

A Phenomenological Study of the Coming Out Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Hmong

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**Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the 11 amazing and brave people who all stepped forward to share their stories for this study.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my family, especially my parents, Nhia Xou and Khou Lee Yang, my partner James, and my son Noah. Especially for Noah, I hope that some day, this world will become one in which you and your peers can love who you love and know that your relationship is respected, accepted, honored and legal!

### **Abstract**

The issue of sexual orientation remains a taboo one in the Hmong community, but one that must be addressed, particularly as more Hmong Americans continue to negotiate multiple identities, including sexual orientation. This study explored some of the internal and external processes involved with the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong. The aims of this study were to provide space for Hmong lesbians and gay men to tell their stories, to provide gay and lesbian Hmong examples of coming out, and to provide clinicians with an understanding of the unique and common issues with which Hmong lesbians and gay men must contend. Eleven participants, five men and six women, were interviewed using a structured interview guide. Ten of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a modified CQR method. Nine domains and 34 themes emerged. The domains that emerged were: meaning-making, language, coming out, family, gender role expectations, the role of religion, intra/inter cultural experiences, life-changing lessons, and hopes. Implications and recommendations based on the findings are also made.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

#### *The Hmong*

Hmong are an ethnic minority group from Asia. Although millions of Hmong continue to reside in China, Hmong Americans primarily trace their most recent ancestry to Southeast Asia, Laos in particular. During the Vietnam War, Hmong were one of the groups recruited by the Central Intelligence Agency and worked closely with American military in Laos (Rairdan & Higgs, 1992). The withdrawal of Americans from Southeast Asia in the 1970s prompted mass exodus of Hmong to refugee camps in Thailand. Many Hmong were eventually allowed to relocate to other countries, such as the United States, Australia, France, and Canada. The largest amount of Hmong settled in the U.S. The 2000 U.S. Census showed 169,428 Hmong in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau), although professionals with close contact to Hmong communities believe this to be an underestimate of the actual population (Pfeifer & Lee, n.d.). In the U.S., Hmong are largely concentrated in the Midwest and West Coast, with small populations throughout the South and the East Coast.

Hmong culture is a patriarchal, patrilineal, patrilocal one. As such, Hmong men are considered the family heads, men typically have more power than women, familial lines are traced through men, and when Hmong men and women marry, they live with the man's family. In terms of religion, the traditional Hmong practice has been referred to as animism and shamanism in Western literature, but is actually a more holistic way of living that encompasses both as well as how Hmong view health, mental health, social relationships, and spirituality. Because of the presence of missionaries in



Southeast Asia as well as the large role churches had in sponsoring early Hmong families to the U.S., many Hmong have now converted to various forms of Christianity, although it is uncertain what percentage of Hmong are Christian, what percentage continues traditional Hmong practices, and what percentage follow a combination of both or neither.

The experiences of Hmong in America have varied widely. A brief review of the current literature on Hmong reveals issues that include the difficulties of socioeconomic adaptation, health and mental health, race relations, gender identity (such as the changing roles of Hmong women), achievement gaps in Hmong children, Hmong culture and history, and acculturation (Pfeifer, 2008). In essence, these issues tell the story of the various challenges that Hmong continue to face in America. A review of Hmong-focused media; however, complement this literature in that it is here where successes of Hmong Americans are truly highlighted, such as Hmong American political and community figures, Hmong American businesses, Hmong American academic achievements, Hmong American artists and writers, Hmong American pageant queens and kings, and even a Hmong American national poker champion. As Hmong become more acculturated in the U.S., new challenges and opportunities continue to present themselves, including that of negotiating identity as Hmong Americans and the rights and responsibilities this brings.

#### *Statement of the Problem*

Gay men and lesbians have not had a place in Hmong history, culture, or literature. Currently, there is no direct translation for the words “gay” or “lesbian” in the Hmong language. This paucity of language means people will have to derive new

words and meanings when talking about lesbian and gay Hmong. In trying to find a more neutral way of talking about gay and lesbian Hmong, Yang (2006) uses “*nkes*,” the phonetic spelling of “gay” in Hmong. However, the absence of language can reveal as much about the values of a culture as the presence of language.

In the field of linguistics, language determinism is the idea that what and how we speak helps determine our worldview (Lyons, 1981). If indeed we ascribe to the theories of language determinism, then this lack of language might indicate that prior to Hmong in the United States, gay and lesbian Hmong apparently did not exist, or perhaps that there was no room to be gay or lesbian in traditional Hmong culture. There exists, however, anecdotal stories about gay and lesbian Hmong. For instance, there are stories of Hmong men and women who never marry, or Hmong women who behave and dress like men. In addition, Her-Lee (2006) discussed a family’s past experience in Laos with a Hmong woman who “behaved like a man.” In the United States, the 2000 Census tracked 135 same-sex couples in which the head of the household reported was Hmong (U.S. Census Bureau). Moreover, five individuals, part of the new wave of Hmong refugees who have resettled in the United States within the past two years, have sought support and help from Shades of Yellow, a Minnesota-based social and support group for Hmong LGBT individuals and their allies (Xiong, 2006).

Some Hmong contend that gay and lesbian Hmong are a product of the freedom in America. After her daughter committed suicide with her female partner, a Hmong woman remarked that “To Hmong, we never have that way. It’s kind of strange...what these two girls have is not acceptable” (Ellis, 2002). It is not surprising that gay and lesbian Hmong seem to be a “new” phenomenon in Hmong culture. Traditional Hmong

social relationships and structure were largely informed by a system in which there were prescribed standards and expectations of behavior. Like many collectivist cultures, traditional Hmong culture emphasized the importance of the group over the needs and wants of the individual. Infused in Hmong culture are expectations of how men and women behave, including courting rituals and the roles of husbands and wives (Lee, 1988). With such strong social and familial bonds and obligations, gay and lesbian Hmong in traditional Hmong society in Laos would likely not have had the safety or freedom to live openly.

Furthermore, even in societies where there is a growing acceptance of LGBT persons, many researchers and clinicians continue to provide caution about coming out, emphasizing safety first. Vargo (1998) warns of the potential familial, social, and financial consequences of coming out. In addition, many researchers of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescent issues advise against coming out until the youth has established some modicum of financial and housing stability, to guard against the adolescent being ejected from his or her parents' home. Physical and verbal abuse, running away from home, criminal activity, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and poor school performance are among some of the problems that gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth encounter when they disclose to family and others (Savin-Williams, 1994). Therefore, one can imagine that in a society where people had to be interdependent upon each other in order to survive, such as that of traditional Hmong society, would not foster support for independence and difference.

Like any culture, however, Hmong culture is not static. Ingrained in the "traditions" of Hmong are constantly evolving values and redefinitions of what is

acceptable. Such an example is the betrothal of small children by their parents. Once accepted as part of continuing ties to family and friends, this practice has nearly expired, with Hmong parents now deferring to their sons' and daughters' choices, as long as their prospective partners are acceptable to the family (Lee, 1988). In addition, Lee discusses a significant change in how some Hmong parents now view what Westerners often call the "bride-price," but Lee labels a "nurturing gift," truer to the direct Hmong translation. Once an important part of Hmong wedding agreements, according to Lee, some parents have halted that practice because of the connotation of "selling" their daughters. These changes, as well as many others in the community indicate that Hmong culture has continually adapted and changed to accommodate new thoughts and ideas. In this new millennium, as Hmong Americans continue to redefine what it means to be Hmong in America, there may be opportunities to at last set a place for gay and lesbian Hmong at the "table" of the Hmong community.

#### *Significance of the Problem*

In September 2002, a special report entitled "Lost in America" in the *Fresno Bee* highlighted the many young Hmong people whose suicides stunned the Fresno, California community (Ellis, 2002). Although the Hmong make up only three percent of the Fresno population, according to the newspaper, the eight Hmong teenagers who committed suicide between 1998 and 2002 made up nearly half of the city's teen suicides in those years. There seemed to be a variety of catalysts behind the suicides, including troubled romances and poor academic performance. For seventeen-year-old Pa Nhia Xiong and 21-year-old Yee Yang (whose death is not included among these numbers), a romantic relationship that was condemned by their families and their

community drove the women to commit suicide by binding their bodies together and drowning in a local lake (Ellis, 2002).

The *Fresno Bee* (2002) named the above story on Xiong and Yang “Embracing the Forbidden,” an attempt to capture the feelings of Hmong lesbians and gay men who are given the message that they do not have a place in their families or communities. Much research has documented the vulnerability of gay and lesbian youth to suicide (D’Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Proctor & Groze, 1994). Moreover, in one of the largest studies of its kind, Remafedi, French, Story, Resnick, and Blum (1998) found that gay and bisexual identified males were seven times more likely to report a suicide attempt than their heterosexual peers. However, Fenaughty and Harre (2003) determined that factors that can contribute to LGB youth’s resilience to suicide include positive role models and the support of their parents/caregivers. Although much research has focused on the psychological problems gay men and lesbians are more likely to experience due to internal and external homophobic barriers, there is also a large body of research that discusses the relatively trauma-free experiences of gay and lesbian individuals who are supported by friends and family in their sexual orientation (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 1991; Hammersmith and Weinberg, 1973; Miranda and Storms, 1989; Weinberg and Williams, 1974).

Current models of support and resilience regarding LGBT individuals are based upon extrapolations from research about primarily White populations (Greene, 1994). A part of understanding how resilience factors into identity development lies in understanding the meanings people derive from being gay or lesbian, including the complex dynamics that go into the decision to come out and how relationships with

others are renegotiated after coming out within the context of one's cultural community.

To date, there has yet been an attempt to examine how relevant the current literature is to Hmong American lesbians and gay men. Because of the potential harmful consequences and the opportunities to support resilience, further investigation of Hmong American gay and lesbian identity development is crucial to fostering a greater understanding of the experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong.

### *Research Questions*

In the present study, the questions to be explored are: Who do gay Hmong men and women come out to, and what are the processes involved in making the decision to come out? How do they perceive that coming out changes their familial and social dynamics, supports, and expectations? How do gay and lesbian Hmong renegotiate these relationships with their family and community? How do gay Hmong men and women carve out meaningful identities within a homophobic culture, and how do the significant Hmong people in their lives conceptualize and understand this? What unique support systems do gay and lesbian Hmong recommend for other Hmong before, during, and after coming out? The aims of this study are three-fold: to give space for Hmong lesbians and gay men to tell their stories, to provide gay and lesbian Hmong examples of coming out, and to provide clinicians with an understanding of the unique and common issues with which Hmong lesbians and gay men must contend.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

In their April 2004 issue, *Details Magazine* featured an article entitled “Gay or Asian?” showcasing an Asian male and invoking racial, cultural, and gender orientation stereotypes. While this article brought about formal, joint protest from Asian American, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT), and LGBT Asian American groups, it also highlighted the homophobia and racism that exist within these groups. For instance, there were many discussions in communities and on the internet highlighting negative stereotypes of gay men, while ignoring the racism imbedded in the article; at the same time, other discussions focused on racism as a more salient factor, discounting the homophobia that the article elicited (Asian Media Watch, 2006). Unfortunately, for many LGBT people of color, this experience is all too familiar. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people of color often exist as “minorities within minorities,” accompanied by the challenges of discrimination and oppression that come with membership in both of these groups. Moreover, there exist additional challenges of integrating two significant parts of their identity, each of which may be devalued by the other (Greene, 1994). In addition, Greene asserted that the stressors created by these challenges can create more vulnerability to pathology for gays and lesbians of color.

According to Heppner, Kivlighan, and Wampold (1999), research is crucial to continuing to develop the knowledge upon which the counseling profession is based. In the past two decades, research in the area of LGBT mental health has multiplied in psychological literature, but this research is often conducted with White, middle-class

respondents (Chan, 1989; Morales, 1992; Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter, 2004). In that same vein, multicultural research has often not included LGBT persons of color (Greene, 1994). Thus, there continues to remain a paucity of research on the complex interaction of sexual orientation and ethnic identity development.

For Asian American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered persons, the exclusion from research is even more pronounced because overall, research on Asian Americans is often lacking in mainstream literature. The Surgeon General's 2001 report on mental health, culture, and race (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) acknowledged the deficiency of research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, stating that the diversity within the Asian American/Pacific Islander category has made research on these populations difficult to conduct. According to Foo (2002), the representation of Asian Americans are not statistically significant enough in mainstream national studies, and thus do not garner the same visibility as other groups. In addition, a history of perceived "sameness," to which aggregated data and old "model minority" stereotypes contribute, can often act to suppress specific and distinct issues for many Asian American communities (Foo, 2002).

This chapter will review a general history of LGBT research, identity development models, the impact of coming out, research on LGBT persons of color, and research on Asian American LGBT persons. Because of the narrow scope of this study, the focus will be primarily on gay and lesbian identity; however, it should be noted that the experiences of bisexual and transgendered individuals are often ignored in mainstream LGBT research, and are certainly areas that should be further developed. In order to better understand the experiences of Asian American LGBT persons,



however, it is important to understand the evolution of mainstream LGBT research, which continues to serve as the framework for which many LGBT populations have been understood.

### Historical Context of LGBT Research

In 1948, Kinsey stunned the western world with his famous publication *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*. In this research-based publication, Kinsey concluded that 37% of American males had had at least one homosexual experience to orgasm. His data also suggested that many adults are neither exclusively heterosexual nor homosexual, but rather fall on a continuum of sexual behavior. In other words, being attracted to members of the same sex and having sexual experiences with them was not as uncommon as Americans thought. Although modern estimates vary due to myriad reasons, including safety and lack of coherence in defining sexual orientation, according to Pruitt (2002), anti-gay groups tend to estimate that between one and three percent of the population is gay whereas gay activists often cite closer to ten percent, a number based upon Kinsey's work.

In 1957, Hooker compared a group of nonclinical gay men and a group of their heterosexual peers and found that clinical expert judges could not distinguish between the projective test protocols of the two groups. In addition, there were no differences found in their adjustment ratings. According to Gonsiorek (1995), Hooker's study provided the first empirical evidence that homosexuality was not an indication of psychological disturbance. This was a crucial turning point for the study of gay men and lesbians because it challenged the predominant view of homosexuality as a mental illness (Gonsiorek). As archaic as that now sounds in mainstream mental health circles,

it should be noted that the American Psychiatric Association continued to use homosexuality as a diagnostic category until the 1970s, and continued to have a diagnosis of “ego-dystonic homosexuality” until 1986 (Bayer, 1987).

In the 1970’s, the growing depathologizing of LGBT individuals in this country allowed researchers to turn attention to other areas of study, such as the psychological processes of how gays and lesbians develop identity in a heterosexist and often hostile society (Gonsiorek & Rudolph, 1991). Much research supports the greater likelihood of gay and lesbian individuals to experience psychological problems due to internal and external homophobic barriers; however, there is also a large body of research that discusses the relatively trauma-free experiences of gay and lesbian individuals who are supported by friends and family in their sexual orientation (Gonsiorek and Rudolph, 1991; Hammersmith and Weinberg, 1973; Miranda and Storms, 1989; Weinberg and Williams, 1974). There are many different models that explain the processes through which a person moves in the formulation of their identity as a gay or lesbian person. De Cecco and Shively (1984) described three general forms in which this identity formulation has been explained: biological, psychological, and socio-cultural.

According to De Cecco and Shively (1984), the conceptualization of homosexuality as a biological phenomenon attempted to mold it into traditional beliefs about sexual relationships between males and females. Thus, a prevailing thought early on was that an excess of female hormones in a man and male hormones in a woman would produce homosexual behavior. The socio-cultural perspective saw the “homosexual identity” as a socially constructed identity in which the gay or lesbian individual interfaced with prevailing social forces, including interaction with

heterosexual norms. The psychological model, which was heavily based upon Freudian theory, carried assumptions of parental responsibility for the “failure” of the child to become heterosexual.

Brown (1995) discussed four different models of lesbian identity development: biological models, traditional psychodynamic models, feminist psychodynamic models, and stage models. Early biological models viewed same-sex attraction as a disease or some kind of mistake or deficit. Current biological models see sexual orientation as largely biologically determined and fixed. Brown contended that while some lesbian and gay activists support this model, thus making the argument that since sexual orientation is a fixed and biologically determined state, it should not be discriminated against, the model does not address the fluidity of development that is often found in lesbian identity. Traditional psychodynamic models, primarily based on Freud’s work, refer to the concept of sexual orientation as a psychological phenomenon. Early psychodynamic models, viewed homosexuality in women as a failure to resolve issues at the oedipal stage of development, leading to the woman identifying with her father, and thus a remaining desire to sexually possess the mother at the same time as rejecting her for lacking a penis. Another school of psychoanalytic thought proposed that lesbian identity develops out of a desire to return to and join with one’s mother. Brown emphasized that this model is typically pathologizing in nature, and often based upon women in distress.

Feminist psychodynamic models typically address lesbian identity development within the context of women’s sexual identity development, thus normalizing lesbianism as one of many possibilities for how women develop their sexual identity

(Brown, 1995). Although less pathologizing than previous models, Brown pointed out that ironically, these models are based on heterosexist viewpoints within the overall context of women's sexual identity development. Stage models of lesbian and gay identity development have been more recent, and according to Brown, are modeled after Atkinson, Morten, and Sue's (1979) ethnic identity development model. These models often attempt to identify stages in which the gay or lesbian individual learns to identify to him or herself and to others as homosexual, within the context of society and culture. These stages often include noticing same-sex attraction, working through ambivalent feelings, finding meaning in and naming those feelings, and then attaching these meanings to a group identity. While these models continue to normalize the development of one's sexual identity, Brown also argued that most of the research done on stage models continues to be done on gay men, and then extrapolated to lesbian identity development, ignoring the more fluid development and political issues involved in lesbian identity development. For instance, Golden (1990) has suggested that some lesbians see choice, affectional orientation, and political perspectives as important essentials of their identity development whereas gay men more often perceive their sexual orientation as a "given," and are more focused on sexual behavior and fantasy. Moreover, Gonsiorek (1988) has described the coming out process for gay men as "abrupt" while lesbians tend to have a more fluid and ambiguous experience, likely due to how men and women are socialized in this culture.

#### Models of Coming Out

It has been theorized that for many gays and lesbians, the "coming out" process, a term clinicians coined in the 1970s to describe the developmental process of coming

to terms with one's homosexuality (Gonsiorek, 1995), is one of the most pivotal and significant processes in identity development, often representing a shift in the core of the individual's sexual identity. This complex process can bring with it a myriad of positive and negative feelings for the individual, including fear, relief, anxiety, deep emotional distress, and a sense of being true to oneself. In most Western literature and gay and lesbian identity development models, the process of coming out implies self acceptance, accepting same gender desire as an aspect of one's identity, complex psychological and social processes, renegotiating of one's entire identity, telling others, and seeking affirmation (Ben-Ari, 1995; Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002; McDonald, 1982; Morriss & Rothblum, 1999).

In many stage models, which represent much of the recent school of thought and research on the development of gay and lesbian identity, the assumption is that coming out denotes the achievement of a "higher" level of development. Additionally, coming out is often associated in literature with the integration of one's sexual identity and the connection of one's private and public lives (Coleman, 1982; Cormier, & Boyd, 2000; Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002; Vargo, 1998; Whitman, Morriss & Rothblum, 1999). Ward and Winstanley (2005) also suggest that in addition to this is a "renegotiation" of one's identity once the choice is made to come out to others.

Cass's (1979) model of homosexual identity was one of the earliest stage models of identity. According to Cass, gay individuals go through six stages, which are non-age specific: identity awareness, where the person is aware of being different; identity comparison, where the person believes they might be gay, but tries to act as if they're not; identity tolerance, where the person realizes they are gay; identity acceptance,

where the person begins exploration into the gay community; identity pride, where the person becomes an active participant of the gay community; and synthesis, where the person fully accepts who they and others are.

Similarly, Coleman (1982) described five stages: pre-coming out, coming out, exploration, first relationships, and identity integration. In the pre-coming out stage, the person feels different but may not be conscious of having an attraction to others of the same sex. In the coming out stage, the person has admitted to him or herself that they have these feelings. Exploration involves experimentation with one's sexual identity, including developing interpersonal skills to meet others who share their sexual orientation. During the first relationships stage, the person learns how to have a relationship with someone of the same sex. In the final stage, identity integration, the person brings together their public and private selves in order to integrate their new identity as a gay person.

Troiden (1989) proposed that people go through stages at certain and specific ages. For instance, the sensitization stage begins before puberty, when the person experiences same-sex attraction but does not understand what these feelings mean for them. This is followed by the identity confusion stage during adolescence, when the person begins to realize they might be gay. In the identity assumption stage (adulthood), the person comes out as gay. Finally, in the commitment stage, the person adopts a lifestyle that integrates their sexual orientation.

More recently, D'Augelli (1994) has proposed a model that involves six processes, rather than the traditional stages, in order to attempt to present a more interactive and less linear expression of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development.

Exiting heterosexual identity is the recognition that an individual is not heterosexual and includes coming out to others. Developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status involves a personal sense of what it means to be a lesbian, gay, or bisexual person, as well as challenging one's own internalized homophobia. In the process of developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, the person creates a support network of people who know about their sexual orientation and support and accept them. The fourth process, becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, involves coming out to parents, and redefining the impact of this on their relationship with their parents. In developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, the person learns how to be in a romantic relationship with a person of the same sex, which can involve many complex re-learnings of what it means to be in a relationship. Finally, in entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community, the person makes the decision to what degree they commit to social and political action. Some persons never enter into this process due to a variety of reasons, including lack of interest or safety, while others risk everything. Similarly, Reynolds and Hanjorgiris (2000) argue for a more continuous and evolving process, citing the rigidity of stage models.

Cox and Gallois (1996) propose that rather than continue to focus on the individual psychologizing of lesbian and gay identity development, there be a conscious effort to move towards a social identity perspective. For instance, the authors contend that many of the current theories often address LGBT identity development without attending to the strong forces of the impact of society. Thus, they propose using social identity theory to look at gay and lesbian identity, which allows the examination of the how this process occurs within an individual, accounting for great intra-group variety,

while also exploring the effect that society has on these processes in addition to how these processes in return affect much broader social structures. According to Cox and Gallois, using the social identity lens also allows the inclusion of understanding how a person's multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status) interact with their sexual orientation identity.

To test the linearity of the coming out process, McDonald (1982) surveyed 199 men who self-identified as "gay" or "homosexual." McDonald's purpose was to explore the developmental progression of milestone events in the coming out process of gay men. This study is a replication of an earlier study conducted by Kooden, Moren, Riddle, Rogers, Sang, and Strassinger (1979), who surveyed gay psychologists. McDonald expanded his population to include a more diverse and nonclinician sample by distributing survey packets to a variety of sources, including social clubs, steam baths, friendship network systems, Gay Liberation discussion groups, and a mailing list of rural gay men supplied by a Gays for Equality group at the University of Manitoba. Overall, a known 600 packets were mailed or delivered in person to prospective participants, although the number of packets distributed in steam baths and social clubs were not counted. These packets included a 22-page questionnaire that contained demographic information and questions asking the degree to which respondents participated in gay and "conventional" communities, age-related "milestone" experiences in coming out, self-disclosure to significant others, anticipated discrimination, and a 50-item measure of positive-negative attitude statements about male homosexuality.



Two hundred and thirty questionnaires were returned and of those, 199 were deemed “usable” for the study. The age of respondents ranged from 18 to 71 years, with a mean age of 31 years. The majority of respondents was middle-class, Caucasian, had completed some post-secondary education. In addition, they were in primarily managerial and administrative occupations. Seventy eight percent indicated some kind of religious affiliation (e.g., Catholic, Protestant, other denomination) while 22% reported no religious affiliation. The majority of respondents also grew up in an urban setting. Sixty percent of respondents reported being single, 5% were in heterosexual marriages, 10% were divorced, widowed, or separated, and 25% of participants were in committed same-sex relationships.

Respondents reported an awareness of sexual feelings for members of the opposite sex at an average age of 13 years. Their first sexual experience and understanding of the word “homosexual” occurred an average of two years later, with self-labeling (gay or homosexual) occurring at an average age of 19 years. Respondents had their first affectional/sexual relationship with another male at the average age of 21 years. Disclosure of their sexual orientation to a significant heterosexual person took place at an average age of 23 years, with 10% of the sample indicating they had not disclosed their sexual orientation to anyone other than a known gay person. At an average age of 24 years, respondents reported having acquired a positive identity, where they were “glad” to be gay. Fifteen percent of respondents indicated they did not view themselves as possessing a positive gay identity, and indeed, had more negative attitudes toward male homosexuality ( $t = -3.88, p < .001$ ), participated less in gay culture ( $t = 2.85, p < .005$ ), disclosed less to others their sexual orientation ( $t = -8.45, p$

<.001), and felt guilty, anxious, and ashamed about being gay ( $t = 6.14, p < .001$ ). The results of this study support linearity to the evolution of one's sexual identity, suggesting that the coming out process occurs in a somewhat orderly sequence of events, progressing from an awareness of same-sex attractions to homosexual behavior to self-labeling, self-disclosure, and eventually a positive gay identity. This study also revealed that a minority of gay men do not reach positive gay identity and seem to suffer more negative feelings about themselves and others. In addition, McDonald compared his findings to previous studies conducted by Kooden, Morin, Riddle, Rogers, Sang, and Strassinger (1979), Dank (1971), and Troiden (1979). Although some of the data were not transferable between the four studies and there were some minor differences in the ages people arrived at their "milestones," the linearity with which people did this remained constant. For example, people do not achieve a positive gay identity without first being aware of same sex attraction.

McDonald's study continues to be germane in that it provides empirical support for stage theorists in gay male identity development, as well as the positive impact of coming out and integrating a positive gay identity with one's entire self. However, there are some limitations with his methodology and findings. By not keeping track of the total number of packets distributed, it is not known from where this sample came, and the biases that potentially exist in who chose to fill out and return such an extensive and personal survey. Although McDonald also tried to diversify his sample, he still ended up with one that is unigendered, similar in race, education level, vocation, and likely socioeconomic status. McDonald also makes no mention of whether these surveys were confidential or anonymous. Given the more conservative social times of

when these surveys were administered, safety might have also played a part in who chose to answer this survey, if indeed the surveys were not anonymous. In addition to possibly systematically excluding populations of gay men who may have had different life experiences, this study also left out the experiences and processes of gay women entirely, including the more fluidity with which it has been proposed that lesbian identity develops (Brown, 1995; Golden, 1990; Gonsiorek, 1995).

Another limitation with McDonald's study is how he chose to report his findings, and the lack of their display, with exception of a charting of his findings compared with the other three aforementioned studies. In his results, McDonald often reported averages, although from his discussion, it can be seen that at times, these ranges were fairly varied. For instance, he reported an average of 6.44 years in between when a respondent became aware of same-sex desires and when they self-labeled as "homosexual." The actual range of years was from one to 33. With such a big range, more accurate information might have included not only the average of such years, but also the most frequent number of years (the mode). This is also true of other information presented, such as the range of one to 28 years for time between understanding the word "homosexual" and self-labeling, and the range of one to 37 years of time between first sexual experience and self-labeling. Finally, although McDonald reported that in cohort analyses, 20-year-old respondents differed significantly from 30 and 40-year-olds in regard to understanding the word "homosexual," self-labeling, and initial involvement in same-sex relationship, he does not indicate how. He leaves readers presuming that the 20-year-old respondents arrived at these milestones earlier than their older peers by later postulating that these

differences could be due to “sociohistorical conditions” existing for the different cohorts.

### Complex Dynamics of Coming Out

In addition to the psychological processes of identity development and coming out, there are very real environmental concerns gay and lesbian persons must consider, including the positive and negative impacts of what coming out means. Troiden (1979) and Miller (1979) found that the majority of men who came out to others reported better physical and emotional health, despite the challenges and turmoil they encountered. As previously discussed, McDonald (1982) discovered that achieving a positive gay self-image was linked to an individual’s ability to disclose to significant others who were not gay. In addition, discrepancies between one’s private and public selves can lead to shame, lowered self-regard and esteem, and diminished morale; although coming out, which included accepting one’s sexual orientation, telling others, and seeking affirmation, contributed to the fostering of a more coherent self (Galatzer-Levy & Cohler, 2002).

While coming out can be a desirable and positive part of identity development for gays and lesbians, its impact can often bring a variety of challenges and consequences. It is for this reason that many researchers and clinicians also provide strong caution about coming out. For instance, Schope (2004) found that while closeted men often had a greater fear of negative evaluation and a higher external locus of control, they also experienced less discrimination than their openly gay peers. Vargo (1998) warns of the potential familial, social, and financial consequences of coming out, and many researchers of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender adolescent issues warn

against coming out until the person has established some modicum of financial and housing stability, to guard against the adolescent being ejected from his or her parents' home. Physical and verbal abuse, running away from home, criminal activity, suicide attempts, substance abuse, and poor school performance are among some of the problems that gay, lesbian, or bisexual youth encounter when they disclose to family and others (Savin-Williams, 1994). Moreover, chronic and long-term oppression and discrimination that many gays and lesbians face has been associated with a variety of psychological distress that includes low self-esteem, social isolation and loneliness, demoralization, guilt, and suicide (Diaz, Ayala, Bein, Henne, & Marin, 2001).

Furthermore, Ward and Winstanley (2005) discuss the coming out process as a repetitive one in which the person is out at different levels in different contexts. Indeed, they found in their sample of how people disclose their sexual orientation in the work place that people often have to be fairly purposeful in their decision to come out, and to whom, and that even when colleagues appear supportive, there are multifaceted issues that arise, such as when new colleagues are introduced, and when office dynamics change, thus forcing the gay or lesbian employee to continually evaluate their disclosure decisions.

Similarly, Whitman, Cormier, and Boyd (2000) found that for their lesbian sample, coming out was strongly connected to identity management. Whitman et al. explored how women at different stages of lesbian identity development make decisions about disclosing their identities. The management of their identities involved how women came out or stayed hidden about their sexual orientation, and how they made decisions to disclose or conceal. Through the snowball technique, they found 25

participants who self-identified as lesbian. The authors used Cass's (1984) Stage Allocation Measure (SAM) to select women at each of the six stages of the model: 1) identity confusion; 2) identity comparison; 3) identity tolerance; 4) identity acceptance; 5) identity pride; 6) identity synthesis. This model is also further detailed at the beginning of this paper. The breakdown of participants at each stage was: one at stage 1, two at stage 2, two at stage 3, eight at stage 4, five at stage 5, and seven at stage 6. The women in this study ranged in age from 19 to 47 years old, with 47% being European American, 12% African American, and 4% Asian American. Eighty-four percent of the participants were from the Northeast United States while 26% were from the Mid-Atlantic region. Forty-four percent were college students, 36% professionals, and the remaining 20% were service or technical workers. Eighty-four percent had been or were currently engaged in therapy.

Participants were interviewed by the primary investigator, using a structured interview. They were also asked to keep a personal journal for one month, recording their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in response to four specific questions regarding keeping their lesbian identities known to and hidden from others in their daily interactions. In addition to the interviews and journals, an independent rater who coded the journals and interviews separately and the primary investigator's journal were also utilized to formulate the results.

The results of this study were organized around the three themes the main questions of this study addressed: identity management strategies of lesbians at Cass's six stages of identity development, decision-making strategies of lesbians at six stages of identity development, and decision-making processes across lesbian identity

development. Five sub-categories were derived from the data: direct active out (telling others), indirect active out (introducing to partner/making statement about partner/other comments/actions made that lets others know they are lesbian without actually saying so), passive out (being out through others' assumptions or by others doing for them), hiding techniques (using mechanisms that actively or passively concealed sexual orientation such as avoiding topic, hiding objects, lying) and changes in identity development connote the changes the person went through during that stage.

In the identity management theme, all of the participants had come out directly to others by disclosing their lesbian identity or sexual confusion. All of them had also used indirect means of coming out, such as dropping clues and discussing involvement with a same-sex partner, and the participant in stage 1 had employed passive hiding techniques while participants in the other stages employed both active and passive hiding techniques. Overall, the higher the stage that the participant was in, the more indirect outs the woman used to indicate her sexual orientation. Women at the higher stages also tended to not use active hiding techniques as often as women at lower stages.

Because of their similarities, the decision-making strategies and processes themes were combined in the reporting of results. Across all of the stages, the importance of participants' relationships with others was crucial to whether they choose to come out to them or not. This included feeling cared for and valued by those to whom they choose to come out to, as well as wanting to form a closer relationship with others. Thus, this involved complex assessments of safety and trust. Certainly, many fears, such as having a child taken away, or rejection of loved ones, were also

considered in the decision to disclose. For women in stages 5 and 6, the decision to come out was much more related to the need to be congruent with their internal feelings as well as a sense of pride. Unique to stage 6 was also a need to educate others and confront homophobia.

The most salient contribution of this study is the focus of the complex identity management lesbian women must engage in, both based on their own internal self as well as the intricate ways they must use to assess their environment in making the decision to come out. In other words, women at varying stages of lesbian identity development used many similar and differing methods for assessing the conditions and potential responses and safety around them before making the decision to come out to others, therefore, along with identity development comes the complex and elaborate tasks of identity management. Like many qualitative studies, however, it is difficult to generalize the findings in this study due to several methodological limitations. First, the use of the snowball method, in which participants identify other participants, can bias the sample pool by the nature of who people know. This is more pronounced when looking at the demographics of who is represented in this study: mainly educated and professional women, the majority of whom had engaged in interpersonal therapy at greater rates than the general public. One could make the argument that there may exist unique characteristics about this type of participant. Additionally, the small sample, specifically in the first three stages, makes it difficult to generalize to a larger group. Furthermore, the authors utilized only those participants who could be categorized according to Cass's stage model, leaving out important information about people who may not fit into this model. At the very most, what these results can do is to present the



processes of these specific individuals as well as serve as a launch for further research. The authors also do not mention what their procedure for recording answers and coding involved, such as whether the interviews were transcribed, or whether notes were taken. If indeed results were based upon notes rather than transcription, there may also be the affect of human error on what was noted. Finally, by not disaggregating their participants, culture may have also confounded the results. For example, because of cultural respect and taboos about the discussion of sex, Asian Americans may be less open to family and others within their cultural groups about their sexual orientation (Chan, 1995).

In addition to the psychosocial effects of coming out, gay and lesbian individuals must also deal with how loved ones, specifically family members, will respond. As previously mentioned, D'Augelli (1994) has incorporated this process into his model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development by including a stage on becoming a lesbian, gay, or bisexual offspring. According to Vargo (1998), one of the first persons a gay individual may choose to come out to is often someone else who is gay, with the assumption being that the other person will be more understanding. The first straight person that a gay person tells is often a close friend. Another close friend or trusted sibling often follows, and finally parents. Vargo acknowledges that parents can be one of the first people told, but more often, they are among the last, as the dynamics involved in telling one's parents, particularly if the child expects a homophobic reaction, are so diverse.

Moreover, Savin-Williams (1998) found that mothers and fathers are often told differently, with more people disclosing to mothers first, believing that mothers would

be more supportive, or at least less abusive. Savin-Williams points out that in actuality, mothers, when initially told, were more likely to be verbally abusive than were fathers; however, after the initial telling, Rotheram-Borus, Rosario, and Kooopman (1991) found that gay and bisexual males found more support from their mothers than their fathers. According to Demo and Allen (1996), there is very little known about the impact of disclosure to extended family; however, there has become an “accepted” belief that parents’ discovery of their child’s sexual orientation often leads to some kind of family crisis (Plummer, 1989; Troiden, 1989). Coming out to parents is not only often associated with intense fear, but there is an irreversibility of this disclosure that often motivates that fear (Ben-Ari, 1995).

Ben-Ari (1995) studied how the dynamics prior and after a child coming out is related to the post-discovery experiences of parents and their gay children. Two different participant groups, gay and lesbian adults and parents of gay and lesbian individuals, were recruited via the snowball method. The adults in the sample were not necessarily the children of those in the parent sample and vice-versa. Thirty-two gay and lesbian young adults and 27 parents who had a gay or lesbian child were interviewed using demographic information, open-ended questions that focused on the description of their experience and that of their child or parents’ regarding coming out. Both participant groups were also given a Parental Reaction Scale, which specified the reactions of shock, denial, shame, guilt, anger, rejection, acknowledgement, and acceptance, and the intensity of these reactions across four specified time spans.

In summary, while both parents, gay men, and lesbians shared similar beliefs that the most common motive for people to come out to their parents was honesty, they

differed in their beliefs about the fears associated with coming out. For instance, parents often felt that their child's fear was that of confronting their sexual orientation, while gay and lesbian participants stated that their greatest fear was being rejected by their parents. Ben-Ari identified fear of rejection, from gay and lesbian adults, and the naming of fear of rejection by parents, as a possible predictor of negative dynamics post-coming out. The motive of not hiding and not living a lie was found to be a good predictor of positive post-discovery family dynamics. Similar to Savin-Williams (1998), Ben-Ari also found that, based upon the Parental Reaction Scale, mothers were generally more accepting than fathers when their children disclosed their sexual orientation.

Ben-Ari's work was one of the more extensive attempts at examining family dynamics pre and post disclosure of a child's sexual orientation, unfortunately, due to practicality, the researcher could not obtain both participant groups from the same families. It would have been interesting to match the experiences of gay and lesbian participants and their parents, rather than extrapolating from different families and dynamics. Ben-Ari also does not discuss the cultural and ethnic demographics of his participant groups, and indeed, does not address the impact of culture on family dynamics. In addition, as is cautionary with snowball techniques of obtaining participants, this study, like the ones before it, carry a potential bias in sampling because of the nature of this technique. The procedure used to comprise Ben-Ari's findings is also missing, and thus readers must assume that Ben-Ari used some method of qualitative analysis in order to produce them. Finally, interviewees for this study often had to reconstruct experiences that occurred often many years ago, and thus these

results relied upon the impression of these memories, which may have been skewed by a number of different experiences that occurred in between.

### Gay and Lesbian Racial/Ethnic Minorities

In the above research, general gay and lesbian identity models and the impact of coming out have been reviewed. As previously mentioned, much of the research utilized to create models of identity development, coming out, and the impact of coming out have largely been based on Euro-American populations, thus leaving out the contributions, challenges, and resilience of many ethnically and racially diverse gay and lesbian groups. In this next section, the multiple identities of ethnic and racial minority gays and lesbians will be explored. The voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people of color have often been ignored from both the histories of people of color as well as mainstream LGBT history (Harper, Jernewall, & Zea, 2004). In recent years, more research has surfaced on the multiple identities that LGBT people of color often must manage. While there are undoubtedly many similarities that gay and lesbian people of color share with other gay and lesbian persons as individuals raised in a largely heterosexist society; there are also unique challenges in being a “multiple minority” (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000; Harper et al.).

According to Akerlund and Chueng (2000), although gay and lesbian people of color share the “common dilemma” of conflicting sexual and cultural identities, the variety in social attachment and personal responses to multiple identities affect groups and individuals differently and illicit diverse responses. Akerlund and Cheung performed a content analysis of 22 journal articles that included African, Asian, and Latino American gay and lesbian participants. Five common themes were identified as

variables that affect the identity development of gay and lesbian Asian, African, and Latino Americans: discrimination, oppression, choosing between cultures, rejection, and social support. Discrimination and oppression was found to occur within multiple communities for gays and lesbians of color, including within their own ethnic communities for their sexual orientation and within in the mainstream gay and lesbian community for being an ethnic minority. Rejection from both communities were found to often leave many gay and lesbian persons of color with limited support, few resources, and lack of role models to assist them in negotiating identity development.

In addition, Akerlund and Cheung also found some similarities between the three groups. In their analysis, they found similarities between African and Latino Americans regarding the impacts of socioeconomic status, sexual behavior, and religion. Because of the disproportionately higher rates of poverty in African and Latino American communities, gays and lesbians in these communities often struggled with access to resources. In addition, both groups share similar sexual behavior preferences. Finally, religion, often Catholicism in Latino communities and Protestant forms of Christianity in African American ones, played large roles in shaming and the reinforcement of homophobia.

Similarities were also found between Latino and Asian Americans regarding family values, roles, expectations, and gender roles. The emphasis on strong family relationships can act as a support for these communities, but because family members are so interconnected, there may be strong pressures to conform to expectations or not to embarrass family members. In addition, particularly for Asian Americans, being gay

or lesbian was viewed as a rejection of traditional gender roles and obligations. In this study, no similarities were found between African and Asian Americans.

Unique issues were also identified for each of the three groups. For African Americans, gender roles tended to be more flexible, allowing for some tolerance of homosexual behavior, as long as it did not interfere with family. Conflicts with mainstream White culture in regard to expressed masculine behaviors for gay men were also noted. For Latino Americans, the unique issue of bilingualism was found. Because of the lack of language to respectfully discuss one's sexual orientation, as well as the many emotions and affective meanings attached to English words, bilingual Latino Americans struggled with self expression both in English and Spanish. Finally, for Asian Americans, religion, socioeconomic status, sexual behavior, and education were unique variables. According to Akerlund and Cheung (2000), Eastern religions are different from Catholic and Christian-based religions in that they do not tend to overtly address homosexuality. Therefore the religious shaming of their sexual orientation did not seem as salient for Asian Americans in the same way as for Latino and African Americans. In addition, their sexual behaviors were less similar to that of the other two groups. Finally, Asian American gays and lesbians were also found to be different in that they tended to be more educated and have a higher socioeconomic status than their African and Latino American peers.

Akerlund and Cheung (2000) have provided tremendous information on the differences and similarities between Asian, African, and Latino American gay men and lesbians, based upon extensive review of existing research. Content analyses can be vastly helpful in compressing large amounts of information into smaller and more

concise parts. This process can also be helpful in identifying common and unique themes, as Akerlund and Chueng have done. A challenge that content analyses face, however, is that the most topics mentioned may not necessarily be the most crucial ones (Stemler, 2001). Moreover, while the authors discussed the keywords used in their literature search, they did not provide evidence regarding how articles were selected for their analysis. According to Krippendorff (1980), six concepts must be addressed in content analyses: which data are analyzed, how data were defined, the population from which they were drawn, the context under which they were analyzed, the boundaries of the analysis, and the target of the inferences. Although Akerlund and Cheung discuss their methodology, they failed to define their data or provide contextual information, which would help clarify the impact of their analysis. In addition to these challenges, Akerlund and Cheung also appear to assume that the issues highlighted are different than those of White gay men and lesbians in this society. Akerlund and Cheung may have strengthened this argument that these are issues unique to communities of color, or that these issues impact communities of color differently, had they also utilized White gays and lesbians as a comparison group rather than relied upon the assumption of difference.

In another comparison study, Parks, Hughes, and Mathews (2004) examined the differences between African American, Latina, and White lesbians regarding lesbian identity milestones (e.g., first wondering, deciding, disclosure) and levels of identity disclosure. Through a variety of recruitment strategies, including flyers and newspaper advertisements, 448 respondents (130 African American, 81 Latina, 210 White, 27 other) were interviewed by a trained, female interviewer using a modified version of the

National Study of Health and Life Experiences of Women instrument. In addition, questions about relationships, sexual identity development, and sexual identity disclosure were also included. Data analysis focused on two sets of comparisons: African American and Latina women and lesbians of color (African American and Latina) and White lesbians. The 27 interviews that represented the “other” categories, which included Asian American, Native American, and multi/bi-racial respondents, were excluded due to the small numbers represented. A series of one-way multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) were performed on three sets of dependent variables associated with identity development: identity milestones, elapsed time between milestones, and identity disclosure. Individual independent variables were also entered. Age was also used as a covariate in three multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA).

The respondents were fairly diverse in terms of age, with a median age of 38 years, and a range between 18 and 83 years. The sample contained mostly well-educated and older women; however, household income varied. Lesbians of color differed from White lesbians on all of the key demographic characteristics in that White lesbians tended to be older, more educated, of a higher economic status, and were more likely in a committed relationship with a same-sex partner. Lesbians of color, on the other hand, were more likely to report that they were religious (with African American women indicating more religiosity than Latina women), and to be a parent or have a child living at home with them.

Regarding age of sexual milestones, lesbians of color were more likely to have experienced sexual milestones one to three years earlier than their White peers.



MANOVA results of the combined milestone dependent variables indicated a significant effect of race/ethnicity, with Wilks's  $F(6, 808) = 3.24, p < .01$ . Although women of color reported all identity milestones at an earlier age, differences between groups in ages of first deciding and first disclosing were not significant after controlling for first age of wondering whether they might be lesbian. There was also an interaction effect between race and current age in that for both lesbians of color and White lesbians, the younger a person was, the more recent the experience of wondering about sexual orientation. For White lesbians, this was much more pronounced.

MANOVA results revealed no significant differences across racial/ethnic groups in elapsed time in between milestones, Wilks's  $F(4, 804) = 2.35, p = .052$ .

MANCOVA of race/ethnicity, with current age, on the elapsed time revealed a significant effect of current age on time elapsed between milestones, Wilks's  $F(2, 404) = 1906, p < .001$ . After controlling for age, elapsed time between identity milestones was significantly affected by race/ethnicity, Wilks's  $F(4, 808) = 2.61, p < .05$ . In controlling for current age, respondents of color took longer to decide they were lesbian after first wondering about sexual identity than did White respondents. Finally, the combined identity disclosure dependent variable was significantly affected by race, Wilks's  $F(4, 830) = 3.75, p < .01$ . Older women of color were more likely than younger women of color to have disclosed their sexual identity to family members, whereas older White women were less likely than younger White women to have disclosed to family members.

Based on these results, Parks, Hughes, and Mathews (2004) hypothesized that the social/historical changes in lesbian, gay, and bisexual visibility have had less

influence on the disclosure of lesbians of color as opposed to White lesbians. In addition, the authors postulated that while more visibility has empowered White women, cultural expectations regarding sexual orientation within certain ethnic and racial communities may have changed very little. Moreover, because lesbians of color may have more pulls to rely on their family for support against other forms of discrimination, they may have been less affected by shifts in general public discourse.

There are many strengths to the Parks et al. study – namely, the diverse amount of women involved in regard to age, race/ethnicity, education, and income. This can help minimize the potential for sampling bias; however, it should be noted that only English-speaking, self-identified lesbian women from Chicago participated in this study, thus limiting how generalizable these results may be. In addition, due to the extra work that participants had to do the work of contacting the researchers and setting up interviews, there might still exist unique characteristics about this group and their commitment to being a part of this study. Indeed, this might account for the higher level of education found among this group as well as a different conceptualization of being out. Moreover, the modified instrument the authors used is one that is was created to measure risk factors related to alcohol use, and thus did not contain detailed information on identity development, thus making it potentially difficult to compare these results with other studies on lesbian identity development. Also, because interviews were conducted by different people, there might exist some confounding factors associated with different interviewers.

Like Parks et al. (2004), Fisher's (2003) ethnography explored a group that rarely has voice in mainstream LGBT research – gay and lesbian Russian immigrants.

As a complete participant, in which a member is a full-fledged member of the group prior to the research (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999), Fisher utilized her own involvement in a gay and lesbian organization of Russian immigrants to dissect the intersecting identities of being Russian and gay, being a gay Russian, and then being an immigrant in this society. Fisher described the group's creativity in visibility without being visible, such as using word of mouth and anonymous flyers to inform other gay and lesbian Russian immigrants of the group's existence, and the homophobic responses of older and more conservative Russians who outraged over the "crazy" and "disgusting" people "who must not be our own" (p. 176). Fisher depicted the heightened awareness of the group regarding safety, such as the discomfort of outing oneself to other Russian immigrants, even if they too, were gay, and the constant sense of being on-guard if a new arrival came to a meeting. She also illustrated a poignant experience centered on her partner's birthday party, at which older Russians, young heterosexual Russians and Americans, and gay, lesbian, and bisexual Russians and Americans were present together, and the different levels of identity management and concealment present.

In addition, Fisher (2003) pointed out that in Western discourse, being in the closet continues to be seen as a representation of LGBT oppression; however, for people who must manage multiple identities that include cultural and sexual orientation, being in and out of the closet becomes part of "tactical maneuvering" for survival. According to the author, no matter how immersed in the mainstream culture, immigrants' lives continue to be framed by a multi-layered text of history and experience. Although most of the people in her group lived apart from their families,

they still could not escape being truly “outside” of the Russian immigrant community. Fisher concluded that the “closet” is highly contextualized, and in the Russian immigrant community, it is a tactic for survival, as well as one that allowed people to move seamlessly from the seen to the unseen, as well as be “out” without really being out. For Fisher, the closet is not a place of oppression, but rather of power in that people can choose to move fluidly between visibility and invisibility.

An ethnography presented such as Fisher’s allows for the reader to engage with the researcher, as well as experience her shift in paradigms. What is particularly interesting about Fisher’s study is that it not only addresses the issues of being a gay or lesbian person of color, but also the acculturation issues that come with being part of an immigrant community. While Fisher comes to some conclusions about her experiences and observations of her organization, it is unclear how she arrives at this shift. In other words, the empirical bases for which the social sciences typically searches beg for some proof, some theme, for Fisher to base her conclusions upon, and that they do not exist in this type of study can be frustrating, particularly since a solid ethnography is possible in psychology. In addition to the style in how Fisher presented her study, while ethnographies can be rich sources of learning, there is always a challenge for the observer to remain objective, and not become over-involved in the experience. As a complete participant, Fisher was able to present ideas and understand subtle nuances that an outsider may not have considered; however, she might have also missed information that a more objective observer might have been able to examine. Moreover, as this ethnography was solely Fisher’s subjective experience, this is

unashamedly a completely biased viewpoint, thus the meaning and generalization people typically strive to achieve from qualitative data cannot be applied.

This next set of articles address the role of race and culture in gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. LGBT youth are often among the most vulnerable of populations in this society (Vargo, 1998). This is often because of the dependence adolescents often have on their families for financial and emotional support. Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) studied ethnic/racial differences in the coming out process of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. The researchers recruited male and female youths ages 14 to 21 years, from community-based organizations that provide services for lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths. A sample of 164 youths (49% female, 37% Latino, 35% Black, 22% White, mean age = 18.3 years) were interviewed at baseline. Because of their limited numbers, the Asian population was excluded, leaving a final sample of 156 youths who were followed for a period of 1 year, with a 2-3 hour structured interview conducted by a trained interviewer at baseline, at 6 months, and at 12 months. Included in the interviews were the Sexual Risk Behavior Assessment-Youth (SERBAS-Y), a 28-item checklist that assessed for involvement in gay-related activities, a modified version of the Nungesser Homosexual Attitudes Inventory (Nungesser, 1983). Youths were also asked about their self-disclosure to others regarding their sexual orientation, as well as their certainty about, comfort with, and self-acceptance of their sexuality. Interviews were monitored for consistency and quality as well as audiotaped for accuracy. Retention rates for six months were 92% and for 12 months, 90%.

In this population, no significant demographic differences were found among Black, Latino, and White participants. Significant differences were, however, noted on

education in that the White participants tended to be more educated than either their Black or Latino peers. In addition, Black youths significantly ( $p < .05$ ) reported more socially desirable responses than did White youths while Latino youths did not significantly differ from White for Black youths. Using a series of multivariate analyses of variance, the authors found no differences between the three racial/ethnic groups and their developmental milestones. Black, Latino, and White youths seemed to reach out to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community at similar ages, indicating that sexual identity formation is not significantly affected by culture.

Significant differences were found on several aspects of identity integration. Black youths were involved in fewer gay-related social activities at baseline and 6 months ( $\beta$ s =  $-.27$ ,  $-.32$  respectively), endorsed less positive attitudes toward homosexuality at the baseline assessment ( $\beta = -.24$ ), were less comfortable with others knowing about their sexual orientation at all three times of assessment ( $\beta$ s =  $-.42$ ,  $-.38$ ,  $-.38$ ), and had disclosed to fewer people at baseline and at six months than had their White peers ( $\beta$ s =  $-.38$ ,  $-.31$ ). Similar to Black youths, Latino youths had disclosed to fewer individuals at baseline and six months ( $\beta$ s =  $-.37$ ,  $-.32$ ) than had their White peers. Latino youths were more comfortable with others knowing about their sexual orientation ( $\beta$ s =  $.25$ ,  $.22$ ,  $.25$ ) and more involved in gay-related activities at the six month assessment ( $\beta = .20$ ) than were Black youths. In examining racial/ethnic differences regarding changes in the coming out process, Black youths were nearly seven times more likely to become more certain about their sexual identity over time than White youths ( $p < .05$ ) and also had a greater increase in positive attitudes toward homosexuality ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

While Rosario et al. (2004) found that the differences in racial/ethnic adolescent gay identity development can be complex, there are several limitations to their study. First, their sample size was not large enough to give a medium effect size, and therefore lacked statistical power. Consequently, while there were statistical differences among their participant groups, this might not translate into “real world” meaning. In addition, by recruiting from youths who were being served by an LGB-focused community organization, the authors might have tapped into a sample that may not be representative of all LGB youth, purely because of potential biases in who seeks services at such an organization. In addition, all of these youth also self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, thus indicating that there is a certain level of comfort they might already have had with their sexual orientation. Furthermore, a glaring omission from this study is how participants identified with their ethnic/racial communities, as this, too, would presumably have an effect on how their cultural upbringing affects their sexual identity.

Similar to Rosario et al., Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) did not find differences between ethnic/racial groups in their sample. The authors examined the effects of traditional family values on the coming out process of gay adolescent males and found that race alone had no systematic effect on how coming out was experienced by the adolescent. Rather, the presence of traditional family values accounted for differences in this experience. In other words, youths who grew up in families which emphasized marriage, children, and religion, and in which a second language was spoken had a much different experience from youth whose families did not endorse these same values. In addition, there was a greater amount of perceived disapproval and

rejection from more traditional families as well as the perception that families that endorsed strong traditional values were less accepting of same-sex attraction. Thus, this study brings up the question of whether we are correctly measuring the implications of culture when we only measure race, but rather, perhaps we have to look at other indications of culture, including history, context, religion, and acculturation. In addition, Consolacion, Russell, and Sue (2004) concluded that multiple minority statuses and identities do not automatically indicate risk. In their study, compromised mental health was not consistently demonstrated among same-sex attracted youths across racial/ethnic groups.

#### Gay and Lesbian Asian and Asian Americans

While the Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) study found no differences in race, many of the descriptors they used to describe their definition of “traditional” families – the emphasis of marriage, children, religion, presence of a second language – could all be used to describe many Asian American communities. According to Chan (1995), Asian American gays and lesbians may experience some uniquely different set of challenges because of how Asian cultures tend to view family, sex, marriage, and children. Mao, McCormick, and Van de Ven (2002) also theorized that the tendency for Asian cultures to be collectively oriented can cause a lot of internal distress for gay Asians who may be seen as dodging their family duties and betraying their cultures and identities. Indeed, Morris and Rothblum (1999) found that except for a correlation between sexual orientation and sexual experience, Asian American lesbians, as compared to their White, Latina, and African American peers, had the least number of intercorrelations between years out, disclosure of sexual orientation, and participation in



the lesbian community, meaning the least integration of lesbian identity. In addition, Asian Americans were unusual in this sample in that they reported first telling a sibling an average of two years before telling either parent, whereas the more typical pattern for the other ethnic/racial groups was to tell the parents first. Likewise, Bhugra (1997) found that sisters were most often the choice to whom disclosure was made for a sample of gay South Asian men in the United Kingdom.

Morris and Rothblum's findings reinforced Chan's (1989) earlier study regarding disclosure to siblings and parents. Chan surveyed 19 women and 16 men between the ages of 21 and 36 years regarding their sexual and ethnic identity development. Sixty four-page questionnaires consisting of 35 items (five demographic, the rest regarding gay/lesbian identity, Asian American identity, community involvement, and family) were distributed at Asian American gay/lesbian organizations. Thirty-five surveys were returned. Of the respondents, 90% were of Chinese, Korean, or Japanese backgrounds and 10% of Indian, Bangladesh, or Filipino ancestries. Over 90% of respondents had a college background and all were currently living on the East Coast. The majority of respondents were first or second-generation Asian American, with eight being third, fourth, or fifth.

The findings from Chan's study are reported in raw scores. They showed that most respondents indicated they did not attend social or political activities in the Asian American community. Rather, they attended similar events in the lesbian-gay community. In choice of community, although the majority of respondents indicated more comfort in the lesbian-gay community (20), the majority also indicated a preference for being considered an Asian American lesbian or gay man (20). While the

majority of respondents had disclosed their sexual orientation to a family member (27), only 9 had to their parents. All but one respondent indicated that they had disclosed to friends. The majority of respondents indicated that it is more difficult to come out to other Asian Americans (27), and yet did not feel accepted or acknowledged in the mainstream lesbian-gay community (30). Women (17) more often than men (3) experienced discrimination for being Asian, while male respondents (12) indicated more discrimination due to being gay. Both male (12) and female (17) respondents indicated discrimination for being both gay and Asian.

Chan's study illustrated the struggles many gay and lesbian Asian Americans sometimes feel about not quite belonging in Asian American or lesbian-gay communities, and certainly illuminated the differences in disclosure to parents, other family members, and friends; however, there remain some limitations to her study. First, her sample size is fairly small and non-diverse. In addition, having been obtained via two specifically lesbian-gay Asian American organized events, the sampling pool might have been biased by the nature of who attends those events, and how they see themselves ethnically, and as a gay or lesbian person. Finally, general limitations of survey designs are often the lack of detail and flexibility for follow-up regarding answers. While this study provided good exploratory information on how gay and lesbian Asian American identity development, a more detailed investigative method might have provided more information as well as contextualized many of these findings.

Mao, McCormick, and Van de Ven (2002) also examined aspects of the ethnic divide and how gay Asian men deal with being a double minority in Australia,

specifically, the extent to which a collectivist orientation (as is most Asian cultures) is related to gay Asian men's experiences in their lives and attachment to the gay community. Three focus groups were conducted by the first author with a total of 19 participants. The majority of participants were recruited through a gay Asian men's network. About half of the participants were of Chinese ancestry, while the other half was comprised of South-East or East Asian ancestry. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s to late 40s, 18 self-identified as "gay" and one participant still felt uncertain of his sexual orientation at the time of the interview. Some of the participants indicated they had not come out to others, particularly their families. Themes that emerged from this study included: gay Asian men valued their Asian culture, but didn't feel accepted in their ethnic communities nor did they feel accepted in mainstream Australian gay communities, and discussed openly the cultural clashes they had experienced due to their collectivist orientation. Another theme was the struggle of deciding to disclose or not to family and the frustration that many Asian cultures don't allow for individual expression and personal freedom. In addition, some participants felt pressured to adopt Caucasian gay stereotypes and indicated they needed more positive gay Asian role models.

The themes that emerged from this study support what other researchers have found about the "double minority" status of being a person of color in a White-dominant society as well as a gay or lesbian person in a heterosexist society in that there are challenges that exist to how a person manages both identities which can often conflict. Because focus groups rely on the interaction of people as they discuss a common experience (Heppner, Kivlighan, & Wampold, 1999), the dynamics of such a

sensitive topic being discussed among strangers might have impacted the discussion in both negative and positive ways, such as inhibiting some participants while possibly reinforcing others. In addition, due to the sometimes strong desire to conform, as well as how they are set up, focus groups do not always allow all of the voices of participants to be heard. Because of how participants were recruited, there is also the risk of bias in the sampling procedure. This might have also been increased because being part of a focus group brings with it a lack of privacy and confidentiality that individual interviews or surveys can guarantee. Thus, people who might be more likely to be public about their views on gay and ethnic identity development might systematically look different and have different challenges from those who would not participate in such a group.

Masequesmay (2003) employed an ethnographic approach to study the intricate ways participants of O-Moi, a support group for Vietnamese lesbians, bisexual women, and female-to-male transgendered persons, managed and clashed with multiple identities, and how this affected people individually as well as the structure of the organization. As a participant-observer, Masequesmay utilized as the basis for her analyses a mixture of interviews of different members of O-Moi (32 overall), three years of participant-observation of O-Moi, and observations from planning meetings, organization emails/listserv discussions, and social gatherings. A general method of deciphering re-occurring themes was used to analyze this data.

Findings that emerged from Masequesmay's work included the strong need for support from other "queer" Vietnamese women as the most cited reason for why women attended O-Moi. In addition, as Masequesmay's group continued to work

through their identities as lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered Vietnamese women, the multiple layers of identity with which the women struggled began to surface organizationally. For instance, the group was comprised of both women who only spoke English, women who spoke both Vietnamese and English, and women who only spoke Vietnamese. Masequesmay described how non-English speakers and non-Vietnamese speakers felt invalidated when the conversation shifted to exclude one or the other, not as a purposeful act, but rather, a reflection of acculturation and assimilation. Dynamics were also impacted as bisexual and transgendered women in the group struggled to be heard and for validation among the primarily lesbian members. In addition, Masequesmay discussed the role of class and its impact on access to and participation in the organization. For instance, working class women were less likely to be able to attend meetings and social gatherings due to work and other financial responsibilities. Moreover, the organization struggled for identity as the women in the group struggled to define their mission – for some, joining O-Moi was purely a social act, for some, it was to seek support, and for others, it was to create political change. The pulls of all of these different reasons created organizational rifts as well as immobilized the organization. Masequesmay discussed the different layered challenges her organization faced as “identity work,” in that identity is created and recreated through everyday action, at many different levels.

As previously mentioned, studies such as Masequesmay’s allow readers to experience the richness of the phenomenon being explored and the meanings it had for the people involved, most specifically, the participant-observer author. On the other hand, because conclusions are based on the subjective experience of the researcher,

observations may be skewed. In addition, Masequesmay is unclear about the method of analysis, referencing only that she made them based on the data as described. Case studies are typically difficult to generalize, therefore, these findings are limited to the experience of the author of the group, and may not necessarily reflect all of the dynamics present for other Vietnamese lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered women.

This final study attempted to describe the characteristics of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Asians. Kimmel and Yi (2004) sampled four different countries (United States, China, Korea, Japan) through 19 different sources, including two Web sites, a lesbian, gay, and bisexual film festival, and members of gay social and political groups. The administered questionnaire contained 36 items that focused on demographic information, extent of being open about sexual orientation, same-sex lover relationships, number of sexual partners, practice of safe sex and reasons for not practicing it, knowledge of someone with HIV/AIDS, having been tested for HIV/AIDS, number of gay and lesbian friends, and participation in lesbian, gay, or bisexual social and political organizations. The questionnaire was translated and back-translated by people fluent in Japanese, Korean, and Chinese. A total of 338 individual questionnaires were completed and returned, 78 by women and 260 by men. A final 314 were included in the analysis and contained 53% Korean, 29% Japanese, 15% Chinese and 3% Other respondents. Of these, 25% were American, either born in the U.S., or immigrated.

Analyses of variance revealed that American respondents were more open about their sexual orientation, had come out to more people, had more lesbian and gay friends, knew more people with HIV/AIDS, and reported a higher frequency of sex per year. Of

all the groups, the Korean respondents were least open about their sexual orientation, most secretive, conservative, and most isolated. Chinese gay and bisexual men were more open about their sexual orientation than the authors expected. Lesbian and bisexual Asian women overall were more open in general than were gay or bisexual men in regard to the number of people who knew about their sexual orientation. Of significance is the importance the role of family played as a support system – for instance, gay and lesbian Asians were more likely to have come out to their families if they knew of someone or had themselves been diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

This study was an ambitious attempt to characterize and compare a diverse group of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Asian and Asian Americans. There are some limitations to this study, however. The different sampling methods utilized in each country might have drawn from a different population than other gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons in that country, and indeed, the authors admit a bias towards young, urban, middle class respondents. In addition, because of the different ways in which the sample pool was obtained in each country, it is difficult to make the argument that results from each nationality can be compared with each other, as other factors may have confounded these findings. In addition, the unequal samples from each country may also not be comparable. For example, again, the Chinese sample only comprised 10 of the total subject set. It is difficult to make the argument that this sample size can represent all gay Chinese men. Furthermore, respondents were recruited only from East Asian countries, which are not necessarily representative of all Asian countries, and therefore, this study cannot be generalized to all lesbian, gay, and bisexual Asians.

## Gay and Lesbian Hmong

A review of specific Hmong literature reveals that as of this date, there exists no published study, including theses, on LGBT Hmong, thus, a review of literature at this time is not possible. The information cited in the previous chapter comes from internet and newspaper sources. Current existing Hmong literature largely revolves around issues related to war and refugee experiences, acculturation, education, gender and familial relationships, and a large number of health-related issues, such as the role of traditional healing and concerns like the growing rates of diabetes and heart disease. In his paper reviewing trends in research on Hmong, Pfeifer (2005) includes as future directions increased research that originate from Hmong authors, in-depth demographic studies, and work that examines the complex and diverse social, political, and cultural differences within the Hmong community. Therefore, it is hoped that this study will contribute to these future trends by providing information about a subgroup in the Hmong community that very little is known, and less has been written, about.

### Summary

The studies presented in this chapter span a wide array of issues related to identity development for lesbian and gay persons. Models of gay and lesbian identity development were reviewed, as were some empirical studies that support the linearity of identity development. There are also different proposals that have been made that lesbian and gay identity may develop differently, with lesbian identity comprising of a more fluid development. Furthermore, more recent voices have been included in lesbian and gay research to include the diverse experiences of different ethnic/racial groups, and the acknowledgement that being a “double” or “multiple minority” in this



society brings with it different challenges. Research is also expanding to capture the voices of Asian Americans, who have often been left out of many traditional race/ethnicity studies. However, research in the area of Asian American gay and lesbian identity development is limited, as can be demonstrated by the studies presented. Extensive search of PsychINFO, the Social Sciences Index, and other databases revealed few empirical studies. In addition, the existing research provides little continuity in building a coherent theoretical model for identity development in Asian American gays and lesbians. For example, Consolacion, Russell, and Sue's (2004) study found that same-sex attracted Asian American youth indicated the least amount of distress when compared with African, Latino, and White American youth, contradicting much of the current literature on LGBT Asian Americans.

Included in the recommendations made by the Surgeon General (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001) in regard to culture and mental health is to continue to expand the science base regarding mental health issues in communities of color to better understand the factors that protect from and perpetuate mental illnesses for these populations. Another major aspect of this vision is to include research on communities of color and evidence-based practices and theories; however, this cannot be implemented when entire populations continue to be systematically excluded from social sciences research. Research can serve to both build culturally competent best-practices and theories as well as to identify similar and unique challenges for different populations. In this current society, research can often have a profound impact on myriad issues, including how populations are understood and served, how policy is made, and how funding is distributed, which makes intentional

inclusivity an even more crucial endeavor. The Surgeon General's report also highlights the importance of investigations that focus on specific Asian American and Pacific Islander groups. Additionally, Consolacion, Russell, and Sue (2004) recommend that service providers focus on issues relevant to specific racial and ethnic groups in order to address what issues pose risk for those populations.

Asian Americans have long been faced with both the opportunity and the curse of being labeled the "model minority" in this society. To an extent, this has enabled Asian Americans some flexibility in terms of visibility. On the other hand, it has allowed invisibility to flourish as a form of oppression. While Asian Americans may have been successful in some realms, to continue to ignore their experiences is to perpetuate the oppression of Asian American voices and contributions. Sound research on the identity processes of gay and lesbian Asian Americans not only benefits gay and lesbian Asian Americans, it contributes to identity development research overall. Future research directions would be well served to include the resilience and challenges Asian American gay and lesbian persons share with other gay and lesbian communities as well as the unique cultural and familial dynamics that contribute to identity development and management. Being able to identify the diverse issues for specific Asian American populations may also provide more accurate and succinct representations for models of identity development.

Moreover, the lack of literature on the specific experiences of Hmong gays and lesbians makes it difficult to compare and contrast those experiences with the known experiences of other populations. For instance, there are some unique aspects of the cultures represented in the literature review that make it difficult to completely

generalize these findings to gay and lesbian Hmong. One can theorize about the social and familial pressures upon gay and lesbian Hmong regarding roles and expectations; however, there are also the influential elements of not only what it means to be Hmong, but to be Hmong in America, and the effects of acculturation on identity development and coming out. While we can make some inferences to how gay and lesbian Hmong experience coming out, and what it might mean to them, a logical step in the literature is to examine the experiences of LGBT Hmong in order to better identify the commonalities shared with others in the LGBT community as well as the uniqueness of the impact of Hmong culture in transition.

## Chapter Three

### Methods

#### *Participants*

Eleven individuals were interviewed. After consultation with the thesis advisor, the researcher decided not to include the results from one interview because the participant did not fit within the parameters of this study in that the participant did not identify as gay or lesbian. Ten individuals, five men and five women, who self-identified as gay or lesbian and as Hmong or Hmong American participated in this study. All participants had come out to at least one family member. Participants heard about the study through various advertisements via the internet, support groups, meetings, and personal contacts. They either contacted the researcher or gave permission to a third party to have the researcher contact them regarding participation in the study. Participants' ages ranged from 20 years old to 31 years old, with the median age being 24.5 years. Five of the participants were born and raised in the United States and five were foreign-born. Of participants who had been born outside of the U.S., the range of migration to the U.S. was 16 to 29 years, with the median years being 22.8 years. Two participants migrated at age five, one at age three, one at age 2, and one at age 1. All participants are from the Midwest. Four identified spiritually as Christian, three identified as practicing Hmong traditional beliefs, one identified a combination of practicing both Hmong and Christian beliefs, and two identified no specific spiritual beliefs. In addition, participants had been out a median of 5.1 years and of the ten, five were currently partnered at the time of interview.

### *Design*

This study is a phenomenology study that employed a qualitative approach to research. Phenomenological researchers attempt to describe and understand human experience, highlighting participants' spoken words rather than interpretations by researchers. A qualitative design was employed because of there was no published research on the experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong. According to Sue (1999), there is a need for more qualitative ethnic minority studies in order to understand constructs and phenomena from different cultural perspectives. Qualitative analysis also allows researchers to understand the data without imposing pre-existing expectations on the topic of study. Moreover, qualitative methods are preferred in studies that are exploratory in nature and when the essence of individual experiences is sought (Patton, 2002).

### *Procedures*

Participants were solicited via the internet, support groups, meetings, and personal contacts with those involved in Hmong LGBT communities. In order to promote safety, the researcher distributed the information to contact persons and prospective participants and asked them to initiate contact regarding participation in the study. Three participants gave permission to a third party to pass along their name and information to the researcher. During the initial contact, the researcher introduced herself, the study, and answered any questions that the prospective participants had. Prospective participants were also offered the opportunity to review consent forms and questions ahead of time before agreeing to participate or commencing the interview.

Participants were interviewed one time for interviews that ranged from 90-120 minutes. Although the interviews were conducted in English, there were times when participants expressed themselves in Hmong. Interviews were audio-taped and destroyed after transcription. In addition, the interviewer allowed for participant self-censorship, as part of the voluntary nature of this study. During two of the interviews, participants retracted specific parts of stories that they relayed because they felt the information was too identifiable. Agreement was made between the researcher and participants about taking these parts out of the data analysis. In addition, in consultation with the faculty advisor of this thesis, it was deemed that eliminating the data did not affect the integrity of the data collection or analysis process.

Participants were offered the option of reviewing and validating their transcribed interviews. The initial offer for review and validation was made at the time of the interview. It was explained that during this process, participants could review the transcriptions of their interviews for accuracy. In addition, participants and the researcher could also agree on which elements, if any, of the interview to disguise or broaden so that the participant could not be easily identified. All participants indicated that they were interested in reviewing and validating their interviews and indicated the best way to be reached, such as via telephone or email. After their interviews were transcribed, the researcher attempted to contact all of the participants. Only six responded and only five asked to review their transcribed interviews. No one offered any changes. It is not possible to be precise about why this response rate was low; however, because of the continuous informed consent during the process of interviewing, participants may have felt that they already validated the interviews.

Some participants indicated lack of time to review their transcripts and trust in the researcher to parse out the necessary themes. In addition, because the interviews were so emotion-filled, it is possible that some participants may not have wanted to revisit those emotions.

Transcriptions of the interviews were coded so that the researcher could send the appropriate transcription to the right participant for review, but yet not reveal the identity of the participant. The tracking system to the code was destroyed once a transcript was considered validated. One participant videotaped his interview as part of a documentary he was making on his life. This did not change the questions that were asked, and the researcher was not visible on camera. This change in protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board.

#### *Clinical impressions of participants*

Some participants, and in particular the female participants, tended to initially broach the interviews more carefully and in a reserved manner. The female participants were also more likely to express concern about confidentiality. All of the participants seemed to relax during the interview and appeared engaged in the process. At times, the interviews were filled with a range and expression of emotions, from amusement and laughter to sadness and tears. Sadness and tears were expressed by the majority of participants most often when discussing issues related to their parents, such as recounting coming out to them, fears of rejection, fears of hurting or disappointing parents, high parental expectations, and recognitions of parental acceptance and love.

### *Instrument*

Guiding questions, contained in Appendix B, were developed for the interview. These questions were designed to obtain some basic demographic information as well as a rich description of the internal and external processes involved with participants' experiences of coming out. In addition, feedback from two individuals involved in LGBT and Hmong LGBT communities was solicited and incorporated regarding the appropriateness and respectfulness of the questions.

### *Data Analysis*

In order to analyze the data, the ten audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim, five by the primary researcher and five by a professional transcriber. The primary researcher, who is bilingual in Hmong and English, transcribed all of the spoken Hmong in the interviews. In addition, after consultation with Hmong elders, she translated these concepts from Hmong into English. The translation is not a verbatim translation, but rather conceptual translation because consultants suggested that translating for meaning, rather than verbatim, would make more sense.

Analysis of the data was based on inductive analysis (Patton, 2002) as well as a modified Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) approach described by McCarthy Veach, Bartels, and LeRoy (2001). Inductive analysis (Patton, 2002) begins with specific observations and develops toward general patterns. Data analysis consisted of organizing the smallest units of data (concepts) into meaningful and progressively broader themes, categories, and domains. This analysis also observed the principles of CQR (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), which emphasizes a team approach and a consensual process. According to CQR, all members of the research team have equal



voice in determining how to code and interpret the data. So that the perspective of one researcher does not dominate, the CQR method provides checks and balances to ensure that the experiences of respondents are accurately represented.

In the present study, the research analysis team consisted of the principal investigator and a counseling psychologist with expertise in multicultural issues in counseling, qualitative research, and Hmong culture. Both team members are involved with the Hmong community through direct service, clinical consultation, and membership in committees that focus on promoting Hmong mental health. The team worked through a consensus process to develop the domains and themes reflected in the results. This entailed a process of both working separately and consensually in order to come to agreement about domains and themes. The researchers independently analyzed the transcripts first through paragraph to paragraph analysis in search of basic concepts that were represented by quotes from the respondents. A total of 47 concepts were generated from 296 pages of data from the 10 interviews. In the next stage of analysis, Patton (2002) emphasized the identification of important themes and patterns in the data. Discussion and dialogue between the two researchers resulted in 34 themes being identified under nine domains. To resolve any discrepancies, the two researchers worked together until consensus was achieved regarding how the data were classified.

## Chapter 4

### Results

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, the domains and themes derived from the qualitative interviews will be presented. A total of nine domains and 34 themes emerged. The domains represent key ideas participants presented about their coming out experiences: meaning making, language, coming out, family, gender, the role of religion, intra/inter cultural experiences, life-changing lessons, and hopes. Within each domain, several themes are presented. Subsequently, selected quotes from the respondents are cited as “raw data” to illustrate both the domain and theme. Variations within samples are labeled in accordance to suggestions made by Hill, Thompson and Williams (1997) in that concepts that apply to all participants are denoted as general, concepts that apply to half or more participants ( $> 5$ ) are denoted as typical, and concepts that apply to less than half of the participants ( $< 5$ ) are denoted as variant. In addition, in this study, general concepts will also be discussed as applying to “participants” or “all participants” to indicate the unanimity of themes. Hill et al. recommend dropping ideas that apply to only one or two cases; however, in an attempt to capture unique perspectives, some of those cases will be included and signified as such. In traditional qualitative studies, results are often presented by the most common themes first, tapering off to more variant themes; however, these results are presented in a more intuitive representation of participants’ experiences, such as beginning with meaning making, coming out, and ending with lessons learned and hopes. A summary of domains and themes is available in Appendix D.

## **DOMAIN 1: Meaning Making**

Participants discuss what being gay or lesbian means to them, their challenges as gay and lesbian Hmong, and finding identity.

***Theme 1: Being gay or lesbian means having a physical or emotional attraction to someone of the same sex.*** In general, participants talked about the “simple” main difference between them and heterosexuals – that they are attracted to and want to engage in relationships with someone of the same gender. Comments like the following were common amongst all participants:

“Being gay, it means: being attracted and/or wanting or longing-slash-stuff like that, to be with someone of the same gender.”

“Most people feel that it means like you’re sexually attracted to other women, but for me, it’s more than just the sex part. It’s who I want to be with, feel most comfortable with, could spend my life with. That kind of thing.”

***Theme 2: Being gay or lesbian means being myself.*** It was also typical for participants to say being gay or lesbian is another dimension of who they are.

“To be a lesbian, I guess, is to like other women, be attracted to them, want to spend the rest of your life with another woman, but really for me, it’s just like being me, the real person that I am and not having to fake it.”

“...at first, I thought it was a certain style or a certain lifestyle you had to live or be or a certain way to be gay and I found out sooner than later that, um, it really doesn’t matter or phase you any more after you come past that coming out part. It doesn’t really...it’s like my friends say, “We don’t even see the gay part when we talk about you or see you. We see you as [Participant] first.” So, I guess, um...it’s kind of hard for me to say that being gay means something to me. It’s just...that’s just a part of who I am. That’s just a small minute piece of the whole picture...”

“I’ve balanced everything perfectly where what a gay man is to me is being a good person, just being truly who you are, letting people see that.”

***Theme 3: Being Hmong and gay holds tremendous ambiguity and barriers.***

Participants discussed the messages they received that being Hmong and gay is wrong

and impossible. Others talked about trying to negotiate understanding both about the racism and homophobia that they've faced. Several participants talked about being on their own and not having access to other Hmong who could serve as mentors or supports.

“To be Hmong in America, it's much harder for us...and...being gay added to that, it's...you know, much, much, much harder because not only are we not accepted in the United States, you know? It's hard for *Mis Kas* people, American people, to be gay and it took them, like, so long for them to be finally kind of be accepted into the community and for us to come out saying, “Hey, we're Hmong and gay,” knowing our Hmong tradition and how strict it is, I think it will never be...they will never accept us, the Hmong community. So...I don't know...I just think it's much harder for us.”

“It means you're part of something you really don't know a whole lot about yet and no one's gonna take you by the hand, so you just have to do it. Just jump in and start swimming, you know? And don't drown. Like, a girlfriend of mine – her aunt is lesbian, so her aunt could say, “do this” or “come out like this,” but that's not how it is for us. Your aunt's probably gonna just bitch slap you or something if you told her you were a lesbian. There's not taking you by the hand and helping you out.”

“I think it means that you have additional barriers. It's hard for people to even think about this concept. I mean for Hmong people to think about this concept. So, layer of them, and then layer for the rest of the GLBT community. We still face a lot of racism, and that's even in the GLBT community. You would think that someone oppressed would know what it's like to be and be more understanding, but that's not true at all. That has been my experience. Some of the biggest racists I know are GLBT people, and that's just really sad. But I guess that might be like expecting Hmong people to be more understanding, and they're not.”

“I would say that the hardest part of being a lesbian and being a Hmong is that you have people who come at you on all sides. The Hmong people don't get why you're gay, and the *Mis Kas* (American) people don't get the culture stuff. Even in my group, they tried to understand, but one of my friends, he finally just said, “You people are too complicated.” I'm really sad about that. Being gay and Hmong should be a rich experience, but because of that, we also have more challenges.”

***Theme 4: Participants struggle with coming to terms with their sexual orientation.***

All participants discussed dealing with homophobia, both experienced and internalized, by trying a variety of different ways to shed their attraction to others of the same gender. In addition, all of the female participants discussed having dated men and most male participants have dated women.

“Yeah, yeah. I actually decided to go to church because I was going through phase where I don’t want to be gay, and felt like I was the only Hmong person out there that was gay so, I guess, like, going to church would stop me from being gay, I guess, at that time.”

“...like a year after I came out, my mom, actually, wanted me to marry [a woman]. I’m so close to my mom that I wanted to make my mom happy and I actually agreed and I told my mom that, “You know what? I’ll try my best to be straight.”

“And, yeah, I slept with a lot of girls. My friends, honestly—excuse my English—but I was a whore. Never had any feelings. It was just over bragging rights. “Oh yeah, I got this one.” It was just trying to be cool in front of the guys so that hopefully no one knows that once in a while I do something stupid or laugh femmy or something a girl would do, so that hopefully no one catches it, you know?”

“I see all these older guys who are getting the hot girls because they’re gang bangers, so...what better off to do than to go be a gang banger, and if you’re a gang banger, you can’t be gay. So, why not? Why not do that and it hides the fact of who you truly are and if anyone starts shit with you, whoever found out, you’d have your guys go and beat him up. You know? So, overall I worked out a scheme where I covered myself, made sure I covered myself. It worked out for me. Which was bad at the time, it was selfish, but it worked at the time.”

***Theme 5: Participants received varying messages about how to be a gay person in***

***U.S. society.*** This included encouragement to be themselves, learning about American (specifically U.S.) gay culture and being pressured to fit certain stereotypes. All participants discussed the cultural experiences they had in figuring out their gay identity. Typically, partners, friends, and mentors who had been out longer were

significant resources. A variant number of participants cited resources that included subcultures of the LGBT community or popular culture and the media.

“I was living with some gay guys and these guys actually taught me who I was for who I should be. They are more or less also my guardian angels, guiding me through this the whole time... You know, who are you? Who do you want to be? Just because you are gay does not mean you have to act a certain way or live...don’t fall into the stereotype...live your life, be who you are...”

“...the GLBT community is really it’s own culture and it’s something that you really have to be introduced to. And when I was first introduced...because I was raised in the ghetto...and so I was so used to being ghetto and then you go here to this—you know, in the ghetto part that I grew up in, you had to be real tough, which helped a lot, I think, with coming out—but in the gay community—and of course I don’t like to pigeon-hole things and say it’s one specific thing—but you get a lot of...a lot of...what we call “Nancys” or “Marys” and those are the really kind of queenie or really bitchy kind of gay guys and when I first came out, those were the first guys that I really met. Yeah. I was scared to death, girl. I was like, “Oh my god! If this is how the gay community is, I don’t want anything of it.”

“I would say that meeting other people through [group] was really good for me. Even they weren’t Hmong, you would say that I learned how to be a lesbian from them. One of our group leaders, she always said being a lesbian doesn’t give you license to be a screw up and start sleeping with everyone around you. You still gotta be the best person you can be, but you just like women. For me, it was also really important that one of them was also a pastor, and she really taught me a lot that God still loves me, and who I am is not a sin. I mean, I still fight against that all the time because it’s so ingrained in me that I’m a sinner, but now I have another voice to fight that message.”

## **DOMAIN 2: Language**

In general, participants expressed difficulty with finding the right Hmong language to express who they are and to come out to their families. It was typical that participants tried to find the right Hmong word, but often resorted to the word “gay” in English, which they believe is well-understood by even limited-English speaking Hmong.

***Theme 6: Participants are not familiar with non-derogatory Hmong language to***

***describe themselves.*** Most participants either don’t know what Hmong language to use

or resort to descriptors and direct translations of English terms. In addition, participants shared the variety of different phrases they have heard, such as phrases that seem purely descriptive but differ in the nuance in which it is used to a phrase that one participant admitted she didn't fully comprehend.

"I personally just say, "*poj nom*," which means "queen" or I just say "*nws nyiam txiv neej*" which means, "he likes boys."

"Um...*tus ntawd tsis ncaj*. You know, "he's not straight." Um...that one I hear a lot. Yeah, it's something kind of like young people have developed because basically they take the English definition of it, like, "He's not straight," and they translate it into Hmong, but mostly young kids."

This participant poses the question of what it means that there is no word for him in Hmong:

"I've only heard *kathoy*, or *poj nyiam nyiam poj nyiam... txiv neej nyiam txiv neej xwb*, which means a girl like a girl or a guy like a guy. I think sometimes it (not having a word for gay) makes me feel kind of like, do I belong?"

***Theme 7: Participants typically mentioned the word "kathoy" but did not fully understand what that means, only that people have used it to refer to people who are gay.*** Participants had a mixed understanding of the word and its origins, but almost all mention it when asked about language issues. While the Thai word "kathoy" primarily refers to men who dress as women, and not necessarily denote their sexual orientation, participants often talked about how Hmong, due to not having a word of their own, have borrowed that word to refer to LGBT folks in general. In addition, participants seem to struggle themselves with this word, its origins, and what it denotes.

"There's a Thai word that Hmong people use as a Hmong word and what that word is *kathoy*, which they basically they translate it into, I guess, a transsexual or someone who has had their sex changed."

"There is a word that is used by Hmong people but it's not actually Hmong. I think it's like Laotian or Thai or Vietnamese or something. That word is *kathoy*,

but to my understanding from asking people that word is used more for the cross dresser or a man wanting to be a woman. So, I guess like my mom said, “there’s not really a word for what you are.”

### **DOMAIN 3: Coming Out**

Although this entire study is focused on the theme of coming out, to honor the rich accounts that participants shared, this domain discusses the mechanics of coming out, such as what participants think about, what they say, and how they do it.

***Theme 8: Participants talk about feeling “different” from others. Most discussed knowing from an early age that they were either gay or different.*** Participants all discussed a feeling of “differentness” that eventually evolved into an understanding of their sexual orientation.

“I’ve kind of always known that I liked boys, I just never knew what to call it. From when I was little, I’ve always been attracted to boys and girls. And then, while growing up, I’ve always been attracted to both sexes. But, it was always like this: the story that I give everyone is, let’s say I was in kindergarten and then let’s use, um...well, I forget the names...I could be coloring with a girl, right? Like a little girl...I could be coloring with her in her coloring book and I’m like, “Oh, she’s really cute,” and then I can look to my best friend in kindergarten and think, “But he’s cute too.”

“I’ve always known I was different from the time I was little. Because I remember being in third grade...I had a teacher and he was so cute. And I thought he was the cutest teacher in the entire world and on some level I always knew that that...and I never told anybody, even at that age, because on some level I felt that it wasn’t something that you could say to anybody.”

“I think for me, it started in junior high, when all of us were changing. I kept noticing that I noticed the girls much more, and was like, “Hello, baby!” I mean, I kept this all to myself and actually just kinda thought that I was curious about how other girls were developing because I was curious about myself. I was a little wrong. It was the beginning. The beginning of my lesbian ways. (laughs).”

“I’ll say that I never really thought about it too much. I mean, I had boyfriends, but in high school, I started to think, this isn’t me, but you know, I didn’t really



know why I kept feeling that way. And then I started noticing that I liked girls in a way that my other friends, they didn't like girls, and I totally would get what the guys were saying about girls, like, wow, check out [name], she's really hot, and secretly, I would agree with them, but I would never say anything. That was when I thought, okay, something's totally up."

**Theme 9: Participants often evaluated safety before coming out, and often came out to women first.** It was typical for participants to engage in a lot of internal evaluation regarding who and how they would come out. In general, there was a resounding perspective that women would be more understanding was often expressed. With the exception of one participant who came out to her entire family at once, everyone came out to a female friend or relative first; however, the female relative was often not participants' mothers but rather a sister, cousin, or aunt.

"I came out to girls first because I guess with me back then, the whole Hmong guys had a big ego. They had the whole pride thing. That's just my own personal opinion, but that's how I felt, so I guess I came out to girls first because I was comfortable with that. And I was more comfortable I came out to my straight guy friends. And they've been accepting of it, so that's a good thing."

"I came out to my sisters first, then my brothers. A year later, I finally came out to my parents, but they pretty much already knew it because there are no secrets in my family. I think they were just waiting, hoping it wasn't true."

"I know that the females would be more accepting, yeah...because girls have a tendency to accept the gays more. I don't know why. I don't know how, but a lot of females have a tendency to accept the gays more...but it hasn't been scientifically proven or anything...but it's like a vibe that you kind of get to."

**Theme 10: Participants come out because they want to be more honest and authentic.** It was typical for participants to cite wanting to be able to be open about who they are, and wanting others to see them authentically. A variant number of participants were influenced by no longer wanting to hide their partners.

"I wanted to better myself. I was tired of pretty much just being on the down-low, being like, "What happens if somebody finds out?" You know? I was just

tired of creeping around—there you go!—creeping around. So, I was just like, “Oh my goodness....”

“One day, I was looking at my kids, and realized, if I don’t, I’m always going to be ashamed of who I am, and they’re going to be ashamed of who I am and who they are. This is me, and I wanted them to know that it’s okay to be who you are.”

“And then it happened one day—I had my first experience. And I can’t say with who or what or when or why but it happened and it was like—at that moment—“Yeah, I am all gay. There is no more lying to myself. I am gay.” I loved it, you know?”

“I just knew that I had to tell people. Part of it was, my girlfriend, she pretty much said she was sick of being in the closet with me, and I wanted to show her that I was serious about us, so I decided to just do it. We’re still together, and I’m glad. I think if I didn’t do it, I would’ve lost her. I mean, it’s been really hard, but you know, she was right. It would’ve been harder on us as a couple if she had to keep living in the closet with me.”

***Theme 11: Participants often yearned for resources and support.*** They talked about their processes in preparing to come out. It was typical for participants to talk about how having access to supports and resources could have helped; however, they also admitted that not having these did not stop them from coming out. This often meant that they felt more alone, but also allowed for some creativity in how they came out. In response to questions about change, participants often responded with their own realizations that by coming out, their entire lives would be changed, particularly in how others saw and related to them.

“I didn’t know I’d need a support group; I think it would have helped if I knew about all the resources, it would help a lot, but there were no resources, so I had to resource myself.”

“I think it would help a lot if I actually talked to people about what would happen if I come out before I come out so I would know what’s coming my way instead of just coming out and knowing nothing about what’s going to happen...but you never know what’s going to happen when you come out, you know?”

“I really thought a lot about that. As you can imagine, I was divorced. People already were saying all these bad things about me. I thought, can I put my family through this? It took me years to even realize I am a lesbian. So really, could I do this? I knew I could survive, but I wasn’t sure about my family. I knew that they already carried the stigma of me being divorced. And my kids. I was really worried about them, especially since they still have visitation with my ex. His parents, his whole family already call me a slut, *mej cab* (prostitute), you know, every kind of name in the book. If they didn’t see him or his family, I wouldn’t worry as much as protecting them, but because they do, I worried a lot about how that would affect them. I still worry, but not as much...I think I knew that a lot would change, but I’ve also been through so much that I knew I could ride it out. I was most afraid was what my family would think, my kids, and then worried about protecting them all.”

“I think just to talk to other people so that I didn’t feel so alone. I mean, I knew that there were other GLBT Hmong people out there, you know? I heard about SOY and stuff, but it seemed like it was all the gay boys, and I didn’t really know where to find the Hmong girls. That woulda been good just to know their experiences.”

**Theme 12: *Participants were afraid of rejection, primarily from their families, and especially their parents.*** All participants expressed the fear of being rejected from their families and what that would mean to them. This ranged from the fear of being physically kicked out of their homes to emotional distance, disapproval, and disappointment.

“I was more worried at the time about how my parents were going to take it especially because you know how in Hmong community, *koj lub qe* (literally “your egg,” meaning “your reputation”) means everything. You know, like ever since you were little, the only thing you hear is, “*Xav txog koj lub qe, xav txog koj lub qe,*” (akin to “Think of your reputation, think of your reputation”) and I knew that something like this was going to embarrass my dad. My dad is pretty respected in my clan, which is why I’m out to most of my family members and I said something to him once but I’m not out to my clan at all, mostly because I’m scared about what my being gay will do to his reputation.”

“This is my biggest fear is when my family finds out—no one will want me. Who’s going to want someone like me? Someone who has a bad rep now because he’s a gang banger and he’s doing drugs and on top of that, he broke

into someone...his own aunt's and uncle's house to steal stuff to deal more drugs and on top of that he's gay?"

"I was the most afraid of my parents. I didn't want them to think I was failing them, or that I was doing this to be a bad person. My whole life, I've tried to be what they want, and I was really afraid that this would change how they feel about me."

This participant discussed his realization that his greatest fear was within himself:

"...how my family and my friends would react, those were my number one priorities right there. But here's the thing: after I knew that they would accept me, like, you know, just not my parents or my brother...but I figured, "How would my cousins think of...about me? How would they think about me? Would they still treat me the same way? Would my friends treat me the same way? Would they think differently?" Yeah, but after I had known that, you know, a lot of people are actually really more comfortable about it than I am and the issue wasn't just with them, the issue was within. Yeah, the issue was within: Am I ready to tell them? I mean, they all knew. (Laughs.) They all knew because, come on, I'm very flamboyant. They all knew; the only thing was that they were waiting for me to tell them because it's like a "don't ask, don't tell" policy and it's out of respect."

**Theme 13: *Participants discussed the mechanics of how they came out, which***

***ranged from difficult conversations to very public mediums.*** Variant participants, in particular male participants, talked about coming out initially as bisexual.

"So, when you first come out...when gay guys first come out they usually come out as bi because it leaves that door partially open for you to go back if you don't like it. You know what I mean? So, it's half-way there. This side would be straight, this side would be gay. Bi would be right in the middle, the bridge that crosses it, so you can change your mind anytime you want... So...I came out as bi and then a couple months after that it was like, "Are you still bi?" And I'm like, "No, I'm gay as hell." (Laughs.)"

"The first one I came out to...had to be my girl friend at that time because I told her that, "I think I'm gay. I'm gay and we've been together for..." when I moved up her she was still living in [state] and I told her that I think I'm gay and that I think...um...we never had sex and so I said, "Hey, I think we've never had sex and I'm not comfortable with you sexually at that level because sexually I'm not attracted to girls." So, I told her that, "You know, it's a year now, why are we not having sex, you know?"

“I think I said something like, “Hey, you guys, guess what? You know my friend [Name]? Well, she’s really my lesbian lover, and so, guess I’m a lesbian.” They laughed. It was pretty funny, but then I wasn’t laughing. I was kinda stupid. I started crying, like totally bawling my eyes out. They have never seen me cry. That was when they realized, something’s up. After I calmed down, I told them, yep, I think I’m kinda gay. They were fine, then everyone freaked out when my sister [name] said, “So who’s gonna tell Mom and Dad?” A few months after that, I told my brothers. I pretty much just said, “Hey guys, I think I’m a lesbian. All the sisters know.” My older brother [name], he just said, “Are you sure?” I said yes, and that was that.”

Two participants talked about coming out in fairly public mediums. The following participant discussed trying to come out and prepare his mother for the publicity:

“I chose my mom first because, I guess, my dad and I were never really close, never really had that bond, I guess, so I felt more close to my mom and so I came out to her. And the start of the conversation was really, really difficult. Well, I don’t live with them, so it was just weird for me to all of a sudden come visit them, you know, out of the blue. It was an awkward feeling for me. I mean, they were doing their own thing. I told my mom, “You know, I have [something coming out in a public medium]”...and she was like, “Oh, what’s in [it]?” And I was like, “Oh, it’s about me coming out gay,” you know? And she then asked, “Why are you doing this?””

***Theme 14: Participants felt liberated about coming out even if it was a bad***

***experience.*** Words such as “happy,” “relieved,” “healthier,” “free,” and “myself” were often used to expressed how it felt to come out.

“Relieved. Really relieved. Like, let’s see...like Times Square had been lifted off of my shoulders. There you go. And Times Square is huge. (Laughs.) So, it felt really good, knowing that regardless I was still accepted.”

“It’s been a rough ride, but yeah....all worth it.”

“No matter what happens, or what has happened, I’m so glad I came out. I feel healthier. Relieved. Open. Honest. [Partner] and I can live openly now with my family. I know I hurt a lot of people, and I never wanted to. It wasn’t my intention, and I’m sorry that they’re hurt, but I have to live my life too, and for me, it has been worth it. I wasn’t going to keep suffering in silence just to be a good Hmong girl.”

**Theme 15: Participants encourage others who are thinking about coming out to know themselves well and to seek supports before doing so.** All participants especially encouraged having sources of physical and emotional safety and often cautioned others to prepare for the emotional toll of coming out.

“If they’re going to come out: the first question I would probably ask is, are you ready? Second questions I would probably ask is, have you weighed your pros and cons? I mean, the pros and cons have a lot to do with it, but “are you ready?” ...Mentally, will you be able to handle it? Emotionally, are you strong enough? ...because there’s going to be some people who accept you but there’s going to be some people who reject you and on top of that, ...there’s a real difference from being in the closet where nobody knows to being out of the closet where everyone knows.”

“If they’re young, they should really wait until they’re, like I said, financially stable enough...before they come out. I think it’s easier if they think about what’s going to happen to you if you told your family that you are gay or GLBT before you come out. Be prepared. Really be prepared of what’s coming your way because sometimes what you don’t expect will hit you hard, so...Prepare mentally and prepared for both parties—understand that your parents don’t have the knowledge about GLBT issues and understand where they’re coming from and don’t just expect them to understand you because they’re not going to understand you.”

“Definitely make sure you’re gay, because this is not anything to joke about. And you can’t take it back. Also make sure that you have lots of support. Like me, I knew that if no one else supported me, I’d have my sisters, and that’s all that mattered.”

“I would say do a lot of therapy. Find a good counselor to help you really work on your issues first before you come out. Before I went to a counselor, I used to make fun of them and people who go to them. Now, I realize, I would’ve died without my counselors. Literally. When I first got divorced, I was so suicidal. Then when I started with the whole being attracted to women, I really was suicidal. My counselors – I wish that they could’ve known how much they meant to me.”

#### **DOMAIN 4: Family**

The presence of family in participants’ lives was threaded throughout their stories.

Families seemed to play numerous and contradicting roles in supporting participants as

well as inducing external and internal shame about sexual orientation. In addition, some families also responded by being accepting, others by rejecting, and typically by doing some combination of both.

**Theme 16: *Families become closer, and in a variant of cases, become more***

***protective of participants.*** Variant participants discussed how the openness fostered a better understanding. Other participants talked about how their family's acceptance and love humbled them.

“Usually, it’s my friends and my family that are very protective of me. I have a...four-foot-nine...aunt that got really mad because somebody actually had a problem with me being gay and we were eating out and she actually stood up on a chair—and she’s not even up to my shoulders—and she was ready to fight somebody. He was like two times bigger than me.”

“Some of them (relationships) have actually gotten better. I became actually a lot more close to some people who were a little bit more distant back then before I came out.”

“It’s more awkward now, but you know what? It made me realize how much my family loves me enough to still include me, even though I know that they don’t understand. And my mom, she just told me straight up, “I don’t understand you, but you’re my child and as long as you’re happy, I’m happy.” That meant the world to me. It really did. It was the first time I realized how much my mom loves me, to be able to say that, you know? (crying).”

“So, we started talking again and I went over and stayed with my friend and my other family and I finally came out to them and they saw me and they were like, “Oh my god, what did you do to yourself?” I still had marks from all my addictions. And I said, “This is what...this is what your [I’ve been] going through. I’m gay and I can’t deal with it and this is how I dealt with it.” And they started crying and I called all three families together without my mom and dad and I sat everyone down and told them my whole everything...my life story...why I’ve lied to them, why I’ve stole from them, how I’ve used them and how bad I feel and how I want to pay them back. I felt like they [finally] understood where I was coming from.”

**Theme 17: *Families respond with, “We always knew,” and often surprised***

***participants with their acceptance.*** Participants were often most surprised by family

members who indicated that they had guessed the participant's sexual orientation, and by their acceptance of it.

"I think it was, "Oh my gosh, I knew! I was just waiting for you to tell me!" Yeah, I think it was that. The girls were...a lot of the girls were like that...a lot of the guys were like "Dude, we already knew. We already knew, we were just waiting for you to tell us." Let's see...there was a surprise because—what is it?—how accepting my cousins and my friends were."

"So, I was sleeping in her room and we were just talking and laughing and talking and laughing and I was like, "Hey, you know, I have something to tell you." And she goes, "Okay." And I was like, "I'm gay." And by this time I knew I wasn't bisexual, I was gay. And I was like, "I'm gay," and she goes, "Yeah, we knew." And so that was the reaction. She was like, "Yeah, we knew. We were just waiting for you to tell us."

"Like I said, my sisters supported me, and so did my brothers. They didn't really say much. I think they were all just worried about my parents and the relatives. For them, it wasn't that big a deal. It really wasn't. That surprised me."

***Theme 18: Families respond by rejecting or distancing from participants.*** Concerns ranged from worries about the reputation of the family to how participants would fulfill their familial obligations to have children. One participant talked about his parents' inability to relate to his partner in a manner that made sense culturally to them. Throughout participants' stories, the concern that seemed to surface repeatedly for families, and parents in particular, is how participants will be able to marry and have children and families of their own.

"When they found out, it was really hard. My mom didn't talk to me for a while and she would like...well, me, my mom and my dad were really close and when that happened, she pretended that she didn't know me and I pretended I didn't know her and we were living in the same household and we just walked past each other like we were ghosts..."

"...and it's hard because of the fact that I'm the oldest too and they say that, "If you're like that, people are going to look down on you and the family's name and reputation and your brothers are never going to get married and no one's going to marry your sisters" and, I guess, they blamed...well, they think this is



going to happen because of me and so they actually blame everything on me because I'm gay."

"Some concerns was that she said, "Maybe you're just thinking like that because you have friends who are, you know...who are gay. Maybe you're just curious and you just want to test it out. What about your reputation? ...in the future, what if you all of sudden don't have that attractiveness to guys and you find a Hmong girl and, you know, they bring that up—what are you going to say?" A lot of it came down to family and building a family. My response was, "It doesn't matter if I end up with a guy or a girl to me, as long as I'm happy. And I do plan adopting if I don't have kids of my own blood, you know." And even if I don't have kids I'm content with it—that's what I said to her. She still just said, "That's what you think now but you know, *lwm hnub koj xav txog ces lig dhau* (some day when you think about it, it'll be too late)," you know? It came all back to family."

This participant addressed his parent's concerns with what his partnership with another man would mean for them:

"...they don't really know who's supposed to go to whose parents to have the wedding, if we're both guys. Who's supposed to pay the *nqi* (bride price) – the money – you know?...and then there's the thing about who they (parents) will live with...they're supposed to live with me and my wife, but if I have a husband, what if his parents want to live with us too? I told them, we'll all live together. They're not sure how to be around my husband. Do they treat him like he's my wife, or like I'm his wife? You know, *thaum lawv txib koj* (when they ask you to perform chores), are they gonna ask me to do the dishes or him? For them, this is what makes them say that I'm not supposed to be with a man, because it messes with how things are supposed to be."

Of the ten participants, only one participant was asked to leave her parents' home. She discusses the ongoing distance with her family:

"I went over to my family's house, and my dad, he just said to my mom, "tell that creature to go away." My mom, she just said, "do you have a place to live?" and when I said yes, she didn't say anything anymore. It's been three years, but it hurts, but it hurts less now. Now, I'm just really, really sad that we can't have a relationship. [Partner's] family has been great... her sisters call me their sister in law, and I'm around their families all the time. We also have our friends, gay, lesbian, bi, straight. All these people love me. I wish my family could see this, but you know, it's really their loss too. I never really thought that my parents could be capable of completely throwing one of their kids out, but I guess now I know that anything's possible. When people are scared, or don't

understand, they're going to do anything, including kicking their own child out..."

**Theme 19: *Family members seem to respond differently, based on their gender, with men often having more perceived negative responses.*** With the exception of one, participants seemed to have more supportive or neutral responses from female relatives (sisters, cousins, younger aunts); however, mothers seemed to spend a great deal of time trying to “reason” with participant while fathers often responded with confusion or silence.

“...my dad didn't understand it at all. I think he doesn't want to understand. You know, my dad, he's very smart. My dad is incredibly intelligent. When he first came to this country he learned English in like four months. My dad, he's really quick. And I think it's just that my dad doesn't think it's a possibility and he doesn't accept it as a possibility, you know? It's not like he doesn't understand, it's just that he doesn't think it's a possibility.”

“I tried talking to...well, before I came out, I talked to the guys [at family functions] but now I just go there and sometimes I sit with my cousin girls and we just sit and chat and sometimes I go and talk to my aunts...my distant aunts and then I shake the guys hands and it's just easier to talk to the girls.

“He hasn't spoken or acknowledged me in three years. Can you imagine that? Three years. My mom told me that he says he wished I was dead, so that when people ask about me, he could just tell them I'm dead, but with me being alive and a lesbian, I guess it's inconvenient to him (crying).”

“My sister was...great. She was perfect...(crying). You know, sometimes they say women can be bitches, but she was exactly what I was hoping for. She helped me come out to all of our other family members, and they were in shock. My older brother, of course, had a cow and did this whole thing where he accused me of trying to shame the family. Everyone else was just quiet. My mom cried a lot and kept saying, “*Kuv tsis to taub koj li ob. Koj tsis xav ua neeg zoo los cas?* (I don't understand you. Don't you want to be a good person?)” Then my sisters started crying, but it wasn't to support her. I think they were just sad about the whole thing. My dad, though. He never said anything. I think that was the reaction that hurt me the most. He never said anything. Just sat there. That hurt.”

One participant talked about a response he got from a sister who he perceived to be more open:

“...I thought it was going to be quite liberating because my sister I always thought was really cool. Like, she would come home from college and she’d always talk about, “Oh, I hate men and I’m going to be with lesbians now.” Or she always talked about gay guys that she knew. So, I thought she was going to be totally cool. The first thing she says to me, “If you’re gay, I’m sending you [back home]. I’m sending you back [back home].” And that was the first thing she said to me when I got off the plane.”

***Theme 20: There seems to be a generational difference in who is accepting and who is not.*** For most, it seems like acceptance involves a combination of acculturation and maturity. In addition, participants also talked about how the parents of their friends and family members are often concerned that participants may have the ability to influence the sexual orientation of others.

“I honestly feel that the ones that are not of my generation or are older, they think I’m going to snap out of that phase and all of a sudden get married to a girl or someone that they want. Someone of the opposite sex and start a family...”

“...in my experience so far—which kind of surprised me—is most of my people that I’ve come out to has been really cool with it. They’ve just been really cool with it. One girl was really excited because her favorite show was Will and Grace and so she has always...So, she always wanted a Will to her Grace and I was like, “Well...” That was interesting. So, that part of it actually surprised me. ...I think that a lot of the younger Hmong kids, especially, that’s where I get the most kind of harassment from. Yeah, high school and middle school.”

“I’m a topic, a subject in our town a lot and, um...the funny thing is, all the older peoples know about it and they’re kind of iffy around me but it’s like all the younger kids, they’re like...they come and high-five and give me hugs, you know, “what’s going on?” And their parents...I’ve asked my friends and, you know, they’ll be like, “Yeah, my mom and dad are like, ‘You know, has he attempted to make any moves on you? Is he trying to turn you?’” You know, stuff like that. I laugh about that. We laugh. And I’m like, “Yeah, let’s go make out.” We just laugh it off because deep down inside I know who my friend is already and how they perceive me and they won’t even let that faze them.”

“My aunts and uncles, they tell my cousins not to hang out with me because they’re really afraid that I’m gonna make them gay or something, especially my girl cousins. But we still hang. The cousins, except for the old ones, they’re all still cool with me. One of my cousins even introduced me to her coworker, who’s a cute little lesbian, but we didn’t really click. See, they’re watching out for me.”

**Theme 21: Family members eventually learn to accept participants, including their partners.** It was the typical experience for these participants that after some distance, some family members, although not all, eventually reconciled with participants. This seemed like a unique process for all participants; however, what seemed a common thread was that parents either overcame their initial rejection in order to maintain relationships with their children, or they came to appreciate the positive qualities their children gained by being more open about themselves and the qualities their partners brought to their lives.

Yeah, they met [partner]. He came around a few times. [partner] and I have been to their place a few times. They actually really like [partner] a lot. The fact that he’s a little bit older ... so they like him. Well, now they like him, but when we first started dating—they didn’t like any of the guys I dated because of the fact that ... it was really new to them and they didn’t understand it, so I had to for the past four years, four and a half years, I had to really preach to them to get them to understand, like bring up the subject as much as possible so they would get used to the gay subject. So, every time I’m around them I go, “Hey, mom. I met this guy. Hey, dad. I met this guy.” You know, I would tell them that all the time because me and my mom are really close, and my dad.

“Now things with my brother are fine. It took us maybe a good three to four years, but finally, he and his wife are okay towards me now. This is sad, but I really think it had to do with when [girlfriend] and I got together, and then they saw that we were like any other couple. [Partner] makes a ton of money. She’s a [profession]. I think once he saw that our lives were stable, then it was okay. I don’t know what he expected. But now, we get along. He and his wife started to invite us to stuff again, and they’re good to her. We don’t get invited to extended family stuff, but that’s okay. We wouldn’t go anyway, and I think that even though he’s accepted it, he still gets embarrassed and doesn’t want to have to explain, so that’s fine.”

Variant participants also talked about how having a different understanding or explanation for why their child is gay helped parents become more accepting. For instance, the first participant talks about herbal medicine that his mother took that changed his gender, from girl to boy, thus explaining his sexual orientation. The second participant talks about his mother's struggles to find reasons for why he is gay.

“...when my mom had me, um, apparently people were talking about how I was supposed to be a girl, and so, but *kuv niam haus haus tshuaj*, and you know, the *tshuaj* that's supposed to make the kid a boy....this is something that you're supposed to drink that to make sure you get a boy. *Kuv niam haus haus tshuaj* and when I came out, I was a boy.”

“...my mom's famous answer is, well, when I was like four, we were living in [city], and I got hit by a car and it had mentally damaged me. (Laughs.) That was her response for the longest time: is the car! When my mom was first starting to deal with it, she was blaming it on things, “Oh, it was because of this....” Or the famous one was: when we were growing up as kids, my mom and my uncle would be like, “Oh, you're going to marrying my daughter, you better be very good. A high education....” and stuff like that. And that was one of my mom's things, was, “it was because they messed with his head ... and that's why he turned gay.....[but now] they truly do understand where I'm at and they see me as a better person and anybody else in the world, it doesn't matter as long as my mom and dad and immediate family see me as who I am and not for what the word or the piece of me that should stay behind closed doors anyways, and they're comfortable with it. I bring my partner around all the time. Hugs and kisses from mom and dad. You know, they're very comfortable.”

Unique in that she was the only participant with children, this respondent discussed their reaction to her sexual orientation and to her partner:

“My kids get along great with [Partner]. She actually has more patience with them. Next year, my daughter's going to college, and she wants to be a [profession] too, and so those two are always talking. My other daughter is funny. She sometimes says she wants to be a lesbian because it seems easier without “stupid boys.” I laugh at her, because she's so boy-crazy. My son, he's a little quieter. He doesn't say much. I'm sure he gets a load of crap from his dad about our life. [Partner] made a good point though. She said that it has to be hard for him to be in a house full of women. So, I worry about him, but I also try to expose him to his cousins and my brothers as much as possible.

When he was little, he always said, “Mom, I don’t care if you’re a lesbian,” but as he gets older, he gets quieter.”

**Theme 22: Participants make conscious efforts about who they decide not to tell.** For most participants, this involves not telling extended family members, although for a few participants, this includes nuclear family members as well, and usually fathers and brothers. Most participants expressed their beliefs that even though they have not formally come out to all of their relatives, because of the nature of gossip in Hmong communities, their relatives likely know.

“...my brothers...Oh my god. They are actually the only people that I’m not out to in my family. All my sisters know. I mentioned it to my dad once. My brothers are the ones that I’m kind of scared of. I’m really close to them. And my brothers are kind of protective of me because of that but at the same time I know that they’re really uncomfortable with the subject. Like, again, especially with nowadays with gay people having so much media exposure, you know, I kind of gauge where they are and see what their reaction is and stuff and some of the things that they say and some of the things that they do, I still know that they’re kind of uncomfortable with that situation. So, I haven’t come out to them yet.”

“...not told my parents...I would do anything, you know, to try to keep anything... me telling them would break their hearts. And since I am the only son in the family, yeah...being gay wouldn’t satisfy them. It wouldn’t make them throw a party, let’s just say that. They won’t be like, “Hooray! My kid’s gay.” Knowing my parents, they’d probably ball their eyes out because they love munchkins.”

“I feel no need to tell anyone outside of my family, so aunts, uncles, those kind of people. I told a bunch of cousins. It was alright. My grandma, she said to me one time, your mom said you don’t like boys? I said yes, that’s true. She just said, wait til you get married, then you’ll change your mind. Is it just me, or does that not make any sense?”

A participant, who no longer has contact with her parents, talks about a poignant moment she had with her aunt:

“I have not come out to anyone else in my family. I’m sure they all talk about me though. But I don’t see any of them. I did run into my aunt last year at the

store. She said to me, is it true? Are you living like a man and wife with another woman? And I said yes. She said, how do you have sex? How will you have kids? I got a little smart-ass on her. I mean, how offensive! I just said to her, we have sex almost like how you have sex, but much, much better. And as for kids, I'm just going to buy myself some good sperm like every other lesbian I know. She just shook her head. She was funny, though. She insisted on giving me some peaches from her grocery bag, and that was it. She said to me, 'No matter what I'm your aunt and even though I have no idea what you're doing, I want to make sure you don't starve.' It was kinda sweet – something my own parents couldn't say, and that made it more bittersweet. So, yeah, I don't see any of them anymore, and I'm not sorry. I feel sad, but I know that for them, it's really hard to even understand, so I just don't go there."

***Theme 23: Participants often react to reactions of friends/family with a wide range of feelings, from surprise to devastation.*** The reactions to negative parental responses seemed to be the most hurtful, even when participants anticipated it.

"You know, it really hurt me emotionally. When she said that tears dropped from my eyes. It was, you know, "I've never made you mad at me; I've never done anything wrong, you know. I'm the son that you guys always come to when you need help and for you to make me feel this way..." I was really angry inside and at the same time really hurt, you know. I guess when she said that a lot of emotions came through that I never felt before, you know? It was just, man, I know I've felt something similar to this but not this much. It was a lot...I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't talk to her then. I just sat there and listened to her say what she needed before I would say something."

"...one time, my dad—at a gathering—went to all the...*cov neeg coj noj coj haus es lawv zaum* and they were talking and when I came in, he got up and he walked away and then really hurt me. So...um...I just went to say "Hi" to my mom and then I just walked out. I feel like, you know...things, you really learn a lot...actually, I really learned a lot about my family, about how Hmong...how important their name and their reputation, how important it is to them. I learned that."

"I was so surprised by my mom. To be honest, I thought for sure she was gonna kick me out. I guess I didn't give her enough credit. She tells me all the time now that she's proud of me, and even though I can tell that she's not that comfortable with [Partner], but she's okay with her, and will greet her and talk to her, and for now, I guess that's good enough."

This participant in particular talks about using his anger and frustration to help relatives better understand the oppression he has faced by drawing upon their experiences with racism:

“I try to show them...try to picture to them...try to tell them, “This is how it feels for me being isolated from our people as well as you being isolated from the Americans. How they pick and prod at you because you have black hair, yellow skin, or your eyes are too slanty or...” you know? So, I just give them a picture...”

### **DOMAIN 5: Gender Role Expectations**

In this domain, the gender expectations participants experience are discussed. These often involve different family responsibilities for men and women. In addition, participants also express their perceptions in the different challenges men and women have in coming out.

*Theme 24: There are clear messages from families about expectations to marry and produce children.* Both male and female participants talked about both overt and covert messages about the duty to marry and have a family. Participants expressed a myriad of feelings, from freedom and relief to sadness and disappointment at the realization that they would not be able to carry out this responsibility, or at least carry it out in “traditional” heterosexual ways. Variant participants also talked about learning to find a new set of gender “rules” to live by.

“...in the Hmong culture, boys are supposed to have kids because that’s what parents want, okay? The youngest son has to have kids regardless...and if there’s only one son that son’s supposed to have kids or else generation-wise dies there...Because I am the only son it is not that easy to come and once I’ve come out now, that’s the only thing that’s holding me back now...I mean, if I could stick with men and have kids at the same time, I would so do it—I would tell my parents straight out right now: “I am gay as hell.” But I can’t sleep with men and have kids, you know? So, that’s the only thing that keeps me from outing myself totally.”



“... as a Hmong person you’re told from when you were really little, you were supposed to marry a girl and start a family and that was like the pinnacle of what you could do and that was what from the time you’re fifteen, your parents kind of tell you that you will marry a respectful girl and have kids and raise those kids and that was the best that you could hope for and the best that you could do...And so I grew up with that mindset until I came out and when I came out, I knew all of that would change...no matter how much my dad wanted it to happen, it wasn’t going to...and, again, that was something that was sad because it was something that I was taught since I was a little and something I hung onto for such a long time, but at the same time it was quite liberating because I knew I wasn’t under that pressure anymore and from that point on I really could do what I wanted and to do what made me feel happy. So, that I knew was going to change. Like I said before, I knew that my relationship with straight guys was going to change. My relationship with straight girls was going to change too...”

“I think my parents pretty much had a limited view of men and women. There was no question. Boys like girls. Girls like boys. They get married, have babies, continue the chain. You know, that’s how Hmong people are. We were supposed to be good Christian Hmong girls. My parents would let us go places as a group, but they didn’t really let us date. They told us we should be pure and all that. You know, be a virgin until you get married... So being a lesbian is probably opposite of being a good Christian Hmong girl. Obey the man. That’s what my mom always said, even though she’s the one that really runs my dad. So, I’m like, okay, but what if I’m a lesbian – who should obey who? I don’t know. I guess I have to figure that out.”

“Clearly in my family, you were supposed to get married and have kids. There was no question about being gay or lesbian. That didn’t even exist in people’s minds. Especially for my family, since my parents are more traditional, we girls did all the girl things – babysit, clean, cook, that kind of thing. I remember having guys come out to visit us at home because we couldn’t go out on dates. My brothers didn’t have those responsibilities, but they always had to attend stuff with my dad, especially my older brothers. That was just how life was. No one really questioned it except for when we didn’t want to do something, then someone would complain, “How come the boys don’t have to do this?” My mom would always say, “This will make you a good wife.” When I decided to divorce my husband, I knew I was going into uncharted territory for my family. After that, well, this (coming out) wasn’t so bad.”

**Theme 25: Participants try to behave in “gender-appropriate” ways.** It was typical for participants to view this as the expression of different facets of who they are while variant participants expressed feeling stifled by these expectations.

“...when I’m with my girl cousins, I can be effeminate, but when I’m around my guy cousins I’m totally different. You know, I slouch a little more and, you know, I start to get that macho swagger a little bit and I say “Dude” a lot... Yeah, and with [female cousins], I’m completely different. I’m chit-chatty and I talk about Angelina Jolie...you know, things that you can’t really relate to your guy cousins. So, it’s still me but it’s just different facets of who I am.”

I was [a good Hmong girl] for a really long time, which was how I ended up getting married at 16, having kids before I knew where they were coming from, taking care of my in-laws, not going to college until later, and I was miserable.

“I’ve done it, but it’s like...*tej thaum* (some times), it’s the first cousin, second cousin, they expect a lot, like, especially *ua neeb nab, neeb ua dab qhuas* (performing *neeb* and other traditional Hmong ceremonies)...they want...I don’t mind doing it, but it’s just like, it’s just too much. (Sighs).It’s way too much. I don’t understand the...what or why they do those ceremonies. It’s hard for—I don’t even know what they’re talking about when they do it.”

***Theme 26: There are some gender differences in coming out, although participants varied in their perceptions of challenges for men and women.*** In general, there was a sense that there may be less pressure for women who come out because the cultural expectations of them are different. For example, for most male participants, there is the expectation to continue the family name, which is perceived to be virtually impossible if he is engaged in a romantic relationship with another man. One female participant suggested that a certain freedom in the oppressed position of being a woman in that people “care less” about one’s activities. A male participant suggested that it is more socially acceptable to force misbehaving daughters to marry and thus become someone else’s “problem.” Another participant discussed the safety issues involved in being a lesbian.

“I think it would be easier also but that’s just my perspective, that’s just my thought. It’s just one mind out of a million, but from my opinion I think it would be easier because women are still able to have children and parents want children, so as long as they find somebody who’s willing to be a donor, then they can still have children.”

“...I really do think that it’s easier for lesbians, but I think it tends to be a little more socially acceptable. Like, being a lesbian, it will be frowned upon but they don’t have the stigma that I think that gay guys do. Because I think that gay men tend to be cast as the boogey man more than the lesbians do, so I think there’s a little more pressure and a little more fear in that. So, there’s a huge difference in the lesbian and gay Hmong community.”

“*Poob ntsej muag* (to lose face) is the same, but carrying the family names, mainly *cov tub* (the sons). *Hos tus ntxhais, koj mus yuav txiv ces koj pais ua lawv tus neeg lawm* (But the daughters, when you get married, you become a part of their family). You become their people, you’re not your parents’ *dab qhuas* (spiritual circle) anymore, you’re their *dab qhuas* (spiritual circle), so to carry the family name, I think it’s more on the guys, but *poob ntsej muag* (lose face) – I think there’s no difference, regardless if you’re a guy or girl. *Poob ntsej muag* (Losing face) is still *poob ntsej muag* (losing face).”

“There are people out there who think that as a woman, you just gotta get the right dick in you, and then you’ll be okay again. I was [worried about that] at first, but now I’m not. When I first came out, I always thought, it could be possible, maybe even my own family would encourage it, or find someone to do it. I really, really thought that for real, but now I’m not so scared. Still, as a woman, you always gotta be thinking that. I bet none of the gay guys have said this, huh?”

“The guys, they have different expectations from their families, like carrying on the family name, so I think that’s more pressure. Us girls, our families don’t really care as much as long as we don’t embarrass them. I know it’s kinda sad, but we’re not really important enough for some people to really care, but I do know that for some people, even if they’re girls, their parents go ballistic.”

## **DOMAIN 6: The Role of Religion**

Religion did not seem to be significant to most participants, with the exception of one who had an experience with a priest that changed his life. Participants seemed to have mostly negative or neutral experiences and also discussed some of the differences they saw between Christian and non-Christian Hmong and their reactions to being gay or lesbian.

**Theme 27: Religion has mostly been a positive or neutral experience.** Although a few participants discussed having to overcome the messages of sin, the spiritual and religious experiences they had in regards to their sexual orientation seemed either neutral or positive. Much of these experiences involved participants coming to peace with their sexual orientation through their spiritual beliefs or through the encouragement of a representative of their beliefs.

“It does make me worry, but I figure that...here’s the thing, also, before I was even born, God has already had a plan for me. Maybe he wants me to be the way I am so that I can reach out to the ones who are lonely, the ones who don’t have the people there, or the ones that don’t have the people there, or the ones who are feeling the same way I do. Maybe that’s his way of me doing my missionary work.”

“I think that if I were more religious, maybe I’d feel more guilty or something. Occasionally, I do think, am I sinning? But I think God loves me no matter what. So I would say, not really. I do know people who are constantly being guilted by their churches and families, but for me, that doesn’t even really play a part in my life.”

“Occasionally, some of my aunts or uncles will tell my mom that they heard about a really good shaman who could “cure” my lesbianism...”

In particular, this participant talked about a life-changing exchange he had with a priest:

“...and I started crying and all of sudden a priest tapped me on the shoulder and said, “What did you do so wrong that brings tears to your eyes.” And I looked up and I didn’t know what to say, I just kept on crying and I couldn’t talk and he’s like...and I’m like, “I’m gay. God says it’s wrong for us to be gay and we’re going to hell. My culture says it wrong and I’m going to hell. What do I do?” I told him my life, I spilled it out. “Since the age of thirteen, I’ve tried to kill myself. Every single time I attempt, I don’t kill myself. Why is that? I pray to god that he takes me. Why doesn’t he take me? I’m done. I can’t deal...I can’t live like this.” ...he tapped me on the shoulder and he gave me a hug and he said, “There’s nothing wrong with being gay.” He said, “No one’s perfect; that’s why we’re human. We are here to do his work and how we perceive it is on your spiritual being and how well you are connected.” He looked at me and he goes, “You are not meant to die. You were put here by god for some reason. For some reason or another, you have not done your job.” And then he gave me a hug and

he goes, ‘God loves all his children, regardless how people perceive it in the book and how they teach it—it’s on them because they are man and man can perceive things differently from what god tells us. And man did write the book.’”

***Theme 28: Christian Hmong receive more formalized negative messages about being gay, which can often pose more internal conflict for participants.*** The tendency for more organized religions to link homosexuality and sin was often mentioned. Non-Christian Hmong also faced barriers; however, they perceived that they were more likely to feel conflict brought on by external cultural factors.

“I see it with a lot of my other Christian Hmong gay friends, they tend to have more of an internal struggle with it, like with the morality of it and I think for us it’s more of a cultural struggle, because it’s us trying to get other people to be more accepting of it. Yeah, and I think that’s a big difference. For us, it’s more external and for them it’s more internal.”

“I think Shamanism would be a little bit easier to come out because here’s the thing: the expectations for you is not that great, culture-wise. Like, Shamanism, you still have to do the drinking, the dinners, the parties and everything like that, but here’s the thing: they’ll still tell you it’s wrong but there’s not a back-up belief-belief to pound it constantly into your head.”

“Oh, yeah. Sometimes I still get it in my head that I’m a sinner, and then I have to go, wait, you’re not. You’re one of God’s kids and you’re fine. But thinking about that sinning thing, that’s hard. I don’t even really know why it’s a sin to be gay, but whatever. I’m over it now.”

### **DOMAIN 7: Intra/Inter Cultural Experiences**

In this domain, the complex relationships participants experience with other gays and lesbians of the same culture and of different cultures is explored. There tended to be some feelings of commonality with Hmong and other Asian American gays and lesbians while it was typical for participants to experience cultural misunderstandings and mishaps with other cultural groups, particularly with Whites.

**Theme 29: Participants' experiences with other Asians are a mixture of support, affirmation, and challenge.** While variant participants found it affirming to have shared similarities with other gay and lesbian persons of similar ethnic/racial backgrounds, variant others expressed more confusion and “drama.”

“It really was affirming a lot. Like I said, you feel like an outsider in the mainstream culture...you're a gay person but, like I said, you feel like an outsider in gay culture because you are a Hmong person. And then meeting these other gay guys, it's like, “You know, you're not alone in this. There are these other gay Hmong people that are here.” Like, it's...it's cool because you can talk about *tua qaib* (butchering chickens) and they know exactly what you're talking about, you know?”

“I'd love to find someone. Not a Hmong girl, though. Hmong girls are way too dramatic. I tried dating one once, and it was like a total soap opera, so I thought, not again. She wasn't out. You know, I wasn't out for a long time too, but she was really dramatic – suicide attempts, the whole thing. After almost a year together, I got out of there. I already got my own drama, girl, I did not need hers too. She was sweet, though, you know? I knew where she was coming from, but at some point, you just gotta be who you are, and she was fighting that the whole time. I finally told her, listen, I can't be with you if we gotta go through this all the time. I did not come out to my family only to go back in the closet with you. It was hard. I thought, she's Hmong, she'll understand. And that was the good thing. We totally understood where we were each coming from, you know, but my personality and hers are totally different.”

This participant talked about his struggle with an Asian American, but not Hmong, partner, who has indicated that the participant's parents are not welcome to live with them, despite the participant feeling that as the eldest son, he should offer his parents a home when they become more elderly:

“I've learned a lot from them. Even though they're [Asian],...I think if he was to, you know, if we were to be together forever and my parents—he's not liable to the Hmong culture, which I doubt he's going to stand [it]...”

**Theme 30: Participants often experienced stereotyping and lack of understanding from others in Mainstream LGBT communities.** These misunderstandings often came

with both bad and good intentions, from people who made racist insensitive comments to people who were genuine in their attempts to understand the cultural issues participants faced but couldn't. One participant talked about her preference for dating "American" women because of the perception that they have less cultural baggage.

"I think that the gay community tends to have a big racism community as well. You know, it's hard because in the gay community the Asian people are considered a fetish, which I hate and I detest. It's like why am I a fetish?"

"...well, because a lot of *Mis Kas* (American) people don't understand our rituals and our ways and a lot of it does affect my relationship with men because there are some gay guys who are just really against my culture because *peb tua qaib, tua npua li ntawd nab* (we butcher chickens, we butcher pigs and such) and so with them it's a big deal. So, I've met a few guys who are like, "Oh, I will date a Vietnamese person and I'll date a Chinese person, but I won't date a Hmong person because I can't. I don't agree...I won't date a Shaman Hmong person because I don't agree with their religion."

"...when you first come out, you basically feel like nothing, like there's no one there. You really do feel kind of a lone. I was the only gay person I knew when I first came out that was Hmong...and especially in the gay community, it seems to be such a white populated place, which is completely socially isolating in and of itself because you can relate to them as a gay person but because you're a minority, there's a huge difference, you know? So, I could talk to them about my dad, you know, and they would listen but you knew that they wouldn't really understand."

This participant talks about how dating "*MisKas*" or "American" women is easier because they don't have the additional cultural barriers that she faces as a double minority:

"I pretty much stick to dating *Mis Kas* girls. In some ways, it's harder because they don't really understand some of the cultural stuff, but then in some ways it's easier because they don't have as much of the cultural stuff to deal with. It's more important for me that I'm dating someone Christian, though, but not someone who's way extreme. I understand that better than someone who does the shaman stuff."

## DOMAIN 8: Life-Changing Lessons

Participants in this study often shared how deeply they and their lives changed as a result of coming out. In this domain, the lessons they learned about themselves and about others are presented.

***Theme 31: Participants change greatly from coming out and learn a tremendous amount about who they are as people.*** Variant participants talked about finding strength and courage in themselves that they didn't realize they had. Another variant talked about gaining a sense of peace and stability as a result of coming out. It was typical for participants to discuss seeing themselves and life differently. One participant talked about a newfound love for Hmong culture and Hmong persons.

“...when I was younger—like I said, when I first came out it was really scary for me and it was this huge scary thing. I'm actually being a banji bitch. Five years later, I'm back to being a banji bitch. And what surprised me—especially now—is how collected I am now compared to what I was before. In high school and in my teenage years I had a lot of emotional problems because of my mom passing away quite early...and so...I was really, really messed up back then. So, what surprised me the most was that after I came out is how stable I feel I am right now.”

“I want life more than anything else where before all I wanted was death. You want other things people want but also to be accepted and loved for who you are. A great remark—and I forgot who said this, but—“It's better to be hated for who you are than to be loved for something you're not.” And I've always kept that because I think, when it comes down to it at the end of the day, that's where I'm at right now: I'd prefer you to hate me for what I am than to love me for something that you want me to be or something I'm not. Does that sound alright? Closure, I guess, for right now.”

“And I'm learning to love our...my people, the Hmong people, more and more...”

“Coming out made me take responsibility for myself for the first time in my life, you know? And it forced me to be honest with myself about who I am. Yeah, I have taken things for granted in my life, and I haven't worked as hard as I shoulda, and I've gotten away with so much stuff. I finally know now that I



need to make some changes if I want the life I want, you know? Before, I always had excuses. Not anymore. I'm a better person for it (coming out) even though my family doesn't see it that way."

**Theme 32: Through coming out, participants learned a lot about others, especially Hmong culture and other people.** Participants often talked about doing additional research on Hmong culture in an effort to better integrate their identities. A variant number were surprised at the amount of LGBT Hmong they have met through these processes and sometimes saddened by hypocrisies in Hmong culture.

"I think since I came out, I've actually learned a lot about the Hmong culture, about my parents, about how Hmong people think, about how the old people thing, about how the community thinks...and sometimes I think it's just sad because people say that, "*Yog Hmoob tsis hlub Hmoob tsis muaj leej twg hlub Hmoob* (If Hmong don't care about Hmong, no one will care about Hmong), but the Hmong's not doing what they're preaching and I just think that it's sad."

Several participants discussed their surprise that there are Hmong people, including older and presumable less acculturated Hmong, who also identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered:

"I have meant older Hmong people who have identified themselves as being GLBT and so I was really surprised. I shouldn't say "surprised"—but, you know, it was just shock that someone of that age came out."

"I just wish that I knew that there were so many gay and lesbian Hmong people! I totally wouldn't have felt so lost. You know, I spent pretty much the first month at [partner's] house in bed, crying, all depressed, because I thought I had to give up being Hmong. Then I started doing searches on the internet and connecting up with other Hmong gays and lesbians. That felt really, really good. It also gives me hope, because some of them, their families have been really, really supportive. Others, their families have been like mine. And then others, their families have been even worse!"

### **DOMAIN 9: Hopes**

Participants expressed many hopes for their lives, their families, others, and hopes for acceptance.

**Theme 33: Participants want “normal” lives, such as children, a partner, success, and acceptance.** Almost all participants expressed wanting a family some day and fears that their families may not be accepted because they will be different from what Hmong culture has traditionally defined as a family. A typical amount of participants commented on the irony of wanting such “normal” lives, such as children, success, and acceptance. They also seemed to accept that they may not get any of these things, particularly acceptance.

“I would love it...you know, if my baby daddy...if my man, my husband at that time would just get along with my parents just like he would be another son also, like I would love that...and we’d have ten children running around, you know? My parents yelling at the little one because she’s putting something in her mouth or yelling at the oldest one because he’s jumping from sofa to sofa...you know, I don’t have any plans with the youngest one being a daughter or the oldest one being a son but it’s just for example. I would just...I could die that moment...I would die just the happiest person on earth. Nobody could ever be able to replace that if my parents were there and my parents were okay with me being gay and we have ten kids and we’re just one big happy family.”

“Yeah, some day I think I want to have kids, a wife, minivan, the whole thing, but right now, I’m just trying to be young, figure out myself. That’s the funny thing too. When you’re GLBT, people think you’re out there having all this sex and that you don’t want what other people do too. That’s not true.”

“My dream is to finish school, have a family some day, with someone who can really fully be my partner, and that my family can accept us as we are. I want a wedding cake where people won’t laugh because it’s two girls on top. I want us to raise our kids and just have a happy life. Maybe we’ll own a dog. My mom doesn’t like dogs though. She jokes that she might have to live with me some day because then she’ll have two daughters to take care of her, and I tell her, ‘That’s what I’m talking about.’”

These participants talk about their hope for acceptance, and one in particular comes to terms with the likelihood that he may never be fully accepted by some people:

“You know, I think the...for a while it would be different but they’ll get used to it because 1) my sister is married to a [biracial man], and first my mom was against it, but you know, the kid she never neglects it, ...I don’t think she would

treat my kids any different than my others, but there may be a little awkwardness for a while. I just don't know how long it would take, you know?"

"But the thing is, I'm kind of jaded now because I've been out for a couple of years now where I kind of know that no matter what I do, they're never going to be accepting. They're never going to just see me as a person, they're only going to see me as a gay guy."

***Theme 34: Participants ask for empathy, understanding, and looking beyond***

***prejudices and stereotypes.*** When asked for messages to other Hmong, Americans, members of the mainstream LGBT community, and clinicians and service providers, the resounding plea was to see participants as human beings.

To other Hmong:

"Even though I'm gay, I'm still human. Like them, I still eat, I still cry, I still have love, I still have...you know, the only difference is that, you know, that my partner is a man—that's the only difference, but then it's the same. There's no difference."

"This is from a movie: *"Tsis hlub tus neeg los hlub ob lub qhov muag* (Even though you don't care about me, respect me as another human being)." To me, in my mind, is how I'm coming from, how I'm putting it out, is even though we have our differences, look at me in my eye and know and love and respect that we are all Hmong."

To mainstream Americans and persons in mainstream LGBT communities:

"I think it's important for them to know that we're a community within a community and that if being gay is hard for them and it's way, way harder for us because of the fact that we have a very traditional tradition that we have to try to understand and follow because even though we live in America, our ancestors are still Hmong, they're still Hmong, and no matter what, they'll always be there."

"Everyone's got their stories, everyone's got their differences, but to get anywhere in life where we want to be, like gay rights and marriages, or anything in that aspect that needs to be talked about or put out up front is that we have to respect each other in our communities...reach ground where everyone's there before we can have hope or look forward to anything advancing because we have too many things that set us back because of our differences within that community..."

To clinicians and service providers:

“...that to take a lot of patience with them. A lot of times these guys...especially these young guys that I’m talking to...I think they really have to figure it out for themselves. You know, they’ll come to you and they’re not really expecting answers, they’re just expecting somebody to really kind of listen to them and really hear what they have to say. You know, it is really a journey of self-discovery and for that it really is incredibly personal and I think it’s a journey only they can take. Especially when you’re working with a GLBT person, most of the time, I think they just need you to listen to them and to reaffirm that they do matter and that no matter what anybody says, they do have value.”

Two participants had negative experiences with Hmong service providers:

“Just know that it’s hard to be Hmong, and now you gotta be gay too? That’s double hard. And for Hmong counselors, don’t be all weird and homophobic. I’ve known some who totally are, and that’s sad.”

“To be honest, the most bigoted people I know are Hmong service providers. They are so afraid of gay people it’s unbelievable...Can you train the Hmong counselors, teachers, workers, etc. to be more sensitive? I have heard some young people talk about how a Hmong teacher or counselor told them not to be gay or make their parents ashamed, and that’s so unprofessional. I don’t know if they can even do that. Isn’t that against what they’re supposed to be doing? So, definitely, train people to be more sensitive.”

## Chapter Five

Summary, Discussion, Conclusion, Implications and Recommendations, Limitations

### *Summary*

This study explored the internal and external dynamics of coming out for gay and lesbian Hmong, and sought to answer the questions: Who do gay Hmong men and women come out to, and what are the processes involved in making the decision to come out? How do they perceive that coming out changes their familial and social dynamics, supports, and expectations? How do gay and lesbian Hmong renegotiate these relationships with their family and community? How do gay Hmong men and women carve out meaningful identities within a homophobic culture, and how do the significant Hmong people in their lives conceptualize and understand this? What unique support systems do gay and lesbian Hmong recommend for other Hmong before, during, and after coming out? In addition, the aims of this study were to provide space for Hmong lesbians and gay men to tell their stories, to provide gay and lesbian Hmong examples of coming out, and to provide clinicians with an understanding of the unique and common issues with which Hmong lesbians and gay men must contend. From 296 pages of data, nine domains and 34 themes emerged that address different aspects of these questions and that fulfill these themes.

In the first domain, participants discussed what it means to be gay or lesbian and Hmong and the challenges they've had in integrating their identities. In addition, they address the intersection of acculturation, both into American and gay cultures. Domain 2 addressed the lack of Hmong terminology for "gay" and "lesbian." What emerged was that while language could have been useful, for these participants, it was not a

significant barrier. In Domain 3, participants discuss the internal and external “mechanics” of coming out, such as to whom, how, and fears. Domain 4 addresses the broad issue of family, which often acted as both supportive and shaming sources for most participants. In Domain 5, participants discuss their experiences with gender role expectations and how they have integrated or challenged these. The role of religion is discussed in Domain 6. Similar to past studies on Asian Americans, religion did not play a significant role for these participants. In Domain 7, participants shared their mixed experiences with other Hmong, Asians, and Mainstream LGBT peers. Domain 8 becomes more reflective as participants talk about their incredible journeys in coming out, and the lessons they’ve learned in doing so. The final domain addresses participants’ hopes for themselves and others, including yearnings for a “normal life.”

### *Discussion*

#### **Domain 1: Meaning Making**

How do we become who we are? What do we make out of that, and how does that continue to impact how we are in our lives and how we are in the world? For participants of this study, making meaning and incorporating a minority sexual orientation seemed to be an important aspect of becoming more fully who they are as people. In a heterosexist world, it would seem appropriate that when participants realized they were gay or lesbian, this makes a significant impact of their conceptualization of who they are and how they might now relate to others. For the participants who talked about how being gay or lesbian was “being myself,” there seemed to be a general sense of pride in being gay or lesbian. Additionally, there appeared to be integration in that being gay becomes only one of many dimensions of

who they are as a person, similar to the integration stage of lesbian and gay identity found in many stage models (Cass, 1979, Coleman, 1982, Troiden, 1989, D'Augelli, 1994).

All participants discussed the barriers they faced as gay and lesbian Hmong. Like many gay and lesbian people of color, there seemed to be a struggle with integrating the identities of a gay person and a person of color as well as the additional challenge of dealing with feeling out of place in both communities (Greene, 1984). Participants often cited covert and overt messages within their families and culture that Hmong people can't be gay and that being gay is a consequence of acculturating to American society. Part of this also seemed intertwined with a strong discomfort around discussing sex and relationships overall, which fits in with how traditional Hmong culture operates. For modesty's sake, sex and intimate relationships are often not discussed in Hmong families. Although being gay or lesbian is more than just about having sex, it seemed difficult to avoid having a conversation about being gay or lesbian without acknowledging the sexual piece. In addition, the sense of loneliness that many participants experienced, such as often wondering if they were the only gay Hmong person, seemed pervasive.

Participants also discussed their own struggles around internalized and experienced homophobia. Many participants expressed concerns about not fulfilling their familial duties, disappointing family members (particularly parents), and being surprised and scared by their own feelings of attraction to the opposite sex. Other participants talked about part of this surprise being due to the lack of conversation (although certainly implied heterosexism) in their families about sex and romantic

relationships. As previously mentioned, because being gay or lesbian was often not on some participants' cultural radar, those feelings can bring multiple fears of alienation and confusion. Thus, similar to the experiences of many gay and lesbian people, these participants struggled against their initial feelings by engaging in activities that they thought could counteract, or at least hide, their attraction to others of the same sex.

While it was not surprising that participants began to learn about gay American culture and incorporate aspects of this into their identity, most salient seemed to be the parallel processes of learning about and acculturating into both gay culture and American culture that may be unique to the immigrant experience. While much LGBT literature has discussed acculturating into gay culture for many mainstream LGBT persons as an aspect of identity development, the participants of this study were not only learning about gay culture, but also mainstream American culture and attempting to incorporate those meanings into their identity as a gay Hmong American person.

## **Domain 2: Language**

Anthropologists and linguists often talk about the importance of language to describe and denote experience. Indeed, Akerlund and Cheung (2000) noted that this was salient for LGBT Latino Americans who encountered the issue of not being able to fully express themselves in Spanish because of the lack of vocabulary, and yet not being able to fully express themselves in English because of their lack of English skills. This domain addresses the lack of Hmong language to address gay and lesbian Hmong and participants' experiences with this issue. Many participants acknowledged that not having Hmong language to denote being gay or lesbian made it more difficult for them when trying to come out to or discuss sexual orientation with their parents. Overall,



however, it did not appear to be a tremendous barrier linguistically or emotionally. It seemed that having English words (i.e., “gay”) and descriptive Hmong words (i.e., “He is a man who likes other men.”) were helpful and thus did not leave participants feeling completely incapacitated in their struggle to talk about who they are in their native language. As many participants suggested, their families understood the English language enough to know the basic meaning of “gay.” One participant did share feeling alienated, but in general, most participants did not express too much distress over this lack of language. Some even talked about the fun in inventing and claiming Hmong terms, such as the literal translation of the English word “queen” into “*poj nom*” in Hmong.

The overall seemingly lack of issue with language may also be due to participant’s own levels of acculturation. Most participants in this study were either born in the U.S. or spent the majority of their lives here, and acknowledged that they often struggled with the Hmong language. One participant stated, “I will be using Hmonglish,” meaning that not feeling native to either language, he would be using combinations of Hmong and English to denote his experience. Thus, because participants themselves are struggling with basic language issues, it not surprising that the emotional meaning of not having language to describe who they are may have become lost in the struggle to retain the basic Hmong language.

Despite how little language seemed to impact whether participants came out or not, it was interesting to note that every participant used Hmong words and phrases during the interview process. The way in which Hmong was used seemed to highlight conversations with parents, Hmong concepts, and times when, as several participants

noted, there were things that just made more sense said in Hmong. As was previously mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, many linguists believe that what and how we speak helps determine our worldview (Lyons, 1981). Therefore, even if Hmong was not their predominant language, it could also act as their predominant, or a competing, worldview, bringing with it all of the strengths and challenges of being Hmong and gay.

### **Domain 3: Coming Out**

Participants addressed the intricate paths that led to their coming out, providing rich details of their experiences. Similar to other LGBT populations, many talked about feeling “different” from an early age. Because the motivating factor for coming out was often to be more open and authentic, it was not surprising that participants then felt liberated afterwards, regardless of the experience. It is common for many LGBT persons to feel relieved after coming out (Vargo, 1998).

Savin-Williams (1998), Chan (1989) and Bhugra (1997) all discuss the perceived safety in coming out to females. Participants certainly followed this trend, although it should be noted that the women to whom they initially came out did not include their mothers. Part of participants’ evaluation of safety was the perspective that women would be more understanding and supportive. Similar to Bhugra and Chan’s studies, which were exclusively Asian (Asian American and British), siblings were more often told before parents. In addition, a few participants indicated that while they were out to siblings, they were not out to parents, primarily for fear of hurting or disappointing them. Chan argues that this is unique for Asians in that parents are often not told first, as is the typical trend for other racial and ethnic groups. Salient in this

study was how much participants thought about parents' reactions in addition to worries about reputation (both self and family). This seems in line with how some Latino and Asian American communities have responded (Akerlund and Cheung, 2000). In addition, Mao, McCormick, and Van de Ven (2002) also theorize that part of the internal struggle for gay and lesbian Asians may lie in their own fears of not being able to fulfill their familial obligations. Ben-Ari's (1995) findings that the fear of rejection is intensified by the irreversibility of coming out was reflected in some of the manners in which participants came out, including participants who came out as "bisexual," participants who often tested the waters by asking hypothetical questions ("What if I told you I was gay..."), and participants who decided to come out in very public ways – in a sense, flooding themselves and their families.

Finally, participants seemed to express a yearning for more support and direction in coming out. Many expressed the lack of social support in coming out, which Akerlund and Cheung cite as a common experience for gays and lesbians of color. These experiences led participants to strongly caution others to be mentally prepared and seek support before coming out. There also seemed to be a deep sense of altruism in participants because of these experiences. Many have offered their support and mentorship to other LGBTQ Hmong and often talked about their participation in this study as a means of reaching out to other Hmong.

#### **Domain 4: Family**

Family remains the most complex domain because in many ways, the issue of family was threaded throughout participants' lives and is such a strong presence in their stories. As one participant noted, "It all came back to family." What seems to be most

salient is that there was no uniform way that family members responded, and indeed, there was often a stark contrast in how separate family members reacted. Participants seemed surprised when family members and friends were accepting. One participant talked about how her mother's acceptance made her realize the depth of her mother's love for her. That participants are so often prepared to be rejected by their families is not only an indication of the reality that gays and lesbians often face but also their resilience in the face of adversity and rejection to preserve their authentic selves.

Similar to the findings of Akerlund and Cheung (2000), families were often concerned with preserving the reputation of the family. The concept of "saving face" is a common phenomenon in many collectivist cultures like Hmong. In traditional Hmong culture, this concept was used as a form of ensuring social conformity and control. This means that although people's personal freedoms may be suppressed, the integrity of the group was preserved. This was demonstrated in Kaiser's (2003) study on a family's response to domestic violence, where she found that while the victim's family members were very concerned about her safety, larger concerns seemed to be about the family's relationship with her husband's family and about the reputations of the victim and her family.

Therefore while parents seemed to be reacting out of their own homophobia, there was also the realistic fear that the entire family could be rejected, creating a rippling effect within family structures and the community. Moreover, because of the importance of reputation in Hmong culture, there seemed to exist a protectiveness implicit and explicit in how parents tried to shield their children, from reminding them of role expectations, to ensuring that they continued to fulfill other familial roles (e.g.,

attending family ceremonies), to parents themselves entering the “closet” with their children. While such avoidance of family shaming is potentially part of many cultures, this phenomenon for the participants in this study seemed especially intense and for many, an over-arching aspect of their daily life. Xiong, Eliason, Detzner, and Cleveland (2005) found that Southeast Asian adolescents and parents rated a “good” child as someone who is obedient and takes responsibility in the family. Given this strong focus on family duty, it is not surprising that participants were often very aware that by being honest about their sexual orientation, they were disobeying their parents and shedding some family responsibility, and thus, not being good children.

In addition, perhaps even more salient were concerns around participants being able to have children and families of their own. In traditional Hmong culture, there are set and prescribed roles that people often follow. The importance of family and lineage are implicit in every-day interactions, such as calling people by familial addresses (e.g., “aunt,” “uncle,” “grandmother”) and delineating paternal and maternal lines (e.g., having distinct and specific names for maternal and paternal relatives, having distinct and specific names for relatives according to their generational relationship to oneself). This complex structure was illustrated by the extensive analysis conducted by Lee (1986), in which the kinship structure of White Hmong was examined. Lee concluded that for Hmong, the recognition of the social relationship one has to another Hmong determines how people should behave and feel towards that person, such as what their obligations, duties, and rights are.

As part of the obligation to uphold the structure of traditional Hmong society, there is an expectation that people of a marriageable age get married and have children.

Hmong men and women who remain unmarried are often not considered full members of the community and can sometimes be considered a burden on many levels (i.e., spiritual, financial, social) for their families. In addition, children are expected to not only carry on familial lines, but to also take care of parents in their old age. Married heterosexual Hmong couples who are not able to have children often worry about how they will be taken care of and whether they will become burdensome to extended family who must fulfill those responsibilities. Therefore, it seemed that participants' parents were often worried about not only propagating their own familial lines, but more importantly, their children's long-term well-being. Consequently, two aspects of parents' homophobia seemed to be the fear that their children's sexual orientation is a threat to traditional Hmong concepts of family and that their children were disregarding the way of life that Hmong have known for generations.

Embedded in the stories also seemed to be a related concern about how other family members would relate to the gay or lesbian person's partner. Because the traditional Hmong family structure is patrilineal, Hmong individuals often have a greater feeling of closeness and affinity to relatives on their father's side (Lee, 1986). According to Lee, this is demonstrated by the language used to describe these relatives, which also determines one's relationship with them and vice versa. The impact of this worldview on LGBT families is that these structures need to be renegotiated – such as what happens when the both parents are either men or women? This was further illustrated by a participant who discussed his parents' questions about how his partner would fulfill the role they expected of a daughter-in-law and how this would impact

them. The adaptation to their son's partner seemed to be a cultural shift that presented tremendous difficulty for the parents.

Furthermore, for many Hmong parents, stability and success are often key hopes for their children. It seemed that for participants' parents, it was difficult to fathom how having a same-sex partner will support those hopes. When parents were able to see that participants' lives continued to be stable, such as the participant who talked about being partnered with a highly educated professional woman, or the participant whose parents grew to appreciate his partner's maturity and calming influence, the intensity around these anxieties seem to decrease. The point of the first participant mentioned is not so much that her partner makes a lot of money, but that her parents realized she would continue to be cared for, and to live a "life like others," which is often a Hmong saying. This seemed to be when their acceptance of her sexual orientation changed. For the latter participant, his parents were able to come to accept that his partner added a depth and calmness to his life, and seeing him successful and happy promoted their acceptance of his sexual orientation and reparation of their relationship.

In this domain, participants also discussed the gender and generational differences in how people accepted them once they came out. True to their expectations and the research, participants seemed to have more neutral or positive responses from females. Perhaps because of the sensitive topic of relationships, mothers often seemed charged with the role of "go-between" when there was conflict with fathers, or with the duty of talking their children out of being gay or lesbian. Fathers and brothers often seemed accusatory, but more often than not, remained silent or in participants' perceptions, under the guise of confusion. Even when male family members were

accepting, there seemed to be a need to distance themselves in front of other relatives. For example, one participant talked about his father walking away from him at a family event while another discussed his brothers' assurances to cousins and male friends that they were not gay. Likely, some element of what it means to be a male in Hmong society is playing out in these dynamics in which it seems that being a male Hmong who is openly accepting of his gay or lesbian child or sibling is very difficult. This was also reflected in the family of the only participant of this study who had children. She shared that while her daughters were openly affirming, her son, as he became older, was increasingly "quiet," and wondered what that meant.

Generational issues in this study appeared related to acculturation. There seemed to be the experience that the more acculturated people were to American culture, the more accepting they were. In addition to role of acculturation was also the role of maturity, thus, while some participants were taunted by adolescent Hmong, their generational peers were more accepting. While this is likely not an automatic rule, it seemed that people who were more acculturated may also have a more expanded understanding of gays and lesbians, or at least have exposure to the existence of gay and lesbian persons.

Finally, this domain also included some extended family dynamics. According to Demo and Allen (1996), there is limited research on the impact of coming out to extended family. Other than their cousins, most participants did not come out in any official way to their extended family. Many acknowledged that their extended families likely know, given the connectedness of Hmong families, but it did not seem relevant to them to come out to extended family. Some participants admitted that this was, in part,



to avoid a big family intervention (as had been experienced by two participants) while for other participants, it just wasn't that important to them as long as their immediate family knew. Several participants talked about the change in their status with their extended family, but overall, the impact seemed subtle. This may be reflective of a generational, and possibly cultural, difference in that the majority of participants in this study did not indicate reliance upon extended family the way perhaps a less acculturated, or traditional group may have. Therefore, it made sense that for this group, it was not as important whether the elders in their family systems were privy to this information. Certainly, this raises the question of whether some distance is necessary from traditional, collectivist Hmong values in order to create the cognitive dissonance to be out.

#### **Domain 5: Gender Role Expectations**

Like heterosexuals, gays and lesbians are not immune to society's expectations of gender and gender roles. In this domain, many participants discussed the clear messages they received about the expectation to marry and reproduce. When these molds no longer fit for them, participants often found themselves questioning and learning how to negotiate new roles and expectations on their own. Many participants addressed the gender differences in coming out. There seemed to be an overall agreement that the privilege of being male in Hmong culture also carries with it familial responsibilities that women do not have to negotiate. In some ways, sexism seemed to allow for more flexibility for women, because, as one participant inferred, "we're really not important for some people to really care." However, this also begs the question of whether family and friends may be equally accepting or rejecting, but that the

manifestation of their acceptance or rejection is gender-specific according traditional gender expectations.

It should also be noted that more often than not, female participants addressed physical safety in ways that male participants did not, such as the fear of being raped as an intervention to “cure” them of their sexual orientation. With some participants, the discussion of whether it was “easier” for men or women to come out was interesting – most everyone seemed to believe that it was “easier” for the opposite sex. One cannot help but wonder at the gender dynamics that created these very different perspectives that may reflect the differences in the socialization of men and women. In addition, this seemed to reflect a complicated and unclear understanding to the researcher about how sexism, including internalized sexism, could be playing out in these perspectives. Indeed, as one participant observed, gays and lesbians can also be sexist and therefore can likely easily internalize all of the same messages about men and women that straight people do.

#### **Domain 6: The Role of Religion**

Akerlund and Cheung (2000) have found that religious shaming salient for other ethnic LGBT groups is not uniformly present in Asians and Asian Americans. The experiences of the participants reflect this finding in that they, too, had mixed responses to how the role of religion affected their self-concept. Some participants discussed having experiences of shame related to Christian doctrines of sin. Others talked about experiences of undergoing or being asked to participate in traditional healing ceremonies to “cure” them of their same-sex attraction. However, most participants expressed either neutral or positive religious experiences in regard to their

sexual orientation. Likely, this is due to the type of participants who self-selected to be a part of this study. For example, participants often seemed to display degrees of flexibility regarding their religious beliefs, whether following Christian or Hmong traditional practices. Many participants perceived themselves to be very spiritual in orientation, but there appeared to be a minimal presence of negative dogmatic belief systems. Moreover, while there seemed to be a uniform recognition that Christian Hmong have more formalized negative messages about being gay, this was not necessarily true for these participants. Although Christian-identified participants expressed internal struggles about messages regarding sin and their sexual orientation, most seemed to have come to some resolution about how to be Christian and gay.

For people who continue to practice Hmong traditional beliefs, sometimes referred to as animism and shamanism, the role of these traditional beliefs may be too intertwined with cultural and familial beliefs, thus making it difficult to parse out what is a strictly “religious” belief. It is theorized that people who may have more challenging issues with religion, whether Christian or not, would probably not feel comfortable self-selecting for this type of study. Moreover, because a requirement of this study was to be out to at least one family member, gays and lesbians who are struggling with this issue may also not be out and thus their voices were not captured in this study.

### **Domain 7: Intra/Inter Cultural Experiences**

Participants shared varying experiences with other Asians and with White LGBT persons. There were times when the experiences seemed grounded in participants’ own ethnic identity development. Some expressed this by discussing the

affirmation they received by meeting other Hmong and Asian LGBT persons. Others expressed this in their dating preferences, such as the participant who talked about primarily dating American (White) women because they don't come with "cultural stuff." The perception of not having as much "cultural stuff" to deal with is interesting in part because there is an implied acceptance that White American gay culture is the norm while other racial and ethnic groups come with cultural baggage. This same theme has been repeated over and over in various other fields, such as psychology, where Euro American experiences become the norm, giving permission for the labeling of other racial and ethnic experiences as "culture-bound" issues.

Significant in this domain were also the experiences of racism and misunderstandings experienced from White LGBT persons mentioned by almost every participant. These experiences seemed to range from good intentions, in which Whites tried to understand but couldn't, to overt racism, such as being treated as fetishes or being told Hmong were not attractive or datable. These experiences, unfortunately, parallel and confirm what other authors have discovered – that LGBT persons of color continue to face discrimination and oppression from their White peers (Greene, 1994). One participant mused over her realization that to have the expectation that White LGBT persons would understand her position as a person of color was similar to the expectation that other Hmong would understand her position as a lesbian. Consequently, just because one is the member of an oppressed group does not seem to necessarily make them any more sensitive to other oppressed groups.

**Domain 8: Life-Changing Lessons**

All participants discussed the life-changing experience of coming out. Salient seems to be their experiences of themselves in ways that surprised even them and an experience of life that often felt deeper and truer. In many ways, what participants seemed to infer is reminiscent of Frankl's (1946) logotherapy – that for participants, part of this process was finding meaning, from the most horrific experiences to the most mundane to the most pleasant, participants seemed to not only find themselves but the capacity to live life on their terms, despite continuing struggles and challenges. For many of the participants, coming out not only forced them to face some of their greatest fears but also tested them on numerous levels and regardless of the results, they emerged greatly changed.

**Domain 9: Hopes**

In this domain, participants expressed hopes for “normal lives.” As such, they talked about wanting to have families, partners, success and acceptance. While this seemed a mundane request given the extraordinary courage and experiences participants had undergone to come out, this request for a “normal life” also appeared to reflect some basic existential and humanistic needs. This was further supported by participants' messages about empathy and understanding. Imbedded in this seemed a hope that while people may not be able to understand being gay or lesbian, participants ask them to understand the commonality of being human.

*Conclusion*

Prior to engaging in this study, there was a sense that there may be issues unique to Hmong culture that may be different from the experiences of other cultural groups.

Indeed, what emerged were many issues similar to other racial and ethnic groups. However, these issues also seemed to be influenced by culture (e.g., Hmong, American, Gay) and status (e.g., acculturation, immigration) to create some unique twists upon these themes. A significant issue seemed to be that of family and the conflicting roles they played in participants' coming and being out. In particular, the considerations family members used in order to weigh their reactions seemed to contain issues that could be unique to Hmong, such as the concerns about participants not being able to have children who will care for them in their elder years, how marriage ceremonies would be conducted, and how parents would relate to their children's partner in ways that made sense to their worldviews. In addition, making meaning of multiple identities was also a consistent theme, whether it was defining terminology, finding language, or figuring out the roles of religion and gender expectations. There was a sense that having to persistently consider cultural and familial consequences seemed to create a nagging angst for many participants. In the end, however, what stands out is the incredible resilience and courage that participants displayed despite all of the barriers they have encountered.

#### *Implications and Recommendations*

This study was exploratory in that no similar study on the Hmong has been conducted. While there was some prediction about the importance of family and issues of competing identities, it was difficult to foresee what issues would emerge. The information that surfaced brings valuable insight into the internal and external processes involved with the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong. The appreciation for the complexity of this process is reflected in all of the themes. In many ways, the

results of this study bring forth more questions than they do answers. For instance, the resilience of individuals and families to deviate from such strong social pressures remains unexplored. It seems an appropriate next step that future research focus on this and the relationship to the mental health and well-being of gay and lesbian Hmong persons and their families. In addition, the roles mothers seemed to play in facilitating relationships after coming out also warrants further research. It is not clear whether this is a role that Hmong mothers, as nurturers, expect to play, or whether this was a unique phenomenon to these participants. Because all but one participant had children and most participants were young adults, it would also be interesting to get the perspective of first generation Hmong and Hmong who have been married and had children. Because of the anxieties about how children and family would look for gay and lesbian Hmong, it seems important to explore how these worries are abated or changed for gay and lesbian Hmong who have children.

Further exploration of how the intersection of acculturation impacts coming out would also be an important addition to the body of knowledge, particularly as immigration and globalization continue to become important realities. As previously mentioned, the participants in this group were all second generation, and as such, largely acculturated to U.S. culture and society. Although the role of acculturation was not within the scope of this study, the results of this study were likely impacted by the issue of acculturation, whether it was participants' own acculturation or that of their family and friends. For instance, one could speculate that the challenges for a first-generation gay or lesbian Hmong may be very different from these participants, such as

not having enough cognitive dissonance to explore one's sexual orientation or indeed to come out about it.

Additionally, this study did not attempt to address gender differences in coming out. Exploring differences and similarities between men and women regarding sexual orientation would be an important addition to the literature, particularly since the field of LGBT studies, like many other fields, has often come from a male-dominated perspective, and as Brown (1995) has suggested, sexual orientation is a different experience for women. Finally, two significant populations were left out of this study – transgendered and bisexual Hmong. Although there are likely some overlapping commonalities for these populations, there are also likely to be issues unique to their experiences. It would be logical to continue to explore what the differences and similarities are in order to continue to inform research and practice in this area.

Based on the findings in this study, below are some proposed next steps. Although these suggestions may be similar to suggestions for supporting all LGBT persons, the focus of each of these suggestions is on taking an approach that specifically addresses ongoing barriers for LGBT Hmong persons and their families. In these recommendations, there are times when “Q” is included for persons who may be questioning their sexual orientation and identity, and “A” is included for Allies. It is this author's opinion that both groups be included in the different recommendations.

**1) Development and implementation of culturally competent programming to support LGBTQ Hmong.** The painful experiences participants had of alienation and being alone in dealing with their feelings emerged from this study. In fact, several participants addressed how resources could have helped and wanted to reciprocate by



mentoring other Hmong who are struggling with similar issues. While there is a growing public awareness of the existence of LGBTQ Hmong, we should not rely solely on informal systems (though much needed) to provide support for LGBTQ Hmong. It is crucial for these supports to address issues of acculturation, family dynamics, gender and cultural expectations, homophobia, and racism.

In addition, developing neutral or positive language in Hmong to address sexual orientation is also an important part of this work. Although not a tremendous issue of concern for the participants in this study, this may be different for Hmong who are less acculturated linguistically and culturally, or for whom language has a stronger implication. Goh, Dunnigan, and McGraw Schuchman (2004) propose that when working with groups like Hmong, who do not have direct translations for English terminology, “cultural semantics” be employed. According to Goh et al, cultural semantics is “the study of culture-specific concepts by analyzing the use of key, everyday linguistic terms” (p. 117). Thus, cultural semantics can be employed to understand and interpret cultural concepts for which language does not currently exist. Although they did not know it, some participants seemed already engaged in this process by experimenting with translations of English terms and concepts, such as using *poj nom* for queen, and understanding that the concept in neither language is being used to mean a female head of royalty.

**2) Development and implementation of culturally competent programming to support families of LGBTQ Hmong.** The challenges families of LGBTQ Hmong experienced came through clearly in this study. This seemed particularly salient for parents. Culturally competent programs would seem to be a logical step in providing

further support for family members of LGBTQ Hmong. Specifically, it seems important to develop ways that help parents address how to expand aspects of their worldview to include having a gay or lesbian child and how to talk about this with family members in ways that allow parents to preserve their and their child's dignity in the Hmong community. Cultural competence, in this case, involves helping families and individuals understand and evaluate how to balance coming out in a healthy way that also allows them to preserve what is important to them as a Hmong family. Thus, while it is crucial not to encourage the family to come out without evaluating the impact on them, it is also important not to inadvertently perpetuate shame in an attempt to be overly protective.

In addition, when working with families, it is recommended that the discomfort and taboo nature of this topic be sensitively, but explicitly addressed. While this may be paradoxical in that perhaps even having this conversation seems at odds with traditional Hmong culture, to ignore this appears clinically unintuitive and may actually serve as a barrier to working with the family.

Despite all of these good intentions, however, there may be the very realistic possibility that families may still reject their child's sexual orientation and any outside attempts to provide support. In addition, people who do this work may be likely to also fall victim to being judged and rejected. If this happens, it is important that the folks who do this work understand how to give the family space and return when the family is more ready and able to explore this issue again, if ever. Furthermore, it is crucial that there is an understanding of how to support the individual through the loss of their family. As demonstrated in this study, the nature of whether families come to accept

their children's new identities seemed unpredictable, but for many families, it was a very long process that was often marked by years of pain, distance, and rejection. Some families never came to accept their children, and in those cases, the individual had to renegotiate a new identity and family.

**3) Development and implementation of culturally competent training for Hmong and Non-Hmong professionals on how to support LGBTQ Hmong and their families.**

The lack of understanding some participants experienced with Hmong and non-Hmong professionals was unfortunate. This suggests a need to develop and implement training, including information derived from the results of this study, to provide professionals with the information and skills to work with LGBTQA Hmong.

**4) Ongoing research to inform program and training development.** Ongoing research is especially necessary when there is such a paucity of information, such as on LGBTQA Hmong experiences. In addition, this would allow for building programs that are grounded in empirical data.

**5) Seek and promote stories of resilience and courage of LGBT Hmong and their families.** Having positive role models is so important in a community where very little information exists. Hmong media have featured some stories, but certainly more can be done. For high-context cultures like Hmong, it seems important to have examples of how other families have dealt with this issue, and perhaps more crucial, how they've done it while maintaining their identity and integrity as a Hmong family.

**6) Engagement in public programming and media in Hmong communities to educate on and normalize different forms of sexual orientation.** This suggestion entails taking a social justice advocacy and education stance in order to engender

change. Without openly discussing these issues in public forums, LGBTQ Hmong continue to live in the margins of Hmong communities.

**7) Foster support from leaders within Hmong communities to engage in conversations about LGBTQ Hmong and engender a better understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ Hmong.**

People who know and work well with Hmong understand that the public positions respected community leaders take can be very influential in those communities. Therefore, it would make sense that the support and validation of community leaders is important to trying to foster a change in public attitude.

**8) Utilize the growing population of Hmong Allies in order to increase community awareness of and support for LGBTQ Hmong.**

For persons of minority statuses, Allies have been able to play important roles in prompting change and raising awareness regarding the oppression of those groups, such as persons of color and Whites partnering to address racism and White privilege, or women and men partnering to address relationship violence. Because there is a growing population of Hmong Allies, this is an opportunity to utilize the supports Allies can bring and to equip them with specific information, such as from this study, which would allow them to be aware of the challenges LGBTQ Hmong face.

**9) Foster community support for continuing exploration of the oppression of LGBTQ persons of color both within their racial/ethnic communities and within the mainstream LGBT community.**

Similar to the proposal above, eradicating oppression cannot happen in a vacuum and must involve persons who belong to the

majority communities, including heterosexual members of the Hmong community and other ethnic/racial members of the LGBT community.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations related to this project. One is the inherent limitation of choosing depth over breadth, as is done in phenomenological research. While phenomenology methods often provide richness in understanding the subjective experiences of participants, these experiences cannot be generalized beyond the people who were studied. Moreover, the sample size was very small and focused on an information-rich approach rather than a representative subject pool (Patton, 1990). The sampling method may have also excluded people who had very different experiences from that of our participants. Because of the limited geographic area from which the participant pool was solicited, there may exist a bias in how participants experience and conceptualize coming out. For instance, because of the political activism and perceived progressiveness of some of the communities from which the sample is being drawn, participants may be qualitatively different and experience being a gay or lesbian Hmong American differently than Hmong Americans in other parts of the country. Moreover, although everything possible will be made to protect participants' identity, the intensity and sense of "outing" participating in this type of research may be uncomfortable for many people; therefore those who self-selected to participate may also be qualitatively different than those who chose not to participate.

Finally, as a heterosexual Hmong American female, this is truly a cross-cultural research endeavor. As is the case in any cross-cultural research, the biases, known and unknown, of the researcher may also have an effect on the entire conceptualization of

this study, what participants experienced, how they responded, and how results were interpreted. It is possible that a gay or lesbian Hmong researcher might have conceptualized this study differently, asked and focused on different questions, interpreted the results through a different lens, and elicited different participants and responses.

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## APPENDIX A

## **A Phenomenological Study of the Coming Out Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Hmong**

**Seeking: Men and women who self-identify as Hmong or Hmong American and Gay or Lesbian, between ages 18 - 65 years who have come out to at least one family member**

### **What's this about?**

I am interested in looking at the coming out experiences of gay and lesbian Hmong in America. Specifically, I am interested in looking at what people think about before they make the decision to come out, who they come out to, how they come out, and how coming out has affected them both personally, in their families, and in their communities. My hope is to develop an additional space for people to share their stories, to provide examples of gay and lesbian Hmong who have come out, and to educate people who work with Hmong families and individuals regarding the things in our culture that support and make it hard for people to come out.

### **Who's doing this?**

Pahoua K. Yang, a doctoral candidate in the Counseling and Student Personnel Psychology Program at the University of Minnesota.

### **What do I have to do?**

Participate in a 60-90 minute interview with me. You will also have a chance to review, add, and change anything from your interview once I have collected all of the interviews. Example questions from the interview include: "What made you decide to come out?" "What do you think someone considering coming out should do/think about/consider?" "What would you like the Hmong community to know about you?" "What advice do you have for how to support gay and lesbian Hmong?"

### **Will people know it's me?**

Because our community is small, there is always the risk that someone could recognize you from your story, but I will do everything in my power to protect your confidentiality. Therefore, anything that is too specific, as well as anything that could identify you will be removed from the final results of this study (name, age, hometown, etc.). Quotes may be used

from your interview to support general themes that participants talk about (such as, “Most participants said \_\_\_\_ was important.”). Plus, you will have the opportunity to review, give feedback, and make changes to what I end up using.

Please call 651-503-6719 or email [\*\*yang0369@umn.edu\*\*](mailto:yang0369@umn.edu) if you have more questions or are interested in being a part of this project. You are more than welcome to take a look at the questions and additional information before deciding to participate. Serious and respectful inquiries only, please.

## APPENDIX B

**A Phenomenological Study of the Coming Out Experiences of Gay and Lesbian  
Hmong  
Interview Questions**

Demographics

1. Sex, Gender:
2. Age:
3. How do you identify ethnically?
4. How long have you lived in the U.S.?
5. Where did you grow up?
6. What religion/spiritual practices do you identify with?
7. How do you identify regarding your sexual orientation? (e.g., gay, lesbian, heterosexual, bisexual, transgender, questioning...)
8. How long have you been out?
9. Are you currently partnered?

Meaning

1. Tell me what it means to you to be [whatever the person stated about sexual orientation].
  - a. How did you arrive at that meaning?
  - b. Is there a Hmong word for that? If there could be, what would you use?
  - c. What have you heard used? What does it mean to you when that is used?
2. What does it mean to be a [ethnic identification] and [sexual orientation identification]?

Coming Out

1. Tell me about your coming out story.
  - a. How long did you know you were [\_\_\_\_\_] before coming out?
  - b. What kinds of things did you consider/think about before coming out?
  - c. What did you think would change?
  - d. What has changed?
  - e. What has not?
  - f. How did you make your decision?
  - g. What made you decide to come out?
  - h. Did you talk with any one before?
  - i. Who did you come out to first? Why?
  - j. What did you say? What language did you use?
  - k. Who have you not come out to yet? Why?
  - l. What were some of the things you were afraid of or nervous about?
  - m. How did people react?

- n. Did anything surprise you about coming out?
- o. What does it feel like for you to be out now?
- p. How do you make the decision to tell new people?
- q. Are there things you wish you'd known before coming out?
- r. Are there conversations you wish you'd had before coming out?
- s. Has anything surprised you about being [\_\_\_\_\_]?

#### Family/Friends/Society

1. Before coming out, how did you see yourself in relation to your immediate family?  
Extended family?
2. Were there ever messages that you picked up (or perhaps were told outright) about what was expected of you as a [man/woman]?
3. What did you learn about dating and marriage rituals?
4. What did you learn about male/female relationships?
5. Did you have expectations for yourself about how you should be as a [man/woman]?
6. How do you think that changed for you as you considered coming out?
7. How has that changed after coming out?
8. How do you think your family/friends saw you before?
9. How do you think they see you now?
10. What do you think would have made this easier?
11. What do you think someone considering coming out should do/think about/consider?
12. Do you think being [religion/spiritual practice] had any bearing on your coming out process?

#### Advice to Others

1. What questions do you wish you could ask someone preparing to come out?
2. What questions do you wish you could ask yourself in 20 years?
3. What would you like the Hmong community to know about you?
4. What would you like the American community to know?
5. The mainstream LGBT community?
6. Clinicians/service providers?
7. What advice do you have for how to support gay and lesbian Hmong?
8. Do you have any regrets about any part of this?

## APPENDIX C

**Consent Form****A Phenomenological Study of the Coming Out Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Hmong**

You are invited to be in a research study of the experiences of Gay and Lesbian Hmong. You were selected as a possible participant because you have indicated that you self identify as Hmong or Hmong American, gay or lesbian, and that you have come out to at least one family member. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Pahoua K. Yang, Ph.D. Candidate, Counseling and Student Personnel Psychology Program, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota, and Michael Goh, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Counseling and Student Personnel Psychology Program, Department of Educational Psychology, University of Minnesota.

**Background Information**

**The purposes of this study are:** to give space for Hmong lesbians and gay men to tell their stories; to provide gay and lesbian Hmong examples of coming out; and to provide clinicians (i.e., therapists, social workers) with an understanding of the issues Hmong lesbians and gay men face.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things: Participate in a one-time 90-minute interview with the principal investigator. You will also be invited to participate in reviewing the data obtained from your interview in order to check for accuracy.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

There are some minimal risks associated with participating in this study in that you may feel upset or uncomfortable with some of the questions that are asked, particularly because they are of a personal and sensitive nature. In addition, because of the smallness of the Hmong community, there is a slight risk that your story may be recognized. There are no known personal benefits for participating in this study.

**Compensation:**

You will not receive payment for this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study, including who participated, will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely behind locked

cabinets and only the principal investigator will have access to the records. These records will be destroyed after this project is complete.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of Minnesota. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researchers conducting this study are listed below. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them at:

Pahoua Yang,  
Ph.D. Candidate  
Counseling & Student Personnel Psychology Program  
Department of Educational Psychology  
139B Burton Hall  
178 Pillsbury Dr S E  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
Phone: 651-503-6719  
Email: [yang0369@umn.edu](mailto:yang0369@umn.edu)

Michael Goh, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Counseling & Student Personnel Psychology Program  
Department of Educational Psychology  
139B Burton Hall  
178 Pillsbury Dr S E  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
Phone: 612-624-4885  
Email: [gohxx001@umn.edu](mailto:gohxx001@umn.edu)

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researchers, **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

*You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature of Principle

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

## APPENDIX D

## SUMMARY OF DOMAINS AND THEMES

## DOMAIN 1: Meaning Making

- Theme 1: Being gay or lesbian means having a physical or emotional attraction to someone of the same sex.
- Theme 2: Being gay or lesbian means being myself.
- Theme 3: Being Hmong and gay holds tremendous ambiguity and barriers.
- Theme 4: Participants struggle with coming to terms with their sexual orientation.
- Theme 5: Participants received varying messages about how to be a gay person in U.S. society.

## DOMAIN 2: Language

- Theme 6: Participants are not familiar with non-derogatory Hmong language to describe themselves.
- Theme 7: Participants typically mentioned the word “kathoy” but did not fully understand what that means, only that people have used it to refer to people who are gay.

## DOMAIN 3: Coming Out

- Theme 8: Participants talk about feeling “different” from others. Most discussed knowing from an early age that they were either gay or different.
- Theme 9: Participants often evaluated safety before coming out, and often came out to women first.
- Theme 10: Participants come out because they want to be more honest and authentic.
- Theme 11: Participants often yearned for resources and support.
- Theme 12: Participants were afraid of rejection, primarily from their families, and especially their parents.
- Theme 13: Participants discussed the mechanics of how they came out, which ranged from difficult conversations to very public mediums.
- Theme 14: Participants felt liberated about coming out even if it was a bad experience.
- Theme 15: Participants encourage others who are thinking about coming out to know themselves well and to seek supports before doing so.

## DOMAIN 4: Family

- Theme 16: Families become closer, and in a variant of cases, become more protective of participants.
- Theme 17: Families respond with, “We always knew,” and often surprised participants with their acceptance.
- Theme 18: Families respond by rejecting or distancing from participants.

- Theme 19: Family members seem to respond differently, based on their gender, with men often having more perceived negative responses.
- Theme 20: There seems to be a generational difference in who is accepting and who is not.
- Theme 21: Family members eventually learn to accept participants, including their partners.
- Theme 22: Participants make conscious efforts about who they decide not to tell.
- Theme 23: Participants often react to reactions of friends/family with a wide range of feelings, from surprise to devastation.

#### DOMAIN 5: Gender Role Expectations

- Theme 24: There are clear messages from families about expectations to marry and produce children.
- Theme 25: Participants try to behave in “gender-appropriate” ways.
- Theme 26: There are some gender differences in coming out, although participants varied in their perceptions of challenges for men and women.

#### DOMAIN 6: The Role of Religion

- Theme 27: Religion has mostly been a positive or neutral experience.
- Theme 28: Christian Hmong receive more formalized negative messages about being gay, which can often pose more internal conflict for participants.

#### DOMAIN 7: Intra/Inter Cultural Experiences

- Theme 29: Participants’ experiences with other Asians are a mixture of support, affirmation, and challenge.
- Theme 30: Participants often experienced stereotyping and lack of understanding from others in Mainstream LGBT communities.

#### DOMAIN 8: Life-Changing Lessons

- Theme 31: Participants change greatly from coming out and learn a tremendous amount about who they are as people.
- Theme 32: Through coming out, participants learned a lot about others, especially Hmong culture and other people.

#### DOMAIN 9: Hopes

- Theme 33: Participants want “normal” lives, such as children, a partner, success, and acceptance.
- Theme 34: Participants ask for empathy, understanding, and looking beyond prejudices and stereotypes.