

A Phenomenological Exploration of the Lived Experiences of
Gay Male Baby Boomers in Couples and Relationship Education

A Dissertation

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Dedication

“Find out who you are and then be that way on purpose.”

-Dolly Parton

This paper is dedicated the beautiful men who have opened their lives to me and whose hearts of bravery fill these pages.

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Abstract

For couples, the intimate relationship between partners is one of the most influential in adult life. Couples and relationship education (CRE) intends to provide contextual knowledge and to facilitate the growth of relationship skill sets. However, current CRE programming is largely heteronormative, relying primarily on male/female relationship dyads. Little CRE research focuses on the experiences of gay men in later stages of their lives, despite sweeping social and legal changes such as marriage equality nationwide in the United States. This phenomenological investigation sought a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of gay male baby boomers who have participated in adult education programs which focus on the health and maintenance of long-term, romantic partnerships. Participants revealed the need for CRE with gay male baby boomers to be more sensitive to a variety of unique compatibility issues, including the extent to which each partner is out and individual sexual identity development. Participants also experienced most existing CRE material as appropriate for use with same-sex couples. However, their lived experiences emphasized specialized considerations related to historical trauma such as the AIDS crisis, previous heterosexual marriages while closeted, chronic social stigma, and the significance of being a trailblazer for LGBTQ civil rights. Recommendations for research and practice in CRE and adult education are provided.

Keywords: gay, LGBTQ, baby boomer, couples and relationship education, adult learning

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Long-term romantic partnership predominates every society in the world (Fisher, 1992). Approximately 90% of people from western cultures marry at least once by age 50 (American Psychology Association, 2015) and global statistics measure similarly (United Nations, 2013). Long-term romantic partnership outside the legal definition of marriage increases these numbers. For couples, the intimate relationship between partners is one of the most influential in adult life. The state of marriage, the legal definition of long-term romantic partnership, is repeatedly found to be central for both individual and family development (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Mitchell, 2010).

Research consistently links relationship quality to health and other benefits. Individuals in happy and stable intimate partnerships like marriage, experience better health, subjective well-being (Gottman, 1994; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010) and economic stability (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Nock, 2005; Harrar & DeMaria, 2007).

The opposite is true: single, divorced, widowed, and unhappily married individuals have lower overall life satisfaction, self-esteem, and poorer mental and physical health (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Silver, 1999; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; D.N. Hawkins & Booth, 2005; Wilson & Oswald, 2005). The unhappily married are also less satisfied and productive at work, which is costly for families, organizations and governments (Forthofer et al, 1996; Sandberg et al, 2012; Sandberg et al, 2013). The

effects of marriage are far reaching and hold the power to positively or negatively affect nearly all aspects of life.

Problem Statement

Relationship education intends to provide contextual knowledge and to facilitate the growth of relationship skill set. This is true for adult education programs aimed to develop and sustain satisfying, long-term romantic partnerships referred to as couple and relationship education or CRE. The critical issue is that current CRE programming relies heavily on heteronormative material. It is unclear whether current relationship education is appropriate for use with same-sex couples or the more expansive LGBTQ faction.

A defining principle of creating adult education programs is the involvement of all stakeholders at the planning table (Caffarella, 2002; Cervero & Wilson, 2006). The lack of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, and queer (and/or questioning) voices in CRE planning reveals a gap in adult education. Qualitative study of LGBTQ individuals helps to confirm or deny appropriateness of current CRE practices. This type of research may also help to identify unique needs of LGBTQ participants in CRE.

While the number of academics considering queer perspectives is growing, there is not much research on CRE and the LGBTQ community. Even less data exists on CRE after the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that made marriage equality legal federally. Of those exploring the queer perspective in CRE, I found the work of Buzzella & Whitton (2009) to be the most relevant to my study. The pair has created culturally sensitive adaptations for relationship education for same-sex couples, piloted programs for gay and lesbian people (Buzzella & Whitton, 2009; Whitton, 2014), and evaluated the programs using

participant feedback (Buzzela, Whitton, & Thompson, 2012; Whitton et al, 2016). The aim of my research was to continue in the same spirit. I wanted to evaluate the experiences of same-sex individuals who have attended CRE and use those experiences to inform programs more culturally responsive. The same-sex CRE programs developed by Buzzella & Whitton (2009) consisted of two sub-programs: one for gay men and one for lesbian women. I choose to narrow my sample to one sub-group, gay men. The men in this investigation were also older, belonging to the baby boomer generation, which spans 1946-1964. This was to contrast Buzzella & Whitton's youth focus. It was also done for the reason there are even fewer LGBTQ studies and CRE studies that specifically focus on gay men in later stages of their lives.

Methodology

Qualitative, phenomenological inquiry was used in this study. This type of research focuses on the lived experiences of individuals who have had a unique experience and abiding concern called a phenomena (Van Manen, 1990). Phenomenology asks, "What is this or that experience like?" (pg. 9). The phenomena in this investigation was the experience of being a gay man in CRE. Instruments used were a structured interview guide and a journal of reflexive memos. The aim of the study was to identify commonalities of the gay male experience in CRE and use them to create programs that more widely consider culturally marginalized groups, like LGBTQ people.

Research Questions

This investigation sought a deeper understanding of the experiences of gay male baby boomers who have participated in adult education programs, which focus on the

health and maintenance of long-term, romantic partnerships. Such programs are generally labeled as couple and relationship education or CRE, and focus on maximizing contributing factors to marital/relationship success and minimizing contributing factors to divorce/breakup. The gay perspective was chosen with intention for use in the development of adult education programs to be less heteronormative, and more inclusive in considering the diversity of long-term romantic partnerships. The primary research question was: What are the experiences of gay male baby boomers who attend CRE? The secondary question I asked was: How can the experiences of gay male baby boomers inform equity-based CRE programs in adult education settings?

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation will begin by reviewing review literature relating to why healthy long-term romantic partnerships matter, how people form and maintain them, and why the gay perspective is important adult education and more specifically, CRE. Next, methodology of the research will be explained, including rationale for choosing a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Data collection and analysis methods will also be detailed. After, the findings will be revealed and discussed. The dissertation will end with final conclusions and recommendations for adult education, CRE, LGBTQ allies, and the greater society.

Key Terms Defined

Please note all key terms are given in depth explanations in chapter two.

Culturally responsive adult education. A type of adult education that focuses on the specific needs of the learner. It uses authentic materials and ties learning to life

outside the classroom or other educational settings. Culturally responsive education is aware of societal forces that privilege some and marginalize others, and seeks to diminish discrimination in adult learning environments (Ross-Gorden, 2002; Cafarella, 2002).

While commonly associated with race and ethnicity, being culturally responsive can also be interpreted to respond to other aspects of culture such as religion or sexual orientation.

Critical pedagogy. A theory and practice developed by Frierie (1970). Main components consist of: decentralization of power between student and teacher; constant consideration of context, critical dialogue, and civic engagement.

Couples and relationship education. Also referred to as CRE. This discipline is a type of adult education typically researched and practiced in the fields of family social science and psychology. CRE is concerned with providing people with the tools to help form and maintain healthy relationships with one's spouse or other long-term romantic partnership.

Healthy marriage. This term is used in this investigation to represent a synthesis of satisfaction and stability (D.N. Hawskins & Booth, 2005). Other adjectives like happy and successful will carry the same weight.

Phenomenology. A branch of qualitative inquiry concerned with the lived experiences of the research participants. It differs from narrative inquiry in that it values the experiences of a group of people who share an experience, which they refer to as a phenomena. It is broken into two categories: hermeneutic phenomenology, which concentrates more on the interpretations of the researcher, and transcendental

phenomenology, which focuses on giving rich descriptions of the participants to frame the study (Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994).

Long-term romantic partnership. Also referred to in this study as LRP. A dyadic, romantic relationship two people have committed to. Components of romantic love association with LRP such as marriage are: passion (sexual attraction, emotional bonding (intimacy), and care-giving (commitment) (Money, 1980; Liebowitz, 1983; Sternberg, 1986; Fisher, 1992; Fletcher et al, 2013; Fletcher et al, 2015).

LGBTQ. A definition that refers to a cultural group based unique identities, which relate to two overarching factors: sexual preference and/or gender identity. The acronym stands for lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans, or queer/questioning.

Gay. Self identifies as a gay man. Identifies with same-sex attraction and same-sex partnerships.

Baby boomer. Anyone born from 1946-1964.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to frame this investigation fully, there are several scholarly domains that require in depth explanation. First, this review outlines the tenets of culturally responsive adult education and critical pedagogy. Issues addressed include: privilege and marginalization, ethnocentrism, generalization, assumption, and oversimplification. Second, arguments are made for CRE as adult education, and counseling as CRE. Additionally, explanation is given as to why healthy long-term romantic partnerships like marriage, matter in relation to physical and mental health, and economics. The origins of why people couple is also explained, from both anthropological and neurological perspectives. Next, essential content matter from CRE is defined in terms of contributing factors to marital/relationship success and risk factors to divorce/breakup. The review closes by defining some specific LGBTQ considerations for gay baby boomers and then taking a closer look at innovative team, Buzzela & Whitton (2009), who are on the forefront of tailoring CRE to the LGBTQ perspective.

Culturally Responsive Adult Education

Adult education settings serve as microcosms that reflect the greater societies in which we live. Who is heard, what is valued, how people are treated all affect learning, educational outcomes and related life outcomes of students (Rummens & Sefa Dei, 2010). When varied perspectives are promoted, and equitable practice is upheld, healthy bi-products include increased literacy, economic growth, stability, a democratic life, higher life expectancy and many other positive aspects (Baker et al, 2004; Wagener &

Kozma, 2005). In contrast, a singularly valued perspective sets the stage for unhealthy by-products of privileging some and marginalizing others.

The roles of the adult educator and learner are social positions and co-generators of culture. Accordingly, adult educators should critically consider their role in adult education, and also consider what kind of culture they hope to create. Those who align themselves with equity based philosophies seek to be culturally responsive with the communities they serve. Being culturally responsive is often associated with cultural difference in terms of race and ethnicity, but can also relate to other aspects of difference, such as religion or sexual identity. Culturally responsive educators seek to create and implement inclusive programs that empower diverse communities and aid in promoting social justice, economic growth and access to other societal benefits. Because inequalities that stem from education affect so many other aspects of what constitutes a healthy life, studying effective ways to promote equity and include diverse perspectives in the adult education settings is essential.

Privilege and marginalization. Culturally responsive adult education acknowledges educational settings are institutions, which promote certain values and discredit others. This issue is commonly known as the privilege - marginalization gap and its amelioration is essential for the culturally responsive educator. Privilege refers to any unearned, unfair advantage, and can encompass material, instrumental, social, emotional, and other resources (Pedersen et al, 2008). Marginalization is defined as “the social process by virtue of which individuals, groups, or communities are excluded from the center of society and relegated to the periphery or margins of a center based on some

characteristic” (p.224). People can be marginalized due to a variety of characteristics including, but not limited to: race, ethnicity, gender/gender identification, sexual orientation, and ability/disability. The acknowledgement of the privilege-marginalization gap is the first step toward lessening its influence in our classrooms.

Privilege and marginalization in adult education occur when a primary perspective is shared, valued and reinforced in an adult education setting. The overarching problem is that the Anglo-Western European culture has remained dominant for the last 500 years (Guy, 1999a; Banks & Banks, 2010). A result of this is that adult education programs often use materials and objectives that reflect someone white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual. Culturally responsive educators attempt to combat this through prolonged engagement with individual students and deep listening to individual needs. They create learner specific education plans by drawing on the rich experiences of the individual learner and tie learner’s previous knowledge to present learning objectives (Ross-Gordon, 2002; Cafarella, 2002).

Ethnocentrism / encapsulation. One major factor of how culture gets way is referred to as ethnocentrism or encapsulation; which surrounds the idea of being culturally self-centered (Pedersen et al., 2008; Banks & Banks, 2010). It is often unintentional and is rooted in a lack of awareness. Culturally responsive adult educators curb the propensity for encapsulation by engrossing in active self-awareness, and actively engaging with the diverse groups they serve.

Generalization, assumption, and oversimplification. Generalization, assumption, and oversimplification are unhealthy bi-products of ethnocentrism. Cultural

stereotyping is another similar term used to describe this (Pedersen et al, 2008). While it is inherent biological nature for humans to categorize, relying such methods can be unethical. Assigning traits or behaviors to whole groups of people is seldom helpful or even accurate. What is generally representative of a culture may not be so for the individual or vice versa. Culturally responsive adult education attempts to push beyond stereotypes and opts for approaches that speak to directly to individual learner needs.

Critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy is a popular vein of culturally responsive adult education. The term used to describe education that promotes social justice, equity and active participation in society (Friere, 1970; Friere, 1998). Like-minded disciplines include: emancipatory education, democratic education and participatory education. Critical pedagogy is, “situated against class exploitation, racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of oppression that pervade the current education climate and the larger society” (Smith & McLaren, 2012, p.333) and takes the approach of “understanding and engaging the political and economic realities of everyday life” (Smith & McLaren, 2012, p.332). The overarching concept is the use of using education for empowerment and social change. Considering the discrimination and lack of visibility LGBTQ people face, adult educators and CRE would be wise to refer to the critical perspective to inform CRE programs in diverse adult education settings.

Critical pedagogy is most widely credited with Brazilian philosopher, Paulo Friere (1970). His early work focused on teaching literacy to Brazilian peasants, which influenced his idea of conscientizacao, or reflection on the social and historical conditions that privilege some and marginalize others. He recognized the

interconnectedness of knowledge, authority and power and believed learning should be used to create awareness of inequalities and take action against oppressive elements.

Critical pedagogy has been interpreted and adapted by many theorists, but generally consists of several key elements: decentralization of power between teacher and student, constant consideration of context, critical dialogue, and civil engagement. They offer suggestions and present possibilities for adult literacy educators who strive for culturally responsive, equitable learning environments, and is suitable for framing LGBTQ research.

Decentralization of power between teacher and student. Decentralization of power between teacher and student opposes traditional, top-down authoritarian methods often referred to as banking, which places the educator as the purveyor of knowledge and the students as more or less empty boxes, which the teachers will fill with the knowledge they possess (Friere, 1970, 1998; Blinne, 2013). Instead, critical pedagogy relies heavily on learner opinion and participation in both the planning and practice of education. Kilgore (2004) emphasizes that educators, “do not necessarily have more experience, knowledge or wisdom than the students who enter their classrooms” (Kilgore, 2004, p.48). The same can be said of counselors and their clients/ patients. Critical pedagogy asserts the idea everyone is both teacher and student. It relies on the rich experiences of the learners, and the needs of learners to steer lessons and discourse. It’s important to cite that for the purpose of this study, educators make up a diverse group and include: counselors, therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, teachers, and sometimes religious leaders, for example in the case of some pre-marital relationship skills classes.

Constant consideration of context. Frierean pedagogy stresses the important of constant consideration of context. Critical educators acknowledge that learning never occurs in a context free zone, and instead use the exploration of context to create transparency. It is only by recognizing the social and societal factors present that they can be appropriately addressed.

Critical dialog. Another chief aspect of critical pedagogy is the role of critical dialogue (Friere, 1970, 1998; Kaufmann, 2010). The basic idea is active discussion should be a part of all learning. This concept allows for a variety of perspectives to be heard, encourages participation and provides those learning the opportunity to think and speak constructively on materials or concepts presented in class.

Civic engagement. While decentralization of power, importance of context and critical dialogue remain important components, critical pedagogy is most widely known for civic engagement. Friere believed dialogue can be used in educational practice for :learning to read and write the world, and as a powerful tool to transform it. It encourages adult students to take active role in the community and to aid in emancipating oppressed or exploited groups. Upholding equity in the classroom is a start, but educators are with learners for limited time. Through civic education, educators can provide them with the tools they need to, “help workers understand and advocate for their rights, protect their safety and health, manage their salaries and benefits, and prepare for industry certification exams” (Jurmo, 2011, p. 201). Further Holst (2010) attests, “training in social movements instills people with a discipline, confidence and conviction that only through their own efforts things can change”(p.255). He continues, “When

people organize, there is a dialectical relationship that emerges between personal and collective power that motivates individuals and collectives to push forward on demands as victories build upon one another or as people see others making gains in similar contexts (p.254)”.

Couples and Relationship Education

Couples and relationship education is a study traditionally seated among disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and especially family social science. Content and process from these domains are used to provide tools appropriate for relationship skills classes and different types of counseling.

CRE as adult education. My argument is to innovate CRE by making it more interdisciplinary. We can go beyond the current confines of family social science, and adult education is a fitting place to start. Both CRE and adult education have the same goals of helping adults live better lives by developing life skills. CRE is simply more focused directly to developing skills pertaining to relationships, especially romantic partnerships like marriage. For the reason most adult’s primary relationship is with their spouse, skill set to navigate this relationship should be of importance to the adult education field. Research consistently shows the far reaching benefits of healthy marriage even extend far beyond the relationship and have the ability to positively affect physical and mental health, work productivity, and economic stability (Baker et al, 2004; Wagener & Kozma, 2005). CRE provides context and subject matter to create healthy marriage initiatives in diverse adult education settings, so working together is beneficial to both disciplines.

Counseling as CRE. There is debate as to whether or not counseling should be included within the definition of CRE. A reason typically cited is that CRE tends to be structured and prescriptive; whereas counseling is semi-structured and therapeutic. Couples and relationship education is often associated with a developed curriculum in an instructional format; whereas counseling is more thought of as therapy and uses applied techniques or exercises to strengthen areas of weakness. Still, for the purpose of this investigation counseling will be considered as a therapeutic branch of CRE. I believe when appropriately framed by critical theory and culturally responsive adult education, counseling has a space within CRE. For example, critical pedagogy's rejection of "banking" style education refutes rigidly developed curriculums. It renounces the traditional classroom setting where the educator is viewed as all knowing and learners are simply empty boxes to fill with the same information (Friere, 1970, 1998; Blinne, 2013). In contrast, critical pedagogy like counseling relies heavily on learner opinion and participation in deciding what they want to learn, and planning the process for doing so. Also like counseling, critical theory and culturally responsive education rely heavily on a continual direct feedback loop, which informs how we respond to specific learner needs. Therefore, I argue that counseling although less structured, and more therapeutic, can exist as a distinct, but included part of culturally responsive CRE in adult education settings.

Why Healthy Marriage Matters

Social scientists and the medical community universally accept the link between social relationships and both physical and mental health. People surrounded by

supportive, positive relationships reap the health benefits of decreased morbidity and mortality compared to those affected by negative social relationships or social isolation. For most adults, long-term romantic partnership or marital partnership is the central relationship and marriage has a clear and direct impact on physical and mental health (Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010).

Romantic partnerships such as marriage are often evaluated in terms of stability and satisfaction. However, one aspect does not consistently signify the other (D.N. Hawkins & Booth, 2005); a marriage can be stable or long lasting, but that does not necessarily mean it is a happy one. The aim of this research is to use information concerning relationships that are both satisfying and long lasting. Adjectives used to describe this synthesis include: solid, strong, healthy, successful and high quality. Terms like happily married or happy couples will also be used regularly. The description of happy is not meant to be used in a trite or idealistic way, but rather to illustrate high levels of marital satisfaction.

Physical and mental effects. Positive health effects are large and numerous for spouses in happy, enduring relationships. Extensive reviews of health-related literature revealed a variety of physical and psychological benefits for happy couples when compared to unhappy couples, or those single, divorced or widowed. Happily remarried couples tend to enjoy similar benefits to those married only once, or never married, but in a long-term relationship. Individuals in high-quality partnerships experience greater overall life satisfaction, lower rates of depression (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Robles &

Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Nock, 2005; Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham & Jones, 2008) and lower rates of suicide (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Nock, 2005). They are also less likely to suffer from other psychological diseases such as Alzheimer's disease (Wilson & Oswald, 2005).

A strong marriage has positive effects on physical health as well. Spouses in enduring, supportive relationships have lower rates of acute and chronic illness as well as lower rates of mortality (Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Nock, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010). These individuals tend to have strong immune systems (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Nock, 2005; Wilson & Oswald, 2005) as studies show happily married men and women have a greater proliferation of white blood cells, which boost the body's immune system (Gottman & Silver, 1999). Additionally, marital quality is associated with lower ambulatory blood pressure (Holt-Lunstad, Birmingham & Jones, 2008). These studies represent a fraction of the many reported benefits. It should also be noted that the above physical and psychological effects correlate specifically with the health of the marital relationship. That is, these health advantages are influenced by the positive interactions within relationship and not simply the state of being married.

There are two sides to every coin. The single, the divorced, the widowed, and the unhappily married tend to live shorter lives and suffer higher rates of morbidity. In fact, marital strain over time functions similar to a chronic disease. Poor marital health has been found to negatively impact many of the body's essential functions, with the potential to compromise cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and neurosensory systems

(Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Hughes & Waite, 2009). Mental health and health-related habits are also affected. People in poor relationships tend to suffer from psychological distress (D.N. Hawkins & Booth, 2005) including depression and anxiety disorders and are at risk for developing poor health habits such as overeating, excessive drinking and smoking (Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003). Further, unhappy couples put their children at risk. Extensive review by Gottman & Silver (1999) and Gottman & Notatrius (2002) show offspring are more likely to experience depression and have more behavioral problems like aggression. Additionally, children surrounded by marital stress are less likely to succeed academically. The effects of an unhealthy marriage are both severe and extensive.

Social relationships & health. As previously outlined, strong evidence supports the link between social relationships and individual health. Positive, supportive social relationships give way to a variety of health benefits, while negative relationships and social isolation have opposite, adverse effects to health (Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010). Marriage is the central relationship for the majority of adults, and influences many health factors, but how? Literature reviews of medical and social science journals reveal several key points.

Marriage affects stress. On one hand, positive spousal interactions breed intimacy and attachment. Attachment releases endorphins, which create a calming affect for both body and mind (Money, 1980; Liebowitz, 1983; Fisher, 1992). On the other hand,

prolonged, negative spousal interactions generate marital strain. This constant strain manifests similarly to a chronic disease (Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003). Other factors impact stress as well. Two of these positively relate to sex and finances. First, happily married couples tend to have more and better sex than the unhappily married or single (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Nock, 2005). Second, married couples that share finances incur less financial strain. Both economic ease and regular sex decrease stress and increase feelings of well-being.

Marriage affects health behaviors. Spouses encourage good and bad habits. Generally, people in satisfying marriages tend to adopt healthier behaviors (Nock, 2005; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010). This may relate to the symbolic meaning of marriage and a felt responsibility of each partner to maintain their health for their spouse or children (Umberson & Montez, 2010). Spouses also tend to encourage each other to make healthier choices (Nock, 2005; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Umberson & Montez, 2010) through scheduling doctor's appointments, healthy cooking and exercising. Supportive spouses also tend to inhibit negative behaviors like smoking, overeating, or excessive drinking.

However, not all partners are a positive influence. Umberson & Montez (2010) found several studies showing a relationship's influence on unhealthy habits as well. For example, overweight or obese individuals are more likely to have an overweight or obese partner. Overeating may be as much of a shared activity for some couples as exercise is for others. It is probable that people gravitate to partners with compatible habits, both good and bad.

A public health concern. Overwhelming evidence ties social relationships to individual health and makes marriage a public health concern. Umberson & Montez (2010) agree and assert, “Poor mental and physical health and unhealthy behaviors exact a huge toll on individuals, families and society. Solid scientific evidence establishing the casual impact of social ties on health provides the impetus for policy makers to ensure that U.S. health policy works to protect and promote social ties that benefit health” (p.S60). Blanchflower and Oswald (2004) estimate the effect of a satisfying marital relationship upon mental well-being to be equivalent to an extra \$100,000 a year. Further, happy spouses have lower rates of suicide, fatal accidents, acute and chronic illness and depression, (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Nock, 2005) in addition to the positive effects on the cardiovascular, endocrine, immune, and neurosensory systems (Kiecott-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Robles & Kiecott-Glaser, 2003; Wilson & Oswald, 2005; Hughes & Waite, 2009). In this light, adult education programs aimed at enhancing social relationships such as marriage could be viewed as a form of preventative medicine. Like other marginalized groups, LGBTQ people suffer from higher rates of physical and mental health problems, this impart due to the daily discrimination and harassment they face. Therefore it becomes pertinent to adult educators and CRE to identify common stressors for LGBTQ people and create culturally responsive frameworks to address them.

Long-term Romantic Partnership & Evolution

Why do people seek romantic long-term relationships? Marriage is a conceptualized form of monogamous pair bonding. Monogamous pair bonding refers to a

dyadic social organization in which each member of a mating pair displays selective or exclusive affiliation and copulation, as well as nest sharing (Young & Wang, 2004; Fletcher et al, 2015). Romantic love is the cornerstone of modern monogamous pair bonding in most western cultures. Consistent with wide-ranging evidence from anthropology, psychology, and neuroscience, romantic love is defined by the existence of three components: passion (sexual attraction), emotional bonding (intimacy) and caregiving (commitment) (Money, 1980; Liebowitz, 1983; Sternberg, 1986; Fisher, 1992; Fletcher et al, 2013; Fletcher et al, 2015). The health of each component is directly correlated to relationship quality (Fletcher et al, 2013) and perceptions of romantic love are strong predictors of whether couples will stay together (Fehr, 2013).

Fletcher et al (2015) reviewed data from a range of scientific sources which revealed clear evidence for several conclusions surrounding pair bonding and romantic love: (a) romantic love is universal; (b) it suppresses the search for mates; (c) it has distinct emotional, behavioral, hormonal, and neuropsychological features; and (d) marriage and/or successful pair bonding are associated with better health and survival for the pair and any offspring reared by their union (p.26). These assertions illustrate many of the fundamental underpinnings of love and marriage from both past and present day.

Ancient ties. The evidence substantiating the antiquity and universality of romantic love is irrefutable (Fisher, 1992; Young & Wang, 2004; Fletcher et al, 2015). In fact, anthropologists have yet to study a culture lacking the presence of romantic love (Fisher, 1992). Sexual attraction and selective social attachment, romantic love's two chief ingredients, "are two of the most powerful driving forces of human social behavior,

profoundly influencing art, music, literature and politics throughout history” (Young & Wang, 2004, p.1048). Indeed, the intensity and power of romantic love is evident in poems from ancient civilizations such as China, Greece, Rome, and Egypt dating from 2,000 to 5,000 years old (Fletcher, 2015).

Anthropologists suggest romantic love evolved from pair-bonding relationships originally purposed for reproduction and child rearing. Experts theorize that when human ancestors began walking on two feet instead of four, females became burdened as they could no longer carry their young on their back (Darwin, 1859; Fisher, 1992). Pairing up eased daily pressures and allowed couples to share the responsibilities of parenting and basic survival. Hominid ancestors, such as *Australopithecus afarensis*, formed pair bonds around puberty, reproduced, and remained paired until the child was around four years. During this period, pairs exchanged simplistic romantic gestures such as sharing food, shelter, and parental responsibilities (Fisher, 1992; Fletcher, 2015). Once offspring transitioned from infancy to childhood, the typical parental pair bond would dissolve; each formed a new pair bond with someone in a neighboring group and bore more young. Here, the term monogamous pair bond signifies serial monogamy; the selective or exclusive nature of the relationship lasted for an extended period of time, then each pair moved on to another monogamous partner. Monogamous serial pair bonds were a common part of humans’ ancestral past. The diversity in sexual partners meant gene variety in offspring, increasing the likelihood young would survive until they reached reproductive age (Darwin, 1859; Fisher, 1992). This information may help explain

present day popularity of serial monogamy and also sexual propensities toward promiscuity and adultery.

Additional research is needed to clarify the biological and social influences of modern life-long monogamy and romantic love. Farm living, primarily the invention and proliferation of the heavy plow, was a binding force for couples, as it required strength more easily provided by males (Fisher, 1992). The plow, along with other survival and economic factors may have extended monogamy, but do not fully explain the evolutionary path to modern romantic love more fully defined by passion, intimacy and commitment. Further, this review of literature did not glean any information about the history of romantic love for gay men, or other LGBTQ peoples. Fisher (1992) mentions that homosexuality was commonplace throughout history, but did not speak to the components outlined by Fletcher et al (2015). I wonder whether same-sex intimacy could be by nature a more evolved, mature form of romantic love since it goes beyond sex for reproductive purpose. Further research could begin to answer new questions like this.

Chemically speaking. Pair bonding relies on two fundamental emotions: attraction and attachment (Money, 1980; Liebowitz, 1983; Fisher, 1992). Each emotion is tied with specific chemical reactions affecting feelings and behavior as people experience “love.” Feelings of attraction initiate pair bond opportunities. During the beginning stages of a relationship, the brain and body flood with an excitant amine called Phenylethylamine or PEA. This neurochemical acts like a natural amphetamine, causing feelings of elation, exhilaration and euphoria. Liebowitz (1983) theorizes attraction developed in order to draw males and females to have sex and reproduce. Today, many

couples remain passionate and sexually attracted to each other throughout their relationship, but the intense attraction, or infatuation stage, tends to last 2-3 years. Over time, either the nerve endings become habituated to PEA levels or PEA levels begin to drop.

As intense attraction begins to wane, another process, attachment takes control. Where attraction is essential in creating a pair bond, attachment is fundamental in sustaining it. Feelings of attachment coincide with high endorphin production, which on a chemical level react similar to opiates or narcotics. These neurochemicals calm the mind and reduce anxiety, inducing feelings of security and peace. Liebowitz (1983) theorizes that attachment developed to encourage joint child rearing, increasing the likelihood of offspring surviving until reproductive age. The duration of the attachment phase differs from couple to couple, but can be long lasting, even life-long, and is positively associated with high levels of marital satisfaction.

An educational argument. The evolutionary perspective has relevance for marriage education. Historical context provides a general rationale for why people marry. The hormonal chemistry behind attraction and attachment explains why people love and what is happening behind the scenes. These social and biological underpinnings allow for increased interpretation of the strengths and susceptibilities for long-term romantic relationships. People should know the basics of why they love and partner. The evolutionary perspective answers some of these age-old questions. A greater understanding of the past gives way to a more informed future. Therefore, the work of

anthropologists, biologists and neuropsychologist should be considered for interdisciplinary curriculum development of relationship education.

Contributing Factors to Healthy Marriage

Psychology and social science dominate the field of marriage research and education. For over seventy-five years, psychologists, psychotherapists and family science researchers have attempted to unravel the mystery of why some long-term romantic partnerships succeed and others fail (Terman et al, 1938). Decades of researching married couples consistently reveals the greatest factors influencing relationship health are: compatibility, communication, intimacy, and commitment. Understanding how couples in high-quality relationships address these components has relevance for relationship education. Data show that people in satisfying, enduring marriages follow similar patterns, and these patterns link directly relationship health. Research also reveals consistent patterns relating to dissolution or divorce. Information in these areas may help safeguard relationships from developing unhealthy behaviors or prevent such behaviors from becoming entrenched.

Compatibility. The association of compatibility with relationship strength and satisfaction is widely accepted. Highly compatible couples share interests, values, and have comparable levels of intelligence and education; they are also often from similar ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and of similar physical attractiveness (Fisher, 2009; Mitchell, 2010). However, to discuss this at length seems straightforward and paltry. Instead, this section focuses on relatively new data surrounding personality profiles and partner compatibility.

For decades, researchers unsuccessfully attempted to determine whether specific personality profiles were linked with marital stability and satisfaction (Gottman & Notarius, 2002). However, it is now known that the health of a marriage is more likely based on compatibility of the two spousal personalities, rather than on individual characteristics (Gottman & Notatious, 2002; Fisher, 2009). Two major studies by Fisher (2009) explore individual personality types and compatibility. Her work aligns with the well-established, but somewhat outdated Myers-Briggs personality profiles (Myers et al, 1998), but is more appropriate for the current discussion given her increased attention to romantic partnerships.

Fisher (2009) conducted a personality type study with 39,913 men and women, which produced four primary personality types: explorer, builder, director and negotiator; each personality is associated with high levels of activity related to a specific hormone (Fisher, 1992, p. 6-7). She affirms that understanding these personality types can help people choose and sustain happy romantic partnerships. Traits of explorers are associated with specific genes in the dopamine system. Explorers are characterized by a propensity to seek novelty, willingness to take risks, spontaneity, heightened energy, curiosity, creativity, optimism, enthusiasm, and mental flexibility. Traits of builders are linked with genes in the serotonin system. Builders are known to be family oriented, calm, cautious, loyal, traditional, and fond of rules, facts and order. Directors are associated with high levels of testosterone; both men and women are capable of expressing strong activity in this neural system. This group tends to be direct, decisive, focused, analytical, logical, tough-minded, exacting, emotionally contained, bold, competitive and systematic. The

last group, negotiators, is linked with high levels of estrogen; like testosterone, both men and women are capable of expressing strong activity in this neural system. Negotiators are big-picture thinkers, think contextually and holistically, have superior verbal skills, and are good at reading other's non-verbal cues. They are compassionate, intuitive, sympathetic, nurturing, mentally flexible, agreeable, idealistic, altruistic and emotionally expressive. There are many other chemical systems that play a role in personality, but dopamine, serotonin, testosterone, and estrogen play leading roles.

A similar personality type study was conducted with men and women from 36 different countries and found similar results. The study's contextual diversity solidifies the argument that personality types stem from biology and not culture (Allik & McCrae, 2004). Fisher (2009) proposes these personality types may have an evolutionary component, "Nature sometimes favored individuals who explored their environments; at other times it selected for those who were more cautious or more aggressive or more socially adept. And gradually these core personality constellations – explorers, builders, directors, and negotiators – proliferated... Variability within the group had important social and economic payoffs. So these four basic personality types prevailed" (p.34).

In another study of 28,128 heterosexual men and women, Fisher (2009) explored how the four personality types from her previous work related to choosing a romantic partner. She found explorers are attracted to other explorers and builders to builders. Yet, she saw directors and negotiators gravitated towards each other. This may help to explain conflicting theories, some which promote a "birds of a feather flock together" position, while others insist "opposites attract". While these studies only look at different sex

relationships, research shows the majority of same-sex relationships to follow similar patterns.

Personality types are significant to long-term romantic partnership research and education and provide deeper understanding of self and others. Personality awareness may aid in the selection of a mate and bring awareness to characteristics that may be acceptable or unacceptable in a long-term partnership. Knowledge of personality profiles can also help established couples; heightened consciousness may positively affect communication and problem solving, which creates space for empathy, tolerance, and compromise.

Communication. Communication was reviewed in terms of personality types and marital ecology. Personality types are evaluated, as is the argument of whether a superior communication style exists among others. The idea of marital ecology is also explored. This concept analogizes relationship gives and takes similar to that of a bank account. Communication styles and patterns can help to clarify meaning between partners and lead to marriages that are more successful and stable.

Communication styles. Good communication is decidedly the cornerstone of happy, high-quality romantic partnerships (Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Rauer & Volling, 2013). Interrelated with other important aspects like intimacy and problem solving, communication is a foundational determinant of well-being in long-term relationships. Historically, social scientists presumed the possibility of universal tenets related to stable communication styles; however, current research based

on more rigorous scientific and observational methods revealed multiple communication styles that support enduring marital partnerships.

In 1994, Gottman proposed the idea of more than one efficient marital communication style. This was supported by his subsequent work (Gottman & Silver, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2002) and more current research by Kamp-Dush and Taylor (2012) and Rauer & Volling (2013). Four styles have been identified: 1) validating/mutually supportive, 2) volatile/mutually engaged, 3) avoidant, and 4) wife compensation.

Validating/mutually supportive couples communicate by regular acknowledgement of their partner's opinions and emotions (Gottman, 1994). They are known to be highly supportive during conflicts, have high levels of intimacy and connection, have a mutual appreciation for one another, and work together to reduce negativity during times of conflict (Raurer & Volling, 2013). These couples tend to use positive affirmations and mirror body language and facial expressions.

Validating/mutually supportive couples are often good friends, "who value the we-ness of the marriage over their individual goals and values" (Gottman, 1994, p.39). Discussions tend to be low in emotional temperature and they resolve problems quickly and quietly (Gottman, 1994).

Volatile/mutually engaged couples display high levels of emotional heat during discussions (Gottman, 1994; Raurer & Volling, 2013). They exhibit some negative behaviors such as dominance and denial, but still have a strong presence of love and commitment (Raurer & Volling, 2013). These couples tend to value their independence

more so than validating couples and do not tend to censor their individual opinions. Yet, this passion is not all bad. While volatile/mutually engaged couples tend to express more negative emotions, they also express more positive emotions than validating/mutually supportive couples (Gottman, 1994). If the couple's passion can be used to fuel great levels of positive interactions, the marriage should remain happy and stable.

Avoidant couples are those who minimize conflict by making light of differences instead of resolving them (Gottman, 1994). They tend to avoid conflicts with an attitude of agreeing to disagree. They may air grievances, but only minimal attempts are made to validate or persuade. Issues tend to be "resolved" by affirming what they appreciate about the marriage and simply accepting the rest. These relationships tend to have a low degree of psychological depth. Additionally, avoiders tend to have lower degrees of friendship and passion than couples with other communication styles. However, this type of partnership does work for many people, specifically those who are most comfortable with high levels of autonomy.

Wife compensation couples represent the most asymmetrical communication style. In these relationships, wives demonstrate high levels of positive communication in the face of their husbands' neutral or negative responses (Raurer & Volling, 2013). It appears the wives' efforts effectively preserve the quality of the relationship, as reports show equally high levels of marital happiness, love and commitment when compared to other accepted communication styles. The placement of the wife compensation group in the "happy couples" category is relatively new and supported by a single study. More data surrounding the characteristics and satisfaction levels of this group may emerge with

future research. This type of research needs no further exploration since it would not be applicable in LGBTQ settings.

There are conflicting opinions regarding the existence of a single, superior communication style. Gottman (1994) asserts all styles have advantages and disadvantages, with no single way leading the pack. Raurer & Volling (2013) contend that validating/mutually supportive couples experience the highest levels of marital satisfaction. While researchers debate the existence of a superior communication style, all support the heterogeneity of enduring marriages. The key aspect is that the communication style works for both partners. If one person leans toward avoidance and the other toward volatile it can be a recipe for trouble. Communication styles must be compatible for the relationship to thrive.

Marital ecology: the relationship bank account. All communication styles require the balance of positive and negative interactions. This balance has been referred to as marital ecology (Gottman, 1994). Partners in stable marriages are able to compensate for challenges with heavy doses of affirmation. Unstable partnerships allow negative interactions to outweigh positive ones, which leads to relationship erosion. The same can be said for those unmarried, but in long-term romantic partnership.

Some experts have analogized marital ecology to a bank account (Bloom & Bloom, 2004). Positives such as acts of service, kind words, and affection function as deposits. Negatives like criticism, neglect, and conflicts act like withdrawals. The more deposits in the account, the more likely the couple is able to withstand the withdrawals. Similarly, Raurer and Volling (2013) propose the most consistently linked factor to

marital happiness is the presence of more positive and fewer negative interactions. Gottman (1994) refined this banking concept by proposing a specific ratio. For a relationship to remain stable, a couple must share at least five times as many positive moments as negative moments. Another source (Russo, 2013) found a correlation between length of time spent in conflict and marital happiness. The shorter the couples took to conclude disagreements, the more likely they were to report higher levels of marital satisfaction. The above studies reveal that creating a storehouse of altruism and minimizing the length of negative interactions can help keep romantic relationships strong. Like traditional ecology, marital ecology is rooted in balance.

Commitment. Commitment refers to the cognitive decision that one loves a certain other and promises to maintain that love (Sternberg, 1986). In order for a marriage to remain stable and satisfactory, couples must pledge steadfast commitment to each other and to the marriage itself (Sternberg, 1986; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Gottman, 1994; D.R. Johnson, 1995; A.J. Hawkins et al, 2004; Raurer & Volling, 2013). Highly committed couples tend to view marriage as a permanent state, which is particularly helpful when it comes to communication and problem solving. These partners are more likely to be optimistic and determined to find viable solutions when problems arise. In contrast, spouses with low levels of commitment are more likely to see problems as unsolvable, leading to low levels of marital satisfaction and stability (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Discerning couples acknowledge that some degree of conflict is inevitable and that faith may be tested, even in good marriages (Bloom & Bloom, 2004). Accordingly,

they invest in positive affirmations as much as possible and work through problems as a team (Gottman, 1994; Bloom & Bloom, 2004).

Intimacy. Intimacy derives from emotional investment; it refers to feelings of closeness, connectedness, and bondedness in a loving relationship (Sternberg, 1986). A high level of intimacy is integral for a marriage to be successful. Satisfied couples report a closeness that is emotional, physical and spiritual (Varmecky, 2012). Further, those who identify themselves in stable, happy romantic partnerships report higher levels of all forms of intimacy, and significantly higher rates of sex than their unhappy counterparts (Donnelly, 1993). A subset of feelings related to intimacy include: (a) desire to promote the welfare of a loved one, (b) experienced happiness with a loved one (c) high regard for the loved one (d) being able to count on the loved one in times of need (e) mutual understanding with the loved one, (f) sharing one's self and one's possessions with the loved one, (g) mutual emotional support, (i) intimate communication, (j) valuing the loved one in one's life (Sternberg & Grajek, 1984) and, (k) equity in shared responsibility, work and power (Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Bloom & Bloom, 2004; Varnecky, 2012). This list is by no means exhaustive, but offers a diverse selection of emotions strongly related to high levels of marital intimacy.

Feelings of intimacy can be maintained through thoughtful communication, active listening and honest pursuits to make one's partner feel loved, special, and appreciated. Bloom & Bloom (2004) regard building the bond of affection as one of the most important things a couple can do to strengthen their marriage. Gottman & Silver (1999) conclude that happy couples retain rich amounts of information about their partner and

use this data in regular communication to foster intimacy. This information includes major events in each other's history, facts, feelings, likes, dislikes and much more. A solid commitment to the relationship is also a must, (Robinson & Blanton, 1993) as is spending time together in shared activities (Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Bloom & Bloom, 2004; Varnecky, 2012). Some studies report activities that encourage communication like dancing or cooking to be especially helpful in fostering intimacy (Varnecky, 2012). Naturally, there are multitudes of other approaches that can be used to cultivate intimacy.

Risk Factors for Divorce

Troubled marriages share a remarkable resemblance. The majority of unhappy couples follow the same destructive patterns leading to marital dissolution. Many risk factors for divorce surround ineffective communication and problem solving. Because good communication isn't always easy, it's important to examine where communication can fall short. Exploring the breakdown of communication may help others to recognize their own propensities to exhibit negative behaviors, thus avoiding them in the future.

The four horsemen. Research supports that the majority of unhappy marriages follow the same downward spiral (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Notarius, 2002; Gottman & Gottman, 2006). Four destructive ways of communication are particularly common in the breakdown of the relationship. Ordered from least to most destructive, these warning signs include: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. Criticism involves attacking someone's personality or character versus complaining about a specific action. Whereas a complaint focuses on the event, "It bothers me you forgot to do the dishes again," criticizing focuses on the person and is less specific, "You never help around the

house.” Contempt is the big brother of criticism. It differs in its severity, with the intent to psychologically abuse your partner. Common forms of contempt are insults and name-calling, hostile humor, mockery and negative body language. Defensiveness, a common response to contempt, involves denying responsibility and making excuses. The last warning sign, stonewalling, is characterized by the cessation of listening or talking altogether. It is the most severe because the act completely disengages communication. Unhappy marriages may illustrate other unique characteristics, but interestingly, most follow this negative spiral of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling.

Other offenders. Additional negative behaviors are associated with the erosion of marriage. Ultimatums, threats, and other fear-based tactics do more harm than good. Guilt trips and recurrent negative storytelling are similarly damaging (Gottman, 1994; Bloom & Bloom, 2004). Infidelity is commonly thought to be a cause for divorce, but this notion is contested. Some postulate it is more probable that problems within the marriage send couples seeking intimacy outside the relationship, not the other way around (Gottman & Silver, 1999). In this way, infidelity functions as a symptom of the greater issue, instead of a root cause. However, one should also consider the biological propensity to seek connections outside a primary relationship as outlined in evolutionary section of this study.

Gay Baby Boomer Considerations

As outlined in the beginning of the chapter, this investigation is shaped by post-modern, critical theory. Friere (1970, 1998) asserted the first step of his emancipatory framework is for those in research and practice to become conscious of the powers that

privilege some and marginalize others. These powers can affect both individuals and couples, and should be of relevance to CRE. In order to become more aware of the marginalization gay baby boomers face, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the community's unique history. It is also important to note the generational differences that support this framework. A study by Grierson & Smith (2005) gives shape to the concept of generational differences in gay men. After, I present three essential experiences of historical trauma that contribute to gay baby boomer identity and gay baby boomer history. The section then closes with a look into some of the daily stressors these men face.

Generational differences in gay men. The topic of generational difference deserves explanation because of the way it informs my investigation. All of the men in the study were baby boomers and experienced similar historical traumas. We explore these traumas below as they relate to the Stonewall Riots, homosexuality being labeled as a mental illness, and the 80s AIDS epidemic. These events link directly to their age and coming of age. If I were to study a group of younger men, different, more current societal forces would most likely affect them. I believe generational difference also affected the social stigmas, or discrimination in daily life. For instance, older gay men are significantly less comfortable with public displays of affection.

The work of Grierson & Smith (2005) has begun to examine the phenomenon of generational differences among gay men. They divided the men into three age categories determined by age relation to one of the most, if not the most historically traumatic experience for gay men, the 80s HIV/AIDS epidemic. Groups were labeled: pre-AIDS,

peri-AIDs, and post-AIDs. This was methodically done, as Grieson & Smith used previous work of Watney (1993) to create their measure. Watney's work defends the AIDs epidemic had profound impact on gay identity and argues more generally for other events of historical specificity that could impact sexual identity. In this light, it seems appropriate that other critical events like the Stonewall riots or being incorrectly labeled as mentally ill due to sexual preference could have a similar impact. Grieson & Smith found great discrepancy among the three groups in terms of coming out and gay identity development. The pre-AIDs group, "focused on two issues: telling parents and finding the gay world" (p. 58) This group involved a, "distinct change in friendship groups," (p.60) and often involved gay men moving to cities with more gay people and LGBTQ resources. The peri-AIDs group had a, "mixture of the typical stories of the pre-AIDs group and the post-AIDs group" (p. 60). This group typically came out to existing friendship circles before families, and some only came out to friends and not to family.

The biggest differences for the post-AIDs group was that the men typically came out at a much younger age than either the pre-AIDs or peri-AIDs groups. Like the peri-AIDs group, men in the post-AIDs group came out to friends first and looked to them for support in navigating the coming out process. One of the significant findings of Grieson & Smith was in how the differences of the stories in these main groups reflected increasing visibility and public acceptance of LGBTQ people and assert a shift, "where one's gayness is not so much something that needs to be explained, but rather a social identity with which one claims an allegiance" (p.61). A limitation of Grieson & Smith's work is that it only looks at the coming out aspect of gay identity. It speaks more in terms

of individual identity and less to the concerns of gay romantic relationships and the fusion of two gay identities. Future research would be wise to continue explorations regarding generational differences in terms of romantic partnerships and their considerations.

Historical trauma. Historical trauma refers to historic events that cause emotional harm to groups of people. The group in this investigation was gay male baby boomers, and three events pertinent to understanding this generation are: the Stonewall Riots, homosexuality being labeled as a mental illness, and the 80s HIV/AIDs epidemic.

Stonewall riots. During the 1950s-1960s sodomy laws existed in 49 states, making homosexuality illegal (History.com). Those found guilty of homosexual acts were often fined and sometimes imprisoned. People were also fined and arrested for not wearing what police deemed gender conforming clothing. Beyond legal restrictions, LGBTQ people experience constant violence, harassment and discrimination. During this time gay bars served as safe spaces, social bubbles where LGBTQ people could express themselves openly and find camaraderie with like-minded cohorts.

The most infamous gay bar in United States history was the Stonewall Inn, located in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, New York (History.com, 2017). The bar was run and operated by the mafia, and while police were aware of the LGBTQ clientele, they generally looked the other way. Mafia owners took advantage of their patrons by overcharging for drinks, and extorting money from wealthy customers in exchange for keeping their homosexuality secret.

In the early hours of June 28th, 1969, the cops did ultimately decide to raid the Stonewall Inn (History.com, 2017). Some customers were fined for solicitation of homosexual relations, and others were charged for not wearing gender appropriate clothing. The LGBTQ patrons, however, did not go quietly. Instead the group gained momentum over several days and were responsible for sometimes-violent- mobs growing into the 1,000s. The riots ended on July 1st, 1969. The Stonewall Riots are now recognized as the first large-scale protest staged by the LGBTQ community and allies. These riots were the first successful attempt toward queer visibility on a national level (History.com, 2017). They also remind people of the harsh realities LGBTQ people faced and the scars of which they may very well carry into the classroom and clinic.

Homosexuality labeled as mental illness. Homosexuality has been linked to mental disorder since the writing of the Old Testament. More recent historical events tie the label to a concern by 19th century medico-legal experts. These doctors, used as expert witnesses in court, believed defendants accused of homosexual acts could be found innocent by reason of insanity. This was initially with the good intention of helping defendants avoid legal prosecution. However, over time it ignited further persecution of gay people, including violence and harassment from the general public. Fast forward to the mid 21st century, In 1952, when American Psychology Associations officially lists homosexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders or DSM-I (Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry, 2018). This diagnosis, along with the Stonewall Riots of 1969, and many other political protests during the 1950's-1970's, started changing the conversations happening in the general public about the issue of gay

people and LGBTQ civil rights. In 1973, the APA declassified homosexuality from the DSM-I. Two influences are commonly cited for the change: the cultural shift by protests in the 60s, and the popularization work of biologist and sexologist, Alfred Kinsey (1953), who argued homosexuality is a normal variant of human sexuality. Nowadays, ethical practitioners of mental health disciplines such as psychology, psychiatry, and family social science, embrace the full spectrum of sexual preferences and gender identities. Still, it is easy to see how this would shadow and potentially influence someone's decision to seek help from a professional.

The 80s HIV/AIDS epidemic. In the early 1980's, people in the United States were mysteriously getting sick and dying, and the affliction had no name. The illness seemed to particularly affect the gay male community, and with no tests or treatments in place yet, some gay men found themselves attending 2-3 friend's funerals a week at the height of the epidemic (Christensen, 2016). The disease is what is now known as HIV/AIDS, but when it first became prevalent in the U.S. it was incorrectly labeled Gay Related Immune Deficiency, and was commonly referred to as the Gay Cancer. Religious zealots said it was backlash for their acts against God. Discrimination and hate crimes increased significantly. For sometime, people didn't know how it spread. They thought it was communicable through simple interactions like touching, or touching the same object as someone with HIV/AIDS. Some nurses refused to treat patients and some doctors debated the moral obligation to treat the gay and afflicted. Again, like the previous section, which outlined homosexuality as a mental disorder, experiences like these would most certainly affect someone's decision to seek help from a health professional.

Chronic social stigma. While historical trauma outlined some of the events and issues of the past that have shaped the lives of LGBTQ people, chronic social stigma describes the negative experiences of queer people in daily life. Harm has come to many LGBTQ people seeking help from adult educators in mental health capacities resulting from misinformed or unethical practitioners (Pederson et al, 2006; Buzzela & Whitton, 2012). By understanding the discrimination that exists chronically for the gay community, one can begin to address it (Pederson et al, 2008).

Unstable protections under the law. The most overarching issue in social stigma in the United States is the unstable protections under the law for queer people. While same-sex marriage became federal law in 2015, the current wave of conservative agendas look to challenge progress made by queer people and allies. Discrimination faced by LGBTQ people forces them to create social bubbles that act like pockets of safety, similar to the earlier description of gay bars as community centers. LGBTQ people, like other marginalized communities often flock to larger, urban communities where they are more likely to find like-minded others and allies. It also impacts what jobs they decide to take or not take, or where they decide to travel. It is always a precursor in all aspects of life. The consequence of not making sure an environment is gay friendly can result in mental or physical harm. LGBTQ identity colors everything; therefore, the acknowledgement of the consistently marginalizing society LGBTQ people must face, is essential for ethical practice.

HIV/AIDS. While HIV/AIDS affects all people regardless of sexual orientation, the gay male community has particularly close ties with the disease. The previous section

on historical trauma discussed the severity of the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, and it remains an insidious weave in the fabric of the gay male story today.

HIV/AIDS affects friendships, many gay men, especially older generations have friends with the disease or have lost one or many friends to the disease. It also affects who they choose how they date. Asking someone if they are HIV positive is a common disclaimer in the early stages of gay dating, again, this is more prominently associated with gay men of older generations. Some men are comfortable with dating someone who is infected, and others take dating off the table once the illness is revealed.

It is important that adult education, and specifically CRE be aware of specific needs that relate to dealing with HIV/AIDS. A learner or client may be managing the disease in their own life, or they may have a partner or potential partner inflicted. They may even come to professionals looking for grief counseling, although this is typically a little outside of CRE. Pedersen et al.'s book, *Counseling Across Cultures* (2008), give support and professes that all CRE educators who work with gay men will inevitably deal with someone managing the disease at some point, and must be versed on the issue.

Substance abuse. Substance abuse is another issue that while affects all cultures, is particularly common for the LGBTQ; this holds also true for other marginalized communities who regularly deal with social stigma (Pedersen et al., 2008). Regular and prolonged drug and alcohol abuse can be very destructive to long-term romantic partnerships and may come up CRE, therefore one should be ready to handle related interventions.

Buzzela & Whitton (2009). Buzzela & Whitton (2009) are among a small, but growing group of scholars and practitioners choosing to address the LGBTQ concerns in couples and relationship education environments. Their work was sparked by the question of whether or not the use of heteronormative material in CRE environments was appropriate for same-sex couples. They looked at research from Kurdek (2004) and Peplau & Fingerhut (2007), and found same-sex couples and different-sex couples to be very similar in terms of several dimensions including “satisfaction, communication patterns, intimacy, equality, and conflict” (Whitton, 2015), but found same-sex couples to experience many issues relating to discrimination that were not faced by different-sex couples. Minority stressors include all aspects relating to historical trauma and chronic social stigma explained in the previous sections.

Buzzela & Whitton (2009), also explained in Whitton (2015) made several adjustments to traditional CRE content and delivery in order to cater to the same-sex clients. The results were their *Strengthening Same-Sex Relationship* programs or *SSRS*. These programs are 10 hours, delivered in a group format to groups of 3-6 couples. They deliver the program, “over three weeks: an initial 6-hour weekend session covers the 5 core unit to build couple adaptive processes, followed by two subsequent two hour weekday evening sessions, in which the new skills are applied to minority-specific topics” (Whitton, 2015, pg. 279). To develop the programs, Buzzela & Whitton removed heterosexual bias from program materials, and adjusted language to be more inclusive. They even created two versions of SSRS, one dealing specifically with lesbian women and the other dealing with gay men. The program has been delivered several times and

has been well received accordingly to direct participant feedback and evaluation. They like the use of authentic materials that reflect same-sex couples, and the inclusion of same-sex specific skills and interventions. The hope is for like-minded people in research and practice will continue steps like these towards programs that are both innovative and based in equity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The following section explains the methodology of the study. First, the phenomenological interpretive framework and epistemological position provide foundation from which to build this investigation. Second, sampling and recruitment information are presented. Third, interview design, consent and process are outlined. Fourth, data collection and analysis provide step-by-step instructions for anyone who may wish to replicate the study. Lastly, trustworthiness and limitations are discussed to provide transparency and ethical responsibility.

Phenomenological Interpretive Framework

A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to explore the individual experiences of gay men in CRE programs. The aim of the study was to deeply investigate the lived experiences of the men and to find commonalities representative of the phenomenon's universal essence; Van Manen (1990) and Creswell (2006) assert the use of phenomenology for such purposes. There are two main veins of phenomenological inquiry: Hermeneutic, which involves placing great emphasis on the researcher's interpretations (Van Manen, 1990; Creswell, 2006), and transcendental phenomenology, which places less emphasis on researcher interpretations and more so on thick descriptions of the participants (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). I consider this study to be transcendental, however, there were a few instances in which I had to use my own judgement to make interpretations; these are noted in the research.

The transcendental approach relies heavily on thick descriptions of the participants to explore emerging themes, and to paint a descriptive portrait of what an experience

means (Moustakas, 1990, 1994). I hoped providing rich descriptions in the analysis of the interviews would enhance the credibility and the transferability of the research. I thought this was especially important because I am not a gay person myself and I wanted to make sure that I was providing a space for the men to speak for themselves rather than my interpretations serving as a mouthpiece.

The phenomenon in my study was the lived experience of gay men in CRE. The instrument used to draw out the phenomenon was a semi-structured interview. Interviews went through the restorying process and were turned into narratives using directed content analysis. Creswell (2006) defines restorying as, “the process of reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework” (p. 56). Frameworks can be shared with planners of CRE programs and applied to CRE to make it more inclusive of an LGBTQ audience.

Epistemological Position

Transparency is an integral part of any responsible research. One of the ways researchers can provide this for consumers is to speak openly about your epistemological position. Barton and Bishop (2014) explain the importance of metacognition, and emphasize, “greater awareness of the ideologies and values shaping the research not only beneficially exposes their disguised presence, but also constructively facilitates the development of novel, forward thinking theories, methods, and outcomes within family studies” (p.241). More simply put, in order for consumers of research to understand the data properly, one must first understand the person behind the study design. This might

also be describe as one's worldview. In this spirit, I hope to bring to light the epistemology that surrounds this research.

I am an adult educator with a passion for helping others. I believe we are all teachers and students, and that it's never too late to start on a new path to positive change. I hold the Confucian ideal that the journey of one thousand miles begins with one step, and that small acts of courage and determination can produce both short-term and long-term success. I am committed to helping adults achieve their goals, especially in the areas of education, economic stability and emotional well being. I believe the U.S. education system places too much value on developing the mind and not enough on developing the heart. I believe compassion and empowerment are the two most valuable tools in creating a more peaceful, loving world.

My research paradigm is best described as postmodern, with a critical lens. I accept the existence of multiple truths, and firmly believe that our differences are what make the world more interesting, innovative, and engaging. As a critical postmodernist, I acknowledge institutional barriers that privilege some and marginalize others (Freire, 1970; Creswell, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). My goal is for educational research and practice to function as tools for positive societal change, and to increase equity among all cultural groups. Further, I would like to see adult education used as tool to create fundamental positive change in our social relationships at work, home, and in our greater communities.

I believe ethical research has the responsibility to help people live better lives. Critical postmodernism strives to build better futures for all people, and not just a

privileged few. Relationship education is relevant to all cultural groups, but voices within the GBLT community have been largely left out of scholarly conversations. I hope for this study to be a step towards changing the status quo in this area of adult education.

Sample and Recruitment

Several requirements were required for participation in the phenomenological study. Individuals had to self-identify as a cisgender gay man who has been a student in a couples and relationship education program. The intent is not to ignore others in the LGBTQ community, but rather to appreciate the unique lived experience of being a gay man in CRE. Future studies should explore other LGBTQ perspectives. The program had to qualify as adult education with a focus on the formation and sustainability of satisfying, long-term romantic partnerships. Marriage education programs or any type of relationship education, which focuses on dyadic romantic partnerships, were considered. This included CRE like relationship skills classes and pre-marital workshops.

I also chose to include types of counseling, like individual and couples counseling. Although family social science researchers often separate individual and couples counseling from CRE, I chose to include counseling in CRE. My perspective is that counseling and CRE share similar overarching objectives, especially when framed by culturally responsive education and critical pedagogy. For example, the desire to help patient/learner live their best lives through navigating relationship issues and building relationship skill set. Further, because of the limited nature of CRE programs, counseling is regularly the only option for relationship education available. During recruitment I was

open to CRE programs from a variety of settings including, but not limited to: workplace education, higher education and community education.

Participants had to be currently married, or engaged in a long-term homosexual partnership, or have had a long-term partner in the past. To qualify, men had to be over the age of 21, but my preference was for them to be over 25. Interestingly, all happened to be baby boomers, meaning they were born between 1944 – 1964. There was no intention of having all participants from a particular age bracket, but it is worth noting for one to responsibly interpret the data. The research questions were refined to reflect the continuity of the age group. Much of the unique data concerning gay men surround historical trauma that is associated with growing up with some of the historical events mentioned in the literature review, like being seen as mentally ill because of their sexual preference or dealing with the issue of dating and HIV. For this reason, it is helpful to know the age range for the men interviewed (refer back to chapter two's section on generational difference for in depth exploration).

I did not control for socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or religion, and this information was not collected. It is understood such factors influence a person's lived experience, but recruitment was expected to be challenging without these considerations. Future research may examine variables such as socioeconomic status or race more fully, but the dearth of gay male participants in relationship education programs provided enough of a challenge for this exploratory study.

Recruitment was expected to be a challenging process. Because of this and the intimate nature of phenomenological research, a small sample size was deemed

appropriate. Phenomenological inquiry aims for a sample of 5 to 25 participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (Polkinghore, 1989); overall, 10, interviewees were recruited.

Several measures were employed to find participants. The main participants were found participants was through paper fliers. Several hundred fliers were created and distributed at LGBTQ organizations like OutFront MN, Lavender, and the Twin Cities Gay Mens Chorus. They were also hung up at LGBTQ bars in the Twin Cities. Additionally, fliers were given to friends and family of the researcher, who put them up at various workplaces and places of worship. Some were placed around the University of Minnesota, but not many because of the age group I was looking for. Further, an electronic version of the flier was made and distributed to circles using email and social media. Some of the participants came from purposive convenience sampling; that is, a couple interviewees recommended another participant for the study. It took a long time to find participants and complete the interviews. It took approximately one year to recruit and complete all interviews, ten in total.

Interview Design

Data was primarily collected through a semi-structured, life-world interviews, the primary tool for phenomenological inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1989; Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Cresswell, 2006). This type of interview, “seeks to obtain descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon” (Kvale, 2007, p. 51). The primary research question was: What are the experiences of gay baby boomers who attend CRE? The secondary

question asked: How can the experiences of gay baby boomers to inform equity-based CRE programs in culturally responsive adult education settings? I began each interview with a grand tour question relating to the experience of being a gay, male, in an adult education program, which focuses on strengthening a long-term romantic partnership. Subsequent interview questions follow a sequence of themes, but were flexible when it is necessary to follow-up on answers in need of expansion or clarification. Open-ended questions were structured to encourage participants to speak at length about their experiences. See appendix A for the complete interview guide.

The secondary source of data was a journal consisting of field notes and notes taken during the analysis. The journal's purpose was to record feelings and observations that might help in accurate data analysis. The intent was for the journal to triangulate emerging themes or to debunk codes, categories, or themes that could emerge from my own assumptions rather than participant subjectivity. The journal ended up being quite lengthy, about 50 pages, and help greatly to support and organize the analysis and findings.

Consent

Consent forms were discussed and signed prior to starting the interviews. Participants were given a brief synopsis of the study and an overview of what would happen with material they provide. The researcher explained a little about their epistemology, and interest in learning about the experiences of gay men in relationship education programs, and my intentions to use their experiences to develop equity-based

relationship education programs for adults, which are more sensitive to the diversity in long-term romantic partnerships.

Interviewees were informed that topics are private and sensitive, and have potential to set off strong feelings. They were ensured any information shared was confidential and would be deidentified for use in scholarly journals or conferences. The option to not answer a question or to stop the interview at any time was also given to participants. There was no issue gaining consent for any of the 10 interviews. Everyone was really enthusiastic to be a part of the project and eager to share their experiences.

Interview Process

An interview protocol was used to ensure a consistent process of data collection across all interviews. Participants were asked to consent to one audio-recorded, semi-structured interview, lasting between 45-60 minutes. Many of the interviews went beyond the hour mark. Those participants were alerted at 60 minutes, but they all graciously continued until all questions had been answered.

Each prospective participant was asked to interview at a place of their choosing, over the phone, or via Skype. All of the interviews were held in person, which I believe contributed to the validity of the study. Much of how people communicate is non-verbal and I feel I was able to get a broader picture of each narrative by paying attention to facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures. The interviews took place at mostly at the homes of those interviewed, and a few coffee shops.

The aim of each interview was two-fold first, to explore the experience of gay men in CRE, and second, to use those experiences to identify gaps in traditionally

heteronormative CRE content. The hope is to eventually use the experiences of these men to create curriculum for this area of adult education that is more equity based and reflects the diversity among long-term romantic partnerships that exist in the United States.

Participants were be briefed before and after the interview regarding subject matter, consent, questions, concerns and anything else they want to go over. Field notes were recorded following each interview. The notes will be used in triangulation during data processing and analysis.

Data Collection and Management

Each interview was recorded using two audio recorders. One handheld recorder was used and also the Quicktime audio recording feature on the researcher's computer. The thought was to have a backup in case one recorder were to malfunction during the interview. The audio files from the handheld recorder were transferred to MP3 files. The files were then be erased from the audio recorder. The audio files from each interview were then transcribed and de-identified. I transcribed the first two interviews and realized it was going to take a lot of time. In the interest of saving time, I chose to have all the interviews professionally transcribed. I then reviewed each professional transcription twice, made edits, and typed up reflexive memos; the reviews were in order to verify transcription accuracy and to further immerse myself in the data. The interview audio files and transcriptions currently reside on a password-protected computer.

De-identification consisted of assigning pseudonyms to each participant, and changing any information that could lead to a participant being indentified. The pseudonyms I chose were: Harvey, Tim, Anderson, Freddie, Dan, Jeffrey, Nathan, Peter,

Joe, and Adam. Some were named after famous gay men in history and others I named after dear gay friends. To provide some additional context, I'll review the pseudonyms along with their relationship status and occupation at the time of the interviews. Tim, Anderson, Nathan, Adam, and Peter were all legally married. Tim was a flight attendant, Anderson was a landscape designer, Nathan was an addiction counselor, Adam was an interior designer, and Peter worked for a large bank. Joe had recently been widowed and was like Tim, a flight attendant. Harvey and Freddie were both partnered and flight attendants. Lastly, Dan and Jeffrey were both single, but previously partnered. Dan was a flight attendant, and Jeffrey was an actor and model.

Data Analysis: A Phenomenological Approach

Epoche / bracketing. The analysis began with the first step of phenomenological transcendental analysis, known as epoche and/or bracketing. Moustakas, considered a forefather of the approach, urges researchers to, “set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). To achieve this, the researcher spent time in quiet reflection and personal inventory. The reflexive memoing helped here too. The overall idea behind this is that by letting go of our own experiences, we are more able to freshly perceive the experiences of others. Moustakas understood epoch to be an imperfect science and stated, “the value of the epoche principle is that it inspires one to examine biases and enhances one’s openness even if perfect and pure state is not achieved” (p.61). The importance is not to aim for unrealistic objectivity, but to acknowledge, define, and maintain self-awareness of one’s own biases and do our very best to bracket them. This step aligns well with one of the tenets of culturally responsive

critical pedagogy, which is to be conscious of one's own culture and bias to avoid pitfalls of ethnocentrism or encapsulation.

Transcendental- phenomenological reduction. Bracketing was followed by step two, transcendental-phenomenological reduction. This process involves a state of listening with consciousness and opening one's self up to the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). This was done by reading each interview transcript individually, while simultaneously listening to the audio-tapes. The hope is to mentally return to the lived space of the actual interview. Listening to the tapes allowed for scrutiny of things like tone of voice and pauses. At the end of each interview, a reflection of the things that hit the hardest was typed, each interview was considered singularly at this stage. The result was a reduced summary of each experience, which provided a kind of birds-eye view of each interview.

As a result of the nature of the structured interview guide, the transcendental reduction notes tended to follow the guide and were generally typed up by category. The thematic categories were: CRE program, CRE facilitator, CRE catalysts, things learned, universal relationship considerations, unique considerations for gay men, and advice for CRE, allies, and the greater society. No codes were assigned at this time, just overall impressions of their answers relating to each category.

Coding using directed content analysis. The next step was to begin coding via directed content analysis. The semi-structure interview guide provided a framework for selective coding using content directed analysis within a phenomenological framework. Each thematic section was assigned a different color: CRE program (green), CRE

facilitator (grey), CRE catalysts (red), things learned (pink), universal relationship considerations (blue), unique considerations for gay men (turquoise), and advice for CRE, allies, and the greater society (yellow). From there, each interview was highlighted for crucial information from each section with a corresponding color. This was repeated for each interview, for all 10 interviews. The next step was somewhat similar, just drilling down deeper. Each interview was reviewed again, section by section; and each section was broken down into smaller descriptive codes. Throughout this process the researcher engaged in constant comparison; while coding an indicator for one concept, they compared that indicator with previous indicators coded in the same way. This back and forth process continued as each interview was analyzed, until saturation was reached (no new insight is gained). Narratives were also developed during the coding process and helped to clarify codes and emerging themes. See appendix B for a sample of complete narrative broken down according to thematic coding using directed content analysis. Pages of supportive notes follow each narrative. Narratives were used to clarify emerging codes and themes. Final codes and the preliminary findings that reflect them were developed once all narratives were compared and completed. The findings reflected a transcendental phenomenological approach, relying heavily on the descriptions of the participants with the aim of enhancing trustworthiness, which will be detailed in chapter four.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was assessed using Lincoln & Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria. Good qualitative research relies on four areas of importance: credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility refers to the degree in which findings make sense and are believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was addressed through critical attention to the type of qualitative approach, participant selection, data collection and advanced plans for directed content analysis. Credibility was also enhanced by prolonged engagement with data through extensive, repeated review of the transcripts and audio files. Additional techniques employed to increase credibility included: (a) bracketing, (b) journaling, (c) including lengthy participant quotations, and (d) seeking peer review.

Confirmability demonstrates the researcher's ability to remain neutral in data interpretation to increase the authenticity of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strategies mentioned like member-checking and peer review helped to confirm results.

Transferability is the ability to which the findings are applicable in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This aspect was addressed using Moustaka's (1994) descriptive approach to phenomenology by providing thick descriptions in the preliminary findings. Rich description intended to show the effort to provide consumers of the research enough information to come to their own conclusions, and perhaps transfer findings to other conditions or circumstances.

Finally, dependability addresses the findings are consistent and replicable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I addressed this by providing step-by-step methodology,

and by including appendices, with research tools like my interview guide and my example narrative template. The provided methodology and research tools could be used by other researchers in related future investigations.

Limitations

Limitation is nearly inevitable in qualitative inquiry. The subjective nature of phenomenology can impede the ability to generalize findings to a larger group. The experiences of the gay men interview reflected their personal truths, but are not representative of the gay community as a whole. This is especially true seeing as the men interviewed (by chance) all fell within the same generation, baby boomers. Many of the unique considerations for gay men surrounded historical trauma experienced directly by the participants and would not be as applicable to younger gay men and their identity development. Another limitation is that nearly all of the men vetted the CRE programs and facilitators beforehand they began their education. They made sure they were gay friendly, and a large portion of the chosen a gay counselor or other LGBTQ counselor. This may have swayed their overall positive experiences with CRE. If they had not checked for safety beforehand, they may have had more experiences with bias and discrimination. Perhaps this is not a limitation, but out of transparency it is worth noting that the research was conducted by a cisgender heterosexual ally, who brings with them their own unique worldview and way of reading the world. This query urges LGBTQ people in scholarly research and practice to make their voices heard and continue the type of work in this study. As to other allies wanting to do similar research, it is strongly recommended to use the transcendental phenomenological framework, so that thick

descriptions from the participants can speak for themselves. There is space for everyone to help the LGBTQ community continue to gain visibility and access to resources. An important thing to keep in mind is that even well intentioned allies can fall into traps like ethnocentrism and generalization; perhaps the best way to avoid such traps is by thoughtful, critical, and prolonged engagement with the gay community.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The organization of the findings is based on the semi-structured interview guide and the directed content analysis based on the semi-structured interview guide. The findings are broken into six categories: CRE program, CRE facilitator, CRE catalysts, things learned in CRE, universal relationship considerations, and advice for allies, CRE, and the greater society.

CRE Program

CRE programs were evaluated in terms of: type, frequency, structure, course materials, homework, and overall experience.

Type. Each interview began by asking participants some basics about the types of relationship education they attended. The most popular types of CRE were individual and couples counseling. Of the ten participants, nine reported to have had individual counseling and seven, couples counseling. Two participants took part in an informal pre-marital seminar, and two others in grief counseling. One person attended sex therapy with a partner. Not all of the CRE programs were traditional counseling methods. One participant attended a coming out group, and another a relationships basic skills class. There was even a participant who has used a call-in counseling service provided at no charge by their employer. Overall, I was pleasantly surprised by the variety of programs represented and I think they contributed to a well-rounded sample.

Frequency. A few of the men simply went to one session to deal with a specific issue like getting married or blending families. Some stretched it out and went to a set handful of sessions to deal with a particular issue. Others went frequently for six months

to two years, using the program as ongoing help and triage. One informant mentioned they didn't remember exactly how much they went, but that it was regularly and happened more often in the beginning of their relationship, "... the majority of our counseling was more early on in our relationship. Because if ... once you've been together for 33 years, you tend to understand each other a little more, hopefully". Many of the men have had multiple experiences in CRE and are still attending their programs regularly.

Structure. The majority of the CRE programs stemmed from the therapeutic branch of CRE and were counseling based. Accordingly, the programs tended to be a traditionally semi-structured. Some of the one-time programs, like the pre-marital seminar, were reported to have had some set topics to be covered. The structure of the relationship skills class taken by one informant was unknown. Several mentioned the format of their program as free-flowing. One participant attended a more spiritual, but non-religious type of program referred to as intuitive counseling, which was structured in combination with meditation and yoga.

Course materials. Seven of ten participants cite CRE programs using course materials. All were written materials, either handouts/supplemental reading materials, books, or both. Some related to more universal relationship considerations like intimacy, anger, co-dependency, and relationship building:

Jeffrey. I think she might have been the one who recommended *The Dance of Intimacy* and *The Dance of Anger*. Harriet Lerner Lowe, is that the author? *The Dance of Intimacy* and *The Dance of Anger*.

Joe. One of them was Harville Hendrix, that was the author, and the title was something like Getting the Love You Want, or something like that. I know there was one called The Dance of Anger.

Nathan. Yes, there were a couple of them that come to mind. There was a couple of codependency books like Codependency No More. I think I remember that one. And then a couple of books on coded codependency and working as a couple in a relationship, relationship building.

Others more specifically addressed gay issues:

Peter. There were recommendations made, as far as some books to use. Like, My Boyfriend Within, or something like that, that actually were more gay related. But then, there were also the ... what was it? Cognitive Behavior. The ones dealing with, "I should have, I could have, I would have," type of thing. Trying to get that negative thinking ... And then recommended this book, as far as, The Boyfriend Within, and things like that.

A less confident Adam says, "I think they were skewed as more gay oriented ... or a mix. I'll put it that way. There's probably a mix of things."

Homework. About half of participants mentioned they had some kind of homework assigned by their CRE facilitator. The most popular being active thought process, which is basically when a counselor tells their client to think about something for the next week and come to the next session prepared to talk about said topic. For example:

His was more like here's what I want you to do. It wasn't like in conjunction with a handout, or any kind of literature per se. But, I remember specifically he would say, "So, for next week, I want you to think about your feelings about what it meant and you found out that Ed started using again. What was your ... " And, "Ed," he would say, "I want you to think what that felt like for Harvey." He was really good about what seemed like it was on you. This one's on you. He balanced it out, so wasn't like it was never an attack. Then he would end with, "Here's what I want for next week." Sometimes it would be directed specific to something one of us had brought up that session that seemed to be a trigger, you know? He said, "I want you to think as this week goes on what you just said about what it's like when ... " Because relationship, something sets it off that maybe becomes an excuse to focus on instead of what's really happening. I remember something like that happening. He would say, "I want you to think about why that sets you off," and it wasn't really related to the main issue, but it's tied up in everything else, if it's affecting you in setting you off. He was good about not letting those things get glossed over.

And another example here:

It was more of an educational thing. He did give me like little homework assignments. "Do this. Write down these thoughts and feelings, and before you come back think on this", and maybe he'd write down some notes or whatever, and then come back and we'll talk about what you did.

Other communication exercises were detailed such as sharing and clarifying:

Yeah., “You need to tell him that, you know,” stuff like that. “You need to share this with ... You need to tell your mom ... And do it or not, but I'm recommending that you practice clarifying communication.”

And a great tool called back to backs:

She would give us little assignments to go home, like the back to backs. She would say like, “Okay, in the next couple of weeks, this is what I want you guys to do. And they were more like experiential assignments so that we had to like in the moment when this happens, this is what you're gonna do it. It's what she had us agree that we would do that. And so, that when it actually happened, we both knew that what that was, what that meant. That it wasn't like something that we're doing a back to back right now. We knew exactly what that meant. And then we'd go back there couple of weeks and we report back how it went.

Well, what we would do is if we saw that our temperatures were escalating, we'd take time up back to back and then we'd have to like go someplace like a room like this and take two chairs back to back and each facing different directions. And so, you don't even look at each other. You'd be like that. And you'd look out, be able to some lookout. Whoever goes first is fine and say you want 10 minutes? Great. The other person just listens for 10 minutes and the other person just talks straight for 10 minutes. And then the next person goes for 10 minutes and then you keep doing that, or the next time is five minutes, so if you can in five minutes. And then maybe I want two minutes this time. And then

the other one two minutes. And then it goes back and forth until you don't need any time. And it gets resolved.

Overall program experience. Every participant had at least one positive experience in CRE. Programs were reported to have been helpful and unbiased. One participant illustrates, “ In counseling you have somebody sitting there, keeping that on track, and making sure that, "Is this what you meant to say?" And then saying to the other person, is that what you heard HARVEY saying? It was incredibly helpful to me coming away from that, where I felt like he had to listen to when I felt like he didn't want to, but he had to sit there and hear me out because we had somebody else in the room. It was a good lesson for me, and it was a good experience for me to see that I wasn't without responsibility.” Others more simply put that programs were: very good, wonderful, awesome, productive, and transformational.

Unfortunately, three men who had multiple CRE experiences, said that one of the experiences was negative and/or unproductive. Harvey remarked, “ It'd already come to deteriorate to such a point that by the time we'd gotten to this round of this time two counseling that it wasn't going to help us. It didn't. The three sessions we had did not have any productive end, and so the relationship ended.” Luckily, only one person, Tim, asserted that they had a horrible experience. It was because the participant was in a family counseling session and dealing with a previous heterosexual family unit. The counselor was chosen by Tim's partner's ex-wife and she did not approve of homosexual relationships.

CRE Facilitator

The men described the process they employed to find potential CRE facilitators and programs. They also explained the perquisites they used to decide on the right professional. They closed by critiquing their overall experience with their counselors and teachers.

Facilitator qualification. The men all vetted their programs and facilitators before attending CRE. This was important to ensure their safety. It was also done to evaluate whether a potential facilitator was knowledgeable about gay issues and capable of helping with unique LGBTQ considerations. Two chief qualifications were found to be prevalent when looking for CRE counselors: they had to be gay friendly, and for many, they had to also be a gay man themselves.

Gay friendly. Before choosing a CRE facilitator, typically a counselor, 100% of participants inquired to make sure the person was gay friendly and/or had experience working with homosexual men and couples. Most gave clear answers, such as:

Harvey: Yeah, that was a priority.

Jeffrey: Yes. I knew she did. That's one of the reasons I went to her.

Tim: Yes, definitely. The first one we went to, she specialized in gay couples.

Peter: I sought out somebody who had experience with working with gay men.

One man didn't directly say it but did remark that he took the advice of a gay friend who presumably already vetted him.

Self identify as a gay man. About half of the men worked with a CRE facilitator who was also an openly gay man. Some felt that in order for a CRE facilitator to be a complete subject matter expert, they must be gay themselves. Harvey explains:

It was a gay man who was our therapist_That was kind of at the time what I wanted. I felt like because things were still really different then, I thought is somebody as much as they could be accepting and open, is a heterosexual therapist going to be able to really grasp? It wasn't that long prior to that, that psychological association was_had just taken the stigma away in '70 ... It was a decade previous. I knew that the thought if we could find somebody who's gay ... And so we did. We found a gentleman who had a lot of experience, and we both liked him. It was helpful knowing going in we had somebody who understood the specifics and the unique qualities and aspects of what it's like for same sex couple, in this case two men. The community was generally supportive, but I still had in the back of my head. I Which, at the time I felt seemed to be the more problematic because we're dealing with the male sexual energy, and just the way we seem to be wired. I didn't see that same scenario happening, not that I knew a lot of lesbian couples, but I did. It seemed like our issues were different.

Dan agrees:

For me I knew by then that if I was going to go to counseling to talk about gay relationship issues, that I should have a gay counselor. It just seemed the logical thing to do ... I realized that when I was having issues in my relationship, that it

made more sense to talk to somebody who at least was on the [inaudible 00:12:59] we're in the same boat from the get go.

Freddie, another informant, similarly illustrates:

I wanted to see a gay man for a therapist, because I don't know, it just makes sense to me, because they get it. They get what I'm going through, and they've lived a gay life, and know what kind of challenges that a gay man has to deal with. ... I not only sought out a specifically gay male therapist, but I read all their bios, and this one lined up with the kind of information I wanted to get or be educated on. He specialized in strength in breakups, and the aftermath, and blah, blah, blah, so it was kind of cool.

Additionally, if participants were to seek out another CRE facilitator in the future, being gay friendly and perhaps being a gay man would still be qualifiers. Several men said that they don't need the facilitator to be gay, but they should have experience with gay men. Peter asserts, "I think working with gay men, probably, would be the thing that would be the most important to me. And then, if somebody who happened to be gay, fine. Harvey agrees, "My natural belief even to this day is just that is a qualifier. If I were to do it again today, it still would be." Further, Adam notes, "We didn't seek out a counselor who was gay themselves. We never had one. But the two main ones that we've seen are both very gay supportive and always have been and are very ... have a lot of gay friends. ... if we went back to somebody else, and somebody new, I know we would ask that question."

In sum, all of the men in this study emphasized the importance of verifying a potential facilitator was gay friendly and/or had experience working with gay individuals and couples. It was important, but not nearly for the facilitator to identify as a gay man themselves. Not only were two these qualifiers important to them historically, if they were to seek out help in the future, they would continue to use the same determining qualifications.

Facilitator discovery. The most popular way for participants to find CRE facilitators was through recommendation. Freddie, Jeffrey, Joe, Nathan, Tim, Anderson, and Peter all used referrals to find their counselor. Freddie, Jeffrey, Joe, and Nathan sought out help from friends. One of Tim's experience's was at the request of his partner's ex-wife, and Anderson took the opinion of his own ex wife. Peter had an initially negative experience with a counselor, but the disliked therapist recommended another one who Peter has really liked and has worked with extensively. Participants also found CRE facilitators through other means. Tim found one of his ongoing programs through work (phone-in counseling), and Tim and Anderson met one of their counselors through church (pre-marital counseling). Dan located facilitators using an LGBTQ directory and Joe tracked down a much-appreciated counselor using gay community services.

Facilitator experience. Facilitators were described as positive, sensitive to learner needs, unbiased, open-minded, good listener, calm/soothing, had my best interests at heart, terrific, insightful, pragmatic), negative (homophobic). Not everyone weighed in specifically on their CRE facilitator, some commented more generally on their experience

in the program which was outline in the previous section of the findings. Of those who did address their opinions, most had positive experiences. Harvey, Freddie, and Nathan all mentioned their facilitator was unbiased, which was of particular importance to them. Harvey stressed the urgency “for both people to feel like the person's impartial and not taking sides” and that is something he experience in both his first and second CRE experience. Freddie further supports, “I needed somebody who was unbiased, didn't know me before, didn't know my ex, and was just willing to listen to what I had to say and tell me if I'm crazy. You know?” Another positive quality was mentioned by Harvey, who found his counselor to be sensitive to his individual needs, “he was listening and making adjustments based on our specific situation.” Dan, Peter, Joe, and Tim had generally positive reviews of their facilitators, calling them, “very good, terrific, and wonderful.” Tim also affirmed his counselor was quite open-minded and, “nothing seemed to make her uncomfortable.” Harvey valued the experience of his counselors,

They were older. Well, they were in their 30s. One was probably 40. So, they'd lived a long time. They had experience. I didn't feel like they didn't know what they were talking about. I didn't feel like I was being preached to. I didn't feel like I was being talked down to, or made to feel like all the classic stuff that you want from a good therapist.

While Freddie stressed his counselor had his best interest at heart,

I think the therapist was great. He was just a really great guy, and I think he had my best interest at heart, and he made me think twice about what I was doing. I wanted to do the right thing, if there is a right thing in that kind of a situation, so

that's where my first experiencing therapist started and ended. I think it was almost a year.

Lastly, Jeffrey found his facilitator to be insightful and pragmatic,

She came at it just from that she had a gift, I think, and that she was insightful and she was kinda working class and missing a tooth and just really plainspoken and earthy, and I think that's why people either liked her or not. But I really found her voice and insight to be just what I needed, 'cause it was really pragmatic and down to earth.

While the vast majority of interviewee's reported positive experiences with a variety of facilitators, there were a few who had negative experiences. Peter had a counselor who knew his partner and uncomfortably brought it up in session. The therapist also to some extent flirted with Peter, which ultimately caused him to seek outside counsel. In another instance, Tim, illustrates a homophobic counselor,

I felt, in fact, that she was terribly homophobic. I think both Lance and I felt that the minute we walked in, that the cards were stacked way against us. That how could we even consider being parents? Then again, as you know, she was his ex wife's counselor, so it was a big conflict of interest and weird.

Dan also had a marginalizing experience, but it was technically in a non-relationship type of counseling,

By the third session, I said, "Oh, by the way, I'm gay. I just want you to know that as we evolve our counseling relationship, that you should know everything about me." And the next thing she said was, "What made you decide to be gay?" And I

kind of got wide-eyed, and I remember looking around the room, thinking, "Is there a diploma on the wall in here? Did she really just say that?"

He does go on to say that later on that she felt bad about the interaction; still, this remains a glaring example of the chronic social stigma, and more specifically micro-aggressions that LGBTQ people face on a daily basis.

CRE Catalysts

CRE catalysts represent the spark that ignited participants' reasons for seeking couples and relationship education. This section is broken down into the following sub categories: identity development, relationship skill development, relationship fusion, abuse, communication issues, intimacy issues, commitment issues, and end of relationship.

Identity development. The catalyst for one participant to seek CRE was coming out as a young man in his twenties. Joe remarks, "Back when I was in my 20s, when I was first dealing with being gay I went to a coming out group. It was a group of, if I remember, six or eight men. They were all ages stages of grappling with our identity of being gay." Overall, he was hoping to gain coming out tools to move forward leading a more openly gay life and gaining self-acceptance.

Relationship skill development. Harvey, Tim, and Joe expressed one of the reasons for CRE was that they were young, exploring themselves and first relationships, and craving out some basics to help foster a good relationship. They found themselves a few years into relationships and needing to figure out skills to deal with compatibility, problem solving, personality differences and other fundamentals. Joe put it best,

explaining, “A lot of it was around our relationship, and planning to have a healthy relationship. My partner was a psychologist, so he was really into wanting to have a good relationship.” Freddie also sought to improve his relationship skills, but more specifically by taking personal inventory of himself and his previous relationships. He opens,

This was the one time while I was still in a relationship that I sought help, and guidance, in what to do in the relationship. I have seen therapists a couple of times since, but they've been post breakup. Like, this is the aftermath. It's like, What am I doing wrong? How can I better approach a relationship and try and make it healthy from the beginning, and let it flourish? What am I doing that's wrong? Maybe I'm not doing anything wrong. Maybe this is just the way things go.

He hoped CRE would help him get introspective and learn from previous mistakes.

Relationship fusion. One of the biggest categories of reasons for seeking CRE was relationship fusion. Relationship fusion, simply means two people consciously coupling and the variable that stem from that coupling. Examples of fusion included: moving in together, preparing for marriage, and blending families. Of these variables, blending families appeared the most challenging. All participants with children, or partners of participants with children, were from previous heterosexual family units. These cases made room for some complicated CRE catalysts. One can have children who are adjusting to parents coming out, floored and confused ex-wives, and new gay male partners dealing with all of the aftermath. Tim illustrates,

I found myself at the back end of three kids, and I didn't know what the hell I was doing. And so I needed to learn a little bit about what it is to be a step-parent, even though I wasn't considered a step-parent by anybody. But that was sort of my role. So that, I would say, that was really our main reason for going, or my main reason for going...I really wanted to learn about integrating a family. That was kind of what it was about, family integration.

Notice in this quotation how Tim states that while he felt like an insta-parent, he wasn't considered a parent by anybody. This was in reference to the refusal to legitimize gay men as parents by Tim's ex wife and Tim's ex-wife's counselor.

Abuse. Several types of abuse were reported to have been the reason the men have sought CRE. Harvey, Freddie, and Peter both had partners with substance abuse. Nathan confided his own battle with alcohol and his partner's plead for him to get clean. For some, emotional abuse was the catalyst for CRE. Nathan was victimized by a controlling boyfriend,

I think it was a relationship that was very controlling, but then kind of abusive to like emotionally abusive, and I think that's what really got me ... I was very quiet. I got to the point where I was retreating into myself too much and I couldn't really quite get out of that. I think that's what, for me, that propelled me into wanting some kind of counseling.

Dan did not sugar coat it in saying the reason he went to counseling was,

A boyfriend sociopath. Really a wrong choice for me. I needed to see a counselor for that one because I knew he was just such a liar, but I couldn't find myself

getting out of that. ...the long-term relationship also was affecting me negatively because he was such a narcissist. Just a real self promoter, and still is.

Both substance abuse and emotional abusive served as reasons these men needed help from a CRE professional.

Communication issues. Communication issues were of course a top catalyst for CRE. Some sought CRE for general communication or conflicting communication. Others were more specific stating they wanted to work on arguing or talking over one another. Joe and Adam commented personality differences mixed communication and sent them off to counseling. Adam exemplifies,

I'm a pragmatist. And he was very much up in the clouds. So he would ... initially when we met, he would have to sort of run up into the clouds and think about things. And I would run after him because I'm a pragmatist. And I'm like "Let's figure this out."

Adam further affirmed they wanted counseling so they could overall get help to just, "understand each other as human beings."

Intimacy issues. Peter revealed a sex rut as one of several things he wanted to address in CRE. Joe mentioned he and his partner went to sex therapy, but didn't elaborate. Nathan brought up one relationship's cycle of fighting and sex, but it was unclear to me as to how much this contributed to their decision to seek CRE. Public displays of affection also came up many participants, but did not necessarily present as a main catalyst.

Commitment issues. Freddie cited an outside love interest as a main reason he went to CRE. He describes,

I had met somebody else that was kind of turning my head, and I really, I didn't so much cheat on the guy I was with, but I didn't want to do anything before I figured out what I was going to do with my long-term, so I kind of kept him at bay. We would get together for lunch, or drinks, or something, and not do anything, but just we were getting to know each other. I knew I was kind of falling for this guy.

...

Yes, and like, "Okay, I've got to step back, and keep seeing this therapist, and figure out what to do."

End of the relationship. Several sources spoke of different reasons relating to the end of the relationship as the instigator for CRE. Freddie said they were on the verge of a breakup, "it was beginning to fall apart, for several reasons. ...I wanted to end it, but I didn't want to end it without trying everything I could do to save it." One of Harvey's several CRE experiences came out of a creative marriage-like contract stipulation,

It was more required because of different circumstances being tied in financially, the home, and so therapy was required as part of what was coming out of the relationship being on the rocky end, and the house. It was part of our agreement that we had to go to counseling before it was ... It sounds convoluted, but it's something we willed before we could sell the house that we tried to make this work, to make sure we weren't being emotional and just walking away from the

commitment. ...we went into it more because it was prescribed by the agreement with the property sale.

If you will, I guess it was an early prenup condition of both of us being on the title was a stipulation of who brought what into it, and what would happen if there would be a sale. Tied in with that was an agreement that if it comes to the point where we feel like the relationship is coming to an end, we need to go to counseling. We would do that a minimum of three times. Then if we couldn't, if we saw no reason to go forward the with counseling, here's what happens with the sale of the house based on the specifics of what was drawn up. We had no other legal standing in the eyes of the law. So, it wasn't completely unique. I knew a couple other people who had documentation like that.

For Joe, it was not merely the end of the relationship that brought him to one of his counseling experiences, it was that his partner was dying,

At that point my concern was Sam, my partner, was chronically ill. I wanted to have somebody who specialized in being in a relationship where the caregiver is dealing with someone who is chronically ill.

Things Learned

The things the men learned in CRE largely related back to their catalysts. Communication skills were cited, as was an increased understanding of themselves and their partner. Some found good ways to reflect and take personal inventory. Others found CRE gave their lives and their relationships direction.

Communication. Many of the men cited better communication as a result of their CRE experiences. Tim stressed, “ I think she definitely put us on the right track for communication, so that was good,” and, “I would say that Lance and I learned our most valuable skill set with Henry (CRE facilitator), about communicating.” Speaking skills and active listening were two things that came up with regularity. Speaking skills helped Joe learn to stand up for himself, “Just tools to learn how to speak up for how you feel things. I need "I" statements. I feel like I need this, or I need that. Trying to own your needs.” Harvey speaks of active listening at length; he illustrates,

That being said, the counseling made both people have to listen. You don't get to get away with the same things when you're talking in a good way or a negative way with someone, friend, partner, whatever, if you're not moderated or have a mediator there. When things are really difficult, and you have somebody there to keep it on track, and to go, "Well, so can you explain ... " During the sessions it was amazing to me how I could sit there, and whether I agreed or disagreed with how my words were perceived by the therapist, it made me listen to what my partner, how he heard it. In my head it was clear. Now we know a lot about this stuff, about active listening, and whatever. Back then it was like, "You're just not listening to me," or people assume, "How could you not know what I meant by that?"”

Conflict management skills helped Jeffrey to reframe his perspective when dealing with disagreements. His counselor helped him by advising, "I'd reframe it. It's not conflict. It's communication. You're just communicating. You're communicating.”

Harvey similarly emphasizes, “So, one of the biggest things early on especially that I got from counseling was how it changed the conversation. Having uncomfortable conversations that didn't devolve quickly into accusation, finger pointing, yelling, that could stay calm and productive.”

Understanding. Compassion, appreciation, and acceptance of difference were three aspects related to understanding that came out of CRE experiences. For example, Harvey re-ignited compassion for his partner and his battle with substance abuse,

When we had to go back because he was falling off the wagon, I learned the compassion I have as a human being was never gone, and I wondered about that because I was so angry when I found out that this was a problem again. I'm like, "Really, after all we went through?" But I didn't understand a lot about that illness, or disease. Then you come away from that as we talked about that through the sessions, you're learning about somebody close to you that maybe isn't something specifically you have a problem with, but here it's somebody you love.

Anderson said he learned, “It was definitely more just about showing how you appreciate each other and how you just become a stronger couple, stuff like that”. Adam attested better understanding came from accepting the inconsistencies between him and his partner, “So we were able to at least let the other person be who they were rather than trying to change them or whatever.” Clearly, these tenants of compassion, appreciation, and acceptance of difference helped to awaken or re-awaken heightened awareness of their partners.

Self-reflection. Self-reflection was an area of CRE competence learned by Dan, Jeffrey, and Nathan. Dan found emotional strength. Jeffrey learned through CRE how his history of being a people pleaser has affected his relationships. He divulges,

But I learned, in counseling, a lot about myself, including that I'm consciously a people pleaser, and as an entertainer, I would try to sort of adapt myself into what I thought the other person wanted. And that's just impossible to sustain. And learning to sort of share the sloppier and darker pieces of myself and accept somebody else's just took practice on my part, and we couldn't work through that. I continued to go to her for quite a while, because I was learning so much. I would say that it's helped all of my relationships, including that one, just 'cause it wasn't a good model for either one of us

...

The people-pleasing, the co-dependence, feeling like you're responsible for someone else's feelings, feeling like you can't express your needs and you can't fully express yourself, 'cause you have to be the best version of you or else you won't be lovable. And so that was what I learned about myself, and started to change.

Safe emotional outlets like CRE, meditation, and sometimes just a good cry in the car helped Jeffrey to gain emotional health needed to navigate his emotions and the emotions of others. Nathan also mentioned meditation and breathing exercising as a way to pause, gather, and reflect.

Direction. Four participants gained confidence to steer the direction of their relationship. For Peter, it was how to move forward in the relationship. Peter said, “ I thought there was some really good discussions, as far as what to do, or how to proceed in the relationship and such.” Freddie, Jeffrey, and Nathan all had at least one CRE experience that taught them it was time to leave the relationship. Freddie commented, “he gave me a lot of help, but in the end it helped me decide to leave. I knew for sure that we'd gone as far as we can go, and I can't go down this road anymore, because I'm getting dragged under. I'm going under with this.” Jeffrey acknowledged, “ I learned a lot about myself and in the course of counseling, rather than it turning into a happily ever after, it turned into, "I'm not happy and I need to end this." And so we kind of navigated our way through that.” Nathan said that one of his experiences gave him the strength to leave, “I wanted to do it the right way, and I just didn't know how. I felt paralyzed. So, the counseling really helped me empower myself to do that.” Whether forwards or backwards, CRE helped give these men direction in their relationships.

Universal Relationship Considerations

All of the men interviewed agreed straight and gay couples have a lot common. Freddie remarked, “ I would say it's not a whole lot different from the relationships that straight people have, because we've all got similar issues.” Anderson commented, “I think when it comes to relationships, it doesn't matter if it's a guy and a girl, a guy and a guy, a girl and a girl. It's two humans. The mechanics are a little different, depending on what you want to do for fun, but what's going on up here is what ... I think we're all more alike that way than we're different.” Jeffrey says we all have to deal with things like

finances, kids, and how to handle old age. On the whole, the men concluded that all romantic partnerships share more similarities than differences. Tim affirmed, “ Our struggles are no different than Shirley and Henry's (heterosexual couple). I just drove with Shirley the other day, and we were talking about some things. And she was like, "Yeah, that's not a gay thing. That's just a marriage thing. That's just a living with somebody thing."

Intimacy. The men reported on one cornerstone to any relationship, intimacy. The desire to couple sparks the beginning of a partnership regardless of sexual orientation. Nathan beautifully illustrated this,

I think that happens in long-term relationships regardless of whether they're gay or straight. People are always kind of searching for love. I think that's the most universal thing that everybody is searching for and trying to ... I think part of the challenge of being in a relationship is finding love without needing the other person to fulfill that love...I think there's not that much different between people who are LGBT and people who are straight. I just think it's a human universal feeling to be searching for love. I just think it's universal.

Dan noted the same thing, and added, “We definitely have that (wanting to couple) in common. I don't know who does it better.” Clearly, underneath it all we are all looking for the same thing, to connect with another human being and know that we are loved and that we matter.

Compatibility. Compatibility is a variable the men reported all couples consider. One aspect related to personality. When people decide to partner, they must think about

how their two personalities will combined. Harvey contemplated spoke a little about specifically personality types and how we all must navigate those types of differences. Jeffrey brought up the relevance of compatible or incompatible conflict management styles. He spoke directly of a previous relationship, which had difficulties because he was from the “calm down and talk it over school” and his partner was from the “sulk and slam school.” Compatibility was also discussed in terms of shared activities and values. Harvey detailed that similar interests isn’t really that important, “as long as each person is allowed to do what they like.” What was of greater importance was compatibility of values. He stated, “I think it’s values,” and “To me you have to have general compatibility when it comes to broader views about what it’s like to be human.”

Communication. Harvey declared simply, “ I think it’s definitely (navigating) communication,” that all couples have in common. Several other participants mentioned communication, but in conjunction with other variables. I’ve chosen to report these findings here in order to keep the supportive quotations intact. Joe said communication and compatibility, “Communication, dealing with anger, dealing with individual differences.” Nathan cited communication along with intimacy, and people losing interest,

Something that's universal probably for everybody is communication and intimacy. I think some of the issues that come up is a little bit people losing interest in each other. I think that happens in long-term relationships regardless of whether they're gay or straight.

Verbal communication skills and conflict management skills were also reported. Jeffrey addressed communication along with intimacy and cleanliness.

Legal rights. Peter brought up legal rights as something gay and straight couples now have in common. Beginning 2015, gay couples in all 50 states can now legally marry. Additionally, gay and straight couples can have children and own property together. He details, "People are able to choose if they want to get married, or if they just wanna be in a partner, committed relationship. They can have children, they can own property together, they can do all of those types of things. They can have intimacy, they can be able to go and do things together, you know? And it not be odd."

Global warming. Global warming; this was perhaps my favorite answer.

Participant Jeremy beautifully illustrates how we're all in this together,

They called me and said, "What do you think is the biggest threat facing the GLBTQ community?" And I said, "Global warming," and there was a big pause on the phone. I said, "That's not on your checklist?" They said, "Global warming is not on my checklist." And I said, "I think that's the biggest threat facing the GLBTQ community, 'cause I think that's the biggest threat facing humanity right now." And I think, to me, it's the more that we just keep stepping out onto the table and coming out and being a part of the community and showing up for the community that we all have to just see that. Who's here today? Oh, you're gay, you're straight, you're black, you're white, you're rich, you're poor? Okay, let's get on it. What are we here to do?

Jeremy eloquently steers the conversation in a way that reminds us that we are all a part of something much bigger and argues for coming together.

CRE catalysts as universal considerations. For the most part, I wanted only to include direct responses to the question, “What do you think that gay and straight relationships have in common?” This was for the reason that the analysis sways toward the Transcendental camp of phenomenology, which emphasizes the use of thick descriptions from participants to drive the analysis. However, it is worth noting that nearly all of the catalysts for CRE in this study were also universal considerations for couples. Issues regarding identity development, relationship skill development, relationship fusion, abuse, communication, intimacy, and end of relationships are things that all couples have in common. Grief was also a component. The overall impression is that all couples face the majority of the same issues, but gay men and couples have the additional component of being gay on top of any issue in question. For example, straight and gay couples deal with blending families when starting a second marriage/partnership, but only gay men deal with the aftermath of a previously heterosexual family unit. These types of unique considerations will be discussed in depth in the next section.

Unique Considerations for Gay male Baby Boomers in CRE

The 10 men were all questioned as to what they thought were unique considerations specifically affecting the romantic partnerships and marriages of gay men. Participants illustrated plentiful considerations. The men noted such variables diverge not only from heterosexual couples, but also from lesbian couples. Harvey explains,

It seems like the things we faced as couples being men, I felt it's different. It's different than heterosexual couples, and it's different than lesbian couples I saw. ...it was always a consideration that no matter where the men fall on the spectrum of, for lack of a better, masculinity, I always felt that of all the possible couplings out there, that bringing two men together, just by virtue of how we're socialized from the time we're young, creates a unique set of problems...I just feel like the power struggle that can be intrinsic or innate between two men presents another layer of issues for having a successful relationship than other couplings.

Differences brought to light through the interview fell into three main categories: compatibility, historical trauma, and chronic social stigma.

Compatibility. Several issues of compatibility were found to relate specifically to gay men. Outness compatibility was a factor, as were issues relating to intimacy and sexuality. Of the three consideration groups: compatibility, historical trauma, and chronic social stigma, compatibility seemed to be the most relatable to other generations of gay men. This generalizability contrasts historical trauma, for example, which is very generation specific.

Outness compatibility. The first aspect of compatibility to discuss is that of outness compatibility. This matters in terms of both how long someone has been out, and also of how out they are in their daily life (think: career, friends, family). Several of the men struggled in past relationships because one of them was either significantly more out than the other. Freddie, who has been out since he was young, flat out said he would not recommend being someone's first gay relationship,

I'm like, "Don't. Don't do it. You're like the first big deal. He's not even divorced yet." It's like, "Wait until he gets divorced. Maybe he has a boyfriend or two, and kind of figures it out, but you don't. If it's meant to be it'll be, but just don't be the first, because it's doomed from the start.

One interviewee, Tim, described a particularly heartbreaking story of his now husband forcing him to hide in an upstairs room when a family member came over. The more out partner ends up feeling the less out partner is ashamed of them, which can erode intimacy.

Intimacy and sexual compatibility. There are several uniquely gay considerations relating to intimacy and sexuality compatibility. A couple of the men opened up about their sex lives, and provided a clear consideration that only affects gay men: top and bottom compatibility. Participants revealed most men have a strong sexual preference for either primarily giving or primarily receiving penetration. When choosing a partner, the compatibility of top and bottom can be a deal breaker, Freddie asserts, "That's a very unique gay thing. It is an issue. It's a big issue." He goes on to say, "You usually try to make it very clear, especially if you're going to get into a dating situation. Pretty quickly on."

Compatibility in terms of open relationships, fetish, and HIV, were three other topics brought up in the interviews. Several of the men suggested open relationships may be more prevalent with gay men, but both have to be ok with not being monogamous. A similar argument was made for fetish. This was not discussed at length, but would be worth exploring in future investigations regarding gay sexual intimacy.

Compatibility was also discussed with relation to HIV and choosing whether to date and be sexually intimate with someone who is HIV positive. While HIV is certainly present outside the gay community, it has roots still firmly within it. Both Freddie and Nathan said choosing to date or not date someone who is HIV positive is a consideration still strongly present. Further, Nathan described an startling new trend, to actually want to become infected with HIV,

I think that that idea that people want to be HIV is more prevalent now than it ever has been...there's this whole weirdness, weird idea, that people who are not HIV are missing out on something that the gay community has been through. So, it's almost like these younger generations are fanning, they want to be HIV positive so that they can experience the full gay experience. It's really weird, and it's really convoluted, and it's sick and twisted, but that's out there.

He goes on to speak of a previous potential partner,

He had this fantasy of walking to the doctor together to get their medications together every day with whoever his partner was. He had this whole fairy tale idea that, it was just like they could check their T cell comes together and all this kind of stuff. I was like, "Wow, it's just so sick."

In the end, Nathan did not choose to move forward with the relationship, but wanted to emphasize his great compassion for those who suffer from the horrible disease. The trend of wanting to be HIV positive is quite surprising. I was unable to find additional support for this finding, but my initial thought is it may relate to nostalgia associated with being a part of a historically gay experience.

Historical trauma. Similar marginalizing societal forces affect the baby boomers in the form of historical trauma. Adam confesses, “We've lived through all of that hatred and all of that discrimination. And I've experienced plenty of it. ... some experiences where it's just been very negative and just a lot of hatred. When I was in high school, I was bullied a lot as a gay man.” Nathan agrees,

It's interesting. I think I used to probably call it that, like discrimination, but now it seems more like trauma. It's all trauma. All gay men have encountered a lot of trauma. I guess, the fact that what our whole community has gone through, it's trauma all the way around. And trauma with HIV, trauma with everything.

...It's trauma stuff. People don't identify it as trauma. They think, “Oh, that's just how I grew up. Or that's just what happened.” But it really is a traumatic event.

And so, as gay men, we have a whole bunch of traumatic events that we've gone through just for the sheer fact that we're gay. Just for the fear of walking outside, holding hands. I mean, just having that initial like acceptance, it reminds you how mom rejected me, reminds me of when I came out and then this happened. All this kind of stuff is kind of related.

All of the men interviewed have suffered immensely. They've been through hell and back, but have managed to survive and thrive. Historical trauma experiences included: homosexual dating/restrictions, pressured into heterosexual marriage, no same-sex roles models, being a trailblazer, and the 80's HIV/AIDs epidemic.

Homosexual dating restrictions. About half interviewed lamented not being able to date as young people. Things were hidden. Jeffrey recalls, “When I came of age

sexually, I realized, "Huh." People were like, "Who do you like? Do you like anybody? Who do you like?" And I'm like, "I can't tell them who I like, 'cause I like a boy." Harvey agrees, " We couldn't date outwardly, openly....I always use the analogy of my high school experience. I didn't really get to date until I was 19 when I moved to the city and came out." They were not able to have the same experiences as heterosexual teens and youth who were going to the movies, dances, and experimenting with what it means to be in a romantic partnership. Harvey continues, "From the time your 12 you're going on dates. You're going to proms and all that. My community was way behind when it comes to that, and I think that colors us as we get into adulthood. ..We didn't have the dating experience under our belts." Instead of the normal romantic rites of passage, gay boys and men were often forced into the shadows. Jeffrey illustrates,

Gay culture, for the most part, was subversive and kind of deviant sexually and quick hookups and have sex immediately and anonymous sex in bathhouses and do it in the back of a car, and it was very ... What's the word? Furtive.

For decades, being a hidden homosexual was often expressed more in-terms of sexual intimacy; a lot of the other relationship stuff was left out.

Pressured into heterosexual relationships. Considering social stigma of being an openly gay man, lots of men chose to date and even marry women. Harvey recalls his high school years, "Any dating I did was pretend with opposite sex, but I couldn't be who I was. I couldn't be authentic. I couldn't be myself." Beyond high school, Harvey remembers, " I had a lot of friends who married women because it was easier than dealing with their sexuality. Of course, it didn't work. Some even had kids, and then they

separated years later, the classic scenario.” Of the men I interviewed, Anderson was the only one who had been previously married. There were also a few who had dated a partner who was married to a woman or had been previously married to a woman.

Freddie had a partner who was married the whole time they were together,

It was hard on me, because I would loved to have had a ceremony with this guy, because I was in love with him, but he didn't go after getting this divorce. I was like, "Get the divorce. Do it for yourself. Do it for your wife. Let her move on. And do it for your daughter, because she wants you to be a happy gay man, and fine love." He did. It's kind of cool. I don't know if I had any influence on it, but within the year after we broke up, they got the divorce.

Peter knew he like guys since high school, but felt pressured to date women. He went back and forth between men and woman, but was able to finally accept his sexuality before getting himself into an unwanted situation. He remembers,

She was really pushing to get married. And I was like, just, it's not right. I don't wanna be that guy who gets a divorce five years down the road, and with kids. So, I was like, "No, that's not gonna happen for me." So then, I finally did come out.

The aftermath of a previously heterosexual family unit is a very unique consideration for this age group of men. So much pain and suffering is caused for everyone involved: the husband coming out as gay, the wife feeling her life was a lie, and confused children watching their dad's identity change drastically. Gay baby boomers regularly bring issues like these in to CRE spaces; therefore, CRE facilitators should be prepared for special considerations like these.

Familial rejection. It's no secret LGBTQ people frequently face family rejection in the coming out process. The pain of being abandoned by family at one of your most crucial periods of self-development is something many gay men bring with them in their daily lives and into CRE programs. Three of the men interviewed spoke of specific, negative family reactions. Harvey simply said that his mom rejected him, but didn't elaborate. Adam shared he was separate from his family for five years after he came out. Anderson confesses, "As soon as my parents found out, they disowned me." The silver lining here is that although these men experienced painful initial reactions, all of them now report positive relationships with their families. It may be particularly prevalent for baby boomers and other older gay men. Family acceptance of gay family members has increased exponentially in the last several decades (Grierson & Smith, 2005).

No same-sex role models. Like other marginalized groups of people, this group of men had very limited roles models for much of their lives. Unlike heterosexuals, these gay men rarely saw themselves reflected in public spaces like TV or movies. No role models is another variable, along with homosexual dating restrictions, and previous heterosexual relationships, that has impeded gay men from experiences more healthy romantic partnerships. When gay men were present in movies, for example, it was often covert or gay men in heterosexual roles. Adam brings up the example of watching Rock Hudson kissing Doris Day, and it still being a major moment for him because even if Hudson wasn't openly gay, a gay man had still made it to the screen, and that was at least something,

I don't know if it sounds weird to you, but it kind of was an earmark in my life 'cause I thought, we don't get to see this. Everybody else gets to see it. And straight couples get to see couples kiss in the movies all the time. Sometimes they're watching gay people kiss straight women. We just didn't know that Rock Hudson was gay when he was kissing Doris Day. But it was a major moment to actually see.

Adam also details the first time he saw two gay men kiss in a movie. It was in 1983 and it caused a negative audible reaction, but was a huge moment for Adam and for other gay men. Adam said even with the negative hush murmured by the audience, it was, “an earmark in my life 'cause I thought, we don't get to see this”. The end of the movie even showed an openly gay couple living together. These were small victories, but victories nonetheless. If there is one thing above all that these men have done well: it is to take each pebble of hope, of kindness, of strength, of visibility and slowly build a bumpy, but viable cobblestone road toward their future and a future of tolerance for LGBTQ people.

Being a trailblazer. Lacking role models and prescriptive guidelines, for eons the gay community has been left to blaze their own trail. The men interviewed seemed to have a reverence for this phenomenon, but also slight irritation for younger gays who, ... don't understand gay history. They don't understand the struggle that we've been through to get to this point. I'm talking about the younger generation who can hold hands in public, or can do this, or can do that. And it's sort of like this pounding on my chest that, I'm the one who made the ways for these people. Yet, they're overall heartened that their efforts had made such positive change.

Peter professes,

We've blazed the way, and so for me, I'm just so happy. Happy to be able to see that today, hey ... heck, I was coming back from the grocery store, and I was listening to the Pride station. And here there was a commercial to recruit people to join the National Guard on the gay radio station. Okay?

His eyes light up as he describes the experience he once thought impossible. It's a unique mixture of reverence and sadness for the arduous experience of paving one's own trail, something a CRE facilitator would want and need to be aware of.

Rejection of LGBTQ label. A couple of the men brought up that not all gay men agree with the LGBTQ label. I've made a personal research decision to keep this section particularly de-identified. One of them remarked, "Those five letters. In the struggle for our own sexuality, I'll say non-heterosexuality, the gays and the lesbians were not necessarily wanting to be aligned with each other at some point in our history."

The other agrees, "I understand that that's their experience, but I don't know that we're necessarily all lumped in the same ... You know, we've all experienced depression because of our sexuality, but calling it GLBTQ, I know that there are gay couples that are like, "I'm not gonna worry about them."

Similar comments were made more specifically in reference to bi-sexual and trans people. They spoke of the struggle for those letters to come together was not natural and some within the group have disregard for another part of the group. This trends generational for the baby boomers and one would expect to see much less of this in generation x and millennial. A source agrees, "We're getting used to it. I'm an older

generation, too. The kids today are so much fun, they're so much cooler with all this than we were. But then we were kind of on the battlefield". It seems this independence stems from the understandable need and desire to have one's unique challenges and triumphs acknowledge and appreciated. CRE facilitators should respect the need for this independence when working with gay baby boomers. It may also be worth noting that the LGBTQ label has underpinnings from societal forces outside the communities and not from those letters coming together themselves.

The 80's HIV/AIDs epidemic. Of the aspect relating to historical trauma, the most prevalent historical event that came up was the 80's AID crisis. As detailed in the literature, when HIV/AIDs became more prevalent in the United States in the late 70s and early 80s, media outlets, like newspapers labeled it "gay cancer." Participants explained once the association was out there, rumors spread like wildfire and people actually believed falsehoods as outlandish as all gay men have AIDs. Adam recalls, "At first it was (labeled) a gay disease. When I came out to my parents, the next words were, "You have AIDS." But I don't have AIDS. But those are words that came out." It was a scary time. Freddie remembers,

I was in college '81 and '86, and that was when everybody was dying, and I was just kind of exploring my sexuality. I was a little, you're a young man, so I was doing stupid things. It's like, "God, I'm so fortunate to have gotten through all that and still be healthy."

One of the main ways HIV/AIDs was transferred at the time was through sexual contact (*none of the men spoke of HIV/AIDs in relation to other ways you can contract it, like

dirty needles, for example). As a result, it became part of the national triage to promote healthy sex choices, but many still lost their lives. Nathan describes a slogan, “Come on me, not in me” became popular in order to prevent lesser exchange of potentially harmful bodily fluids. Safe sex with protection was also encouraged. Nathan said that safer sexual choices are one of the reasons he’s negative today, “I’m very grateful that I’m negative now and that I have been in all that. But I know I’ve had some close calls with it. So I’ve been there, I’ve lost a lot of people.” He continues,

And I think for our generation, there's a lot of that ... we carry a lot of that grief forward. And we've had to go on. And we've had to with a lot of loss. And it's been hard. But we've survived it. And we got through it. And we move forward.

Because now people don't look at AIDS as a death sentence.

Yet, another example of how hard these men have fought to gain access to the most simple of resources, to love and to stay alive. Adam compares his generation’s losses from HIV/AIDs to that of the previous generations losing friends to wars, “ You have to live with a lot of loss,” he laments.

Chronic social stigma. While the previous section spoke of past traumatic experiences, this section focuses specifically to marginalization experienced in daily life. The variables explored below all speak to the feeling of “otherness”. As Harvey puts it,

It is in every aspect of our lives that we have always been looked as being different. That's a lot that comes in even in the subconscious when it comes into relationships. We have to be able to be aware of that, I think, when you start to figure out your commitment to a relationship. We're facing just a different

environment by virtue of being gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or Q. It's a whole set of different issues that come into play based on the outside's judgment.

Like other marginalized groups the men illustrated the concept of never being able to “take off your gay coat,” as one put it. It is important for planners of CRE programs and CRE facilitators to familiarize themselves with the daily life of gay men and couples in order to be culturally responsive to their needs. Unfortunately, a huge part of their lives is sidestepping discrimination and creating their own safety nets. Like the previous section on historical trauma, the answers detailing social stigma were also quite lengthy. For this reason, this section is also organized numerically: 1) safety bubbles, 2) gay bars as community centers, 3) self-image and physical appearance, 4) politics/unstable protections from the law, 5) embarrassment/shame from family and friends, 6) microaggressions, 7) offensive speech, 8) public displays of affection, 9) career, 10) travel, 11) substance abuse, and finally 12) gay poster child.

Safety bubbles. One of the primary ways my interviewees talked about keeping themselves and their partners safe and happy was to surround themselves within social bubbles. These safety bubbles consist of pockets of people and places of tolerance. This aspect casts shadows to nearly all of the social stigma considerations. These bubbles concern careful choice of everything from where to live and travel, to career and friendships. They are basically creating their societal pocket with the need to, as Harvey said, “make sure our world is also our safety net.” He stresses, “ We surround ourselves with people who we are and know us as we are.”

Gay bars as community centers. For some men, gay bars served as early safety bubbles. Harvey explains, “The world was not friendly outside, but you walked in and the door close, and the music was on, and everybody was happy. Not happy because things were great outside, but happy because in here, you're with people that you knew.”

Self-image and physical appearance. Nathan brought up the difficulty with being an aging gay man within gay social circles. He stresses,

I think it's harder being an older gay man because you don't have kids and you don't even have kind of a legacy. And so, sometimes older gay men are seen as dirty, dirty old men that they're not cute anymore. And that gay men in their '20s and '30s seem, you know, they can fall off and laugh and be cute and do whatever. But then once you're in your '40s, '50s, '60s, I think you're expected to not do those things. And so, it kind of takes away some of that, like fullness that used to be charming. And I think that's the hardest challenge, I think.

He laments, “our community” is too focused on physical appearance and it's harder getting older as a gay man.

Politics / unstable protections under the law. While the LGBTQ community has made huge political strides over the last several decades, there is a long way to go, and the future is uncertain. The current political environment and the resurgence of extreme conservative rhetoric has left community members and allies wondering: Are we going backwards? Adam worries, “Now, with of course, our current president (Donald Trump), God only knows what he'll try and do to gay people's rights.” Adam, with increased intensity, agrees,

With our current political state, it could go the other way. And it could go ... it could get ugly. There's already a lot of ugliness out in the world. And he's just dismantling everything we're trying to ... and so I'm imagining ... or trying to imagine if he's gonna try to dismantle at some point to appease his constituents to go there.

The most in depth political conversation was with Harvey. His words are emotional and eloquent. His own suffering and his compassion for other's suffering is palpable. He describes, "the political spectrum right now, and the things that are happening are horrendous " and how political stressors affect relationships. He talks about it always running in the background,

It's not far from my consciousness at any given moment because it affects everything, to me is about being a civil human being. That's kind of where things are at. So, yeah just kind of a daily thing.

He discusses how unstable political protections and marginalization color everything in a gay person's life. He likens the LGBTQ struggles to other groups discriminated against because of race or religion. He makes explicitly clear what Peter directly said to the blue eyed, blonde haired, white, middle-class woman sitting in front of him, "there are things happening in the gay community that are negative to the gay community and they won't affect you. "

Embarrassment/ shame from family and friends. Two of the men, Tim and Adam, shared examples relating to embarrassment or shame in response to their homosexual romantic partnership. Tim talked a little bit about his experience with his

now husband. His husband has only been out for a few years and has had a previously heterosexual family unit. When Tim's partner came out and starting dating him, his partner's kids felt somewhat awkward. He describes the kid's reactions more, "a little bit embarrassed," and not so much ashamed. Tim brings up the example of having a sleepover at heterosexual mom's house vs. gay dad's house,

I think that I would ask somebody to understand that it would be much easier for all three of the kids to say, "Hey, do you want to come over to mom's house and spend the night?" versus, "Hey, do you want to come over to dad's house. Oh, and by the way, dad has a husband." It just would be easier.

Adam's examples were more heated in nature. We both had very emotional reactions during this part of the interview. One incident occurred at Adam's niece's wedding.

Adam wanted it noted that while this happened at his niece's wedding, his niece is super liberal and "gay people are like nothing to her, she's worked with a million of them."

Adam and Leo go to the wedding and decided to stay at the hotel offering for the night.

In the morning they go down to breakfast with a big group of family members,

And the minute we walked in together ... now, we weren't holding hands or anything ... the room went silent. And they're all looking at him. And I was like ... my heart just sank. And I was just like, "What can I do here?" I wanted to ... I was almost like ... I wanted to say something. But I didn't. We got our breakfast. And everybody was quiet. Nobody said anything. Right, right. And so we literally ... and then I thought after that ... we turned around and we got our trays. And we're like, "There's no place to sit." Because every table was taken.

Adam and Leo just stood there with their trays while no one made room. They were just about to resort to going back to their room when his older sister finally said, “We can make some room over her by us. Why don’t you sit by us?” Keep in mind the room is still completely silent. They then walk to the sister’s tables, “And so they made some room. And we found some chairs. And we sat down. And then everybody started talking.”

Adam also shared an experience that happened with him and Leo during the holidays,

At Christmastime we went to my sister's house, and it's Christmas. It's Christmas Eve. We're opening gifts. And I literally put my hand on Leo's hand. And my sister made ... she talked about it months later. One of my sisters said, "I saw you put your hand on Leo's hand." I said, "Well, we love each other, and it's Christmas. We didn't put a hand on each others crotch, or we didn't kiss. We didn't- We didn't touch each other's butts. We didn't ... and she was like, "But there were kids present.”

Like others who lack understanding of gay men and couples, his sister over-sexualized something as small as holding hands. It’s my belief that children should be exposed to the diversity of relationships and families. Luckily, Adam did go on to say that his family has adjusted and now they’re response is, “Can Leo come?!?!?”

Micro-aggressions. Joe labeled the term micro-aggressions in his interview. He uses the term to describe the more implicit, hidden ways gay men are marginalized by the general public. He outlines a specific example that happened the day before our interview. Sadly, both Joe’s partner of over 30 years and his sister died in the last year. At

his sister's funeral, Joe gave a Eulogy and within it mentioned his deceased partner. The funeral speeches were video taped. The day before *my* interview, he went to pick up the DVD from his cousin. When he watched it, the section about his partner had been removed with scalpel like precision,

The thing that she edited out was, "As I'm sure many of you already know, I lost my partner, Sam, of 34 years last spring to Huntington's Disease, and now this, the loss of my sister from her complications from Crohn's Disease." This is my story. This is where I'm coming from. This is how I'm starting the whole little talk about my sister. She edited that out.

He and his cousin looked at the original and same thing,

Whoever made the DVD edited part of what I said. Nowhere else in the DVD was it edited. I'm learning more about this. She edited at the very beginning I was talking about my partners of 34 years, and she edited all that out.

Joe did not unfortunately have the opportunity to confront his oppressor, but did seek support by bringing it up at his next CRE session. His partner was a physiologist and he seems to have a lot of tools he's acquired over the years through dealing with stigma in therapy. He cautions younger gay men,

I would tell young gay people to just be aware. If you have something that did happen, call it out, whatever that may mean. You don't have to personally attack the person that did this to you, but you need to make it public in some way and let it be known. I just think we have to take the rock off of all these types of things, and let the light shine on it.

This advice holds true for LGBTQ allies and culturally responsive educators. When you see injustice, call it out, and do what you can to help.

Offensive speech. Both Tim and Adam gave examples of offensive comments they receive. Tim outlines an experience in family counseling with his now husband and his husband's ex-wife. The intent of the session was to address blending family. In the session, the ex-wife said they were two men, and therefore can't be parents. The facilitator/counselor did nothing to stop her hate speech, but instead as Tim recalls, "She clearly had no want or reason to enforce Lance and I has legitimate parents." Adam spoke more directly to the general public and points out, "Well, there's a lot of hatred, a lot of people call you names...queer, fag, all that stuff. They use words that are still offensive to this day and age." He does however, note that the word queer has shifted over time, "The younger generation, in fact, I think they actually like to the word. I don't think my generation does. I don't personally, but I know the younger generations are more akin to it." Here, another generational comment. For the baby boomers, queer still holds its sting, where younger generations accept and sometimes celebrate the term.

Public displays of affection. Public displays of affection or PDA, usually refers to the small actions one does with a romantic partner like holding hands or a quick kiss. Generally these actions are thought of as sweet, loving gestures, and don't take on an overly sexual tone. Still, because of the chronic social stigma of being gay, many of these baby boomers do not feel very comfortable with it. Of the 10 interviews I did, we talked about PDA, or lack there of in 7 of them. For some it came up organically and others I prompted a bit, just asking their general thoughts and overall comfort level with PDA.

Tim is comfortable and enjoys PDA, but his partner took a while to come around. It's critical to note again here that Tim has been out since his twenties and his husband only came out a handful of years ago. He talks about the difficulties regarding PDA they faced early on in the relationship, "I needed to get a handle on, how come he doesn't want to hold my hand in public? How come he doesn't want to kiss me in public? So he took it to CRE for discussion, and the counselor was very helpful. Tim remembers,

Even really when we were talking about holding hands in public, I felt like the counselor we had, she was very much, like, okay. So hold hands in public. It's no big deal. She wasn't like, oh, you should maybe judge the crowd before you do it, or ... And I will tell you that all of this has helped, because Lance, who would never be affectionate in public, just the other day in Boise, Idaho, we're walking down the street, and held my hand and gave me a big kiss. So clearly it does help. Time helps, too. But it does help when you talk to people and they go, "Oh, yeah. It's okay.

Anderson speaks to the other side of this coin. He's not nearly as comfortable with PDA as his partner is. He said he has never felt comfortable with PDA, even when he was with women, but noted "it is exacerbated for homosexuals." The difference in comfort level surrounding PDA caused tension in the early stages of his relationship with his husband,

I know that that would be hard on George, even when the kids weren't around. It's like, "What's wrong with you? Why can't you be affectionate with me?" It's like, "Well, I'm in public." He's like, "Well, who cares?" I'm like, I've just always been

kind of shy that way. Yeah, so definitely there's an added layer of tension and anxiety.

Freddie says straight up,

The thing about, that's interesting that you mention about public affections. I've never really been in a relationship with somebody that was comfortable with it. I've always thought I would be, but I still can flinch sometimes when like Oscar's holding my hand, or wants to give me a kiss or something. I'm like, "Oh, can we do this here?"

Dan argued that comfort level with PDA is one of the best examples between gay and straight couples,

Oh, yeah. That's the big one. That's the biggie. I think growing up gay or whatever, being gay, being a gay couple, a gay single person, we know that the discrimination is out there in neighborhoods and cities and other parts of the world or other parts of our own town where you wouldn't be openly affectionate, or where you wouldn't even think of staying or going, because you know you wouldn't be welcome there as a gay person or a gay couple. I just can't imagine what it would be like for heterosexual couples just to behave as they wish wherever they go, and nobody think twice about it. That's something that we grow up with. Even if you're comfortably out in a relationship, we wouldn't kiss in a coffee shop, let's say, or hold hands where we thought people might be looking at us, for fear of retaliation. That's a huge difference. That's probably the primary biggest difference.

Several reported change of comfort levels in PDA depend on the area. This goes back to the social bubble and staying in gay safe zones. But other couldn't even do that.

Adam expresses,

So we figured, we're in the (gay) district so we can actually hold hands or whatever if we want to walk arm in arm, hold hands ... and we saw people doing this and ... because we're in this area and it happened all the time. We couldn't do it. We tried it, but we were so stigmatized... that we're not supposed to show public affection. We couldn't do it. We finally had to ... I was like, "I can't do it." And Leo's like, "I can't either."

Peter and Joe feel that their discomfort with PDA is generational. Joe also thinks PDA is easier for young gays today stating,

I do think it's a generational thing too. I think more younger gay men are comfortable with holding hands when they're walking down the street, but you still don't see it that often. You might see it in uptown, but not that often.

Peter gives a hopeful and heart-warming example from his last vacation. He describes an adorable, young, gay couple playing in their hotel pool. The hotel was mixed; it was not a gay hotel and resort. He watched them goofing off in the water together and every once in a while hugging or kissing, "I was like that would have never happened 20 years ago for Jake and I in a mixed hotel, but yet, today, it was happening." He continues, "I mean it was just sort of endearing and wonderful to actually see personally" and laments that while things are getting better "Certain aspects of public displays of affection are easier for a straight couple to do than a gay couple."

Career. Many gay men experience discrimination in the workplace.

Adam affirms,

I've gone through where I've been ... a lot of hatred ... a lot of discriminated against because of the fact that I was gay or people perceived that I was gay. I haven't gotten work because I was gay. I did a project once ... or I was working on a project once. And the client came in. And the ... it was a wife and the husband ... and he had major issues with ... not that I said anything, did anything. I just was doing my job, but found out later that he perceptively said or thought in his mind that I was gay. And he didn't want to deal with me. He didn't want to have anything to do with me. And I didn't do anything, say anything that would even lead into that place ... that I was aware of. But he did. And it became a real issue because I don't ... In my work, my sexuality has nothing to do with my work.

Adam also faced particularly traumatic discrimination when recently working in the rural area of the state where he lives. He lives in a metro area, but traveled to this particular town numerous times for interior design projects. He describes the town as a "very homophobic community," and stresses, "I would never go back there again. I will never spend money there. I tell people do not go there because it's a horrible community... the mentality there is stupidity."

Travel. Talking with Adam about his negative career experience in the rural mid-west dovetailed into a conversation about travel. Here we are, back at the social bubble. When gay men travel they need to consider their safety within the communities they visit. Adam says he and his partner would never go to the south "for any reason" because he

feels, “there’s a lot of ignorance and scary people who live down there.” Anytime before they travel it’s a prerequisite to make sure the area is at least relatively gay friendly. He emphasizes, “We always try to check out wherever we’re going and just the mentality of it.” If they’re traveling by car, they calculate their stops. They won’t exit off the freeway to eat, for example, unless it’s a larger community, “just because we feel it’s safer.”

Substance abuse. While substance abuse knows know color, creed, or sexual orientation, Harvey asserted some gay men medicate with drugs and alcohol. He brings up a previous partner’s addiction and believes, “It’s addiction, that comes out of, for him, it was an escape from dealing with being gay.” He was asked straightforwardly if he felt substance abuse was an issue prevalent in the gay male community, and he agreed,

It's obvious to me it (substance abuse) plays a role not because it was necessarily a problem for me myself, but I've seen it across the board. I saw it when I was younger, and I continue to see it now...I have several lesbian friends, but I didn't see drug abuse being an issue with my lesbian friends.

Yet, he was still careful to stress, “I’m not saying that to wrap it up and be able to say blatantly that everyone who's abused drugs was covering up issues about their sexuality, but I think they're really tied together.” I’m not sure whether this is worth noting, but there were several other men in this study that brought up their own experiences with addiction and experiences with partners. Harvey was the only one who link the abuse to homosexual trauma. For that reason I only chosen to include his critique of the issue.

Being the gay poster child/ mascot. Jeffrey professed the daily weight and pressure of feeling like he always has to be flawless ambassador for the gay community.

He expresses, “You have to be better than you are. You have to be the best at what you're doing, so when people find out you're gay, they're like, "Oh, well, you're okay. I like you, I love you.” He continues, “I was also co-dependent culturally, thinking that I was responsible for making people like me.” This was also for safety reasons in hopes that by being “on” all the time he could make people at least, “not want to bully me or hit me or scream at me or throw things at me or oppress me and my kindred spirits.” Fortunately, he has been able to work through some of these issues with a trusted CRE facilitator and hopes to continue to work on, “This feeling that you’re on stage all the time and you have to be something more than what you are.”

Advice for CRE, Allies, and the General Society

The last section is a final reflection from the men as to what advice they had to give CRE, allies, and the general society. This section was structured so that the men’s responses are tied to traditional tenets of adult education. Then chapter closes with some guidance on things all citizens can do outside of the clinic and classroom.

Know your audience. Perhaps the first rule I learned about adult education is the importance of knowing your audience. Then men recommended to do this by becoming more knowledgeable about issues affecting the gay community and getting to know the back-stories of individuals themselves. Peter suggests having working knowledge of, “what’s happening in the political or economic environment that is affecting people who are gay, that isn’t affecting people who are straight.” He also commented to look at the intersection of being gay and with other life influencers such as religion,

And I'd say that's one other thing that would be interesting from, you know, if I'm in your position, is also understanding some of the religious aspects of things, where in the Muslim faith, versus the Christian faith, versus the Jewish faith, and things like that, as far as, how does that baggage hang on people? Especially in gay men.

Freddie advises learning more about individuals' personal histories. He says, " You have to be open and honest about what has brought you to this point in your life, especially if you're a gay man." Tim reflects on his own history and remarks, "I think it would be hugely important to understand the differences in being married heterosexually and then gay married." Many gay men, especially baby boomers and older generations hid in straight relationships for short or long periods of time before coming out; creators or CRE programs and CRE facilitators should be prepared to take on unique considerations like this. Harvey expresses one way to get to know your audience is through repeated exposure; he encourages,

Continue to put yourself in settings where you are exposed to gay men. And how they're interacting with each other. I think that the challenge is, is that there are certain things that a ... and I would say this across the board, that if it was a lesbian who is studying to do this for gay men, or someone who's straight, studying to be a counselor to gay men, I think it's more continue exposure, and continue understanding what's happening in society itself.

On the same wavelength, Adam directs us to enroll in our own self-taught, "Gay 101." His answer details at length the experience he had with his own version of the class,

“What I teasingly call Girl 101.” Girl 101 consisted of in depth exploration of the female experience. He did this because he, “wanted to understand how women feel, how women do what they do. Why women are more global thinkers and men are more ... because I wanted to understand what it's like to be a woman because I'll never be with one.” He urges allies and those in CRE to curious, rigorous, and open-minded. A longer excerpt from our discussion is described in detail,

I purposefully sought out many women and talked to them like you're doing with me and other people because I wanted to understand what makes a woman tick because I would never be with a woman. I never have been. I never will be. But I wanted to have the understanding of the experience and what it's like to go through that. And what it's like to have a relationship with a man. And what it's like to have a sexual experience with a man, what that feels like, and what that ... and I talk very candidly with people about that and ask a lot of questions that some people maybe would be embarrassed to ask. But I said not because I was trying to pry into their lives, but because I wanted to know ... it helped me to understand them the most clear way that I could.

But I would encourage you ... that's what I did. And I'm not saying what I did was right. But it helped me to understand what it means to be a woman on this planet and in all experiences. And to really ... and not that I say I'm a great understander of all women. I'm just saying I tried to learn as much as I felt I could. And I asked some very deep questions. And I had people that were willing

to answer those questions. So I felt like I got at least a good understanding so that if somebody ever said something to me or ... I could at least have compassion.

This is a really good idea and is easily explained by Adam. I think we could easily use these simple and effective ideas in culturally responsive CRE.

At the planning table. The participants of the study revealed several pieces of advice that may aid in creating CRE programs that embedded considerations for gay men and couples. First and foremost getting everyone to the planning table, that means having gay men present as subject matter experts and creating materials that reflect CRE in specific nature. Harvey asserts, “there’s a plethora of experience,” and that is something to draw on in order to design programs that widely consider diversity of experience.

Nathan suggests altering an existing technique he’s seen used in his work with addicts in recovery. The recovery tool is a timeline technique used to track patterns in drug use and abuse. Nathan thinks CRE could adapt it for use with common relationship problems. Addiction counselors use it to track things like, “when you use, and how often, and how long,” but we could alter it to something like, when did the issue begin, how often does it occur, etc. He riffs about it for a while and he expands,

So like you take the first year of your long-term relationship. What was that like? What did you do? How often did you eat dinner? How often did you go out for dinner? How often did you have sex? Was it intimate? Second year. What did the second year look like? You kind of do that and then towards the end, you'll start seeing all these things that you used to do at the beginning that you're not doing it anymore.

One can imagine there are counselors out there using similar methods, but it came up organically with Nathan and adapting to a gay audience seems like a notable idea.

Harvey points out one difficulty in getting gay men to CRE is there are a lot of religious based programs. He confirms,

I think where you lose the GLBTQ community because the idea is that so many programs are tied to some religious group, of kind of a relationship nature. I think when people hear counseling, or especially when it comes to pre-relationship, it's usually always been through the church. For me, not being religious that would always have been a stop sign.

Agreeably, planners of CRE programs should consider designing programs to include offerings that are secular in nature.

Lastly, Harvey brings up the reactionary nature of counseling, which trends as the most accessible form of CRE. He explains,

When people are interested in learning, suddenly we always seem to be reactionary. We go to counseling or we do this when we've reached an impasse instead of reaching out in advance before the problem is there. I think that education, it's out there, and it's accessible and known about could potentially stave off other aspects of relationships being needed as a last resort, like counseling. Maybe if people had access to reading about these things, or maybe it'd come up in their discussion with their partner, and they could talk about it, and who knows?

Who knows? Us. Now. The support for proactive approaches is out there, it now becomes our responsibility to design and implement them.

In practice. A few of the men gave recommendations helpful for CRE in practice. Peter pleads for privacy, “Never say that you've talked to the other person's partner. Tip number one.” He had a previous counselor who brought up he knew Peter's partner multiple times in session and was a cause for stopping his program. Nathan and Adam urge us to avoid feeding stereotypes. Nathan reminds,

Feeding a stereotype is really bad. So, I think anytime you add to a stereotype, trying to be ... I think one of the biggest insults that you can do to somebody who's gay if you're an ally is trying to be cute with somebody who's gay, but you're kind of feeding into a stereotype that you assume that they do because they're gay, but you're doing it all kind of an in-joke.

He goes on to bring up a couple examples like people thinking gays are promiscuous or thinking,

Oh, you must be really good at hair. Can you do my hair? You must be really good at hair.” And you're like, “Really?” It's annoying. That kind of stuff is really annoying. Unless a person, you know them well enough to know that they love to do hair then that's all right. But if they don't, don't assume that they do it just because they're gay, or if they know how to decorate because they're gay, or because whatever. That kind of stuff just gets really annoying.

Adam, much more playfully, recounts reacting to an otherwise irritating occurrence, “Yeah, I still have people who sometimes will say, "Well, which one of you is the

woman? I'm like, "Well, neither of us is a woman. BARBARA (Streisand) is the woman, and SHE rules." Lastly, Harvey and Joe encourage us to expect everything. Harvey attests, "Everybody's bringing such different experiences to the table when it comes to relationships that they're bringing their whole life." Everyone brings with them a unique journey. Joe speaks more to planners and facilitators of CRE and explains,

When a person is going to something educationally, to just be more open to different types of relationships, and not even have any implicit judgment about monogamy, say, versus not monogamy. That's the only example I can really think of... or age difference. Don't be judgmental about if there's a great age difference between the two people, or whatever. Just to be really aware of not excluding somebody or some relationship.

This serves as a good reminder to be open-minded, and not to be shocked or surprised.

In society. Allies and those working in CRE have a greater responsibility to fight for LGBTQ rights outside of the planning table, classroom, and clinic. It is only through diligent daily efforts to address marginalization that we can increase understanding and equity. Some of the suggestions from the men include: increasing visibility, confronting marginalization, and extending CRE outreach programs to gay men in rural areas. Harvey speaks to the importance of visibility,

That's the reason the crux of every movement is about making yourself seen.

National Coming Out Day, there's a reason that we try to encourage people because the more that people are out, the more that neighbors who maybe would have felt fear about that kind of go, "Oh, yeah, he or she isn't so bad. They've

lived next to me for 5 or 15 years." It demystifies to people who maybe they haven't had that experience. Really I think it's important, and then once that happens they continue to talk about it. People prior to that maybe would have thought, "Oh, I never would have known anyone like that," suddenly is in the position of being able to say to people they know, "Yeah, my neighbors are, or somebody at work is in that community," or whatever, and it takes away a level of the blinders. It's really important.

Joe recounts his own painful experiences with discrimination and warns that unless we confront marginalization when we see it happen, " Then its going to happen again and again. There won't be change if we don't call it out." Finally, Peter points while many adult gay men hide in liberal safety social bubbles, there are still many who live in less accepting communities. Peter reminds,

I think would be helpful, is also that I would challenge you for, is that some of the clients that you probably will have, are going to be gay men who are coming in from areas that aren't as accepting. ...and how are those people ... what baggage do those people carry with them, that's still out there?

He later continues,

You hear these horror stories about kids who are bullied online, and they're growing up in small towns, you know? Sometimes they're in big towns, but I mean, they're growing up in small towns where there's [inaudible 01:05:03]. So, it's maybe even understanding what's happening out in rural America, and how

does that affect people who you might be counseling? I mean, there's a whole different study, I'm sure, there.

LGBTQ people in rural or conservative areas may not have access LGBTQ community resources, therefore outreach to people outside liberal safety bubbles should be strongly considered.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The idea for this investigation began a few years ago when I found myself in my early 30s, and on the outside of several failed long-term relationships. I wanted to find someone to spend my life with, but I struggled deeply to do so. I didn't grow up with good examples of healthy romantic partnerships until my chosen dad came into the picture late in life, and I also didn't have any religious tenets to rely on. So I did what a graduate student would do. I went to the research. What data do we have about healthy long-term romantic partnerships? I wondered. How do people find them? And more importantly, once in a relationship, how do you keep it going strong? These were all mysteries to me, and as I talked casually about the topic with friends and family, I found a lot of people asking the same questions.

My background is in adult education, and I feel one of my chief responsibilities is to use education to help adults live better lives. Since so many people choose to marry or commit to long-term partnership, how to develop and sustain healthy relationships should matter to adult education. From the beginning, my hope has been to use relevant data to inform culturally sensitive relationship education in diverse adult education settings.

There was not much information about healthy personal relationships within the scholarly domain of adult education, so I looked to other fields as content experts. I found the primary field that studies long-term romantic partnership to be couples and relationship education, or CRE, and it is situated within the greater discipline of family social science, or FSOS. At the same time, I also wanted to know more about the biology,

psychology, and neuroscience behind romantic partnership. As a strong advocate for interdisciplinary research, I scrutinized those areas as well.

A key element of professional research is to look for gaps in the literature. While reviewing CRE content, I found extensive information about healthy marriage, but the literature generally did not address same-sex marriage. This is most likely because same-sex marriage was not federally legal until 2015, and I was conducting the literature review in the midst of the change in law. Accordingly, it seemed like the perfect time to design a study surrounding the long-term romantic partnerships and the marriages of LGBTQ people. I had grown up around many gay and lesbian people, and currently have lots of LGBTQ friends and family members, I wondered whether or not the healthy marriage information I learned would be applicable to them. I also wondered what additional considerations they would have for working with LGBTQ people in CRE.

I have always strived for my work in research and in practice to be culturally responsive. My philosophies are post-modern, and based in critical pedagogy, which deeply considers individual needs, honors the lived experiences, and promotes equity-based practice for emancipatory purposes (Friere, 1970; Friere, 1998). Informed by critical theory, it became urgently clear: the lack of gay voices in couples and relationship education had to be addressed. Thus, it became my honor and responsibility to do so.

The next step was to determine the appropriate research methodology. I reviewed several types of qualitative inquiry including grounded theory, ethnography, narrative inquiry and phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990; Moustakas, 1994; Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Barton & Bishop, 2014). After careful

consideration, I chose a phenomenological framework, which focuses on studying the lived experiences of a group of people with something unique in common. The element in common, in my case, was the experience of being a gay man who had attended some type of couples and relationship education. A semi-structured interview guide was created and the research questions were refined. The primary research question was: What are the experiences of gay male baby boomers who attend CRE? The secondary question asked: How can the experiences of gay male baby boomers inform equity-based CRE programs in adult education settings?

CRE Programs

Each interview began by having the men speak briefly to the logistics of their program(s) and their impressions. Topics included: program type, frequency, structure, course materials, homework, and overall experience. The majority of the men went to some type of counseling, with individual and couples counseling being the most prevalent. One participant's program was combined with meditation and yoga, and another had health insurance that provided free call-in counseling over the phone. Other CRE programs included: premarital classes led by a religious leader, sex therapy, a secular relationships class, and a coming out group. Some programs were single session and designed to address a specific issue, like moving in together for example. Others sought CRE weekly or regularly, or as needed. Because many of the programs were counseling based, the format of most of them was traditional, semi-structured, based on the issues of the individual. There were also programs with set topics, but still somewhat informal.

Many of the CRE programs had course materials, but only one person mentioned a book specifically relating to gay men and couples. No one said they had formal homework, but several did say they were asked to do communication exercises in between classes/sessions. On the whole, participants had hugely positive things to say about their CRE experiences. The two that did have a negative experience, had multiple experiences and only one of which was unfavorable.

The programs in this study had some variety, but the majority of offerings were counseling based in some way. I'm unsure whether they sought counseling by choice or whether it was the only offering of CRE available. At the beginning of recruitment I had actually hoped to only interview people in non-counseling CRE, but this proved to be an arduous task. I was only able to find a couple of queer relationship skills classes locally, and unfortunately no one from those classes volunteered to participate. So while I expanded the study to include counseling, I noted the need for more easily accessible, non-counseling CRE options. This gap could be addressed by having adult education work with FSOS as content experts to plan more diverse non-counseling CRE programs for adult learners. Planning of CRE programs should also include members of the LGBTQ community as content experts. Together with CRE content and LGBTQ perspective, adult education can create culturally responsive CRE programs in diverse settings.

Part of developing programs for adult learners includes having culturally sensitive materials, but only one study participant reported as having specifically LGBTQ books in their CRE. Accordingly, program planners would be wise to bolster the development of

LGBTQ sensitive materials. Buzzela & Whitton (2009) have developed some same-sex CRE material, and others should move forward in this spirit. Further, researchers should continue the contemporary work of Whitton et al. (2016), and simply continue to listen to the LGTQ perspective and use their experiences to create programs that address same sex-needs. It is worth noting that the majority of existing CRE content was developed before the legalization of same-sex marriage. Fortunately, we now have the ability and responsibility to expand healthy marriage initiatives to include the full spectrum of diverse romantic partnerships.

CRE Facilitators

Participants were also asked to evaluate their CRE facilitator, which could be any one of the following: a counselor, a therapist, a teacher or any type of educator; two men were taught by pastors, and were evaluated as a CRE facilitator in the same light. Only a couple of the men had a negative experience with CRE and the two that did had multiple experiences, with the remaining experiences being positive. It is important to note that all of the men preemptively verified their facilitator was gay-friendly, and most of the men preferred to work with someone who also self identified as homosexual. It is also worth noting that men typically found their CRE facilitator and program through LGBTQ resources or from the recommendation of and LGBTQ person.

Safety is a huge concern for same-sex individuals and couples. In order to avoid harassment, discrimination, and even violence, LGBTQ people have safety procedures they follow. This process is of vetting nature, and involves the verification that a place or person is gay friendly. In terms of this investigation, one hundred percent of the men

interviewed remarked taking steps to qualify if a CRE facilitator was comfortable and had experience in working gay men, specifically. They did this by using LGBTQ resources, whether a queer directory or a recommendation from a gay friend. This has implications for practice: practitioners of CRE must get the word out to LGBTQ community members that the resources exists. Further, advertisements should use inclusive language and be displayed in diverse LGBTQ settings. For example, I connected with many of my participants from engagement with local magazines and organizations, which tailor to the queer community. I also advertised by putting fliers up in LGBTQ bars, as the gay bars still hold community center like status.

The other facilitator qualification that came up regularly was that numerous participants also made sure to choose a counselor who self-identified as gay; thought being a gay man would understand other gay men's needs best. This is another example of why planners of programs for culturally responsive CRE must included gay men at the planning table. In practice, this issue can be addressed by having gay men as counselors in counseling, and by having gay teachers in relationship skills classes.

Catalysts for CRE

The catalysts for CRE broke into two categories. Some were more proactive, like identity development, relationship skill development, and relationship fusion. Others were more reactive, and surround the aforementioned big three: communication, commitment, and intimacy. A couple men sought relationship help because of substance abuse; some had partners with substance abuse and others had a problem with it themselves. These catalysts reflect the same patterns and problems face by heterosexual

individuals and couples previously explored in the literature review. Both the review and findings conclude these similarities. In this light, it can be conclusively said that much of the data and materials surrounding healthy long-term relationships and risk factors for breakup are in fact largely appropriate for use with same-sex individuals and couples.

Things Learned in CRE

Things learned in CRE generally correlated directly with CRE catalysts. Communication skills, conflict management skills were noted. Participants also expressed they left CRE with a greater understanding and appreciation for their relationship and partner. Like the catalyst findings, the things learned findings bolster support that both same-sex couples and different sex couples follow similar relationship patterns and have similar trajectories. These answers provide examples of what one could expect in terms of learners evaluating their own experiences during or at the end of a CRE program.

Universal Relationship Considerations

The men were all asked what they thought same-sex and different-sex couples have in common. Again, the same concepts came up as the two previous sections. They reported everyone deals with issues relating to intimacy, communication, and commitment. They also declared same-sex couples now have many of the same legal rights, like the right to marry, have children, or own property. These changes to the law no doubt greatly impact gay identity and relationships, and should be studied in future research. It may be fruitful to study how the change in label from partner to spouse, from partnership to marriage, affects same-sex individuals and couples.

Unique Considerations for Gay Baby Boomers

The men were questioned as to what they thought were unique considerations for gay men and couples in CRE. Their answers fell into three categories: compatibility, historical trauma, and chronic social stigma.

Specifically gay compatibility issues related to outness compatibility, and intimacy and sexuality. The men explain outness compatibility consists of two components: how long a person has been out, and how out they are in their daily life. The men recommend dating someone who has been out for a while and someone who is equally out in public spaces. Gay specific intimacy topics included top/bottom preferences and a tendency to be more open in terms of: sharing partners, kink and fetish. They also pointed out that while the influence of HIV/AIDs is not as prevalent as it once was, it continues to affect the gay dating scene. In fact, most dating gay men grapple at some point with the decision to date or not date men who are HIV positive.

Researcher should continue to speak with LGBTQ people to gain further insight of other queer opinions not represented in this investigation. At the same time, future study could also help to legitimize current findings. Planners of CRE programs for adult learners should educate themselves on topics of gay compatibility to inform the creation of programming which reflects the diverse relationships that exist in western society. Moreover, practitioners/CRE facilitators should familiarize themselves with queer compatibility to avoid heterosexual ethnocentrism, and develop frameworks to help address distinctly gay issues.

The two remaining variables, historical trauma and chronic social stigma, relate directly to discrimination. These marginalizing forces overarch all universal considerations and color everything in a gay person's life, past and present. The persistent nature of these deeply rooted issues was a primary takeaway from the entire investigation. When looking at the intersection between same-sex and different-sex couples they really do generally follow similar patterns of forming and maintaining long-term relationships. They also bring comparable issues to CRE, and have similar risk factors for breakup/divorce. So it is chiefly the areas of historical trauma and chronic social stigma that deserve attention in terms of meeting unique needs of gay men, or more specifically gay baby boomers.

In terms of historical trauma, the men in this study reported a variety of heart-breaking experiences. Some were disowned from their families upon coming out, and others felt forced into heterosexual relationships, and even marriages. Because the men were all baby boomers, participants tended to follow a similar historical trajectory. All have lived through the Stonewall riots, have been labeled as mentally ill, and have survived the horrific events of the 80s HIV/AIDS epidemic. This should be of importance to culturally responsive adult education and CRE, as such forces shape gay identity and worldview. It is also important to strengthen compassion and understanding for the LGBTQ people CRE serves. The findings regarding historical trauma give way for research to explore the generational differences between gay men. For example, if I were to have interviewed all millennial men, it is unlikely that such historical forces would have the same impact. While it's true the events of gay civil rights affect gay men of all

age groups on some level, it is a different thing entirely to be a trailblazer and first hand witness. Therefore it becomes pertinent for additional research to address generational differences in gay men.

The concept of chronic social stigma in this study referred to marginalization in daily life, or a constant awareness of otherness. Unlike the historical events described in the previous section, chronic social stigma is impacted less than historical trauma, in terms of generational difference. Perhaps the largest contributor to societal stigma is the unstable protections under the law that LGBTQ people face. While federal changes during the Obama administration granted more protections for LGBTQ people and legalized same-sex marriage, the current wave of conservative rhetoric spouts attempts aimed at rolling back progress made by the LGBTQ community and its political supporters. True advocates and allies must remain vigilant to keep current political protections in place.

Navigating social stigma was found to be a consistent part of everyday life for the 10 gay men I studied. It determined where they chose to live, where they worked, and even where they traveled. I think its culturally responsive for educators in CRE to picture what it's like for a gay person to navigate the day to day. We should seek to unravel the complexities our learners bring into classroom and clinic. It is only by getting to know others than we are able to understand what individual needs and how we can work collectively to meet them. I am grateful for the men in this study who spoke with the bravery and power that can only be accurately expressed by lives who have lived it. This greater understanding of chronic social stigma came at great cost to them men who have

endured it. The importance of including LGBTQ voices in all steps of the process of creating programs aimed to help them navigating relationships cannot be overstated. Culturally responsive CRE programs must rely on the experiences and expertise of LGBTQ people to inform research and practice that is sensitive and speaks to the unique needs of the LGBTQ community.

Advice for CRE, Allies, & the Greater Society

The findings section covered in depth commentary surrounding the suggestions of the participants in this study, but is worth review. The men's advice was organized by: know your audience, at the planning table, in practice, and in society. First, they encourage us to get to know LGBTQ people through prolonged community engagement; this includes developing awareness of the political and economic pressures that affect queer people. Secondly, they remind us to include them at the planning table when developing CRE programs for LGBTQ use. Thirdly, they caution the need for respecting privacy, avoiding stereotypes, and being open to everything. Lastly, participants spoke to the greater society and asked for help to: enable forces that create visibility for LGBTQ people, help LGBTQ people by confronting discrimination when you see it happen, and developing outreach programs for queer people in more conservative and/or less accepting areas. In the spirit of transcendental phenomenology, I am consciously choosing to leave you with the advice given by my participants, and little of my own interpretation.

Final Thoughts

Baker et al. (2004) propose "...whether it is freedom, love or a decent environment, it is possible to ask whether these goods should be available to everyone equally or just to a privileged few" (p.49). I argue we all deserve access to the resources that allow us to live better lives. This includes access to education regarding long-term romantic partnerships, which affect and color so much of adult life. I further contend that responsible research aims at closing the privilege-marginalization gap and culturally responsive adult education can help to close this gap in terms of CRE.

One of my participants said something that profoundly resonated with me; Dan expressed, "Something I have always said is that one thing I've done really well in life is to survive it." While his resilience is both beautiful and admirable, he deserves a better state of existence than merely survival. So do all LGBTQ people, and all marginalized communities for that matter. It then becomes the responsibility for those of privilege to join hands with discriminated minority groups to enable visibility and equal access to resources. We must stand up when we see oppressive forces and demand for change. At the same time allies, like myself must be carefully aware of their own privilege. Through continued engagement with the LGBTQ community and listening to LGBTQ voices I hope to continue my journey towards greater awareness of their needs and how I can be of service in helping them.

To the incredible men of this study, please let me express my deepest gratitude for sharing your lives with me. I learn because of you and this study is only because of you. You leave me forever grateful and forever changed. To future researchers of adult

education, CRE and LGBTQ perspective, my advice is simple: to listen openly, and let your participants do the talking.

In closing, I reflect back to my own worldview, one that is largely influenced by Minnesota and the bold north. I'm reminded of novelist, F. Scott Fitzgerald and his infatuation with love and romantic partnership. In fact, the first research paper I ever did surrounded parallelism between Fitzgerald's life, love, and work. He studied love with intensity and allowed people to explore its deep and varied expressions. This is my hope for the readers, for researchers, for practitioners, allies, and myself. To continue to study and appreciate the vast diversity of romantic partnerships, and help each other live better lives. Ultimately, could it be that love is in fact the most universal consideration of all? It has the power to heal and save us, but then again, perhaps like Fitzgerald, "in the end we are all just humans drunk on the idea that love, only love can heal our brokenness."

Let's try anyway.

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Appendix A: Gay Experiences in CRE: Semi-structured interview guide

<p style="text-align: center;">Gay experiences in CRE Semi-structure interview guide</p> <p>Academic research questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary research question : What are the experiences of gay men who attend relationship education programs? • Secondary question: How can the experiences of gay men inform equity-based relationship education programs in adult education settings? <p style="text-align: center;">Interview protocol</p> <p>Introduction: Introductions, provide overview of study, and review and sign consent form.</p> <p>Phenomenological explanation: The reason I chose this study is because I truly want to get a better understanding of what its like to be a gay male in marriage-type relationship education programs. I want to know what it's like to walk in your shoes. I would love for you to be my teacher in understanding your point of view. I'm hoping that through your teaching, I can honor your experiences and use them to inform relationship education programs that are more inclusive to same sex couples.</p> <p>Example interview questions:</p> <p>Getting started</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything important for me to know before we begin? • Can you tell me a little about the couples and relationship education program you attended in general? Where it took place, was there a set amount of sessions/classes or was it ongoing, just kind of basic things like that. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Were there other gay men you were aware of that were participants in the program? • Why did you decided to take part in a couples and relationship education program? <p>Overall experience</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me a little about your overall experience. Does thinking about the program bring back any specific feelings or memories? • Tell me about the first day you attended the program. How do you remember it? Any emotional reactions to this event? • Did your sexual orientation contribute to any positive or negative feelings relating to your experiences with the program? <p>Instructors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To your knowledge, did your instructors express any training in working with same-sex couples? • When your instructors discussed "couples" did they address the full spectrum of romantic partnerships? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How did this make you feel? 	<p>Course materials and planning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did your program use any books / written materials? Do you remember the names of anything? • Were participants asked to be involved in the curriculum planning? If yes, how were they involved? <p>Skills, issues, unique considerations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What were some of the skills you hoped to learn or issues you hope would be addressed in the course? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Were these addressed in the program? • What do you believe heterosexual couples and homosexual couples have in common? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Were these addressed in the program? • Do you believe there are unique considerations for same sex couples, specifically for gay men? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What are some of the issue that you believe are unique to gay couples? ○ Were those areas addressed in your relationship course? <p>Bias</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was there anything about the program that made you feel uncomfortable? • Did you ever feel treated differently because of your sexual orientation? • Was there any information presented that didn't seem to apply to you? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Anything specifically related to your sexual orientation? • Was there anything about the class that seemed heterosexually biased? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Can you give me some examples? ○ What was your opinion on why this happened / this happens? ○ What could have been done to avoid this? <p>Wrapping up and moving forward</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are some things you felt the program did well? • Where are some places you felt the program felt short? • Did you come away from the program with questions/concerns that you felt were unanswered? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We any of those concerns specifically related to being in a same-sex relationship? • What advice do you have for people planning programs for couples and relationship education? • What are some things people just don't understand about gay men and relationships? • What do you think couples and relationship education programs can do to be more inclusive to inclusive of the variety of romantic partnerships that exist in society? <p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there anything else about your experience you would like to add?
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Appendix B: Harvey Narrative

Harvey Narrative Categories: Selective coding using directed content analysis

After coding Harvey's transcript, I revisited the transcript several times; reading, rereading, and listening to the audio files. Codes were reworked and revised. Categories from my interview questions started the directed content analysis. I went through each interview category and inserted select codes/quotes from the transcripts that I felt were the big takeaways from how the participants answered the questions from that interview category.

GCRE Program

Type: *individual counseling and couples counseling.*

Frequency: *weekly counseling (experience 1), a few sessions (experience 2).*

Structure: *semi-structured (implicit, my interpretation)*

Course Materials: *supplemental readings*

Homework: *active thought process.*

Overall Experience: *helpful, unbiased (exp. 1), relationship too far gone, unproductive (exp. 2).*

GCRE Facilitator

Facilitator Qualifications: *gay friendly, self identifies as a gay man (exp. 1 and exp. 2).*

Facilitator Discovery: *referred by friend.*

Facilitator Experience: *unbiased, impartial, sensitive to individual learner needs, a good listener.*

Catalyst(s) for GCRE

Relationship Skill Development: *foster basic relationship skills*

Abuse: *substance abuse (partner)*

Communication Issues: *talking over one another.*

End of the Relationship: *terms of a legal agreement*

Things Learned

Communication: *active listening, speaking skills/conflict management skills*

Understanding: *compassion*

Didn't Learn Anything (exp. 2 only)

Universal Relationship Considerations

Communication

Compatibility: *hobbies, values, personalities*

Unique Considerations for GCRE

Historical Trauma: *homosexual dating/marriage restrictions, pressured into heterosexual relationships*

Chronic Social Stigma: *social bubble, gay bars as community centers, politics / unstable protections under the law, substance abuse, familial rejection*

Advice for GCRE and the Greater Society

At the planning table: *include all stakeholders, create secular/non-religious programs, take a proactive approach*

In practice: *expect everything*

In society: *increase visibility*