg, personal communication, 2009). As transgender people and concerns became more visible in the late 1990s, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual[12] centers added the term 'transgender' to their names and officially joined campus discussions around gender. Although some campuses took care to discuss the implications of adding the 'T' to their titles, many did not do much outreach to educate the campus community about what it meant (Beemyn, 2005; Schoenberg, personal communication, 2009). Thus, much of the work surrounding gender issues at LGBT centers were policy-related, such as housing, restroom access, adding 'gender identity' and 'gender expression' to non-discrimination statements,[13] and so on (Beemyn & Pettitt, 2006).

Very few university LGBT centers have created discussion groups open to self-identified transgender students only (e.g. University of Washington's Transformers and University of Minnesota's Tranarchy) or ones open to self-identified and non-self-identified transgender students who want to explore gender (e.g. Wesleyan University's Trans/Gender Group and Carleton College's Trans/Gender Discussion Group). As no studies to my knowledge have examined how queer college students benefit from a non-judgmental space to grapple with questions of gender -- especially outside of

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[12] In the U.S., a large number of college-based lesbian and gay centers added 'bisexual' to their moniker in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Schoenberg, personal communication, 2009).

[13] To date, 280 U.S. universities include 'gender identity/expression' in their non-discrimination statements. For a complete listing, go to <http://transgenderlaw.org/college/index.htm#practices>.

heterosexual constraints -- my work brings a new perspective to both theorists and practitioners.

Summary

It is this jumbled milieu of gender and sexuality facing queer young adults that my research examines -- by removing obligatory heterosexuality -- to investigate how they learn, unlearn, or relearn about gender free from its constraints. No studies, to my knowledge, have examined this area previously. This is where my research contributes to the literature on queer young adults in general and college-age young adults in particular.

II. Theoretical Frameworks

This study is rooted in the belief that U.S. sexual norms are discursive products of knowledge and power which not only assume the authority of 'truth,' but *make* themselves true (Foucault, 1978/1990) while demanding heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). As a result, sexuality and gender are linked inextricably as "gender affects the operation of the sexual system, and the sexual system has…gender specific manifestations" (Rubin, 1984, p. 33). It is this mutual reinforcement which will be untangled to explore how college-age queer young adults in the U.S. – who already are positioned outside of obligatory heterosexuality – learn, unlearn, or relearn gender in queer majority spaces. To examine the nuances of learning of gender in a pragmatic manner, I will draw on gender, queer, and situated learning theories.

Queer Theory

"*Queer* is not a neutral term" (Pinar, 1998, p. 3; italics in original), yet it has evolved into the chosen word for theorists dissatisfied with the assimilationist politics affixed to 'lesbian' and 'gay.' In addition, as "queer is not only queer" (Pinar, 1998, p. 6), it allows for two forms of identity: affiliative, typified by identification, and exclusionary, characterized by disidentification. Britzman (1999) concurs and goes one step further by asserting one's identity is always relational, not just positive. It follows, then, that a person's identity always is implicated in her/his/hir ostensible opposite (Pinar, 1998). It is this tension giving rise to the homosexual/heterosexual dichotomy which is at the center of Western culture (Sedgwick, 1990) and reinforces that "without gender, sexuality is nothing" (Luhmann, 1999, p. 145). Accordingly, leading queer theorists such as Foucault (1978/1990) and Butler (1990/1999, 1993, 2004) assert gender and sexuality are neither naturally given nor anthropologically fixed. Thus, it is important to examine the processes and structures creating sexuality and gender as historically specific sociocultural power relations that in turn, produce subjects to ensure the normality and continuation of heterosexuality and the gender binary. Destabilizing such relations to point out their incoherencies, then, is at the root of queer theory.

Queer theory is not the historical or contemporary amalgamation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and their experiences as

commonly thought, although it does give added weight to such gender and sexual identities (Jagose, 1996). Broadly defined, queer theory resists allegedly stable relationships by subverting them through the revelation of their inconsistencies. Put differently, queer theory questions fixed identities by examining how they "…were created, what political ends they serve, what erasures have made them possible, and how they are able to present themselves as real, natural and universal" (Wilchins, 2004, p. 124). By focusing on gender and sexuality, queer theory probes the assumed constancy of heterosexuality and its effects, including the gender binary (Britzman, 1997; Jagose, 1996). Therefore, it suggests it is pointless to speak generally of 'females,' 'males,' or any other group, as identities have so many facets that to assume people can be viewed collectively because of one mutual characteristic is incorrect. As a result, queer theory intentionally challenges all notions of permanent identities and indeed, arose out of theorizing about the constraints of identity politics. It has, then, been developed mostly outside the widely accepted academic chronicles of self-identification, detection, and truth (Jagose, 1996).

According to Butler (1993), queer theory is effective because it is understood that the outcomes of its involvement are not unitary and therefore cannot be projected. This is vital, as categorical identities can assume the authority of 'truth,' and *make* themselves true as 'natural,' descriptive

taxonomies (Foucault, 1978/1990). For queer theory to evade such normativity on an on-going basis, however, it

> …will have to remain that, which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes, and perhaps also yielded in favor of terms that do political work more effectively (Butler, 1993, p. 223).

By focusing on the malleable, reactive nature of queer theory, Butler (1993) troubles the supposedly obvious identity categories by denoting how the commonly accepted reasoning behind identity politics -- gathering together similar subjects to achieve shared goals through creating a minority rights discourse -- is far away from natural or self-evident. Indeed, Jagose (1996) argues queer theory activates an attuned identity politics aware of the limits of naming and ensconcing foundational classifications preceding and under-girding political involvement to the point of supporting non-identity politics. As such, queer theory does not intend to consolidate, reify, or stabilize itself, but instead depicts unlimited prospects of such variety that they cannot be demarcated beforehand (Foucault, 1982; Halperin, 1995). It is this unwillingness to stabilize that makes queer theory useful to my dissertation because I explore gender and how it is learned from the unknown margins rather than in a setting which reinforces conventional norms.

Gender Theory

When multiplicity is reduced arbitrarily to absolute dichotomy as with gender, conflict and inequality ultimately result (Bornstein, 1995; Diamond & Butterworth, 2008; Hawkesworth, 1997; Lucal, 1999). In fact, since gender is institutionalized in the United States and constitutes humans as two, and only two, different categories, social relations of inequality are based on that difference; the difference between 'man/masculine' and 'woman/feminine' with no room for anyone else and the masculine trumping all (Hawkesworth, 1997; Lucal, 1999; Paechter, 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Wilchins, 2004). Such hostility toward difference has spawned theoretical inquiries which attempt to explain the ways an individual's identity is situated within given contexts and reflects and inscribes her/his/hir social world and the modes in which she/he/ze may perpetuate and/or resist cultural norms.[14] Amid these investigations, gender theory has become paramount, as American cultural norms have made it salient and functionally significant (Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2004).

Emerging in the 1970s when pioneering second wave academic feminists critiqued the prevailing concept of 'sex' for conflating biology with social context, the term 'gender' was introduced to demark differences solely constructed within social arenas (Foster, 1999). Although 'gender' was

[14] This research uses gender theory's social construction branch. For a detailed discussion of its other manifestations, see Wharton, A.S. (2004). *The sociology of gender: An introduction to theory and research.* Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

integrated into both scholastic and common parlance over 30 years ago, it has been described as a social category, social practice, social structure, power structure, performance, and at times, a combination of these. Over time, however, gender theorists were criticized for their biased portrayals of anything having to do with 'gender' as White, heterosexual, and upper class (e.g. Anzaldua, 1987; Gunn Allen, 1986; hooks, 1989; Lorde, 1984; Rich, 1993). As a result, gender theory evolved to take into account "social and historical processes that create multiple meanings in multiple sites, ones that may occur on many levels of social interaction" (Foster, 1999, p. 434). Such a general premise widens the scope of gender theory by not assuming static boundaries, meanings, or the relationship among race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, and so on. It is important to note, however, that gender should not be seen as the universal cause force despite its broad reach.

Gender theory today is a dynamic framework that sees gender as a social construction, something we 'do' (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Butler's influential text, *Gender Trouble* (1990/1999), is the seminal work in gender theory as it was one of the first to assert that

> gender is complexly produced through identificatory and performative practices, and that gender is not as clear or univocal as we are sometimes led to believe. My effort was to combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there, interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence, something that we cannot deny, something which, natural or not, is treated as a given (Butler, 2004, p. 212).

Butler (1990/1999) further posits gender is bound by social temporality and 'done,' akin to West and Zimmerman (1987), through a "stylized repetition of acts" (pp. 140-141). Gender, then, is comprised of the many ways – movements, manners, signals, and so on – a person projects the chimera of a bearable gendered self within the constraints of societal norms so she/he/ze can be at least tolerated, and at best accepted, by the communities of which she/he/ze belongs. Gender performativity is not a physical action, then, but rather a discursive, citational process through which subjects are constituted (Butler, 1993).

Although Butler (1990/1999) focuses on gender, she also addresses, and indeed uses, sexuality as a critical device. This is because the two concepts are linked immutably as "gender presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 30). It is important to note, however, the deconstruction of gender and sexuality does not mean identity categories are no longer available. As Butler notes, "one can still organize as a lesbian, but one has to be open to the notion that we don't yet know who else will ally with that sign, or when that sign will have to be relinquished in order to promote another political goal" (Blumenfeld, et al., 2005, p. 23).

Thus, gender identity becomes a personal, signifying practice once gender is freed from the suspicion of being complicit in the discourse and structures from which it sprang. Such denaturalization not only defies categorical reinscription, but also moves to enhance the understanding of both identity and power. It is from this stance, Butler's (1990/1999, 1993, 2004) exploration of gender becomes not only useful, but also powerful as the critical use of gender identity helps discover problem areas in need of clarification or exploration and then provides foundational concepts to guide one's research (Hawkesworth, 1997).

Situated Learning Theory

While locating my research within gender and queer theories, I also will use the more pragmatic educational theory of situated learning to analyze my data. Building on Vygotsky's (1978) research linking the mind and body and therefore learning with action, situated learning theorists argue learning occurs as a function of participation in an activity, its context, and the culture in which it occurs, similar to both queer and gender theories. Learning, then, is not achieving the discrete end product of 'knowledge' as in cognitive learning theory, rather it is applicable "progress along trajectories of participation and growth of identity" (Greeno, 1997, p. 9; see also Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, learning is about jointly creating the nature of knowing (Resnick, Säljő, & Pontecorvo, 1997). Taken further, as individuals create personal continuity across activities, learning becomes an inevitable

part of their developmental process (Lemke, 1997) and a fundamental necessity for generative social practice and enculturation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paechter, 2007). Consequently, a person's identity becomes a function of her/his/hir being part of a greater whole (Sfard, 1998).

Contextualized physical and theoretical spaces and their inhabitants comprise what Lave and Wenger (1991) call communities of practice – "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time" that are "in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (p. 98). As a result, content is learned inherently through doing tasks enmeshed in the 'real world' that may be applied elsewhere. Learning and action then become "interestingly indistinct, learning being a continuous, life-long process resulting from acting in situations" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 4). This means that ultimately, every activity is situated and involves the whole person learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paechter, 2007; Resnick, Säljő, & Pontecorvo, 1997). Hence, learning is a sociocultural process through which individuals either intentionally or unintentionally become involved in communities of practice comprised of given beliefs and expected behaviors, first through legitimate peripheral participation and then as full participants. It is through legitimate peripheral participation, however, that the meaning of learning is configured as an individual works to become a full member of a community of practice.

The first step toward becoming a member of a community of practice is for an individual to engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) where teachers, broadly defined, usually are assumed to be expert participants and preservers of practice (Sfard, 1998). Such engagement then becomes a mediating scaffold for learning (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). Consequently, legitimate peripheral participation is the mediated interactions between the initiate and experts, activities, employment of sociocultural artifacts (tools), and so on (Brown, 1994; Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lemke, 1997). The significance of legitimate peripheral participation, then, derives from vibrant interconnections through time and across cultures, challenging "'natural' categories and forms of social life" through the "understanding of how they are (historically and culturally) produced and reproduced" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 38; see also Paechter, 2007). The overarching notion of challenging natural categories within situated learning theory via legitimate peripheral practice is appealing as it allows me to not assume the presence of the gender binary. By challenging such 'natural' categories, situated learning theory can be used to explain the ways an individual's identity is positioned within given contexts and reflects and inscribes her/his/hir social world and the modes in which she/he/ze may learn, relearn, and/or unlearn cultural norms. Consequently, learning is integrated with the individual's identity and

participation, not her/his/hir garnering and retaining of abstract, sometimes random, information.

Another positive implication of situated learning theory for gender research is its emphasis on actual practice in communities instead of communities operating under consensus. This is because situated learning theory does not assume each community of practice makes its members act only in accord with agreed upon rules, instead it focuses on the real and perceived action occurring as it is affected by relationships in the community and the world at large (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Cobb & Bowers, 1999). Practices located in varying contexts, then, can be seen to create varying conceptions of the extent of consensus, diversity, or disagreement among self-identified members and those identified by others as community members. Such theoretical positioning is useful as it allows for the deconstruction of the gender binary and therefore enables individuals who do not subscribe to traditional gender norms as well as non-heterosexual people to exist (Butler, 1990/1999). Moreover, since gender is a social construct and one's gender identity is an individual category, the decomposition of binary gender allows for more freedom in terms of individual gender identity, thus enabling the researcher to examine gender identity in all its multiplicity in the present, instead of relying on socially and culturally assumed rigid constructs (Paechter, 2007). Research in the present tense will permit a focus on

contemporary practice and therefore how gender community members are varied contextually.

Situated learning theory also will enable me to develop meticulous analyses of structures, their participants, and the interrelations within activity systems and between individuals, therefore concentrating on the multifaceted aspects of learning while not limiting explorations to classroom locales. Thus, because of the reflexive relationship between theory and practice while collecting data, I can focus on the learning of individuals through their mediated practice(s) in community; in this case, gender group.

Overall, the implications of using situated learning theory are few, but potentially great. In addition to stressing the contextual nature of learning, situated learning theory challenges 'natural' categories through its focus on legitimate peripheral practice which allows the gender binary to be deconstructed. This deconstruction is helped by situated learning theory's concentration on actual practice in communities, which allows for the individualization of community participants. Such individualization is, in turn, affected by the power dynamics in communities of practice which bind the legitimacy of peripheral participation as well as who can achieve the level of expert. As a result, each of the aforementioned aspects of situated learning theory have positive implications for future gender research as how one learns, relearns, or unlearns her/his/hir gender is explored.

III. Synthesis

In marshaling the individual and collective strengths of queer, gender, and situated learning theories to explore how queer young adults learn, unlearn, and relearn about gender a powerful, yet not complete, theoretical framework emerges. This is because although the theories are harmonious in numerous ways, they still push "beyond and against those methodological demands which force separations in the interests of canonization and provisional institutional legitimation" (Butler, 1997, p. 24). As such, both the conceptual similarities and differences push my work in important ways.

Situated learning, gender, and queer theories are quite compatible despite their varied foci. Somewhat obviously, queer and gender theories grew from related roots and often have been used in tandem in past research and therefore 'speak' to each other readily. They also share several tenants, however, with situated learning theory. First, all three frameworks are bound temporally, situated contextually, and based socioculturally. Such similarity allows data to be collected and analyzed in a coherent way while still being viewed through multiples lenses. Hence, the ways an individual's identity is situated in given contexts, reproduces and marks her/his/hir social world, and effects and/or defies cultural norms can be explored. This allows for gender to be examined at its elastic limits rather than from a culturally normative perspective.

As the margins of gender are always are shifting, action – in multiple forms -- is a key concept in queer, gender, and situated learning theories. One of the basic premises of situated learning theory is that learning occurs as a function of participation in an endeavor (Lave & Wenger, 1991), similar to gender theory which revolves around gender performance as a discursive, citational process creating subjects (Butler, 1990/1999, 1993), and queer theory which destabilizes societal norms (Jagose, 1996). These various actions combine to make a dynamic construct with which data can be collected and analyzed in a methodical manner while not solidifying society's categorical assumptions.

In varying ways, situated learning, queer, and gender theories each challenge 'natural' classifications. At its base, gender theory problematizes the gender dichotomy by questioning how non-normative sexual behaviors disrupt its permanence and privileges heterosexuality through the compulsory performative effect of recurring acts (Butler, 1990/1999, 1993, 2004). Similarly, queer theory subverts the conventionally heterosexual reinforcing structural and routine power relations that produce subjects by focusing on their contradictions (Wilchins, 2004). In a somewhat specific manner, situated learning theory questions societally assumed categories via legitimate peripheral participation across time and mores through grasping how they are created and recreated (Lave & Wenger 1991). These theories,

individually as well as together, free researchers from limiting, structural sex and gender constructs.

The spotlight on each participant as a unique person with her/his/hir own experiences also is a key component of gender, queer, and situated learning theories. By focusing on practice in communities, situated learning theory allows for the individualization of participants and how each is affected by the overarching community of practice thus providing both micro and macro perspectives (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In gender theory, gender identity is a personally defining exercise once it is extricated from its societal origins (Butler, 1990/1999, 1993, 2004). This move resists typical discursive or structural reinscription to augment insights of power and identity (Hawkesworth, 1997). In the same vein, queer theory responds to the confines of group designation by showing the boundless, wide-ranging, and individual identities that cannot be isolated in advance (Foucault, 1982; Halperin, 1995). As I examine gender and how it is learned from the unknown edges instead of in a site which reinforces conformist standards, such individualization is valuable.

The uniqueness of situated learning, gender, and queer theories also frames my research. As stated earlier, situated learning theory is more practical and applicable than the others and has, to my knowledge, only been used to examine 'traditional' gender by Paechter (2007) previously. This difference, however, is beneficial in that it enables me to have a structure in

which to apply gender and queer theories. In this way, both queer and gender theories can be 'grounded' which has not done previously. Other differences tend to be complementary rather than opposing, forcing me to scrutinize the data even more thoroughly.

IV. Implications and Summary

The literature review of queer young adults and the connections among gender, sex, and sexuality in this chapter's beginning laid out the groundwork for my selection of relevant theoretical frameworks. As stated earlier, we are in the midst of a shifting sociocultural period in regard to queer young adults sexuality narratives (Cohler & Hammack, 2007), making it ripe to investigate their gender journeys which for many, occur in college settings. Drawing upon queer and gender theories allows this work to highlight gender to examine how participants make sense of it while still being underpinned by its socially constructed nature. As such, the ways an individual's identity is situated in given contexts, marks her/his/hir world, and effects and/or defies cultural norms can be explored permitting gender to be explored at its edges rather than a culturally normative perspective.

Going beyond norms, although beneficial in many ways, was impractical for research purposes. Hence, gender and queer theories were grounded, but not limited, by the use of situated learning theory to frame learning as becoming a community of practice member; in this case, becoming a gender group participant as a mediating scaffold for their gender

journeys. It is through their learning, relearning, and unlearning of gender in unenforced heterosexual contexts, then, that queer young adults' lived gender journeys can be captured.

CHAPTER THREE

Study Design

Given the current literature around queer young adults detailed in Chapter Two, their learning, unlearning, and relearning of gender in queer majority spaces has not been interrogated fully, if at all. As a result, qualitative inquiry methods were employed to reveal new insights into queer young adults' lived gender experiences in their own words. Such methods are most appropriate for "understanding the *meaning*, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 17; emphasis in original). Examining such meaning allowed the young adults to be the focus of the study while still accounting for context. In the same vein, phenomenology served as my methodological framework because it explores people's lived experiences of specified sociocultural events and how they understood them (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Lichtman, 2006). Consequently, a phenomenology-based, qualitative approach enabled participants to relate their personal understandings of their unique circumstances, lives, and identities or "learning journeys" (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). Thus, young adult-centered qualitative methods allowed me to gather rich, detailed data allowing for a more productive, full examination.

The methodological discussion of this chapter is in two sections. Methodological processes and study intentions are detailed in the first part. In the second segment, research challenges, misgivings, and explanations are given.

I. Methodology

In this research, it is important to focus on young adults and the first-person meaning they construct from their unique learning journey experiences while not losing sight of the relevant conditions. Due to their focus on how people feel and what they think, then, qualitative methods are most appropriate for my research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lichtman, 2006; Maxwell, 1996). Further, to capture the essence[15] – not just the outward manifestations – of young adults' experiences since "'being there' is rudimentary to any educational place" (Cannatella, 2007, p. 624), it is best to use phenomenology as a methodological framework as it does not generate empirical observations; rather it relates accounts of actual happenings as they are lived as "the things people experience to be true are true" (Levering, 2006, p. 457). Believing in the participants' truths and revelations is vital in my work not only to earn trust, but also to understand the meaning(s) they attribute to their lived experiences. Put differently, by using phenomenological methods I stress the "subjective aspects of people's behavior…to gain entry into the conceptual world of [my] informants (Geertz,

[15] In this case, 'essence' strives to mean the heart of the matter. In no way does this work make traditional essentialist claims.

1978) in order to understand how and what meaning they construct" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 25) of gender group and their individual learning journeys.

Phenomenology has multidisciplinary reach, possibilities, and an epistemological basis in subjectivity which concedes personal meaning, accepting each individual has her/his/hir own perspective of reality (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Levering, 2006). Generally, phenomenological research draws on in-depth event descriptions from those experiencing them firsthand to better comprehend how such individuals experienced it, and what the experience meant for them, thus avoiding all-encompassing metanarratives (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). This approach allowed me to gather insider accounts during group sessions as well as after through individual interviews to identify recurring themes, therefore encapsulating the quintessence of participants' group interpretation(s) and understanding(s). Although contrary to positivist investigation relying on 'traditional,' scientific research processes, such epistemological centering of participant descriptions and meanings of their lived encounters is still noteworthy as it provides the 'how and what' implications of participants' lived experiences. More specifically for this project, phenomenological methods captured "the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-at-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 2). In other words, phenomenology enabled me to pull out the implications of participants'

learning journeys while still keeping relevant conceptual assertions in mind, especially vis-à-vis queer and situated learning theories.

Many education, queer, and gender theorists also maintain phenomenological, qualitative inquiries target and offer a glimpse into individuals' personal life perceptions (e.g. Ahmed, 2006; Elze, 2003; Lichtman, 2006; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Maxwell, 1996). For instance, Rasmussen (2006) asserts such methods open up a necessary interrogation into people's understandings of their experiences. In this specific case, the methods allow for an examination of how young adults learn about gender in a specified, constricted space delimited by the inclusion of only queer participants and where obligatory heterosexuality is not mandated. As such, multiple qualitative data collection methods were drawn on throughout the study: field notes, online journal entries, group session transcripts, in-person interview transcripts, and analytic memos.

Research Context and Participants

Target population and participants.

The target population was traditional college-age undergraduates, ages 18-26 (Mueller & Cole, 2009). It was vital to focus on this age group as it is during this developmental period one's personal sexual and gender identity exploration occurs (Bell & Weinberg, 1981; DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002; Haffner ,1995; Remafedi, et al., 1992). Participants who knew about or were members in Orin College's LGBTQA mostly undergraduate student

group, QueerZone (QZ)[16], self-selected into a stand alone gender group facilitated by me on campus. They were not required to demonstrate their queer identity beyond QZ participation. Although Diamond (2003) critiques studies relying solely on self-identified queer young adults for eliminating potential participants who may have same sex attraction but who have not claimed, or purposely choose not to claim, an identity label, I believe the benefits of limiting participation to self-identified queer young adults outweigh its limitations. By focusing on self-identified queer young adults' specific experiences not undergone by heterosexual young adults, valuable information can be culled that may be lost when using larger, less precise samples. Moreover, when including young adults who may have had same sex attractions in the same group as self-identified queer young adults, the sample becomes so heterogeneous that it lacks meaning.

To invite potential participants in early fall 2008, a presentation was made at a QZ meeting as well as in an upper-level Women's Studies seminar, e-mail was sent via QZ's listserv (see Appendix B for example), supportive faculty and staff members were encouraged to refer young adults, and snowballing occurred. Participants self-selected into the gender group which did not occur at or as a part of QZ meetings, but were held on a different day and time. The sessions occurred in a closed door, academic building on Orin's campus one afternoon per week for eight weeks in fall 2008. This

[16] 'QueerZone' is a pseudonym.

allowed young adults to appear as if they were attending review sessions or attempting to find a quiet place to study to help ensure confidentiality. At the inaugural meeting, investigation information was discussed, questions were solicited, and a summary handout was distributed. This oral process was repeated whenever a new participant joined the group up to 12 individuals, the maximum number for this study. It was anticipated to have 10-12 volunteer group members, three to four of which would become investigator chosen focal participants. Instead, after a melt of five people following the first few gatherings, five regular attendees comprised the final study group and all were considered focal participants. Although seemingly a small N, such numbers are large for qualitative research spotlighting queer young adults due to academic researchers' sensitivity toward adolescents and sexuality in general (Elze 2003).

As mentioned earlier, five participants withdrew prior to expected completion due to session conflicts, academic workload, and/or disinterest. Each person did so via verbal or written notification and bore no negative consequence. All information collected from such persons was destroyed. As a precautionary measure, every participant was informed about on-campus counseling[17] was available and also obtainable

[17] I sent my proposed Pastoral Internal Review Board (IRB) application to the school's counseling center director to inform her of my study's occurrence. Afterward, she wrote a letter of acknowledgement and support to include in my finalized IRB submission packet.

at the Lyon-Martin Center,[18] a city sponsored public health center focusing on LGBTQ persons for those who want it.

Site.

After two failed attempts to secure a research site,[19] the study occurred during the 2008-2009 academic year at Orin College, located just outside an East Coast metropolis. The school enrolls almost 3,700 students, approximately three-fifths of whom are female identified, through part-time and full-time, daytime and evening, undergraduate and graduate programs. Orin is a comprehensive, co-educational, independent institution of higher education founded in the late 19th Century striving to engage the changing academic, career, and developmental needs of students, alumni, and the neighboring community within the strong traditions of a liberal arts education. Accordingly, it endeavors to provide a uniquely wide-reaching, cohesive, and personal experience for each student to give and thrive in a multifaceted and ever-changing world through on-campus and study-abroad options. Such a commitment allows Orin to define academic distinction as: 1) major field mastery, 2) critical thinking and communication skills, 3) capacity to apply knowledge, 4) appreciation of varied disciplinary perspectives and methods, 5) understanding the key relationships among people globally, 6), ability to

[18] 'Lyon-Martin Center' is a pseudonym.

[19] The site which I had in mind when designing this project fell through a few weeks before data collection was to begin in summer 2007. It was due to changing site and staff dynamics despite my working with the site for over one year previously. The second proposed site did not yield enough potential participants during preliminary inquiries in spring 2008.

work well within culturally diverse groups, and 7) dedication to social responsibility and ethical decision making.

Orin College was a good investigation site because it has an active undergraduate lesbian and gay community and both the administration and student body has worked to foster queer safe space on campus. Such a supportive atmosphere enabled me to create a queer majority site on campus where compulsory heterosexuality was eliminated, with the caveat that the young adults and I still harbored some ingrained heterosexism. To isolate gender specifically, I facilitated a stand alone gender discussion group. This allowed gender identity formation to be free from the influence of heterosexuality, for the most part, allowing for the examination of how, if at all, it is learned by queer young adults as they questioned and formed their identities (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

The gender group was held in a newer academic structure housing several social science departments which adjoined an older academic building with general classrooms and a few profession-based departments. This linkage is important as sessions were held outside traditional building hours when it was locked. Although I arranged with campus security to unlock one door in the older building for group access, it did not always happen. The first time it occurred I assumed participants could 'swipe' me in since student identification cards can be used as electronic keys, but this did not work a majority of the time. Instead, I tried every exterior door until I

found one propped open, but usually ended up following a random student inside when her/his/hir identity card worked. Once inside, participants either called my or another participant's mobile telephone to gain entry. The process meant meetings often began late.

I arrived early for each gender group session to set-up the space as well as light refreshments I provided as a small thank-you and lure to participants. The actual area was a student lounge at the end of the third floor overlooking a newly constructed water feature. During regular hours it was used mostly by majors of the departments located on the floor as well as LGBTQ students as one of the most out, supportive faculty member's office door was off it. Furthermore, one of the young adults was employed as the departmental work-study student which was beneficial for three reasons: 1) as lounge decoration was at his discretion, he ensured LGB periodicals and academic resources were at hand as well as advertisements for LGBTQ campus events, 2) his position gave us access to department supplies in case I forgot to bring something or a random need arose, and 3) his mere presence gave the group credibility to faculty members who may have stumbled upon it.

The actual physical area of the lounge was rectangular, with the water view and a magazine rack featuring queer and feminist publications on one of the long sides, a faculty office on one of the short sides, two gender specific restrooms, a water fountain, and the hallway on the other long side, and the

supportive faculty member's office and a stairwell door on the other short side. The carpet was institutional taupe in hue and there was a round table with classroom-like brown-padded chairs around it, as well as two groupings of two beige-patterned club chairs with a small round table between them. A short bookcase with a plant, featured books, and candy dish on top was situated catty-corner between the supportive faculty member's office and the entrance to the men's restroom. A few plants also were situated near the windows. For meetings, I used the club chairs and a few classroom chairs to form a circle around a small round table on which I set the digital recorder. The larger table was used for food and beverages.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection.

Guided by phenomenological methods, data collection was designed to ensure multiple avenues to explore the essence of participants' gender learning journeys (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007): observations, interviews, group transcripts, written reflections, and multiple point surveys. The primary site for data collection was a weekly gender discussion group on Orin College's campus. The group was comprised of five young adults and focused on varied aspects of gender (see Appendix A for sample activities). Actual data collection began during the first meeting after study explanation and obtaining the young adults' consent when they filled out a brief survey. The same instrument was given again at the midpoint and final sessions for

benchmarking purposes. Survey data helped frame young adults' learning journeys and capture sometimes unspoken information, such as each participant's personal definition of 'gender.'

In addition to facilitating the gender group sessions, I observed, took copious field notes, and made audio recordings to hone in on the phenomenon of situated learning as "progress along trajectories of participation and growth of identity" (Greeno, 1997, p. 9). Each method also was used to grasp the extent to which young adults engaged as legitimate peripheral participants and/or full participants in this community of practice. They additionally enabled me to understand the use of cultural tools such as jargon, both academic and campus-based. Observing and recording such phenomena was significant in noting the interconnections which challenge 'natural' categories through the understanding of how they are socioculturally (re)produced (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Finally, observations, digital recordings, and field notes were used to prompt online reflections as well as reference points for finding interpretation (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1997).

Individual interviews were conducted and digitally recorded interviews in Orin library's private study rooms after approximately half of the group meetings had taken place and again after the conclusion of the sessions. A semi-structured interview format was employed to gather more extensive data than structured interviews, yet give young adults the freedom to respond to question without being limited to specific answers (Maxwell,

1996). The interview protocols were informed by both the literature as well as earlier sessions (for the preliminary interview protocol, please see Appendix B). In phenomenology, interviews are used as a means for exploring narratives of participants' lived experiences in their own words (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

In addition to the above methods, I asked the young adults to share personal documents identified by them or me as revealing insights into their gender journeys and how they make sense of their experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). No one did so. To a large extent, however, participants wrote regular entries responding to questions that arose during group meetings in a confidential web journal to which I had access. This more personal approach gave participants ample time to process their thoughts and previous discussions as well as explore new ideas in a completely non-judgmental forum.

Digital recordings of group sessions and interviews were transcribed by a paid transcriptionist and then checked by me as well as participants for accuracy. I also downloaded and saved online journal entries to ensure continued access. All confidential data collection and storage was completed by me and no information was shared without participant's express permission. Participants' names are not used. Instead, the young adults selected pseudonyms are utilized in all written and oral presentations and kept separate from research data to ensure confidentiality. Audio and text

files were saved and examined on a password protected computer and ultimately will be destroyed by erasure. Similarly, all hardcopy data will be stored in a locked file cabinet only accessible by me and ultimately destroyed by shredding.

Data analysis.

My data collection yielded ample material for analysis. All analytic processes were based within a phenomenological framework, as it enabled my emerging theoretical work to foreground young adults' experiences while still attending to context. As such, my dissertation's various theoretical underpinnings were combined based on real data, not just conjectural rhetoric.

Analyzing field notes as well as digital audio recording transcriptions through iterative cycles of coding in the phenomenological tradition (Levering, 2006) allowed me to build a fuller recounting of the practices and discourses of meetings, thus moving toward as thick of a description as possible (Geertz, 1978). Moreover, after transcription, I provided the opportunity for participants to review session notes for accuracy in personal and group portrayal. Once all field observations and digital audio recordings were collected, data were examined systematically using content analysis "without regard for how or whatever ideas and categories will ultimately be used, whether other relevant observations have been made, or how they fit

together" (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p.151) to explore all avenues of inquiry.

After transcription, interview data were examined qualitatively using inveterate, inductive coding techniques (Strauss, 1987). Following preliminary coding, focal participants were interviewed a second time using a modified interview protocol created as additional questions surfaced during research and from previous analysis of data sources. Additionally, online journal entries were examined qualitatively using cyclic content analysis. While creating relevant coding schemes across sources, I also wrote multiple analytic memos to clarify my mental processing as well as receive the young adults' feedback. Their comments helped me solidify and examine emerging themes from numerous perspectives.

Validity.

The multiple methods of data collection as well as the data analysis I completed contribute to the validity of my investigation. My data collection methods were triangulated due to their variety – field notes, digital audio recordings, personal online journal entries, and young adult interviews – and reduced the risk of chance patterns and systematic preconceptions appearing. Moreover, participant member checks were solicited throughout the data collection process, as it is "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpretation of the meaning of what they say and the perspective they have on what is going on" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 94). Another

way I ensured my study's validity is by tacking back and forth between my field notes and transcriptions of each session to look for inconsistencies. These methods, according to Maxwell (1996), work to enhance the validity of qualitative studies.

Despite the previous argument, the concept of validity, or even its possibility, was a constant companion throughout this poststructural inquiry. If it meant having a non-contradictable conclusion based on gathered evidence, this work was not valid in the traditional sense. This is because manifold, sometimes contradicting experiences and perceptions were acknowledged and respected. However, drawing on Blackburn's (2001) reframing of the notion, I aimed for validity "marked by contestation, reciprocity, and work for social change" (p. 63). As such, my study was contested repeatedly through recursive data collection and coding to enable me to have varied and, at times, conflicting interpretations. Moreover, group participants challenged my work as they reviewed data and how they were depicted. On a more basic level, students regularly were invited, and took the opportunity, to disagree with me and others throughout group meetings and interviews.

II. Challenges and Misgivings

Like all research exploring any facet of humanness, my work explains only a portion, or perhaps a few, of the participants' storied lives, even when limited by such a specified context. Accordingly, I encountered difficulties

which shaped this study's latitude and tone despite going to significant lengths to produce cogent, convincing, and data driven arguments. Such challenges included my role(s) and views as investigator, the young adults knowing each other before study participation, everybody – including me -- bringing heterosexism from 'outside' to the group, and the ability to generalize the findings.

A researcher's deductive, and therefore personal, role is a key aspect in qualitative analysis (Jackson, 2007; Lichtman, 2006; Rasmussen, 2006). As explained earlier, my self-identification and openness about being a queer community member provided me insider access to participants, which was both helpful and a hindrance. Sanlo (1999) describes this quandary as participatory consciousness,

> the awareness of a deeper level of kinship between the knower and the known," adding that such recognition of kinship--the seeing of self in one's participants--is an issue not only of obligation, but also of ethics. It is wanting only to understand and not to impose the self on the participants; however, it is also a process of not denying that self as researcher is present (p. 28).

Although my outness provided kinship with the participants, it also imposed potential barriers to understanding their emic perspectives, or how they made sense of their experiences.

As a result of our kinship, the participants and I had a shared understanding of what it is to be LGBTQ on a college campus, for the most

part. For instance, when participants used the phrase 'coming out' they assumed we had common experiences, reactions, and feelings around the subject. These assumed common understandings and cultural congruencies facilitated conversations and helped me establish rapport with participants (Herdt & Boxer, 1993), but also limited my analysis as my understanding of an idea or concept may have had a distinctive nuance from that of participants. Put differently, a common biographical detail does not necessarily transmute to mutual interests and/or a larger potential of empathy between the investigator and the participants (Kennedy & Davis, 1996). Keeping this in mind I tried to make the familiar strange (Geertz, 1978) by probing further or ask for examples when meanings were assumed. I also was aware keenly that my experiences were not identical to the students for many reasons (e.g. age, different campus experiences, etc.) and I needed to not force my interpretations onto their stories. Such attentiveness enabled me to collect meticulous and intimate data while still ensuring its interpretation reflected participants' viewpoints, not mine.

All of the young adults knew each other before the study began, but to varying degrees, as a result of recruitment methods. The use of such a "naturally occurring" group has the advantage of replicating the networks and/or relationships within which sensitive issues, such as questioning one's identity, might be discussed (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). On the other hand, despite the advantages noted above about holding a group where students

knew each other, it was likely that conversations also may have been limited due to self-censuring if a participant knew how another might feel and/or react. For example, two group members were dating and living together when sessions commenced but broke-up a few weeks into the study. I did not know about this and the meeting immediately after their dissolution was tense, with one member of the former couple not speaking and visibly upset. I was concerned, but other participants continually steered the conversation away from the upset woman and anything which may provoke her. As a result, the session did not go well as students blatantly were censuring their comments. Luckily, however, one person pulled me aside afterward to explain the situation and I was able to incorporate the incident and the young adults censuring into future individual interviews.

Another data collection concern was the extent to which both the participants and I brought obligatory heterosexuality into the group, even if unintentionally, as this "embeddedness of the oppositional male-female duality within our consciousness constrains thought and action" (Houston, 1996, p. 76). Although the group was an attempt to create a space without compulsory heterosexuality, in some ways it had to be present because gender and sexuality language in the United States revolves around it. As such, heterocentric language was sometime used to spur conversation in hopes it would be debated and potentially redeployed. All of us, however, still defaulted to common parlance when other words did not do a concept

justice or it was simpler to compare and/or contrast what one was trying to describe to societal norms. As Butler (2004) notes, heterosexual norms govern what is 'real' but they are called into question "when they take place in a context and through a form of embodying that defies normative explanation" (p. 218).

Due to the limited scope of this project, it is also important to address its generalizability. Since the study has a small sample size and was focused on queer, traditional college-aged students at a small, private liberal arts college in the United States, the findings cannot be generalized to all American residents, college students, or even queer students. The results can, however, raise vital questions and concerns about the hegemony of heterosexuality and the gender binary, how context affects learning, and how college students benefit from a non-judgmental space to grapple with questions of identity. Additionally, the work can point to the usefulness of queer and gender theories in educational research in combination with situated learning theory as well as on their own. The study, then, can be used as a 'jumping off spot' for many types of future research.

III. Chapter Summary

Qualitative, phenomenological methods were required for this work due to its research aspirations of portraying and analyzing participants' lived experiences around gender. Moreover, the specific methods used were appropriate for this and other studies wishing to reveal the significance

individuals ascribe to their encounters and lives. Despite a number of challenges and concerns arising during the research process, each was addressed and together they allowed for a deeper, more thorough, and careful understanding of the data.

CHAPTER FOUR

Gender Group: The Rules

Today's queer young adults are barraged with a multitude of messages as U.S. culture continues to grapple with sexuality (Blackburn, 2004). In the more entrenched struggle and success narrative, they are depicted as victims who wrestle with their sexuality in isolation against the backdrop of compulsory heterosexuality who ultimately, but not always, triumph by coming out against society's heterosexist norms (Herdt & Boxer, 1996)[20]. In recent years, however, an emancipation narrative has surfaced extending 'normality' to queer young adults' sexual identity development, which highlights their developing resilience and coping skills around stress related to being a sexual minority in a heterocentric society (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Blackburn, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002)[21]. Gender group participants, 20-26 years of age, were in their late teens before the emancipation narrative was put forth in academic circles, let alone common parlance and media (Cohler & Hammack, 2007; Blackburn, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Muñoz-Plaza, Quinn, and Rounds, 2002). As a result, their formative years generally were shaped by the regulations of the

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[20] Commonly known examples of media depicting the struggle and success narrative are *The Best Little Boy in the World* and *Annie on my Mind.*

[21] The emancipation narrative can be seen in media examples such as *Beautiful Thing*, *Boy meets Boy*, *Will and Grace* [television series], and *Ugly Betty* [television series].

heterosexual-based struggle and success narrative (personal communication, October 5, 19, 27, and 28, 2008; personal communication, November 9, 24, and 25, 2008).

The nod to culture's role in lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults' sexual development is more than a contextualization effort; it depicts the omnipresence of society's rules that maintain heterosexuality despite scholarly, and indeed some cultural, advances in destigmatizing the sexuality of queer young adults. When creating gender group where heterocentric rules were not enforced there was not a known structure within which to operate, so the participants strained to reconceptualize gender. Consequently, their past gender and sexuality related assumptions and experiences crept in persistently as they both labored against and for gender group's rules. Indeed, in this chapter I argue queer young adults' relationship(s) to rules affect how they reframe gender in a space lacking compulsory heterosexuality.

In the following pages, this chapter explores the pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions in terms of queer young adults' response to, support of, and battle against community rules. After giving a thumbnail sketch of participants and gender group in the first section, I investigate how the queer young adults react to rules and why it is difficult to dismantle heterosexuality based assumptions through the creation of gender group's norms. Then, using situated learning theory as a lens, I explore how heterocentric

suppositions come into play when participants question the 'natural' categories of gender. Next, the polarization between those reifying the rules of heterosexuality and those who strove to break them is detailed to depict the young adults' varying relationship(s) to them. Finally, I demonstrate how the rules of heterosexuality determined an individual's learning trajectory during gender group. Together, this chapter's parts elucidate how queer young adults' relationship to rules influences how they reconceptualize gender in a space without obligatory heterosexuality.

I. People

It is important to populate and complement the physical tour of gender group in Chapter Three as well as structure session exploration through the lenses of situated learning, queer, and gender theories. It is essential, however, to reiterate this work is embedded in the belief that U.S. sexual norms are discursive products of knowledge and power which not only assume the authority of 'truth,' but *make* themselves true (Foucault, 1978/1990) while demanding heterosexuality (Rich, 1980). As a result, both the young adults and I brought varying socioculturally informed, heteronormatively laden views of gender and sexuality to the meetings, or as one participant asserted, we "were all raised with the same heterosexual ideas and rules and don't necessarily know any more about gender than heterosexual individuals" (Benji, personal communication, November 27, 2008). That said, because group norms were designed to curtail hegemonic

heterosexuality as much as possible, the participants and I were at liberty to concentrate on their gender journeys.

Group composition

When recruiting participants at Orin College, I relied on presentations to QueerZone (QZ), the campus lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally organization, a women's studies class, and a 'virtual call' via QZ's listserv. Informally, however, I realized having Ruth Garrett[22] -- a revered, out, lesbian professor -- endorse my work was paramount to the young adults participation. Ann, one eventual group participant even averred:

> Garrett's the one with the pull around here. She gets done what needs done for us. All the gay kids know that, so does the other faculty and higher ups. She just gets it and gets it done. She'd do it even if she wasn't QZ's advisor (personal communication, September 12, 2008).

When Ann's sentiments were reiterated by several other Orin students as well as a colleague in another department whom I know, I asked Garrett to assist me in direct recruitment. She agreed readily, and attended a QZ meeting at 10p on a week night where I asked for participants and chimed in that "Erin's work is important and I encourage you to be a part of it" (Garrett, personal communication, September 12, 2008). Moreover, Garrett offered the lounge

[22] Ruth Garrett is an assigned pseudonym. In addition to being held in great esteem by students as evidence by her receiving the Award for Outstanding Teaching, Garrett also is respected by other faculty which was demonstrated by her winning the Outstanding Faculty Service Award in 2009. The recipient is nominated and chosen by colleagues from across campus.

outside of her office as a meeting place for gender group, which helped participants come forward as it already was perceived as a safe space (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008; November 24, 2008).

As stated previously, study participation was limited to self-identified queer young adults; the only 'proof' of non-heterosexuality for this study was participation in QZ. As such, sample homogeneity was maintained in regard to sexual orientation. Age and recent academic levels also were controlled by focusing on traditional college age students, ages 18-26 (Mueller & Cole, 2009). After attrition,[23] five students attended group sessions regularly, all of whom self-identified as Caucasian, or a variant there of at some point during the study. Table 4.1 details their demographics based on initial research surveys given during the group's first meeting.

Ann, Bea, and Jay were all close to Garrett as she was their academic advisor and each had taken several of her classes. As a result, Garrett took the three of them and me to lunch one day to ensure they participated in my research and recruited others. Benji and Stacy were recruited at the QZ meeting as were approximately 12 additional queer students, but due to group timing and the need to commit eight consecutive weeks, only seven students came to the initial meeting. One student never returned and the other stopped coming after three sessions. Interestingly, the former was the

[23] Although no reason was given when youth dropped out, Paechter (2007) asserts it may stem partially from their inability/lack of desire to work with the group to develop collective understanding, thus they did not feel a part of the community.

only sophomore and the latter the only self identified person of color. Neither gave a reason for discontinuing their participation to me, Garrett, or continuing participants. Although this limited the diversity of the young adults, it also enabled me to control for race (to a large extent).

Table 4.1

Initial Participant Demographics

Name [24]	*Age*	*Race**	*Sex*	*Gender*	*Sexual Orienta-tion*	*Where Raised*	*Major(s)*
Ann	21	Caucasian, white	Human	Female	Lesbian	Rural CT	Sociology
Bea	20	American	Female	--	Queer	Altoona, PA	Sociology
Benji	21	Caucasian, Irish, whatever	Male	Male	Gay	Suburban Philadel-phia	Psychology and Pre-Art Therapy
Jay	26	Caucasian	Female	Female to male trans-gender	Fluid	Southern NJ	Sociology and Criminal Justice
Stacy	21	white	Female	Female	Bisexual	Lancaster, PA	Liberal Studies

**Racial capitalization displayed as written by participants*

To ensure candid, open conversations, it was vital to create an arena where queer young adults felt safe (Blackburn, 2001). In addition to meeting in an area already considered relatively safe due to its proximity to Garrett's office and Jay's attempts to make it comfortable and welcoming for queer students (personal communication, October 28, 2008; November 24, 2008),

[24] All participant names are self-chosen pseudonyms. 'Jay,' originally 'Big Daddy Jay,' was shortened and made less colloquial with the participant's permission.

several other steps were taken with an eye toward participant comfort so they could relay their lived experiences. These measures helped define the group's "space," or the loosely designated area which was inhabited cognitively and physically (Désert, 1997). The concept of space is more freeing than "place," as it is evolving, imperfect, and sometimes volatile while place is more static, "such as a given culture to be transmitted, an interpretation to be learned, or defined skills and methods of reasoning to be acquired" (Talburt, 2000, p. 19). According to Doty, space can be queered, or "marked as contra-, non-, or anti-straight" (as cited in Désert, 1997, p. 20). To be queered as well as to be considered a dynamic and contestable area, the space and the users must be in constant dialogue. Such ongoing interaction enabled a community to develop over time (Paechter, 2007) through the meaning based, lived experiences so vital to phenomenology which relies on accounts of actual occurrences. It is important to note, however, that for each young adult, gender group's space felt different each week depending on what was occurring in the group, outside of the group, and so forth as the gender group community of practice, a set of relations among people, activities, and space over time, was just one to which the queer young adults belonged (Bea, personal communication, November 25, 2008). In fact, several other communities of practice overlapped gender group's by default to varying degrees – QZ for all group members as well as others for one or a few of those present.

II. Framing Gender Group

Group norms

After consent was obtained during the first gender session not only to meet institutional requirements, but also to set a tone of security and ease for the participants so they could share their lived experiences, norms were established as a group. I asked the young adults to share ground rules they wished to have in place first, and then clarified and added a few personally. For instance, confidentiality was discussed in depth to assure participants' understanding and earn their confidence in me as facilitator as well as the other young adults. The following dialogue participants, demonstrates how rules in the form of confidentiality were interrogated:

> Stacy: …we can say anything and it will not get out? C'mon, this is a tiny place and things get around. Let's be real.
>
> Benji: You're right, but if we really try we can do it.
>
> Stacy: (interrupting) Sure, like it's all a fuckin' bed of roses if we try.
>
> Benji: This is not high school, Stacy, we're all adults. I mean, we all kept being gay secret at some point. Not talking about a few hours a week will not kill us.
>
> Bea: Yeah, he's right. It also helps the study.
>
> Jay: (loudly) The brainiac speaks!
>
> Ann: She's right, so go shit yourself!
>
> (Jay laughs with the group)
>
> Erin: Hey…
>
> Ann: (interrupting) What? It's true. Bea is right. We gotta do it 'cause we signed our names. Simple.

Benji: Let's just agree to do it, okay?

(silence for approximately 50 seconds)

Stacy: Guess you already know my stuff anyway.

Ann: Let's move on, then.

(personal communication, October 5, 2008)

This exchange illustrates how queer young adults' reactions to rules still are based on heterosexual assumptions despite being in a space lacking compulsory heterosexuality. For instance, unbeknownst to me at the time, Stacy's past experiences around the rules of assumed heterosexuality directly shaped her view of confidentiality after witnessing the backlash of gossip for two lesbians in her high school (personal communication, October 27, 2008). Later during a one-on-one interview, she explained

> …when I was in high school I was – I knew I wasn't exactly just a female…but any time any girl expressed any tomboyish attributes it was automatic dyke. Even though I knew I like women back when I was in high school, I didn't want to get that target on me because it was very – I know some lesbians from my school and it was very tragic for them. So, I just basically stayed with being a female (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

This excerpt speaks to Stacy's past experience with sexuality – and to some extent gender – ruining people's lives when they became part of hallway gossip. Moreover, it also explains her wariness of the ability of the other queer young adults to maintain confidentiality because she did not want to

become a target as the lesbians did in her school. Bowing to peer pressure to agree to ensure confidentiality, however, Stacy justified her move by asserting that the others "already know [her] stuff anyway" (personal communication, October 5, 2008). But did they? This was the first inkling of a participant's past experiences with gender and sexuality flickering in the group, and it was not until later that with the assistance of Stacy's story it was unearthed.

The group also discussed the importance of believing each person's experiences as her/his/hir lived truths (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Lichtman, 2006). This norm was not only phenomenologically relevant, but was significant in gaining the trust and participation of the queer young adults. Additionally, I stated explicitly that gender group was a space where heterosexuality was not assumed – at least by me, and hopefully by the participants -- and why such a norm was imperative to my investigation. The following discussion then ensued:

> Jay: I guess we can do it, but it's kinda deep.
>
> Stacy: Yeah…
>
> Benji: …almost impossible.
>
> Ann: It's up to you to remind us of it (gesturing at Erin), 'cause it's harder than tryin' to quit (tapping her cigarette pack). Not that I'm trying.
>
> Jay: Me neither…
>
> Bea: Wouldn't it be easier for you, though (glancing at Jay)?

Jay: Just 'cause I'm a tranny the world doesn't change. I still want to pee standin' up!

Erin: Huh?

Jay: Not sitting means you're a man.

Erin: Yeah, I get that, but how does it tie into suspending heterosexual assumptions in group?

Jay: It's always gonna be in my mind, 'cause all guys pee standin' up and like women. I know it ain't true, but it's still in there (tapping his head).

Ann: Yeah, so keep reminding us (looking at Erin). I need a smoke break.

(personal communication, October 5, 2008)

Embedded in the conversation once again is the notion that participants' relationship to the obligatory rules of heterosexuality influence present beliefs as Stacy, Benji, and Ann still wrestle with the idea of a non-heterocentric space because they have not been exposed to one previously (personal communication, October 5, 2008), and Jay explicitly states normative heterosexuality is still in his mind.

I then explained gender group was not fixed, but a jointly created space evolving throughout our ongoing sessions. This allowed the group's 'actual happenings' (Levering, 2006) to be true as well as enabled me to examine how and what meanings were constructed around sexuality and gender. Other norms were more standard group rules such as taking turns to speak, active listening, and so on. The ground rules were written on newsprint which was displayed at future meetings to remind participants of

shared norms as well as give them faith in the interactive group process. Reflecting on the process in an online journal entry, Ann stated that

> …it was weird when we made the rules because we knew them. I guess Erin had to do it for her research or something. I liked we could make up group stuff, though, because it will at least make it fun and leave room for shits and giggles (personal communication, October 20, 2008).

Benji also commented on the first session in his online journal, remarking

> …setting it all up was strange. I think we could've just run through the rules quickly since we knew everybody instead of taking so long to each say something, write it down, etc. We are all adults anyway and know what we are doing (personal communication, October 24, 2008).

Both Ann and Benji's thoughts echo their lived truths of the first gender group session; creating the framework for future meetings was somewhat pointless as they "knew everybody" as well as the 'rules.' What rules? I assert their reflections demonstrate how entrenched assumed heterosexuality's rules are in society today as well as their relationships to them. For Ann, her knowledge of the 'rules' harkens back to her mother's death when she was a teenager and realized society has "…this very constrictive role where the mother is just supposed to be nurturing and the fathers have to be the provider and disciplinarian" (personal communication, October 27, 2008). Consequently, she felt as the 'woman of the house' she had to step into her

mother's nurturing role, despite its limitations. Ann, then, knew the rules of enforced heterosexuality early in life, especially as they pertained to gender. Benji also learned gendered rules as a teen because when he acted more stereotypically feminine, he was

> …aware of it because in high school when I was younger, because I was called out on a lot of it, I tried not to do that and so I kind of – for me, I would hold back a lot of the feminine side of me so that I wouldn't be – I guess trying to pass and not trying to draw any attention to myself (personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Benji goes on to say having to pass made him "grow up quicker" as he had to be attentive to so many heterosexually based rules to survive. This is instructive as he assumed the other queer young adults had the same experience and therefore were "adults" who knew what they were doing based on his dealings with gender transgressions and normative heterosexuality.

Immediately following the creation of group norms, I shared personal information to establish kinship through queerness (Sanlo, 1999), past experiences at Orin, a connection to Ruth, and my role as an expert through my doctoral studies and work at Penn's LGBT Center. Although potentially limiting in regard to nuanced meanings and understandings, I believed our common knowledge of Orin College and self-identification as queer enabled us to have a shared understanding of terminology and some experiences that

otherwise may not have existed (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; Herdt & Boxer, 1993). Because I was aware of the potential pitfall(s) of missing gradations of meaning, however, I always tried to probe or ask for examples when meanings were assumed (Sanlo, 1999).

Community of practice

Gender group was designed to be a community of practice; basically, a group engaged in shared praxis (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). This community of practice centered on discussing and learning about gender without the assumed constancy of heterosexuality and its effects, in the manner of queer and gender theories (Britzman, 1997; Butler, 1990/1999; Jagose, 1996). The practice of gender group was central to its mission, as it made the community what it was and allowed it to become, and remain, cohesive. Paechter (2007) argues three facets enable such communities of practice to be viable: 1) mutual engagement, 2) joint enterprise, and 3) shared repertoire (see also Wenger, 1998). Together, these aspects demonstrate the nature of the community to both participants and outsiders. For instance, when a baby is assigned as a girl or boy,[25] she or he is

> thus placed in a constellation of overlapping local communities of practice of masculinity and femininity, through which he or she will learn, from more established group members (such as parents or siblings) what it is to be male or female in that community (Paechter, 2007, p. 7).

[25] Such assignment assumes unambiguous genitalia. See footnote 2 in Chapter One regarding intersex babies.

Depending on whether the child was assigned as a girl or boy, she or he automatically is an outsider to the other dominant community of practice (i.e. as Paechter (2007) argues, girls are not a member of the masculine community of practice and boys are not members of the feminine community of practice[26]; see also Britzman, 1997). Gender group, although artificial in its construction for research purposes, was still a community of practice as it was a mutually engaging, linked undertaking which eventually had a collective repertoire.

When gender group began, I was the expert trying to co-create a community of practice. After explaining the group's purposes and receiving consent from participants, however, queer young adults began to engage in legitimate peripheral participation -- mediated interactions between initiates and experts, activities, tools, and so on -- through discussions and shared activities as they knew they belonged and had the right to contribute. Stacy captured this sense of 'fit' during the first session when she stated, "we've got our own space without the heteros and their rules" (personal communication, October 5, 2008). Immediately after Stacy spoke, though, Ann asked "yeah, but what do we do?" (personal communication, October 5, 2008), then looked at me as an authority to elucidate more. Once again I described the purpose of gender group and especially its underlying premise that heterosexuality

[26] Despite increasing attention to tomboys who do not 'fit' into the feminine community of practice completely (e.g. Carr, 2007; Hall, 2008; Paechter & Clark, 2007), most children are inculcated to believe they must adhere to the praxis of their gender communities of practice or suffer the consequences (e.g. a feminine boy being labeled a sissy or gay).

would not be assumed or enforced, but without a historical or even contemporary referent, the concept was not grasped easily by the young adults. In his online journal, Jay put it bluntly when he said

> What the fuck! A place with nothing heterosexual, good luck. I guess I cannot even image that place and now I have one? No way. We can't escape those little boxes we put others into as we all have a bush or a twig and berries (personal communication, November 22, 2008).

Although still conflating heterosexuality with sex to some extent, Jay explicitly states he cannot imagine a place that is not heterocentric despite his atypical gender journey. Remarkably, then, his past experiences with heterosexual based 'natural' categories color his worldview a great deal as he strives to signal his gender as masculine based on dichotomous norms. As gender group continued to meet, however, participants realized it was through their engagement, or legitimate peripheral practice, around assumed binaries that the group was being defined by them as well as me.

Legitimate peripheral participation

Legitimate peripheral participation constructs the meaning of learning as an individual works to become a full member of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Being and feeling legitimate were important as they signaled the valid contributions of queer young adults in gender group. For example, it took Ann talking to me one-on-one in her first interview for her to

feel validated within the group (personal communication, October 27, 2008). She felt frustrated that other queer young adults "were very focused on language [and] one of the things [she] thought in [her] head was its not so much the language that we have a problem with, it's the concepts behind it" (personal communication, October 27, 2008). Ann eventually shared her thoughts with the group after I assured her it was fine to disagree with others, including me, despite it going against the majority – or in her mind, going against 'nature,' which was akin to going against the rules of heterosexuality -- as everybody contributed to the group's dialogues which shaped our community of practice. Indeed, such challenges were imperative in contesting the rules, whether actual or perceived, which in this case, was the participants' focus on language around gender.

The interceding interactions between the queer young adults themselves and me as the expert became a scaffold for learning through legitimate peripheral participation (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). The significance of legitimate peripheral participation is its questioning of hegemonic or 'natural' categories by exploring how they are created and maintained temporally, culturally, and contextually similar to queer and gender theories. For instance, to stimulate discussion, I read *X: A Fabulous Child's Story,*[27] which portrays a child without a given or perceivable gender

[27] Gould, L. (1978). *X: A fabulous child's story.* New York, NY: Daughters Publishing Co. The book's text is found readily online, but securing a print copy is difficult because it is out of print.

and hir effect on hir parents, classmates, and others, aloud to the participants to help them to somewhat envision a gender-free environment. Instead of focusing on the possibilities in X's story, however, Benji questioned the likelihood of an X even being able to exist (personal communication, October 19, 2008). When I asked him why he thought X could not be real, he posited

> …I just feel there's too much built in society that it would be…really hard for the child to not be kind of an outsider in a way. Um, obviously he wouldn't have any, like, limitations as one sex or the other so that would be good, but I think there's other limitations when you don't have some sort of category (Benji, personal communication, October 19, 2008).

When I pushed Benji further, he continued saying

> I feel like there's so many different things that are ingrained in us that I think it would be almost impossible to make sure you're, like, gender neutral [in] every possible thing. [Be]cause even some of the things in there, they were like, they kind of reversed roles. Like, they had the dad teach stuff about, like, dolls and house and had the mom teach about things needing fixed with tools…I feel like its almost trying too hard to reverse it so that you're still having some sort of…a neutral (personal communication, October 19, 2008).

By questioning X's existence, then, Benji reinscribed the U.S. gender norms he learned earlier in life by pointing out the faults in the story rather than the going against the rules and questioning today's gender ideals. Bea agreed, adding,

> …'boy' and 'girl,' 'male' and female' are so loaded that it doesn't matter after a certain point how gender neutral you teach the child, they're going to get it from somewhere because somebody knows they're a boy or a girl" (personal communication, October 19, 2008).

Ann reinforced the assertion in her online journal when discussing the story, positing,

> There is no real truth, only common perceptions that most of is at least recognize, if not concur with. Whether one agrees or disagrees doesn't change the unspoken contracts we have with one another in regards to gender (personal communication, October 20, 2008).

In a few sentences, she summarized how embedded the gender dichotomy is in the United States, marking the story of X impossible rather than imagining the possibilities through challenging the heterosexually based gender dichotomy. She continues by talking about our gender discourses always ending in arguments

> …because everyone thinks their idea is the only correct one therefore their solutions are the only correct solutions. Instead of progress through discussion I feel as though the only progress being made is the increase of aspirin sales (Ann, personal communication, October 20, 2008).

Such frustration bears witness to the difficulty even the most well intentioned people can have interrogating the rules with which they were raised as well as reaching a consensus about how to do so, let alone put it into practice as we were attempting to do each week in gender group. As such, X's story had to be imaginary.

After agreeing X could not be real during the group dialogue, Benji led the conversation toward X's sexual orientation despite X's young age – we decided eight years old or younger -- and the fact we were focusing on gender identity and gender. He inquired

> So someone who's not a female or male, supposedly, you know, where do you fall in that who you're attracted to?...if they're not identifying as either male or female then are they a heterosexual couple? Is it a gay couple? (Benji, personal communication, October 19, 2008).

Once again, gender looped back to sexual orientation as a person's perceived non-typical gender behaviors will mark them as other, in this case homosexual (Almeida, et al., 2009; Dubowsky Ma'ayan, 2003; Lucal, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). The link between compulsory heterosexuality and gender could not be loosed in the minds of most of the queer young adults; therefore they discursively reinforced existing gender standards taught to them earlier in life.

Although gender group was designed to be a unique community of practice free of obligatory heterosexuality, it never truly stood on its own as evidenced above by the continual reinscription of heterosexual norms. Instead, in many ways it became a node of legitimate peripheral practice within the larger, overlying feminine, masculine, gender, and sexuality communities of practice in which at least one group member was involved (Paechter, 2007). Put differently, because gender meetings were created for the purpose of this research, there was no existing context and/or history for the queer young adults to draw from to envision a community of practice free of assumed heterosexuality. Such a lack of rules prohibited gender group from becoming a true community of practice, as I could not conjure any examples from which to draw as the 'expert.' As Lave and Wenger (1991) explain, this is because legitimate peripheral participation includes "an increasing understanding of how, when, and about what old-timers collaborate, collude and collide, and what they enjoy, dislike, respect and admire" (p. 95). Gender group did not have 'old-timers' so we drew from our shared and individual lived experiences as queer people who had already 'paid the price' of living outside the boundaries of heterosexuality to create a community of practice which resisted obligatory heterosexuality. Consequently, the young adults' heterosexual assumptions arose when questioning the 'natural' categories of gender as they were baffled by not having known rules to guide their discourse.

Polarization

As gender group meetings progressed, it became clear – although not always verbalized directly –two factions existed among the queer young adults: those clinging to the rules of the gender binary with which they were familiar and those at least outwardly trying to destabilize them. The former was comprised of Benji, Stacy, and Jay and the latter was comprised of Bea and Ann. Interestingly, albeit not surprisingly, those who were male identified were more satisfied with the heterosexually based gender binary because of its patriarchal empowerment. In other words, despite not belonging to the sexual majority, they still claimed entitlement and power as men, sometime called the 'patriarchal dividend' (Connell, 1995, 2002). This confers significant benefits such as greater access to political power, higher education levels, increased earnings, and personal power in the private sphere. For example at Orin, Benji took an executive board role with QZ because the female identified leaders were too 'jokey' and he felt that "in a leadership position…more masculine qualities are expected" (personal communication, November 25, 2008). He felt influential positions needed to be held by males as inferred from the rules of heterosexuality because he benefitted directly from them.

Even more pronounced than Benji's adherence to heterocentric rules, however, would be Jay's observance of masculine gender rules as he is transitioning:

> I signal my gender by dressing in a masculine manner, keeping my hair cut short, growing out my lil' mustache, trying to avoid too much eye contact with males, walking with a larger stride, standing more erect and talking less (personal communication, October 20, 2008).

He goes on to say such presentation gives him access to male realms and his presence is much more acknowledged. For instance, he feels more comfortable speaking up in class without waiting to be called on like he did before taking testosterone. In his transition, then, Jay is gaining societal status by claiming a male identity through patriarchal dividends and therefore works to sustain the structures which bestow higher standing on him (Connell, 1995, 2002).

Jay did not maintain he consciously upholds the heterosexually based gender binary. Indeed, Jay repeatedly discussed his female to male transition as "fucking up people's gender ideas" as "the whole concept of gender is pretty crazy for [him]" (personal communication, October 11, 2008). His appearance may confuse onlookers, acquaintances, and friends, but in the end, he has chosen to become physically male to mirror his masculine gender identity, which was not lost on Ann. She confirmed Jay's participation change in class as he transitioned, stating that he does not "really have that level of uncertainty" because as males "…they know that if they act aggressive and they get talked down to its okay, and they can fight back" (Ann, personal

communication, October 27, 2008). Further, Ann noticed when Jay joins in class discussions with other males it escalates "into fighting, like verbal fighting" (personal communication, October 27, 2008). She also mentioned Jay has become more vulgar and promiscuous as he continues to inject testosterone, "just like a guy" (Ann, personal communication, October 27, 2008). Ann's open acknowledgement of Jay's devotion to masculinity recognizes the rules of heterosexuality, but also mocks them by pointing out the negative aspects associated with the supposedly stronger half of the gender binary.

Akin to Jay, Benji and Stacy also would not feel they intentionally sustain U.S. gender ideals. In Benji's interview, he admitted he

> still kind of identify[ies] with the dichotomy as much as [he] kind of know[s] better just because its easier from one standpoint…I guess immediately when I think of gender, I still kind of go back to what I was taught, what I learned (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

Although quite honest and insightful when asked directly about such issues, during group sessions Benji regularly moved discussions away from gender toward sexual orientation. This is because for him, it lessened his patriarchal dividend as the only biological male present (Connell, 1995, 2002) and emphasized that he did not have heterosexual privilege like the other queer young adults. "We're all gay, so it is easier to go there than to gender identity

and gender where I am *the* man" (Benji, personal communication, October 23, 2009 [emphasis in original]) To be fair, however, Benji "never considered being, like, anything but male" despite people seeing him as effeminate because "that's more of a sexual orientation than actually gender because I feel like people skip the gender factor and the kind of immediately go to sexual orientation" (personal communication, October 26, 2008). For him, then, reinforcing the gender binary at this point in his life was unconscious since, as noted previously, Benji consciously maintained his masculine façade through his high school years to the point that when he arrived at Orin, it was "…an eye opener" that there were other "feminine acting males" and he did not have to pretend to be macho anymore (personal communication, October 27, 2008). Stacy, on the other hand, did not even consider her bolstering of dichotomous norms as they were assumed since childhood. In fact, Stacy blatantly stated "I just don't think about my gender at all" when I queried about how gender manifested itself in her daily life (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

The gender deconstructionists were by no means a united front. The most radical person, relatively speaking, was Bea who asked

> …why does it have to be only men and women when – especially the department I am in[28] – they always preach that there's not a binary, and then they teach class in binary terms and then it's the

[28] Bea was referring to the sociology department.

> only way they can talk about it. Nobody's talking about it any differently (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

In a similar vein, she argued it is "wrong to tell a child they're a boy or girl" because people should ask her/him/hir who she/he/ze is instead of assigning them a gender based on genitalia (Bea, personal communication, October 17, 2008). In openly raising her discomfort with the rules of heterosexuality as well as those who reinforced them despite saying differently, Bea is trying to push others to not only verbally defy the rules but also to do so through their actions. Ann was more practical in that she believed the language around gender was not going to change, so the concepts defining it have to be demolished and rebuilt. She describes doing so as

> …traveling somewhere and you know you have to make a pit stop for gas before you can reach your final destination. In the case of going from biological sex to gender, we miss that pit stop and we don't even stop for gas. It's like we don't even notice it. We don't even wave to it as we go by, and I think the thing that really needs to be fixed in terms of gender being realized, one, there's a difference between what you're born with and how you're supposed to act, and then the other connection, that just because you have certain parts doesn't mean you have to behave in a certain way. And I think that's the conversation that really needs to happen. It's not so much, 'oh, we should just change it' (Ann, personal communication, October 27, 2008).

More specifically, the pit stop Ann mentions "is the connection between realizing that just because you're born with certain biological aspects and secondary features doesn't necessarily mean that you have to take on the

roles" (personal communication, October 27, 2008). Basically, she wants to reclaim the actual meanings of the terms 'sex' and 'gender' so they are not conflated with one another and people realize they are free to move within them. Ann, then, despite her binary gender experiences growing up under heterosexual rules, wants to reclaim and empower sex and gender.

On the whole, then, gender group participants were divided about reinforcing or challenging the gender binary for the research's duration but their positions were reflective of their relationships to the heterocentric rules in the U.S. Such ideological persistence was fascinating because despite various entrenched beliefs about the gender binary, the young adults still learned a great deal about the subject.

III. Learning

As described in the preceding chapter, I draw from situated learning theory and define learning as a primarily situated, sociocultural process in which the space where knowledge arises and is arranged cannot be severed from, or even secondary to, education and cognition (Engstrom, 1987; Lave, 1988; Lave, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). Consequently, learning becomes an essential requirement for producing social practice and jointly creating the nature of knowing (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Paechter, 2007; Resnick, Säljő, & Pontecorvo, 1997). Adherence to the rules of heterosexuality will be used to examine how and if

the queer young adults progressed along a learning trajectory in gender group as part of their gender journeys.

Together, gender group members intentionally became involved a community of practice that did not assume hegemonic heterosexuality when they agreed to participate despite their doubts surrounding the parameters as described previously. Their learning, be it intentional or not, could be seen as evolving – although not always linear -- pathways of active discourse and identity development which were either limited or enhanced by their challenging of the rules of heterosexuality (Greeno, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Bea noted in an online journal entry comparing her sexual coming out to her learning about gender in group:

> I don't know that I have ever had a gender identity that was actually my identity and not just a reflexion of what my biological sex is supposed to be until group. I know that until this point I have been identified as a woman, and until this point I have not really questioned this. Coming out as queer did not alter my gender identity. I don't think I realized I had other options until now. And now that I realize that I have these other options, I don't know what identity I would adopt. When I first came out, I came out as bisexual and when that didnt' seem to fit so well anymore I came out as a lesbian. After a lot of searching, a lot of questions from myself and others, I finally came to settle on my identity as queer. I don't think that that will ever change. No matter what gender I end up with, I will always identify that way. But gender is something different and not so different at the same time. For now, I will identify as a woman until I can come up with something that fits me better, or maybe I won't ever come up with something that fits me better. Man and woman and male and female are not dichotomies that I am comfortable with (personal communication, October 12, 2008 [typos in original]).

By tackling her personal gender identity in her journal as well as gender group, Bea is engaging in legitimate peripheral practice and therefore learning as it shows her advancement along participatory and identity augmentation routes (Greeno, 1997). This would not be possible without her ability to disregard the heterosexually based rules. Stacy's learning, although still legitimate peripheral practice, was not as intense as others as she relied on cues from them to participate on the whole. For example, after talking about personal gender identities in a gender session, she wrote

> My gender Identity that I have known my self to be is female. I have known this to be true mainly by people telling me that I am a girl while growing. And then throughout the years I have gotten to like more feminine merchandise…I fell as though I was told so many times I believed it myself (personal communication, October 14, 2008 [typos in original]).

Despite still conflating a term used for sex (female), Stacy began to realize her gender has to do with being feminine and that it is a result of her believing what others told her instead of an innate quality. Her lived experience of being told she was feminine was never shared with the group as a whole as it did not 'fit' with what the other queer young adults were discussing. Instead, Stacy relied on reiterating other's points through the sessions, so her learning was covert and limited due to her reluctance to go

against the gender binary without the support of at least one other gender group member.

As a group, the queer young adults struggled to go beyond compulsory heterosexuality and looked to me as an expert for cues for negotiating practice. That said, even when I reminded participants of the group's rules and goals, they easily slipped back into the heterocentric rules taught to them as children: conflating sex and gender, going against gender norms signaling homosexuality, and the binaries of sexual orientation and gender. For instance, the topic of changing gender norms arose during our sixth meeting around women's roles expanding and men's roles being static. The following dialogue took place:

> Erin: …a male kindergarten teacher. Is that acceptable? Is that looked on as okay?
>
> Ann: That's why I just said female roles are expanding, male roles aren't. That's where the problem is. 'Cause now it's questionable as to why a heterosexual or gay man would want to be around little children in a field that doesn't pay very well and if you have health benefits and if you have a family….and you could go to company picnics and be very macho with your beer, light beer. What's that new beer that just came out? The sixty-four calories? What the hell is that? Sounds disgusting.
>
> Jay: Michelob Ultra?
>
> Ann:…They've had these commercials where the woman goes up and she's like, 'I'd like a sixty-four calorie vodka cranberry'…this beer, supposed to be a beer, in the commercials the men are the ones ordering sixty-four calorie beer.
>
> Jay: It's because they're gay.

Ann: Probably.

(personal communication, November 9, 2008)

This vignette confuses gender stereotypes with sexual orientation and upholds the gender dichotomy. Such conversations were the norm, rather than an aberration as participants' adherence to the heterosexually based rules limited their learning. That said, legitimate peripheral practice was still occurring as the queer young adults were contesting gender, albeit in different ways than I had anticipated. A final example is that at the last gender group session they agreed that to 'solve the problem' of the gender binary despite some of them clinging to it, education was needed in the early years of a child's life (personal communication, November 24, 2008). What the substance of that education would be, however, was never determined as each participant's learning trajectory was unique as was her/his/hir ability to contest heterosexual norms. That, or as Jay wanted, for everybody to have "a huge orgy, and everybody was just, you know, whatever" (personal communication, October 26, 2008).

As individuals instead of as a cohort, learning only can be measured in terms of moving from legitimate peripheral practice to full fledged community membership as knowledge is not a tangible set of facts or skills in situated learning theory. Consequently, it is the journey of activity and development embodying the people, proceedings, and lived experiences queer young adults had around gender when it was untied from obligatory heterosexuality.

Accordingly, there was no concrete way to measure each participant's learning precisely. That said, the more a young adult challenged the rules of heterosexuality, the longer and more significant her/his/hir gender journey seemed to be.

To attempt to assess the queer young adults' growth and learning, however unspecific it may be, I analyzed their personal gender identities, sex, and sexual orientations from the last meeting in relation to how they did so at the beginning of sessions. Their answers to the final survey are in Table 4.2. Only Stacy's responses were static across categories, but everybody's sexual orientations remained the same throughout the study. Ann reverted to the sex she was assigned at birth and Jay redefined his sex to reflect his transition instead of his gender doing so earlier. Three young adults characterized their genders differently; Benji claimed his femininity but did not let go of his 'male' descriptor, Bea actually stated she was not sure of her gender instead of not having an answer, and Jay unabashedly claimed his male identity. Bea was the only participant who openly asserted that gender group caused her to learn about and even question her own gender, though, despite others' changed answers.

Table 4.2

Final Participant Self-Identification

Name	*Sex*	*Gender*	*Sexual Orientation*
Ann	Female	Female	Lesbian
Bea	Female	Not sure	Queer
Benji	Male	Effeminate male	Gay
Jay	Female to male tranny	Male	Fluid
Stacy	Female	Female	Bisexual

IV. Summary

In this chapter I asserted how the queer young adults reframed gender – if at all -- in a space lacking compulsory heterosexuality through the exploration of the pervasiveness of heterosexist assumptions in terms of queer young adults' response to, support of, and battle against community rules. Without heterosexually based rules there was not a known framework within which to function, so the queer young adults struggled to reconceptualize gender. Through investigating the creation of gender group norms, I noted the difficulty participants had challenging their heterosexuality based assumptions. Moreover, heterocentric rules were referred to and applied by some group members when questioning the 'natural' categories of gender and taking sides in terms of reifying or questioning them. Finally, I examined how the rules of heterosexuality determined an individual's learning trajectory during gender group. On the whole, then, queer young

adults' relationship to rules affects how they reconceptualize gender, even in a space without obligatory heterosexuality.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jay: Negotiating Space, Language, and Learning

Chapter Five will explore Jay's gender journey during the eight weeks of research while situating it in the context of his past lived experiences as well as gender group sessions where heterosexuality was not required or assumed. In keeping with the assertions of gender, queer, and situated learning theories, I examine his learning through his participation, navigation mechanisms, inability to separate gender, sex, and sexual orientation, and language. Jay's journey, then, reveals how one queer young adult learned, unlearned, and relearned about his gender and gender identities in a space when compulsory heterosexuality is not enforced.

Through an analysis of Jay's experiences, I found spatial navigation mechanisms, or what way(s) one chooses to act in and with a given context, affect how and what is learned, unlearned, or relearned. Furthermore, Jay's journey demonstrated that language constrains dialogic space and therefore learning. The chapter is divided into different sections to highlight these findings. First, to contextualize the examination as well as his mechanistic choices, Jay's background is detailed. Then, the notion of space in terms of his negotiation methods as well as their affordances and constraints are explored. In turn, Jay's learning is depicted through the lenses of limited language and his intermingling of the meanings of sex, gender, and sexuality.

Collectively, these sections depict Jay's gender journey while demonstrating two of this study's findings: 1) spatial navigation mechanisms affect learning, and, 2) language constrains discursive space and therefore learning as well.

I. Jay

Jay is a Caucasian, sexually fluid person raised in central New Jersey. His gender journey during group sessions typifies those of the majority of members in that he found it difficult to disengage gender from sexuality as well as find personally suitable and satisfying language throughout the study. In other ways, however, his journey was distinctive. His voice was valued to a greater extent than others by the participants because he self identifies as female to male transgender, therefore giving his words more weight around the topic of gender. This is a direct result of the other queer young adults assuming Jay had interrogated gender thoroughly because he was in the process of transitioning, not from previous discussions that had occurred between them. In other words, because Jay currently is experiencing gender in non-heterosexual ways, the other participants felt he must be an expert about it without having any substantial evidence.

This section will explore Jay's lived experiences around sexuality and gender then use them to situate his gender journey during the eight weeks of research. As a result, Jay's knowledge at the beginning of the study can be assessed and used later in the chapter as a baseline to investigate his progress and/or changes during gender group.

Jay was not a stereotypical Orin College student in many ways, which affected the lived gender events and opinions he brought to gender sessions. First, he is 26 years old, at the upper end of what is defined as traditional college age (Mueller & Cole, 2009). As a result, his life experiences have been much more varied than the other queer young adults. While unusual for women, in his experience, Jay enlisted in the army immediately after high school and viewed it as his life's career. In fact, he was "fast-tracking" through the ranks when he came out as a lesbian to himself and some of his friends.[29] At Fort Riley he says he

> …learned about [the] gay lifestyle while I was there, and the clubs and stuff like that. Went to a lot of drag shows. I even brought my straight friends that I worked with to them, and it was a blast (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Not only did Jay learn about "the gay lifestyle," he also met his "first trans person…that's what helped me – I didn't come out…until I was in the military" (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Jay credits the army for helping him to grow up and find himself on many levels, including sexually; the latter being unusual for military personnel in his mind (personal communication, October 28, 2008). He now sees the irony in the situation as the very rigid, gendered life in the military made to reinforce heterosexuality was what allowed him to explore his

[29]I will use male pronouns throughout this chapter for Jay despite the awkwardness when writing about experiences he had as a female, as it is his preference.

sexuality. In other words, the army's processes, power relations, and structures implemented to ensure the normality and continuation of heterosexuality and the gender binary had the opposite effect on Jay and indeed, was queer(ed) in its inconsistencies. As Britzman (1999) and Pinar (1998) assert, this was a result of Jay's identity being related to, and therefore also implicated to, its opposite – in this case the unyielding composition of the army. After serving a tour of duty in Iraq where he did 'female' jobs like patting down women and children in addition to his regular information technology role, he eventually was 'outed' as a homosexual by someone he describes as a vengeful ex-girlfriend. This caused Jay to lose his military career as he was discharged under the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy.[30]

In addition to his age and military experience, Jay differs from other Orin students because he self-identifies as transgender. Born anatomically and assigned female, raised to be feminine, and assumed to be a 'girl,' Jay thought of himself as a tomboy growing up and later identified as a lesbian (personal communication, October 28, 2008; November 24, 2008). It was not until he attended Orin College and took sociology classes addressing gender issues that he began to question his gender identity. Ultimately, he spoke with a campus counselor who provided him with a list of area resources to take care of his "physical as well as psychological needs" (Jay, personal

[30] Passed by Congress in 1993, 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' requires the discharge of openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual service members. The policy does not mention transgender individuals.

communication, October 28, 2008).[31] Jay now takes testosterone, uses a masculine name, and is hoping to have a double mastectomy soon. He now passes well as a male in his late teens but has been perceived as both heterosexual and gay depending on where he is and with whom (personal communication, November 22, 2008). Because of Jay's openness about his transitional gender status, he was viewed as an expert on some levels by the other participants when it came to actual experience around gender.

Similar to other participants, Jay broke prevailing U.S. gender norms as a child. He recalled his favorite memories of growing up were

> …any time I was out in the woods with my dogs. I used to build forts at my dad's house, and I used to hide stuff, put stuff in little Ziploc containers or whatever and bury it so that I can find them years later…I would go out there with my dogs, and my little cammis with my little buck knife and everything, and go out there and play. Go out and shoot things with my BB gun (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

That said, he learned he still had to wear a dress as a girl because when he wore his brother's underwear with a sock in it his family did not tolerate it (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Jay just wanted to be able to do what his brother did, so he thought he needed to have a penis, even if it was only a sock as being male and masculine were the same to him and others

[31] Remarkably, the counselor Jay saw contacted me in my role as Associate Director of Penn's Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center after being referred to me by others on Orin's campus asking for a list of transgender-related resources for a student. It was not until Jay's first one-on-one interview that we made the connection.

in his area (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008; November 24, 2008). So to be freed from the gender constrictions in his home – and indeed, challenge them -- Jay reveled in the woods where gender norms were nonexistent.

Despite transitioning and exploring gender deeply on a personal level, Jay still struggles with gender assumptions in his hometown today (personal communication, October 28, 2008; personal communication, November 3, 2008). To fit in as community and family members knew him previously, he has changed his behaviors. Jay explained

> When I go home…I feel like I have to feminize myself at some times. For example, I was at the local diner a few weeks back with my ex. We were hanging out and having dinner (at which time I could be masculine since she knows about everything and is very accepting of who I am) when my Mom's uncle, Uncle Bill, walks in. He comes up to the table to shoot the shit with us and I find myself trying to make my voice higher while talking to him (personal communication, November 3, 2008).

Such an action exhibits how ingrained being feminine was linked with being female to Jay, as even he reverts to it unconsciously. As he says, people try to "box you up" so he just tries "to pass as a guy" to make it easier for himself and others (personal communication, November 24, 2008).

II. Space

As noted in Chapter Four, the concept of space was central to my research for multiple reasons. Most importantly, having a space where

heterosexuality was not enforced was a condition of the study to investigate how queer young adults learn, relearn, or unlearn gender without its imposition. Second, it conjures a notion of dynamic change and possibilities rather than cultural stasis (Talburt, 2000) allowing participants to co-create *their* space so they had a sense of ownership and comfort. In doing so, the queer young adults were able to inhabit gender group's meeting space cognitively which safely enabled them to queer it within tangible physical boundaries (Doty as cited in Désert, 1997). Consequently, participants fashioned and co-fashioned both positive and negative mechanisms to navigate the space and create a much needed arena for a non-judgmental, on-going dialogue around gender and sexuality at Orin. In turn, crafting gender group's space helped construct a sense of community (Paechter, 2007) through meaning rich, lived encounters. Jay's experience – both conscious and unconscious -- in terms of space in particular, highlights the significance of contextualization to learning, unlearning, and relearning gender.

Negotiation and Mechanisms

For Jay, negotiation of space began before gender group officially met for the first time because as the student worker for the sociology department he was responsible for the general upkeep of the lounge and therefore had a sense of ownership (personal communication, November 24, 2008). As a result, he decided it should be "gay," so he displayed queer periodicals and

QZ announcements and had a few plants for "ambiance" (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008; November 24, 2008). He commented, however, it was "crazy shit" that off the space he was trying to make safe for LGBTQ people were two gender specific restrooms "with the little stick figures" (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Jay later returned to the matter after a break during gender group's first session, stating

> I think it's fucked up that I just thought about which bathroom to take a leak in. I mean, we're the only ones here, we're not supposed to be boxed up by heterosexuality and I thought about where to pee…so fucked up. I didn't even smoke 'cause of it, so you know it is massively fucked (personal communication, October 5, 2008).

Despite claiming the lounge as 'his' since the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year, then, the pervasiveness of compulsory heterosexuality had not dawned on Jay previously; even in his space, even in the private realm of relieving oneself.

Later in an online journal entry, Jay continued to negotiate the restrooms when he wrote

> I knew peeing had to do with gender, but didn't think about it being related to heterosexuality until now. I mean, why do we have separate bathrooms, so the guys won't attack the girls? How stupid. People just want to pee or cut some logs in peace (personal communication, November 3, 2008).

He then deviates from the topic for a paragraph, but then returns wondering

> Why are those bathrooms such a big deal for me? People knew me as H[32] so they should know I'm not a threat in the guy's room. I mean, some of them still call me H for christ sakes…maybe it's because those are my bath rooms in my gay spot (Jay, personal communication, November 3, 2008 [typos in original]).

From his experiences, it is evident Jay's negotiation of the lounge went in a new direction after gender group began. Instead of just being 'his' space, it was now somewhat contested in his mind due to the flagrantly heterosexual "stick figures" on the restroom doors.

As the restroom topic did not arise naturally again in gender group meetings or in Jay's online journal, I asked him where he was at in terms of processing it during his last one-on-one interview. He remarked that he was unsure because

> I get that men are more comfortable around other guys and can pee standing up so they have urinals. If I look like I belong there I'll be left alone as long as nobody looks at what direction my feet are facing if they don't smell me blowin' up the place [he laughs]. I guess that's what I'm trying to believe anyways (Jay, personal communication, November 24, 2008).

I then pushed Jay further, asking him how he came to those conclusions, especially in light of gender group's dismissal of compulsory heterosexuality.

[32] Although Jay used his full previous name, I am not including it for confidentiality reasons.

In response, he reasoned that to be 'one of the guys' he thought like one and realized separate restrooms enabled "guys to be guys" and that was fine by him (Jay, personal communication, November 24, 2008). As a result, it had nothing to do with "being straight or gay" (Jay, personal communication, November 24, 2008). When pushed even more in regard to how gay men might feel in the restroom because they violate heterosexual norms, Jay persisted and restated that using the restroom had nothing to do with sexual orientation if you "…just go in, do what you have to do, and leave" (personal communication, November 24, 2008).

Instead of embracing the freedom of unassumed heterosexuality to negotiate gender group's space, which eventually included the restrooms in the minds of participants, Jay relied on the gender dichotomy to justify them as a place where 'guys will be guys.' Such insinuation of masculine stereotypes implies women, no matter their gender identity, would not want to be or should not be in 'guy space.' This conclusion was drawn from not only past lived experience, but also Jay's recent experiences of being seen as male more frequently; thus – in his mind – he could and indeed wanted to be 'one of the guys' (personal communication, November 24, 2008) despite the fact he will never pee standing up[33] and that the same system enabling him to be 'one of the guys' has complicated his entire existence as a "tranny fag

[33] Ironically, despite asserting he wants to pee standing up, in his first one-on-one interview, Jay stated "…actually, I'm not going completely all the way over. I don't plan on having bottom surgery" (personal communication, October 18, 2008).

(FTM transexual/pansexual)".(personal communication, October 11, 2008 [misspelling in original]).

Beside negotiating the physical and psychological space of the restrooms without the constraint of compulsory heterosexuality, Jay also navigated discursive space throughout the study. From the first gender group sessions, he decided to provide comic relief whenever he could. Mostly such 'relief' it consisted of vulgar and/or bodily function related comments such as, "…it'd be funny if you had a few beers and then farted" (Jay, personal communication, October 12, 2008) or "…the system's fucking you? Fuck the system" (Jay, personal communication, November 16, 2008). In examining when Jay made such comments throughout the course of gender group meetings, they were uttered at least half of the time in the midst of, or immediately after, a discussion I would deem challenging in that it questioned the beliefs of one or more of the queer young adults and/or U.S. societal norms around gender and sexuality. Developmentally, using such base humor, as well as using it to dispel tension, usually is depicted as the behavior of a pubescent male (Beck, 1991).[34]

Jay's juvenile attempts at comic relief were his means of negotiating the sexually unregulated space of gender group. In an interview when we were discussing how gender group was progressing, he stated, "…it's easier

[34] This is relevant in that many female to male transsexuals go through what has been deemed a 'second puberty' once they being taking testosterone, which may include lowering of the voice, acne, increased body odor, and so on (for more information, go to <http://www.ftmguide.org/ttherapybasics.html>).

to make those guys[35] laugh than to keep banging your head against the wall tryin' to figure stuff out without rules. And I'm funny" (Jay, personal communication, October 18, 2008). Instead of using gender group as an opportunity to explore how gender could look without required heterosexuality, then, Jay wanted to ensure he and his gender group cohort did not have to 'bang their heads against the wall' and think too hard because his female to male transition was already "fucking up people's gender ideas" (personal communication, October 11, 2008).

Another mechanism used by Jay to navigate gender group's discursive space was by speaking as an expert, which took many forms. In one of his online journal entries, he wrote

> …sometimes I have to jump in to make sure they get it right. I mean, I've lived every side of it so I aught to know. Male, female, gay, straight, and in-between, here I am. I've gone over this stuff a million times in my head already (Jay, personal communication, November 13, 2008 [misspelling in original]).

After analyzing gender group session transcripts thoroughly, however, he only spoke authoritatively a handful of times but to him, he did so regularly as it was his lived experience. On the other hand, Jay spoke from and about his personal gender journey numerous times which he, and others, may have

[35] In this context, the term 'guys' refers to all of the gender group participants regardless of their gender identities.

construed as being an expert opinion. This notion is backed-up by Stacy, who in her final one-on-one interview said

> Hearing what Jay had to say made the group at times 'cause he's been there. I mean, he's right that nobody really gives a damn how you fuck and where you fuck – and who you fuck, right? Maybe we should just all have an orgy so these things don't matter anymore (personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Such a self-perception led Jay to stand apart to some extent, thus leaving him room to negotiate gender group as he wished rather than grappling with the rest of the queer young adults to co-create a space loosed from compulsory heterosexuality.

Affordances and Constraints

By choosing to use certain mechanisms to navigate gender group's lack of assumed heterosexuality, Jay both benefited and missed opportunities. After cognitively, emotionally, and physically struggling to come to terms with the gender demarcated restrooms Jay ended up relying on the gender dichotomy, his newly evident masculinity, and his desire to be 'one of the guys' to rationalize them. His negotiation strategy afforded him the comfort of familiarity with the gender binary, affirmation of his masculine gender expression, and hope he would fit in as male at some point. Jay counted on other people in his life to uphold heterosexual norms and therefore read him as a masculine male. In fact, when I asked him what his ideal personal gender

would be he responded "…grrr, masculine army guy," affirming his desire to live up to many macho stereotypes perpetuated by assumed heterosexuality reinforcing his restroom decision (Jay, personal communication, November 24, 2008).

On the other hand, Jay also was limited by his navigation of the restroom issue. His reliance on societal gender and sexuality norms limited his gender expression to project pure masculinity so he could use the men's restroom and be at least tolerated, and at best welcomed, by Orin's masculine community outside of gender group. Simultaneously, however, by obeying the heterosexist rules of U.S. society he also restricted his ability to queer his gender identity anymore and question "where do the lines get drawn…what is this "gray"??" (Jay, personal communication, October 11, 2008 [punctuation in original]). In the end, Jay did not take advantage of gender group's removal of compulsory heterosexuality; instead he concentrated on surviving his day to day life based on past knowledge and experience.

Humor as a mechanism of negotiating gender group's discourse had both positive and negative ramifications for Jay. His wisecracks endeared him to the other queer young adults for the most part, as it provided common ground during discussions where members were unsure where others stood, especially Jay since he was transitioning. Moreover, Jay's comedy broke what I viewed as 'uncomfortable silence' when participants were unsure of

what to say. This was not true for every person, however. In her online journal, Bea wrote

> I was mad when Jay made the stupid fart joke last week, but everybody else was laughing so I let it go...it ruined my train of thought, concentration and what was a really important conversation. I'm fairly sure I'm the only one who feels this way…" (personal communication, October 12, 2008 [punctuation in original]).

Jay was not aware of Bea's feelings regarding his humor to my knowledge. Her feelings, however, still were an unknown constraint for Jay in terms of Bea's esteem for him, especially in terms of seeing him as an expert. Furthermore, his wit kept Jay from taking full advantage of gender group's non-heterosexual space to learn and grow personally.

Positioning himself as an expert to navigate gender group's space allowed Jay to engage and disengage from discourse without retribution from other queer young adults as they, for the most part, believe he had things "figured out" (Stacy, personal communication, November 16, 2008). Such agency was unique and enabled him to steer the conversation at times as well as avoid addressing topics that made him uneasy. That said, it also limited his individual learning opportunities as well.

III. Learning

Throughout gender group's duration, Jay's gender journey was not linear but a combination of his development in a space with other queer

young adults without compulsory heterosexuality and his continued lived experiences. As a result, his learning was affected in multiple ways, most notably by gender specific language and intertwining the concepts of gender, sex, and sexuality. First, however, it is important to examine Jay's personal accounts of his encounters with learning about gender.

At the first gender group session, Jay defined gender as "how someone portrays themselves as far as masculinity, femininity, clothing, stuff like that" (Jay, personal communication, October 5, 2008), more akin to the traditional definition of gender expression. Personally, when asked how he identified in terms of his gender identity Jay responded

> …if we go off the whole binary system that people like to go with, I would say I'm female to male transgender, or if people actually understand what a transsexual is instead of just the whole umbrella term, I say that. As for myself, in explaining it to people that would understand concepts better, I would say I'm more just kind of like floating a little bit of both. I'm a little bit of both sides, a little bit of everything (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Although he asserts he has explored gender extensively, it is clear Jay still was constrained by the gender binary. This is because it allows him to be "okay" to others as he is read as being somewhat within societal norms, as he tries to "send out the signal that I want to appear as a guy" (Jay, personal communication, October 20, 2008). Moreover, because he is read as male in

most instances, Jay feels he is safer physically than when he was not able to be put in a box easily (personal communication, October 20, 2008).

During the time gender group met, Jay was in the nascent stages of using a self chosen masculine name instead of his more feminine birth name as well as exhibiting the physical manifestations of taking testosterone (personal communication, October 5, 2008). These lived experiences were crucial in his understanding of gender and his own gender identity. For example, he admitted he had "been observing guys and how they interact because I have to relearn that, which is very weird because guys interact very differently than girls do" (personal communication, October 26, 2008). Jay was uniquely aware, then, of the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn about gender. Interestingly, however, Jay unconsciously placed his identity squarely into today's gender and sexuality norms in the U.S.; therefore allowing societal customs to define him instead of defining himself (Butler, 1990/1999, 1993, 2004)and belonging to that 'greater whole' (Sfard, 1998).

Despite his admission of relearning gender, Jay posited it was mostly related to his transition, not his group participation. He said he mostly learned "how other people saw it, how they characterized gender being different from sex" (Jay, personal communication, November 24, 2008). Indeed, the last question I asked each person in their exit interview was 'if you could be any gender, what would you be and why?' and Jay answered

> I would be a biological male because I could pee standing up, I wouldn't have to worry about as many sexual issues, especially stuff like pregnancies, and I'd make more money and I could do things that women and trans-people can't do. If I had my way I'd be born a biological male and I'd still be in the army (personal communication November 24, 2008).

He did not answer the question. Instead, he talked about sex as if it was synonymous with gender. His learning, then, was about others' views not himself.

Intertwining gender, sex, and sexuality

Throughout the sessions, Jay – and the majority of other queer young adults – interlinked sexuality and gender despite the group defining norm of not assuming heterosexuality as well as his being outside the heterosexual standard. Harkening back to Foucault (1978/1990), this may be because heterosexual sociocultural ideals not only assume the authority of 'truth,' but *make* themselves true to such an extent that they could not be forgone even in a space designed to negate them. By co-constructing the community of practice through his discursive habit of intermingling gender and sexuality, then, Jay unwittingly undermined the group's premise.

As Butler (1990/1999) asserted, Jay believes sexuality echoes gender and gender echoes sexuality;

> gender is linked to sexuality namely through sexual orientation, like you have to know what your gender is and what your partner's gender is in order to figure out what your sexual

> orientation is so somebody can box you up in this nice little package (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

He continues to explain he would have to know he is "female to male" to know he was a straight transman when he had sex with women. Basically, he believes others want to know a person's gender because "they just want to know your sexual orientation" (Jay, personal communication, October 28, 2008). So for Jay, gender is linked directly to sexual orientation. He also states, however, that he "figured out the whole difference between sex and gender" (personal communication, November 24, 2008) but then goes on to say that sex always has dictated gender in his mind, which is why he began taking testosterone.

Jay's views influenced others in group sessions. In a discussion about how people signal their gender, Jay posited his gender was the same as his sex. In his online journal afterward, Benji wrote Jay's point made him realize "masculine and feminine traits are innate" and that people's "gender presentation and assumed sex influences how others see our sexual orientation" (personal communication, October 24, 2008). Previously, he saw gender as a social construction and not innate. By the end of my research, however, Benji once again saw the differences between sex and gender and even asserted it was "the male/female gender roles that are broken and make people feel uncomfortable…heterosexual people…feel even more threatened than they are about sexual orientation" (personal communication, November

23, 2008). Stacy had a similar back-and-forth experience based on Jay's opinion. Consequently, his learning was curtailed by his own participation being taken as fact by the queer young adults instead of challenged.

Language

Language was an impediment to Jay, as well as others in group meetings, as he had difficulty with terminology around sexuality, the gender binary, gender identity, and sexual orientation. No matter how group members tried, discussions always came back to terminology tied to the gender binary as if deviating from it would cause harm (Almeida, et al., 2009; Dubowsky Ma'ayan, 2003; Lucal, 1999; Savin-Williams, 2005a; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). For instance, when Jay attempted to introduce new gender terminology during a session -- "vaginally advantaged" and "vaginally deprived" (personal communication, November 2, 2008) – Stacy kept saying she "didn't get it" (personal communication, November 2, 2008). Moreover, Benji argued that terminology did not need to change, "just the concept of how we talk about [gender]" did (personal communication, November 2, 2008). In effect, contemporary gender terminology has been so reified for Benji that he could not imagine a world without it. After his suggestions were thrown out, Jay reverted to conflating sex with gender, female with feminine, and so on therefore limiting the community of practice by relying on enforced heterosexuality.

On the whole, Jay's lived experiences greatly affected his gender journey, both before and during gender group. He learned at an early age that sex was tantamount to gender and still believes it today, despite being able to interact with and listen to others with differing ideas. Part of his inability to parse gender and sex may also be a result of not having the language to explain his gender identity to his satisfaction, as Ann posited (personal communication, November 25, 2008). That said, Jay's learning did progress but he has not, and may never, integrate a concept of gender that is not based on heterosexuality into his identity.

IV. Summary

On the whole, Jay negotiated gender group's space with both positive and negative results by positioning himself as an expert, using humor, and relying on compulsory heterosexuality and the gender binary. These navigation methods affected his learning as did the limitations of language. Each of these, however, was influenced by Jay's previous lived experiences when he learned at an early age that sex was tantamount to gender. He still believes it today, despite being able to interact with and listen to others with differing ideas. Part of his inability to parse gender and sex may also be a result of not having the language to explain his gender identity to his satisfaction, but he also was invested in maintaining the heterosexually based gender binary to ease his transition in terms of acceptance by others as well as to claim some of his newfound patriarchal dividends.

CHAPTER SIX

Bea: A Progressive Journey

A journey usually refers to physically travelling from one place to another. During my research project, however, Bea's gender journey was cognitive, emotional, and ultimately unfinished. Her progress in terms of learning, unlearning, and relearning gender is examined in the context of gender group. More specifically, I explored her learning through participation, valuation of 'gender' as a concept, and personal agency. Bea's experiences, then, demonstrate how one of the group's queer young adults learned, unlearned, and relearned about gender and gender identities in a space where compulsory heterosexuality was not enforced.

Through an investigation of Bea's gender journey while she attended gender group meetings, I found that gender is recognized as pivotal in queer young adults' lives. Moreover, I also found that participants claimed personal agency around transgressing the gender dichotomy. To best illustrate these findings, the chapter is segmented into three sections. First, to contextualize Bea's experiences, her background is described. Then gender's importance is examined and leads into analysis of the concept of agency. Together, these sections illustrate Bea's gender journey while depicting two of this study's findings: 1) in a space where assumed heterosexuality is not assumed, queer

young adults recognize gender as fundamental to their lives, and 2) space where heterocentric rules are not imposed is significant for queer young adults to obtain agency around the gender binary.

I. Bea

In gender group, Bea was unique. She was the only junior, the only person not originally from the East Coast, and most importantly for this work, the only one whose progress around loosening gender from heterosexuality was fathomable. As a result, she started a new leg of her gender journey without the confines of hegemonic heterosexuality during gender group sessions.

On the surface, Bea felt she was a fairly representative Orin College student. She asserted this was because she is female, like almost 75% of its undergraduates,[36] was near the top of her high school class academically, raised in Pennsylvania, and has a part-time job to help pay her tuition (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Unlike most of her peers -- even in Orin's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally (LGBTQA) student community -- Bea self identifies as queer. As she says, "a lot of people can handle the whole gay thing and when I tell them I'm queer, you know, they look at me kind of funny" (Bea, personal communication, October 12, 2008). Consequently, Bea is used to having to explain parts of her identity to

[36] According to official Orin College statistics, however, male enrollment is up 112% since 2000 (Orin College web site). In a personal conversation, a senior Orin administrator informed me that many current students as well as outsiders tend to exaggerate the percentage of female undergraduate students (personal communication, October 13, 2010).

others and was just starting to realize she was "being defined because [she has] a vagina, and [she's] really sick of it" (personal communication, October 28, 2008) when gender group meetings commenced, both of which are atypical for Orin undergraduates, even those in the LGBTQA community.

Before attending college, Bea admittedly did not question much in her life. In Southwestern Pennsylvania where she was raised, she asserted that "your sex is your gender and the definitions other people give you are based on that fact" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Bea did not think about gender until after kindergarten when she

> …realized that there was another gender and everybody talked about the other gender and wanted to date the other gender, even though we were seven and we didn't know what it meant (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

As a result, she "was really turned off by boys because [she] didn't want to date them" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). Interestingly, the intermingling of gender and sexual orientation began early for Bea. In addition, Bea admittedly did not have many adult men in her life. She met her biological father when she was nine years old and her grandfather was in his 60s during her formative years. Accordingly, most of her learning about gender was either from her predominantly female teachers, school, mother, and especially her maternal grandmother.

Her grandmother was the person with whom she spent the most time growing up, but she did not force Bea to be a girl. Instead, she always wanted her to have a "feminine touch" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). For example, if her grandmother thought her clothes were too masculine, she would ask: "isn't there something more feminine you can wear, or do, or say, or act?" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). So, she did those 'more feminine' things like ensuring her sneakers were pink, being a majorette instead of playing an instrument in the band, and so on. Bea explained

> …a lot of the things I did were very female. I wasn't allowed to do gymnastics because it was too competitive and my mother didn't want me to be competitive. I didn't want to play drums because all the boys played drums. So there were really big gender lines, and you never saw them (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

She posits, however, that she did not do these things to please her mother and grandmother, rather "it was to please myself because it's what I thought I was supposed to be doing" (personal communication, October 28, 2008). Thus, Bea's gender was, and continued to be "what [she] was raised that it was supposed to be" (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Despite not questioning gender in her formative years, Bea stridently chose not to be identified as heterosexual. She stated:

> Um…in high school I vehemently chose not to pass [as heterosexual]. I was very, very out and um…I was guilty by association more than anything because I hung out with people who were known not to be straight and therefore I was assumed to not be straight. Anyone who hung out with me was assumed to not be straight…I told everybody I could and get them to tell everybody they could…I would hear another rumor flying around the high school and really didn't like what that did to people. And the best advice I ever got was, "you're going to be out in two ways, either by choice and something you accept or as a rumor that you're going to deny." And I was like, I won't live like that. I refuse (Bea, personal communication, October 19, 2008).

Bea, then, wanted to contest heterosexual norms and as she stated, "automatic assumptions" (personal communication, October 19, 2008) during her secondary schooling. She never tied such actions to gender, however, even in later gender group sessions and interviews.

Overall, Bea's surroundings did not cause her to question gender when she was growing up as most of her activities and experiences were female oriented, such as having all girl sleepovers, going Black Friday shopping annually with her female relatives, and sometimes even assisting her grandmother at the daycare center where she worked with all other women. The only time she was around men was at functions with her grandfather, a Lutheran minister[37]. Notably, however, her paternal grandmother was a correctional officer, but would not discuss it with Bea. In fact, she only saw

[37] Bea made sure to emphasize, however, that women were allowed to become ministers and there was one in her synod, but there "…just weren't many in our area that I knew of" (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

her grandmother in her prison guard uniform once in her life – a fact by which she is still amazed (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

II. Gender Makes a Difference

After gender group began, Bea began "noticing gender everywhere" (personal communication, October 28, 2008) because she did not realize she "had other options until now" (personal communication, October 12, 2008). Moreover, during the first discussion of gender group, she uttered one of the most telling statements about her and the other queer young adults' questioning of gender:

> …whenever you start talking about gender, you're challenging something very, very fundamental to even the most liberal, open-minded people. It's a really difficult space to go to…to mess around with gender ideas (Bea, personal communication, October 12, 2008).

Bea continued by giving an example which focused on QZ:

> …even within the queer community once you start going into gender issues, it somehow always comes back to heterosexuality as the standard guy/girl sex, whatever. It seems to always go back to that (personal communication, October 12, 2008).

Through her statement she illuminated how gender is so misunderstood as a topic that conversations around it usually revert to sexual orientation, even in majority queer spaces. Using the example to reflect on her own life, Bea

remembered that "so much of who [she is] rests on the fact that [she is] not straight that [she] hadn't really thought about what it means to be any other part of [herself]" (personal communication, October 12, 2008). Bea went on to challenge her group mates -- and indeed heteronormativity -- regularly in terms of their reliance on the gender binary, especially when they elevated sexual orientation to a primary position. She argued that although they are linked,

> …a lot of sexual orientation is breaking gender stereotypes more so than any sexual issues people have with it. It's who you're with and not what you're doing…the whole sex aspect of it I don't think is nearly as important as the fact that women are not supposed to date other women or do a man's role (Bea, personal communication, October 26, 2008).

In bringing conversations back to gender away from the binary, Bea not only was a legitimate group participant, she also was queering the topic by questioning its reified nature in the U.S.

As she discovered she had much to unlearn and learn about gender, Bea had what she called "a great moment of insight" while reflecting about gender group in her online journal (Bea, personal communication, November 1, 2008). She wrote

> I have never really been able to think about sexual orientation in terms of anything other than sex. I've understood differences in gender, but only in terms of degrees of femaleness and maleness and never really as an entity in and of itself. I realized that who I like is not very dependant on a person's sex, but is

> often based on their gender presentation (Bea, personal communication, November 1, 2008).

It was through her strong identification with being queer, then, that Bea was able to determine gender expression's importance in her life beyond femininity and masculinity. On an individual level, she shared an anecdote about her own gender presentation:

> So before, my friends were just like, 'oh, I'm not going to wear make-up today.' I'm like, 'I'm not wearing make-up today and that has something to do with my femininity and masculinity. It means something even if it's only to me.' Before I would've just been like, 'okay, I don't have time to out make-up on.' Now it's like I have made a conscious decision. In other words, she knew she had much to unlearn and learn about gender and she was grateful she had gender group as a safe space to process her thoughts (Bea, personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Bea understood she was 'doing' gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) and asking herself "questions that [she'd] never asked [her]self before, that [she] didn't even realize existed" because she was "working on incorporating gender into my actual identity" (personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Bea realized that despite working on gender personally, she always would be categorized in terms of it by others. In gender group one day, she asserted she was

> …constantly called a girl, but there are a lot of female things I don't identify with so…and there are plenty of women that I'm nothing like and I don't want to be anything like but I'm still called a woman and I'm still grouped with those people no matter what (Bea, personal communication, October 26, 2008).

She was frustrated by such boxing of her identity, especially around her implicit gender because

> …it is so foundational, so assumed to be boy this and girl that and in reality – well, my reality – it is so personal and changing so I don't know how people keep assuming so much about people (Bea, personal communication, October 26, 2008).

Such conflict between her reality and the reality of U.S. society's obligatory heterosexuality made Bea realize that one's perceived and actual gender make a difference on many levels.

Although by her final one-on-one interview she could not point to many specific moments in gender group that allowed her to think about gender beyond the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality, by the end of the research Bea had challenged the reified categories of the gender/sex dichotomy. Even in her daily life, Bea asserted she was "noticing gender everywhere. Like signs on the bathrooms bother me and the forms I have to fill out really bother me…" (personal communication, October 28, 2008). She was also seeing gender and its significance in her on-campus activities:

> I do QZ and a lot of things we talk about in QZ are very geared towards gender, even though they think they're geared toward sexual orientation. So I feel like the gender issues are there and nobody sees them, or they don't want to see them…[because] gender's already well established (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Bea eventually tried to point out gender's relevance to the sexual orientation related topics discussed at QZ meetings, but reported in her last interview that "no one really listened because they all thought things were only about being gay or lesbian" (personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Bea made significant progress during the length of the study by embodying in words and deeds her disregard for the gender binary in her intellectual and personal lives. She acknowledged, however, that in day-to-day living heterosexuality and dichotomous gender are inescapable, but due to her participation in gender group she felt as if she now had agency in what she was doing in those regards. She also admits she still is working on her gender identity and she does not think

> …it's quite entirely what [she] want it to be yet. There are times when I feel like I have to be feminine, and I do not want to ever have to feel like I have to be anything other than [me] because I want to. I'm not quite there yet (Bea, personal communication, November 25, 2008).

As much as possible within the limitations of gender group, then, Bea recognized the importance of gender in her life and thus began her gender

journey to deconstruct and reconstruct her notions about gender, gender identity, and gender expression.

II. Agency

Co-creating a safe space for discussion was central to this investigation, as explained in Chapter Four. Such space allowed for gender to be interrogated and indeed, to be seen as something created, not static. In turn, the "possibilities of 'agency' that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed" are opened (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 187). Accordingly, it is imperative to recognize that "construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and become culturally intelligible" (Butler, 1990/1999, p. 187). As a result of questioning the categories of assumed heterosexuality and the gender binary within the confines of gender group, then, participants gained agency. In other words, the queer young adults acquired the capacity to act independently and make free choices that could affect their world(s), particularly in the context of gender group. This is especially true for Bea, whose recognition and grasp of agency will be detailed in this section.

The moment gender group began to meet and discuss rules Bea was pegged "the brainiac" by Jay (personal communication, October 5, 2008). So from the start, she was viewed as the person who, as Ann stated, "…knows and gets theory. She can live in her head if she wants to *and* if she doesn't…"

(personal communication, October 28, 2008 [emphasis added to convey verbally stressed word]). Such a distinction is important as the other queer young adults saw Bea as a person who could comply with gender group's rules and suspend obligatory heterosexuality. Despite being teased about it at times, she also gained the respect of the other participants because of it. As Benji explained in an interview,

> Well, we are all pretty smart, but Bea is really one of those education types, you know. I guess she gets how sexual orientation is linked to gender and all that theory. Maybe it's because she is a soc[iology] major or something… she's just hyper-aware of what's going on (personal communication, October 27, 2008).

Due to the deference of her peers, then, Bea was afforded the space to progress in terms of questioning heterocentric norms and therefore the gender binary. Moreover, the admiration of the other queer young adults enabled her to have a sense of personal agency during gender group sessions more easily than others.

Bea's grasp of personal agency was not immediate. Instead, it grew as gender group continued to meet and she processed the discourse both in and out of sessions. During the first few meetings Bea, as well as the other participants, was focused on establishing a comfort level in the gender group community through relationships with rules, others, and me as an outsider (see Chapter Four for a more detailed exploration). For example, in regard to

challenging the rules as well as her perception of my authority, Bea entered the following in her online journal:

> …we talk about heterosexism and gender a lot, but are we going to do something??? What does Erin want??? She says we can say what we want but I don't know. What if we don't agree??? (personal communication, October 7, 2008 [punctuation in original]).

It is evident that early in the process, Bea was considering the possibilities of agency while examining her relationship to gender group's emerging rules as she was contemplating what, if anything, the group would do.

During the second gender group session Bea shared that she took an opportunity the week before to confront the QZ leaders around the substance of the organization's meeting:

> …in QZ we just had this discussion on Wednesday about gender roles within the [LGBTQ] community and somebody asked me how I felt like it afterwards and I was like, "my biggest problem with it was that we were only talking about men and women the entire time." Like that's it. That was all there was to it (personal communication, October 12, 2008).

The other queer young adults, even those who had attended the QZ meeting in question, did not react or add to Bea's discussion thread but instead continued talking and joking about a game we had played earlier that

afternoon. Although visibly upset, Bea was undeterred by her peers' lack of acknowledgement of her attempt to make a difference.

By the fourth gender group session, Bea was speaking openly about what actions she wanted to take around disrupting obligatory heterosexuality. When Benji was pondering aloud if people react to his gender or his sexuality, I asked if those ideas could ever be teased apart in the real world outside of academia or if trying to do so was just "intellectual masturbation." Bea piped up and asserted, "I'm tempted to walk into a men's room…that never bothered me before" (personal communication, October 26, 2008). Once again, however, Benji took the conversation toward sexual orientation and the rest of the queer young adults followed, including Bea. She was allowed to suggest potential agency by the others, then, but because they deemed her a 'brainiac,' they usually did not attempt to engage in dialogue around Bea's suggestions.

Bea finally obtained the attention of the other queer young adults in terms of agency during the last gender group meeting. When I checked in with the participants as the session began, the following interaction occurred:

> Bea: I've been talking to everybody about [gender]. It's really interesting.
>
> Erin: In terms of?
>
> Bea: It's not something people ever think about until you start telling them that you're deconstructing gender they look at you a little bit funny. They ask you a lot of questions.

Erin: Like what?

Bea: Like, "isn't it just easier to have men and women and be done with it?" That's been the answer to some of the things we've talked about…Like, are there really men and women and why?

Benji: I feel like when I talk to you I fell more educated.

(personal communication, November 16, 2008)

Although still personally marked as intellectually superior by Benji, Bea's comments about her agency outside of gender group were not dismissed or ignored as they were previously. Instead, the direct nature of her statement and its timing at the beginning of the meeting, not embedded in on-going discourse, enabled the other queer young adults to grasp what she was saying, note her agency, and incorporate her experience into group conversation. Consequently, the other participants started to discuss their lack of agency around gender outside the group, but they never tied it back into potential agency within the group.

The construction of a space without enforced heterosexuality allowed Bea to interrogate her early notions of gender as well as have a sense of agency. Her agency was aided by being denoted as 'the smart one' by the other queer young adults who despite their teasing, respected Bea and gave her the space to examine gender without the constraints of heterosexuality throughout gender group. In turn, she developed a sense of agency around disrupting the gender binary outside the group. Moreover, Bea also cultivated individual agency in her personal life.

In her day-to-day life, Bea saw gender everywhere (personal communication, October 28, 2008). Personally, she also saw how dichotomous gender had been, and still was defining her life, as she asserted, "I didn't choose to be a woman. I was just told I was a woman and I never questioned it. So I'm questioning it. I don't like all the stigma that goes along with it" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008). When I asked if she was questioning being a woman or being put in a feminine box, Bea replied,

> It's the box. I have no desire to be a man, or something other than what I am. I just don't feel that I am a woman because somebody told me I was a woman when I was born. I feel that to be very frustrating (personal communication, October 28, 2008).

Bea continued, saying

> I'm realizing that whenever people look at me the first thing they see is a girl…I don't know what [my gender] is today. Oh my. I'm trying to do what I want to do and when I want to do it. So I feel like wearing a skirt it's because I felt like wearing a skirt because I felt like being more feminine today, and if I feel like putting on boy's jeans then I'm going to do that. If I feel like putting on make-up, it's not because I think I need to wear it. It's because I feel like wearing it. So I'm trying to make [my gender] what I want to do and not what I'm expected to do (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

For Bea, then, some of her actions around gender were for her alone, like in the example above. She took others into account, however, in that she was

"trying to think of a new way to define gender for [her]self that – and hopefully when I tell other people they're not going to look at me like I have three heads" (Bea, personal communication, October 28, 2008).

As the study progressed, so did Bea's sense of agency. In her second interview, she addressed the subject with an anecdote:

> So before, my friends were just like, "oh, I'm not going to wear make-up today." I'm like, "I'm not wearing make-up today and that has something to do with my femininity and my masculinity. It means something even if it's only to me." Before I've just been like, "okay, I don't have the time to put make-up on." Now it's like I've made a conscious decision. Somebody is going to look at this and see this for something, and whether they read it right or wrong it means something to me…because of group I just feel like I have a lot more agency in what I'm doing, which is very important to me (Bea, personal communication, November 25, 2008).

Claiming her agency around the gender binary, then, became quite significant to Bea.

The construction of space in gender group where heterosexuality was not enforced allowed Bea to claim her personal agency and begin integrating new ideas into her life. This was helped by her being deemed 'the smart one' by the other queer young adults who, despite teasing her about her intelligence, also gave her the space to explore alternatives to obligatory heterosexuality. In turn, Bea's stance allowed her to encourage the other

participants to decouple heterosexuality and dichotomous gender, albeit mostly unsuccessfully, while still forging ahead on her gender journey.

IV. Summary

Overall, through Bea's participation in this dissertation study, I found that gender is critical in her as well as other participants' lives. After contextualizing her gender journey with a portrait of her formative years, I found that spaces without assumed heterosexuality allow queer young adults to have agency around obligatory heterosexuality and the gender dichotomy. Personally, Bea's sense of agency – both inside and outside of gender group sessions -- was assisted by the other participants who gave her the space to claim it by deeming her 'the smart one,' despite their jesting about it at times. Such a marker truly enabled her to embrace and negotiate the rules of gender group's space to begin a new leg of her gender journey as well as progress individually and push others in the group to do the same.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion

This dissertation was intended to be an investigation of how queer young adults learn, relearn, or unlearn their gender and gender identities when obligatory heterosexuality is minimized in a specific group setting. My project, then, was motivated by the unavoidable presence of heterosexuality and how it forms and informs the gender binary throughout U.S. society. As a result, I created a space where assumed heterosexuality was not enforced to explore gender, how it is learned, and the mechanisms used to navigate such a space. This endeavor was underscored by the push to question and destabilize the fixed identities of gender and sexuality in an attempt to reveal their inconsistencies through queer and gender theory while grounding it in situated learning theory. As such, the data presented in Chapters Four, Five, and Six center participants' lived experiences and personal accounts as sources of new insights while referring to theoretical and methodological frameworks reiterating central premises.

Many themes surfaced from my data analysis presented in this dissertation, and further topics permeate the data not included in this final work. In fact, drawing from multiple sources produced numerous stories and details, all of which were impractical to incorporate into my dissertation. That

said, given the intellectual concerns and theoretical frameworks informing this research, several implications emerged. This final chapter, then, builds on the analysis presented in previous chapters to offer conclusions, implications, and directions for future research.

I. Findings

This dissertation project has five major findings. Each one will be detailed in this section, and then the themes which cut across them will be noted and explored in more depth.

The study's first finding is that *queer young adults' relationship(s) to rules affect how they reframe gender in a space minimizing compulsory heterosexuality*. Group members strained to interrogate the gender binary without reinforcing the already known heterosexually based rules with which they were raised and still existed in their day-to-day interactions. The omnipresent rules of heterosexuality and participants' relationships to them also established each individual's learning trajectory during this study despite the attempt to rid the group of their grips.

Second, I found the *mechanisms -- what way(s) one chooses to act in and with a given context – chosen by participants to navigate gender group's space affect how and what was learned, unlearned, or relearned*. Jay's use of self-positioning mechanisms within gender group as an expert and/or jokester allowed him to enter, leave, and direct conversations at will, but limited his learning potential as well as that of his peers. Furthermore, his reliance on

obligatory heterosexuality and the gender dichotomy, while enabling him to create a masculine image of himself both inwardly and outwardly, also interfered with the enforcement of gender group's minimal heterosexuality and thus his and others' prospective learning.

The third study finding is that *language constrains dialogic space and therefore learning*. Gender group's discursive space was limited through the intermingling of terminology, including but not limited to sex, gender, and sexuality. The use of such terms without specificity enabled confusion to be a part of gender group meetings, therefore slowing or even stopping potential progress. As a result, Jay and the other queer young adults continued to depend on heterosexual standards which made such ideas true to such an extent that they and their accepted vocabulary could not be relinquished even in a space designed to work against them.

Another project finding was that *gender as a concept was significant in gender group participants' lives*. As my analysis of Bea's lived experiences showed, the tension between her gender reality and the reality of U.S. society's obligatory heterosexuality made her conclude that one's perceived and actual gender – be they identical or dissimilar -- make a difference in many ways as one moves through the world.

Finally, I found that *personal agency can be developed through the co-creation of a group's rules and space.* Put differently, participants acquired the ability to act independently and make free choices which could affect their

world(s). On the whole, then, my analysis of multiple data sources led to five distinct, yet thematically related findings.

Themes

Although each of this study's findings is unique, linking them topically helps highlight their importance and utility. As a result, the findings will be explored more in depth in regard to relationship(s) to rules, space, and the primacy of gender.

Relationship(s) to rules.

As demonstrated in Chapter Four, queer young adults' relationship(s) to rules affect how they reframe gender in a space minimizing compulsory heterosexuality. This was illustrated by investigating the establishment of gender group rules in depth which highlighted the heterosexist assumptions made by the queer youth. In fact, heterocentric rules were referenced and actually applied by a few participants when questioning the 'natural' gender categories. This especially was the case when the queer young adults took sides in terms of reifying or interrogating such classifications during gender group meetings. For example, Jay adhered to traditional masculine gender rules as he was transitioning so he could pass. In a similar vein, Benji and Stacy also clung to traditional rules but their reasoning for doing so differed from Jay; they believed heterosexually based gender rules already exist in U.S. society and thus they were hard to change. On the other hand, Ann and Bea wanted to go beyond the reoccurring theoretical conversations to actually

breaking down the gender dichotomy either by action or by redefining terminology.

As part of her gender journey, Bea obtained a sense of personal agency through the co-creation of gender group's rules. Put differently, she acquired the ability to act independently and make free choices that could affect her world(s). Although her sense of agency was facilitated somewhat by being marked as 'the smart one' by the other queer young adults, their admiration gave her the space to examine gender without enforced heterosexuality throughout gender group. Consequently, Bea developed a sense of agency around disrupting the gender binary outside the group as well as cultivated individual agency within the group by challenging the rules of obligatory heterosexuality.

Space.

Through an analysis of Jay's lived experiences in Chapter Five, the importance of space arose and encompasses two of this study's major findings. By space, I mean the loosely designated area which was inhabited cognitively and physically (Désert 1997). I found that varied mechanisms were employed by participants to negotiate gender group's space which in turn, shaped how and what was learned, unlearned, or relearned. For instance, Jay was able to control how he penetrated, exited, and/or even guided discussions at will through his self-positioning either as the group clown or expert. Such navigation, however, limited his learning potential as

well as that of his peers especially in regard to Jay's steering of conversations toward sex instead of gender. Consequently, by framing himself as an 'expert,' he was able to construct a hyper-masculine image of himself in his mind as well as others, while still relying on the gender binary and heterocentric mores and thus interfering with the implementation of gender group's minimal heterosexuality. Moreover, Jay used comedy to make the other queer young adults laugh instead of allowing them the dialogic space to attempt to interrogate gender when heterosexuality was minimized (Jay, personal communication, October 18, 2008). He did so blatantly because he believed his existence as a female-to-male transsexual was already confusing the other participants' notions of gender (personal communication, October 11, 2008). Through his negotiation of space, then, Jay not only limited his potential to learn, but also of the other participants learning potential as well.

The second spatial finding uncovered by my analysis of Jay's gender journey is that language constrains dialogic space and therefore learning. Although not always specific to Jay, his navigation of gender group's discursive space – be it as an expert or jokester – is demonstrates how one young adult influenced the terminology employed during group sessions. During one meeting, Jay introduced the new terms "vaginally advantaged" and "vaginally deprived" (personal communication, November 2, 2008) and a few participants vocally resisted moving away from heterosexually sanctioned language. After his new term suggestions were rejected, Jay and the other

young adults relapsed into using and jumbling the meanings of gender, sex, and their related vocabulary. As a result, participants relied on heterocentric language therefore constraining the group's potential discursive space and learning.

Primacy of gender.

In Chapter Five, I found that the concept of gender was significant in gender group participants' lives. This was shown through an analysis of the strain between the enforced heterosexuality which exists in U.S. society and Bea's lived gender experiences. For instance, when talking about how gender manifests itself in her daily life, Bea states, "there are times when I feel like I have to be feminine, and I do not want to ever have to feel like I have to be anything other than [me] because I want to" (personal communication, November 25, 2008). Her awareness of such societal pressure to conform to assumed heterosexuality and therefore dichotomous gender as well as her personal interrogation of those constructs, have infiltrated Bea's existence thus making gender primary in her life.

Section summary.

The five findings of this dissertation emerge from either the individual or communal experience of queer young adult in a space where obligatory heterosexuality was not enforced. Although seemingly separate to some extent, they, indeed, are related. The first finding, that participants' relationships to community rules when obligatory heterosexuality is not

enforced, leads into spatial negotiation. This is because each queer young adult's choice of what navigation methods to employ was related to her/his/hir relationship – positive, negative, both, or neither -- to gender group's rules. In turn, the chosen negotiation strategies affected how or what was learned. Similarly, the language used and available to the participants restricted their dialogic space and as a result, their learning. Despite these limitations, however, gender group's attempted non-heterocentric environment enabled the queer young adult to discover the importance of gender in their lives both in- and outside gender meetings. This realization allowed participants to claim personal agency around heterocentrism and the gender dichotomy. On the whole, then, this research's findings highlight the lived experiences of one leg of the queer young adults' gender journeys.

II. Future Research

The five findings of this investigation described in the previous section capture the apparent insights of this dissertation study and therefore the majority of this work was dedicated to an in-depth exploration of these issues. Although my analyses pointed clearly to the conclusions summarized above, this work raised many considerations which merit further explanation and inquiry.

My entire dissertation project was based on studying a space where compulsory heterosexuality was not enforced. Since an existing site was not accessible, I discovered a location where I could establish such a site. Several

constraints arose regarding my project as a result. From the start, it was difficult to recruit participants because of the unknown nature of what I proposed – a space without obligatory heterosexuality. Moreover, it resulted in fewer than the ideal number of participants as the queer young adults had to commit to two hours per week over and above their regular academic, work, and social schedules. Additionally, once they came to the initial gender group session, participants had to wrestle with their relationships to rules which may have caused two people to leave the study. The investigation's small number of participants also limited the racial diversity of the queer young adults as Orin College's LGBTQA community is predominantly white which reflects the campus at large.

There are many implications of the need to create a space where non-heterosexuality was the norm. As mentioned earlier, trying to run a group without the heterosexual rules in place was difficult as both the participants and I did not have any past history with such a space or non-heterocentric language on which to rely. Consequently, society's rules and language were used as a safety net from which to draw at times instead of challenging them and then making new ones.

Using a created space also limited data collection in that a significant amount of gender group's discourse was around trying to follow the 'new' rules and subsequently the problems and safety of the 'old' ones. That said, the actual defining a space would not have been as dominant of a concern if

the study's duration was longer. However, I could not foresee these challenges when designing the study. As a result, this study's findings cannot be generalized beyond this work, but point to the need for similar studies of longer duration to account for the time it truly takes to co-create a space without assumed heterosexual norms.

Another study limitation was my main assumption going into the research; namely that because queer young adults had questioned their sexual orientation they would be more adept at challenging assumed heterosexuality and the resulting gender binary. As this project shows, my assumption was incorrect. In retrospect, it may have been helpful to have several gender-focused education interventions before attempting to create a space with minimal heterosexuality. However, extending queer young adults' time commitment may also deter potential participants.

Overall, this dissertation study raises vital issues for researchers and educators in terms of the actual space where learning occurs, the negotiation there of by participants, student agency, and how to assist university students' gender journeys by creating safe discursive space. Moreover, it also demonstrates how queer and gender theories can be deployed along with situated learning theory to question stable categories that are assumed to be 'true.' Such an interdisciplinary tact enable this work to illuminate learning, ideas, and experiences that otherwise would not have been demonstrated.

III. Implications

Several implications and recommendations can be made as a result of what was learned throughout this investigation in regard to theory, research, and practice. First, my study demonstrated that both gender and queer theories help push the envelope around learning by examining action, dialogue, and space at the margins. Such positioning enables researchers to explore the affinitive as well as the exclusionary self and imposed identities and therefore allows for multiple, and sometimes unexpected, outcomes. Simultaneously, when the aforementioned theories are employed with situated learning theory, they become more applicable in real world situations instead of being abstract, for the most part. Consequently, deploying the theories together strengthens them individually and as a whole, while still allowing theoretical tension to push beyond 'natural' categories and reification. This work, then, began to build the foundation for others interested in examining learning and identities in a new and powerful way.

Another recommendation is a result of the queer young adults in this study being bombarded by conflicting narratives around sexuality from various media, family, faith community and other sources, making assumed heterosexuality an omnipresent notion in their lives. Consequently, they struggled against it when they came out as sexual minorities, just as many of today's youth continue to do at even earlier ages (Denizet-Lewis 2009). Although a large number of college and universities have offices to serve

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, most of them do not have programming around gender unless they are charged to do so specifically (see Chapter Two for a more detailed explanation).

This research shows that queer young adults would benefit from discussions pinpointing gender regarding its primacy in both society and their lives. Such conversations also would enable them to claim a sense of agency around their gender identities as well as breaking down the gender binary writ large. More urgently, however, my research points to the need for LGBT student support services at Orin College, so queer young adults have a place to discuss not only gender, but also the related issue of sexuality. I also believe firmly such supportive space would benefit heterosexual identified university students too, especially in light of my assumption that queer young adults would more easily interrogate gender than heterosexuals being found to be incorrect. Perhaps then, the constrictions of assumed heterosexuality and dichotomous gender will be loosened, giving at least a bit more gender and sexual freedom to everybody.

IV. Summary

This final dissertation chapter offered a brief summary of the findings and themes that surfaced from the investigation into how queer young adults learn, unlearn, or relearn gender in a space where compulsory heterosexuality was not enforced. The five major conclusions of this study work together to highlight the importance of co-constructing safe space for

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) college students to interrogate gender, not just sexual orientation. In addition to recapitulating the major conclusions of this study, this chapter also noted key implications to consider for future studies. As a result, further studies which address how, where, and why queer young adults learn, relearn, or unlearn gender without the constraints of heterocentric rules need to be completed to understand this key facet of queer young adults' development.

In addition to summarizing major conclusions, this chapter raised significant methodological and theoretical implications for future investigations. Foremost, it is important to question one's assumptions when planning research. Based on anecdotal evidence, I assumed queer young adults would have an easier time interrogating gender and letting go of obligatory heterosexuality; I was incorrect. As a result, the group's dialogue around gender was more limited than I had hoped, but my error did enable me to highlight just how intensely intermeshed the concepts of sexuality and gender are in the U.S. In turn, I believe this work is a noteworthy precursor to further studies which parse out gender and sexuality. Conceptually, future research should continue to consider the benefits of theoretical interaction for exploring learning both in and out of the classroom. In terms of methods, this study points to the need to take demographic factors into account that shape participants' early gender journeys, the researcher's personal lenses and interactions in the group setting, and the import of acknowledging and

examining spatial negotiation mechanisms. Through building on the contributions of my dissertation, then, further research on learning, relearning, or unlearning gender in a space with minimized heterosexuality can help queer young adults' gender journeys as well as the on-going gender journey of U.S. society.

APPENDIX A

Sample Group Activities

- What is gender?
- Gender pictionary
- *The Story of X* reading and discussion
- I learned about gender:
    - As a child
    - As a teenager
    - As a college student
    - Elsewhere
- 'Random' uses of gender (e.g. on SEPTA passes, etc.)
- Gender, gender everywhere: Where are you uncomfortable, if anywhere? Where are you comfortable, if anywhere?
- Is this person…(photograph exercise)

APPENDIX B

Preliminary Interview Protocol

All questions open ended and followed with probing and clarifying questions, when and if appropriate.

1) Chosen pseudonym
2) Age
3) Racial background
4) Biological sex
5) Gender
6) Sexual orientation
7) Educational level attained?
8) Living situation
    a. City section
    b. Dwelling type
    c. With whom
    d. Neighborhood description
9) Educational level attained by parent(s)/guardian(s)/care giver(s)
10) Type of job(s) held by parent(s)/guardian(s)/care giver(s)
11) Type of job(s) held by adults in your neighborhood
12) Are you out as [insert answer to question six]? If so, to whom and in what specific situations?
13) Define 'gender'

14) When and how did you learn about gender's meaning?

15) What does gender mean to you today?

16) How would you characterize your gender?

17) How does gender manifest itself in your daily life at:

    a. Home
    b. School
    c. The Attic
    d. Elsewhere

18) Is Orin University a safe place to explore gender? If so, why?

19) Has your gender or your understanding of gender changed since coming to Orin University? If so, how?

20) In what ways, if any, is gender linked to sexuality in the U.S.?

21) In what ways, if any, is gender linked to sexuality in your life specifically?

22) Anything else you would like to share, especially about gender?

23) What is your favorite childhood memory?

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