Learning from life histories of queerness in schools and experiences with mental health systems

by

Austen Rae Koecher

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

University of Toronto

© Copyright by Austen Rae Koecher (2015)
LEARNING FROM LIFE HISTORIES OF QUEERNESS IN SCHOOLS AND EXPERIENCES WITH MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

Master of Arts 2015

Austen Rae Koecher

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

University of Toronto

Abstract

This study involves a series of life history interviews with two participants who experienced homophobia as students in school, and who have had contact with mental health systems. The interviews investigate the participants’ school experiences and how they interpret their experiences of homophobia as intersecting with their contact with mental health systems. The analysis will examine how the participants’ stories were told as reflecting what school cultures, the ways queer issues are taken up in schools, and social constructions of “mental illness” are involved in those experiences, and as reflecting how ways of being are made possible and impossible in school and broader communities.
Acknowledgments

I would like to express my thanks to everyone whose support has aided me in writing this thesis.

First, I would like to thank Prof. Tara Goldstein for your unwavering support, encouragement, guidance, and mentorship. Thank you for providing opportunities for me to grow, for reading and learning with me, and for always being so generous with your time and expertise.

Thank you also to Prof. Heather Sykes, who has always pushed me to do my best work. Your support throughout this process is much appreciated.

To Tara’s thesis writing group, thank you for your ideas, your support, and for going down the path first so I didn’t have to find my own way.

To Janet, Bob, and Sam, thank you for listening and reading, and for letting me know when my ideas aren’t quite there yet. You have always encouraged me and believed that I could succeed, and I know that I would not be here without you.

Finally, thank you to the research participants whose lives make up the basis of this work. Thank you for sharing your time and your experiences with me.
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT .................................................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................................... iii

TABLE OF CONTENTS ................................................................................................................................. iv

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................ viii

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................... ix

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................ 1

Chapter Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 1

Research Problem ................................................................................................................................... 1

Research Questions ................................................................................................................................. 2

Outline ....................................................................................................................................................... 2

Literature Review ...................................................................................................................................... 3

  Student experiences of homophobia and “risk” .................................................................................. 3

  Medicalization, individualization, and social constructions of disability and queerness .................... 7

Conceptual Frameworks ............................................................................................................................ 11

  Safe, positive, and queering moments ................................................................................................. 11

  The Triangle Model ............................................................................................................................. 11

Theoretical Frameworks ........................................................................................................................... 13

  School cultures .................................................................................................................................... 13

  Cultural capital and social capital ....................................................................................................... 14

  Surveillance, Panopticism, and Synopticism ...................................................................................... 15

  Subjectivity and hailing ....................................................................................................................... 16
CHAPTER FOUR: QUEER ISSUES IN SCHOOLS

Chapter Introduction

Gay-Straight Alliances

GSAs as exclusive

Social surveillance/social repercussions

Fear of outing oneself

Teacher Responses & Curriculum Representations

Inaction & absence

Safe moments & allyship

Positive moments

Potential queering moments

Barriers

Chapter Summary

CHAPTER FIVE: CONTACT WITH MENTAL HEALTH SYSTEMS

Chapter Introduction

Schooling and Mental Health

Religion and Mental Health

Religion and stressors

Experiences of mental health systems

Chapter Summary
CHAPTER SIX: COMING OUT AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME.................................................. 106

Chapter Introduction................................................................................................. 106

Barriers to Coming Out............................................................................................ 107

Coming Out to Self and Others .............................................................................. 110

Trying Out Coming Out........................................................................................... 113

Consequences of Coming Out............................................................................... 114

Chapter Summary .................................................................................................. 117

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION.............................................................................. 118

Significance of this Study....................................................................................... 118

Future Research...................................................................................................... 120

Concluding Thoughts.............................................................................................. 121

REFERENCES........................................................................................................ 122
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Triangle Model
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Second Interview Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Emerging Themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Analytical Frameworks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter One: Introduction

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I will first introduce the thesis study, including the research problem and questions. Next, I will give an outline of the thesis document, and give an overview of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks used. I will comment on the significance of this study, including the pedagogical and scholarly contributions. Finally, I will explore my own background that brings me to and grounds me within this work.

Research Problem

People who identify as or are identified by others as a sexual or gender minority (such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer {LGBTQ} people) are commonly conceived of as “at-risk” of mental health issues, problems, or conditions (see Acosta, 2013; Human Rights Campaign, 2014; Toronto District School Board, 2011 as examples). This conception locates mental health, and thus the responsibility for care of that mental health, within the individual, constructing such individuals as problems of mental health. In recent years, some consideration has been given to the premise that queer students are “at-risk” of mental health problems because of their experiences with homophobia, transphobia, and/or biphobia (Taylor et al., 2011). However, while schools and school boards are beginning to recognize the issue of discrimination against queer students, mental health systems continue to label students with diagnoses of mental illness (S. T. Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011). They consider the environment as a factor in mental anguish, but continue to place the “risk” within students’ bodies and
maintain an individualized and medicalized understanding of “mental health.”

Individualized and medicalized models take a deficit approach to mental wellbeing by assuming that students’ bodies are the location of mental health or illness.

In this study, I will not attempt to determine whether queer people (and others impacted by homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia) do or do not experience higher-than-average rates of what is constructed through medicalization and individualization as “mental illness.” Rather, through an analysis of the stories people tell about their lives, I will attempt to examine the social processes by which people experience queerness in schools and have contact with mental health systems. My analysis brings about a deeper understanding of the cultural production of individual bodies as problems, and what ways of being are made possible and impossible in schools and broader communities. The research questions that this study will explore are included in the following section.

**Research Questions**

1. How do people who have experienced homophobia in schools and who have had contact with mental health systems talk about these experiences?

2. From these tellings, what can be learned about school cultures, how queer issues are taken up in schools, and about social constructions of “mental illness”?

3. From these tellings, what can be learned about what ways of being are made possible, and what ways of being are made impossible, in school and broader communities?

**Outline**
In the remainder of this chapter, I conduct a literature review on the experiences of queer students in schools and the medicalization and individualization of mental illness. I will also lay out the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that I call upon in my analysis. Finally, I will explore my own personal identifications as they relate to my research. In Chapter 2, I explain the research methods I have used to conduct this thesis study. I also introduce the participants and explore my own role as a researcher. In Chapter 3, I explore the participants’ experiences of homophobic bullying in schools and their experiences of heteronormative and homonormative expectations at school. In Chapter 4, I work with the participants’ experiences of queer issues in schools to comment on gay-straight alliances and teacher responses to and curriculum representations of queer issues. In Chapter 5, I explore the participants’ experiences of contact with mental health systems in two significant contexts: schooling and religion. In Chapter 6, I discuss the participants’ dilemmas of coming out at school and at home. Finally, in Chapter 7, I offer my final thoughts about this project and its implications for schools.

Literature Review

Student experiences of homophobia and “risk”

Homophobic bullying is widespread in Canadian schools. In 2011, EGALE Canada surveyed students across Canada and found that on a daily basis 70% of all students hear comments, such as “that’s so gay,” that represent queer individuals in a negative light (Taylor et al., 2011). Similarly the study found that 48% of all students hear homophobic slurs such as “faggot,” “dyke,” and “lezbo” every day
(Taylor et al., 2011). Students are not the only source of homophobia in schools, as 10% of queer-identified students report hearing homophobic comments from adults in their school on a daily or weekly basis (Taylor et al., 2011).

While it seems a straightforward assumption that encountering homophobia in a school environment will be damaging to queer students, a homophobic school culture can have wider effects. Espelage and Swearer (2008) note that homophobic bullying can create a school culture that is detrimental to all students, not only those who are the direct victims of bullying, nor only those who identify as queer. Indeed, they argue that rather than youth who identify as homosexual or heterosexual, youth questioning their sexuality are most distressed by homophobic bullying. For a student who is questioning their sexuality, and who may be battling internalized homophobia, homophobic taunting may be more damaging than it would be to a student more comfortable with their sexual identity. Espelage and Swearer also note that much bullying uses homophobia as a tactic, not just bullying that victimizes students who identify as or are perceived as queer. For example, students who identify as and are perceived as heterosexual may still be bullied with homophobic slurs as a way of degrading them.

EGALE Canada’s *National Climate Survey on Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia* comes to similar conclusions. Homophobic school environments have negative consequences for all students and teachers, not just those who identify as queer. Taylor et al. (2011) report that homophobia in schools can negatively affect students for a variety of reasons, including their own queer identity or that of a family member, their perceived identity as queer, empathy for victims of
homophobic comments, and shame based on their own participation in homophobic bullying. Indeed, though only 14% of students report identification as LGBTQ, more than four times as many students report being upset by the homophobia that exists in their school (Taylor et al., 2011).

The reactions of teachers and school staff to homophobia in schools are critical to the experience of students. Hansen (2007) argues that staff intervention into homophobic comments in the school environment is correlated with more positive outcomes for queer youth. Espelage and Swearer (2008) agree, noting that queer youth feel more hostility in a school environment when teachers do not react to homophobic slurs. As argued by Kumashiro (2000), inactions, not just actions by educators, can pose harm to students. This demonstrates the importance of teachers and other adults in schools responding appropriately to incidents of homophobia and transphobia. Unfortunately however, Taylor et al. (2011) report that only one in four students sees school staff consistently intervene against homophobic bullying.

Homophobic bullying can affect children as early as kindergarten. Some students are targeted based on their sexual or gender expression, and others are targeted based on their family dynamics. Espelage and Swearer (2008) note that in elementary schools, homophobic bullying negatively also affects students from same-sex families or students who have queer family members by creating feelings of exclusion.

Many queer students find schools a place where they are targeted, instead of a nurturing, supportive environment. One in five queer-identified students
experiences physical harassment or assault based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Taylor et al., 2011). More queer students experience sexual harassment than do other students, including almost half of trans students who experience sexual harassment based on their gender identity (Taylor et al., 2011). Due to the frequent targeting of queer students, EGALE Canada notes that 64% of queer students report feeling unsafe at schools, with changerooms, washrooms, and hallways being the spaces perceived as most unsafe (Taylor et al., 2011).

Queer-identified students are reported as having thoughts of suicide more often than other students. Taylor et al. (2011) report that queer-identified students who report homophobic bullying have higher rates of depression, poorer academic outcomes, and engaging in more risky behaviour than non-queer students. Hansen (2007) agrees, arguing that queer students are at risk for negative psychological outcomes, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.

While there may be real risk to well-being involved when queer students are bullied, caution must be taken to avoid stereotyping queer students as universally “at-risk.” Harbeck (1995, cited in Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007) argues that in a safe school context, queer students may still be victimized by an attitude of queer youth as hopeless, destined to lives of “suicide, substance abuse, homelessness, prostitution, and violence (pp. 184-185). Similarly, Talbert (2004) argues that the subject positions of queer youth are constructed by adults, not the youth themselves, and that these positions reflect stereotypes. One such subject position is the “at-risk” gay youth who is dependent on adults for guidance. This stereotype relies on discourses of risk, suicidality, and lost academic potential (Talbert, 2004).
Talbert also gives what she calls a more recent stereotype, the “well-adjusted gay teen” (p. 117), which reproduces queer youth after successful queer role models. Talbert acknowledges the benefit of a positive stereotype, arguing that “to point out that gay people are not inherently at-risk offers a needed image of queer youth” (p. 118); however, she notes that positioning queer youth as necessarily at-risk or secure can give educators preconceived notions of what interventions need to be done, and thus can disguise the real issues. Additionally, Talbert notes that scripting a queer identity, either as at-risk or as confident and secure, offers queer youth only one way of being, and gives other youth only one idea about what it means to be queer. Talbert further argues that promoting one queer identity, such as encouraging “outness” or equating queer and white identities, can limit possibilities of what as perceived as a positive queer life. Talbert notes that if queer students equate a healthy queer life with an “out” one, those who cannot or do not desire to be “out” may have unfavourable perceptions of themselves.

I draw upon this review of the literature on the experiences of students who experience homophobia in schools in Chapter 3 in my discussion of the ways that the participants experienced victimization in schools. I also use this literature review in Chapter 4 as the basis for my analysis of the need for and usefulness of gay-straight alliances, and in my discussion of the ways that teachers take up queer issues in schools.

Medicalization, individualization, and social constructions of disability and queerness
Processes of individualization and medicalization can influence the cultural production of queer bodies as “at risk” of mental illness. Individualization refers to the processes by which problems are associated with and attributed to individuals. Conrad (1975) argues that “we tend to look for causes and solutions to complex social problems in the individual rather than in the social system” (p. 19). Medicalization is a more specific form of individualization by which problems interpreted as occurring within individuals are given medical diagnoses and treatments (Conrad, 1975).

Several factors allow disability to be represented as a medical problem. Titchkosky (2001) describes how politically-correct language choices can construct disability as a medical issue. She illustrates how people-first language (such as referring to someone as “a person with autism” rather than “an autistic person”) allows disability to be represented as an incidental attribute of certain people that “is only significant as a remedial or managerial issue” (p. 126). Titchkosky argues that when disability is only considered as a drawback, it cannot be conceived of as valuable. Titchkosky also writes that people-first language causes disability to be regarded as separate from the person to whom it is attached, and at the same time, prevents disability from being understood as a political or cultural phenomenon. This perspective is socially legitimated through its use by medical professionals, and its employment is thus promoted within disability discourse.

Kendall (2000) argues that psy-professionals such as psychologists and psychiatrists often construct people with “psychiatric disabilities” as deficient and ignorant. Kendall explores the ways that certain behaviours are classified,
pathologized and regulated by psy-professionals (psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.). Kendall (2000) further describes how psy-professionals function to construe “psychiatric disabilities” as existing within a person, independently of sociopolitical structures that serve to disadvantage certain ways of being (p. 84). When factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexuality, and others are ignored, certain behaviours can be pathologized or regarded as deviant. Kendall argues that the responsibility for disability is shifted onto the disabled person, allowing oppressive practices to continue unchecked.

Fabris (2011) demonstrates how those with “psychiatric disabilities” are regarded as ignorant and their knowledge illegitimate. He discusses the various ways medical professionals hold power over those with “psychiatric disabilities,” and like Titchkosky (2001), discusses how medical knowledge is considered superior to the knowledge of disabled people. Fabris gives the example of how those who deny having a psychiatric illness can be labeled as incapable. Here, the patient’s knowledge of their condition is regarded as illegitimate, and the opinion of the medical practitioner prevails. Indeed, the patient’s denial of any illness is regarded as evidence of that illness itself.

An alternative conception of disability argues that disability is constructed by social and cultural interactions that affect certain people in certain ways, and that disabled people themselves have the best understanding of their own experiences, needs, and wants. Unlike the popular representation of disability as a medical issue, this perspective offers disabled people the opportunity to prioritize their own knowledge of their disabilities.
In Kendall’s exploration of the effects of psy-professional disciplines (2000), she writes that pathologized behaviours are regarded as individually-based problems, rather than having origins within sociopolitical frameworks such as race, gender, socioeconomic class, or others. Alternatively, she argues, if these frameworks were taken into account, much behaviour could be explained as reactions to oppressive social conditions. This would allow “psychiatric disability” to be located within the environment, rather than within any one person.

In the literature, disability has been related to queerness insofar as each category has historically been, and in some cases continues to be medicalized and pathologized. Ballan et al. (2011) argue that disability studies and queer studies each “address... the lived bodily experiences of people who fit outside of hegemonic... norms, that is, the ways individuals negotiate corporeal experiences hindered by societal barriers that only privilege certain bodies” (p. 263). Many disabled and queer bodies exist in a social and medical context that interprets their existence as problematic and works to pathologize, medicalize, and “cure” them.

Samuels (2003) argues that disability and queer identity are similar in that both have historically been marginalized through an oppressive medical model, and that many queer and disabled people do not have these identities in common with family members, and as such may have more difficulty finding and maintaining a community with this identity.

I use this review of the literature on processes of medicalization and individualization in the Chapter 5 discussion of the participants’ contact with mental health systems, especially in the discussion of how one participant, Matthew,
experienced the psychiatric pathologization of his experience of sexuality. I also use discussions of social constructions of disability throughout Chapter 5 to suggest ways that the participants’ experiences of disability were influenced by the social expectations surrounding sexuality.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

**Safe, positive, and queering moments**

The first conceptual framework I have used to analyze the findings of this study is one of safe, positive, and queering moments (Goldstein et al., 2007). In this framework, the authors argue that safe moments occur when differences in sexualities are tolerated, but not accepted. In a safe school context, students and staff are protected from harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, but heteronormativity is still prevalent (Goldstein et al., 2007). Positive moments, they argue, exist in schools where policies and practices more completely resist oppressive frameworks, and where respect and acceptance, not just tolerance of others, is the goal. Finally, queer moments exist where heteronormativity is interrupted, and where sexuality and desire are conceived of in novel ways (Goldstein et al., 2007).

I use this framework in Chapter 4 as a tool to analyze the ways that queer issues were taken up by teachers in the participants’ schools. The ways that the participants’ teachers responded to queer issues and the presence or absence of such topics in the curriculum are categorized into moments of absence or inaction, safety, positivity, and potential for queer activism.

**The Triangle Model**
Another conceptual framework through which I locate my analysis is The Triangle Model (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 1987). Initially designed to explore ideas of racism in organizational structures by Thomas (1987), and adapted to apply its concepts to issues of oppression in schools (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005), it relates ideas, institutional practices, and individual practices to examine the concepts and policies that support and facilitate individual actions. These three intersecting corners of the triangle each inform the ways that the others exist within an education system (see Figure 1).

![Figure 1: The Triangle Model](image)

I use The Triangle Model in Chapter 3 to structure my analysis of the ways that the participants experienced homophobic victimization in schools and also experienced a variety of expectations surrounding sexuality. Similarly, I use The Triangle Model in Chapter 5 to explore the ways that the participants experienced contact with mental health systems. In these cases, the ideas prevalent in schools and broader communities; the individual practices of teachers, students, parents,
medical professionals, and religious leaders; and the institutional practices of schools and religious institutions came together to make possible the conditions that the participants experienced.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

**School cultures**

Prosser (1999) delineates three modes of thought about school culture. First, he identifies the view that schools “do not exist in a vacuum” (p. 7) and are influenced by the broader cultures of their surrounding social systems. Thus, schools reflect the broader socio-cultural climate of the area. The second mode of thought see school culture as a “generic culture” (p. 8) that is attributable to schools by virtue of their structure as such. That is, the general policies, procedures, and norms that make schools schools give them a particular culture. Finally, Prosser discusses school culture as “unique” and reflective of the “predominant values embraced by an organisation that determine the guiding policies and provide insiders with distinctive in-house rules for ‘getting on and getting by’” (p. 8). In my study, I make use of the first and third types of school culture. Where institutional policies interact with the ideas prevalent in the broader society, and are then confronted by the students and staff who enter a school each day, a unique situation is created. As I will explore in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5 using The Triangle Model (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 1987), the intersections of each of these factors come together to cause a school culture to exist in a particular way. This contributes to answering Research Question 2: “From these tellings, what can be learned about school cultures...?”
**Cultural capital and social capital**

Originally conceived of by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, cultural capital takes the concept of financial capital and applies it to the “cultural currency used by a particular social group in order to maintain superiority over other groups” (Field, 2008, p. 16). Bourdieu argues that access to cultural capital and access to financial capital are not intrinsically linked, and that in some circumstances, one might compensate for a lack of the other (Bourdieu, 2011). Bourdieu later conceived of social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu, 2011, p. 86). Social capital is attributable to an individual’s connections to a network which has other capital resources – cultural or economic.

An individual’s access to social capital has implications for education. Field (2008) argues that social capital is linked to improved educational outcomes, and may in some cases outweigh negative factors such as limited financial means. Valenzuela, focusing on social capital within the schooling experience, describes social capital as “the social ties that connect students to each other, as well as the levels of resources... that characterize their friendship groups” (2005, p. 83). As access to social capital is important to consider in the context of education, in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 I discuss the research participants’ access to social capital and the ways that it is granted, limited, and transferred throughout the student body of their schools. This contributes to answering Research Question 3: “From these
tellings, what can be learned about what ways of being are made possible, and what ways of being are made impossible, in school and broader communities?”

**Surveillance, Panopticism, and Synopticism**

Lyon (2007) offers a description of surveillance, saying that it consists of “the focused, systematic and routine attention to personal details for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction” (p. 14). Green and Zurawski (2015) broaden the scope of surveillance, arguing that regardless of the means of surveillance, “in each case a binary between two parties has been established – between watcher and watched – the position of watching acting as placeholder for all kinds of senses and recording or monitoring techniques” (p. 29). A consequence of surveillance, social sorting, occurs where “processes of selection, inclusion, and exclusion” are undertaken so that “people from different groups may be treated differently (Lyon, 2007, p. 204).

In his discussion of Bentham’s theoretical Panopticon, a prison designed so that every movement of the prisoners can be seen by guards in a central tower, Foucault describes “the formation of a disciplinary society that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social ‘quarantine,’ to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of ‘panopticism’ (Foucault, 1995, p. 216). In regards to schools, Foucault notes that panopticism “makes it possible to observe performances... to map aptitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications” (Foucault, 1995, p. 203). Though Foucault’s panopticism is based on the surveillance of the many by the few, Mathiesen turns the concept on its head, suggesting a synopticon in which the few are surveilled by the many (Mathiesen, 1997). In Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, I
use synopticism and social surveillance more broadly to analyze the ways that the participants’ schools’ student bodies acted to regulate behaviour and enforce social norms, further answering Research Question 3.

**Subjectivity and hailing**

The poststructuralist notion of subjectivity is differentiated from the humanist notion of identity in that subjectivity is fluid and is built through a subject’s relations to its discursive environment, while identity is conceived of as fixed, continuous, and rational. Coloma (2008) recognizes three types of subjectivity: compartmental, intersectional, and constitutive. Compartmental subjectivity places persons within an either/or framework, for example insider/outsider. Intersectional subjectivity considers a person’s status within many visible and non-visible discourses of identity, such as race, gender, place of birth, citizenship, and language. Constitutive subjectivity recognizes that all claims of subject position by or towards a person are situated within a historical and political moment that attributes meanings to labels. These three modes of subjectivity work together to make possible the way that a person interacts with the world, and is continuously altered by those interactions. As Sullivan (2003) writes, “it is in virtue of having/being a body that is discursively produced in and through its relation to culture, that I am an ‘I’” (p. 42).

Throughout this text, I work from the perspective that individuals’ subjectivities are constantly being reconstructed through the discursive environment and their interactions with the world. As I discuss later in this chapter, I include myself in this perspective, and I acknowledge that even my analysis is
reliant on my temporally-dependent subject position. I use the notion of subjectivity specifically in Chapter 3 as a lens through which to read the participants’ experiences of homophobic bullying in schools, in answer to Research Question 1: “How do people who have experienced homophobia in schools and who have had contact with mental health systems talk about these experiences?” and Research Question 2: “From these tellings, what can be learned about... how queer issues are taken up in schools...?”

Judith Butler (1993) takes the concept of hailing from the philosopher Althusser, who described interpellation as the moment in which a subject is formed by the attachment of a being to discourse, as in the attachment of criminality to a subject who is called out by a police officer (Butler, 1993). Butler expands on the notion of interpellation by questioning the outcome when the subject does not respond to this “hailing”:

“[Althusser] does not consider the range of disobedience that such an interpellating law might produce. The law might only be refused, but it might also be ruptured, forced into a rearticulation that calls into question the monotheistic force of its own unilateral operation. Where the uniformity of the subject is expected, where the behavioral conformity of the subject is commanded, there might be produced the refusal of the law in the form of the parodic inhabiting of conformity that subtly calls into question the legitimacy of the command, a repetition of the law into hyperbole, a rearticulation of the law against the authority if the one who delivers it” (Butler, 1993, p. 122, original emphasis).

Jackson and Mazzei (2012) note that the hailing process expects that the subject will conform and respond, but that the process can take place without the subject’s response or knowledge. That is, one can be called out and thus subjectified without being present or even aware of the process.
I use the concept of hailing in the Chapter 3 discussion of homophobic bullying based on queerness and perceptions of queerness. This discussion contributes to the answer of Research Question 3: “…what can be learned about what ways of being are made possible, and what ways of being are made impossible…?”

**Individual and social models of disability**

The social model of disability was first described by Oliver (1990, cited in Oliver & Barnes, 2012) as an alternative to the more commonly cited individual model which locates disability in individual bodies and not within the society whose discursive structure is the source of disability. The individual model sees disability as a “problem in need of a solution” (Titchkosky & Michalko, 2012, p. 140), and locates that problem within an individual while simultaneously conceiving of disability as a random tragedy (Oliver, 2009). The social model reimagines disability as the result of the conglomeration of the forms of inaccessibility and prejudice that work against disabled people (Oliver, 2009). In other words, it is not a person’s impairment that causes disability; rather it is caused by the refusal or inability of the environment to behave in an accessible way. In Chapter 5, I use the individual and social models to work through the ways that the participants experience contact with mental health systems and other institutional forces, contributing to the answer of Research Question 2: “From these tellings, what can be learned... about social constructions of “mental illness?”

**Significance of this Study**
This study has pedagogical implications for educators who work with gender and sexual minority students and students who have contact with mental health systems. In Chapter 3, I explore the ways that homophobic bullying and heteronormative and homonormative expectations in schools impact students in a negative way. In Chapter 4, I explore the ways that gay-straight alliances can be inaccessible to students and sometimes fail to achieve their stated purpose. I also examine teacher responses to and curriculum representations of queer issues in schools, and explore the successes and failures that the research participants experienced. Teachers who work with gender and sexual minority youth (that is, nearly all teachers of youth) can learn from the experiences of these participants and the successes and failures they describe to build a more positive environment for all students. In Chapter 5, I explore the ways that contact with mental health systems in school and religious contexts affected the lives of the research participants. In Chapter 6, I describe the ways that “coming out” took place for the research participants in a variety of contexts. Educators can learn from the experiences of each research participant, one of whom experienced contact with mental health systems in relation to his diagnosis of ADHD, and the other who experienced this contact in the context of a religious environment which understood his queerness as symptomatic of mental illness. The experiences of the research participants inside and outside of schools demonstrate important lessons for educators to keep in mind when working with students.

The scholarly significance of this study comes from its contributions in the areas of theory and methodology. As discussed in Chapter 7, this study
contributes new thinking in the areas of school culture (Chapters 3, 4, and 6) and disability studies (Chapter 5).

**Personal Identifications**

Cooper and White (2012) argue that it is essential for a researcher to begin with their own positionality with respect to their work, both as a measure and understanding of one’s preconceived notions, and as an additional lens through which the reader can read the work. They argue, “if it is true that a “good” researcher is aware of his or her own position within the research text, then it is important to have a solid understanding of one’s self, including one’s pre-understanding of the subject at hand” (p. 34). Finlay (2002) and Cole and Knowles (2001) similarly argue for researchers to practice reflexivity in all parts of the research process, in order to examine how the researcher’s positionality and presence affect the work. I take these directives to critically examine my own subject positions seriously for both of these purposes; firstly, so that I can be continually self-aware of my own lenses as I conduct my research, and secondly, so that my reader can take my understanding and analysis with an awareness of where I am coming from, so to speak. I begin with some caveats.

In past writing, I have intentionally made very clear who I am and who I am not, with respect to social and identity categories, as an intentional effort to expose my inherent biases that exist because of the ways in which I identify or do not identify with a variety of subject positions, and to locate myself in relation to my work. I still recognize the value in these identifications, but I also recognize that they are flawed in several ways. Firstly, without ongoing and critical attention to
the ways that my myriad subject positions affect my work, from my choice of topic, to the ways that I collect data, to the interpretive and analytical choices I have made, these identifications mean little. Without this ongoing attention, I fear that these identifications are at best lip service to marginalized groups, and at worst an excuse to ignore my privilege and pretend that my work of critical self-awareness is done.

Secondly, any description of my own subject position is temporal. While some factors in how I identify myself are stable, many are fluid and subject to change as I learn, grow, and come into new life situations.

Finally, the ways in which my subject positions have influenced this work cannot be described in a few short descriptions of my race, my sexuality, my gender, my class, and so on. Every choice I have made within this project, and every choice I have made that has brought me to this project, this program of study, this educational institution, has been influenced by my own personal history and social conditions. Instead of describing these choices in this section, I have rather committed to an ongoing and meaningful analysis of my own role in the work. Thus I am both researcher and participant – a researcher in that I have collected this data and written this analysis, but a participant in that my own role and actions are also the subject of investigation.

With these caveats, I come to a discussion of my own history and subject positions as they relate to this project. As an entry point to this work, I began by writing my own critical autobiography using Pinar’s methodology of currere (Pinar 1975, cited in Cooper & White, 2012). In his description of currere, Pinar states that “I am taking as hypothesis that I am in a biographic situation, and while in certain
ways I have chosen it (and hence must bear responsibility for it), in other ways I can see that it follows in somewhat causal ways from previous situations.” By moving through the four stages of currere (as described below), Pinar argues that the participant moves to a conceptual space where they can “explore the complex relation between the temporal and conceptual,” and “might disclose their relation to the Self and its evolution and education.” This goal of the reconceptualization of personal history in the frame of educational experience offers the possibility of a new perspective on lived experiences.

Pinar’s method asks participants to explore their educational experiences through four lenses: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetical. Pinar’s regressive phase of currere involves observance of the participant’s schooling and other educational experiences, from the earliest memories until the present, without attempts to analyse these observances. (Pinar argues that “Interpretation interrupts presence in the past.”) The second stage, the progressive, involves an imagination of future intellectual and educational possibilities. Though Pinar states that these futures should be based on the participant’s own past and present interests and personal conditions, he cautions one to avoid rationality or criticality, and warns against “conclud[ing] that an imagined future state is unreasonable.” The third phase of currere is the analytical. In this phase, Pinar instructs the participant to link the first two stages of past and future together using a “photograph” of the present. Finally, in the fourth stage, the synthetical, the participant works to analyze their point of view as it is influences by their present condition, their lived experience, and their imaginings of the future. In
attending to the totality of one’s past, present, and future experience, Pinar directs the participant to ask of their own reflection, “Who is that?”

I began by writing my own critical autobiography through currere, which allowed me to consider my own schooling and life experiences of living in a queer family and having contact with the mental health system. Using currere allowed me to trace my own educational history and position myself as not only a researcher, but as an experiencer of education. This project of currere allowed me to carefully consider myself in relation to the work of this project. The remainder of this section introduces my reflexive work as I come to this project as influenced by my currere.

My own history with gay and lesbian activism begins at my birth. As a child of a gay father and a lesbian mother, I grew up in a house where artifacts such as posters emblazoned with the words “GAY RIGHTS NOW” were commonplace, and family outings to the annual Pride festival were a regular occurrence. It never crossed my mind that my family structure, or the circumstances of my birth, were unusual or unnatural. Indeed, my upbringing seemed so normal to me that it came as a surprise and a shock when a therapist I encountered in adolescence pointed out how unique my situation was. This history of queer normalization provided me with an uncommon perspective on queer identity and family structure; whereas many people come to queerness after first experiencing (and sometimes surviving) the hetero world, for me there was an adjustment to heteronormativity after my own insulated upbringing. At the same time, however, this insulation was made possible by the invisibility of my queer family – as I lived with my mother and my
father, it was not immediately apparent to an observer that mine was a family out of the norm.

I come to this work as a consumer/survivor of the mental health system. My own histories of diagnosis, institutionalization, and ongoing personal connection to mental illness and wellbeing have put me in a position where I am at the same time critical of many aspects of the mental health systems in Ontario and appreciative of some of the care I have received.

I also come to this work as someone who has not experienced oppression based on race, religion, sexuality, gender identity, or geographical origin and location. I am privileged as a white, cisgender female of upper-middle class means, who lives, works, and studies on First Nations territory. I acknowledge that these privileges have in many ways made it possible for me to access higher education, and that in some ways they make it more difficult for me to understand oppression in ways that I have not experienced. However, I come to this work with a purposeful attentiveness to viewpoints other than my own, and I commit to questioning and challenging myself.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have introduced the thesis project and given an overview of the research questions that this study will attempt to answer. I have given an overview of the research methods used, and conducted a review of the relevant literature. I have explored the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that will structure this thesis, and explored the contributions that this project will make in terms of pedagogy and scholarly work. Finally, I have discussed my subject position
as a researcher. In the next chapter, I will delve more deeply into the methodology of this project and introduce the research participants.
Chapter Two: Methodology

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce the life history approach I used in this study, and explain the participant recruitment, interview, transcription, and data analysis methods employed. I also introduce the participants to give context to the narratives used in the following analysis chapters.

Life History

As argued by Cole and Knowles (2001), life history research “is about comprehending the complexities of a person’s day-to-day decision making and the ultimate consequences that play out in that life so that insights into the broader, collective experience may be achieved” (p. 11). In this study, I use the experiences shared with me by two participants and analyze the ways that they experienced both queerness in schools and contact with mental health systems, to make connections to cultural practices, especially in schools, that continue to affect many more students.

There are several benefits to the life history method that I have used in this project. Patel (2005) argues that life history methods can be used effectively to elicit narratives for analysis, and can be used for the empowerment of participants, through the benefits of sharing their stories with others. Because of the non-linear, semi-structured way that the participants and I discussed their experiences, we were able to move more deeply into the experiences that they found most notable, and I was able to ask probing questions to elicit clarifying information. Each participant additionally mentioned that they were excited to have their stories told
and that they thought this was an important project to participate in. As one participant, Matthew described, the issue of queer youth experience “just needs to be talked about more.”

The disadvantages of life history as practiced in this study include the lack of generalizability or auditability of findings (Hagemaster, 1992). Because of the small sample size (n=2), the findings of this study are not representative of any other school, student, or experience than those analyzed in this study. However, the narratives that the participants shared are representative of their understandings within their social, cultural, spatial, and temporal contexts and representative of what ways of being were possible and not possible in those contexts. An additional caution for life history research is the potential difficulty in anonymity for the participants (Hagemaster, 1992). Because the participants share a great number of intimate details of their lives, they may be recognizable by those who know them well, despite the fact that no names or personally identifying information are being released. Each participant in this study was made aware of this risk and agreed to participate with as much anonymity as is feasible.

Vignettes in life history research

Though life history has been done with a single participant (see Tierney, 2013), or with a less narrowly defined topical focus (see Behar, 2003), the methodology can also be used for studies of multiple participants with a more narrow focus (see Patel, 2005; Squire, 2000; Sykes, 2001). Because this study has a particular focus on queer student experiences of schooling and contact with mental health systems, I decided to use an interview style that encouraged participants to
produce vignettes describing their experiences. Glesne writes that life histories can be elicited as “focused vignettes, exemplary of particular perspectives, incidents, or interactions” (Glesne, 2011, p. 20). Because of the topical focus of this project, the participants were guided through a series of prompts that attempted to elicit their experiences, perspectives, and insights in terms of their schooling experiences, and more specifically, their experiences with queerness in schools and contact with the mental health system.

**Recruitment and Participant Selection**

The participant recruitment design encompassed both a convenience sample and a snowball sample (Bryman, Teevan, & Bell, 2009). I made an initial inquiry of my networks and acquaintances, providing a brief summary of the project and a list of the qualifications for participation. I asked in turn that the recipients of the initial recruitment email might pass the information on to anyone they knew who might be interested in participating. I also asked each participant to send the information about the project to anyone else whom they thought might be interested in participating.

Though this sampling method posed some drawbacks, such as a limited pool of potential participants, there were several reasons for this choice. First, because of the relatively restrictive criteria for participation, I decided to rely on individuals’ knowledge of people who might fit the criteria and might be interested in participating. I did not have access to lists of Ontarians who identify as LGBTQ and had contact with the mental health system, in the same way that one might have access to lists of people who fit broader or less intimate categories. A related second
reason for the choice of sampling method was so that no one would be “outed” to me as a researcher without first declaring their interest. I specifically asked people sending out information about the project to ask interested parties to contact me, rather than providing me with their contact information. Besides being a violation of the research ethics protocol, I felt that it would be off-putting and possibly upsetting to contact potential participants with prior knowledge of their identification as LGBTQ and their contact with the mental health system. Finally, due to the intimate nature of the research and the commitment participation would require, I felt that it was important that participants were invested in some way in the project, and that it would be a valuable experience to them. I did not want to pressure anyone to participate, and wanted to find participants for whom the experience of participation would be intrinsically rewarding.

In the end, the two participants in the study were acquaintances who volunteered to participate after I had described the project I was working on. At the time that they agreed to participate, I did not know that they fit the criteria, and I was not “pitching” the project to them as potential participants. As far as I am aware, the participants do not know each other, but they share some interesting similarities in terms of personal identifications.

My initial goal in participant recruitment and selection was to keep the project open to any adult who had attended school in Ontario, identified as LGBTQ, and had had contact with the mental health system. Many of the differences between the two participants' lived experiences are discussed in later chapters. However, I would like to discuss some of the unintended similarities between the
participants’ subject positions. Both participants are white male graduates of social science programs at the pseudonymic University of Southern Ontario [USO], neither of whom was raised in a major urban centre.

At the time that I was looking for participants, I described my project in person to several dozen people, in addition to those to whom I sent a written description. I cannot be sure what factors influenced these two people in their inclination to participate, but I suspect that the in-person description of the project, my personal connection to the participants, my unwitting choices in with whom I discussed my upcoming project, and the makeup of my networks all factored in to the outcome.

The similarities between my participants caused me to wonder whether I was too selective in whom to describe my research to, even when I was not actively recruiting participants. Both participants are white males, out to me as gay or queer, who attended post-secondary education. In personal settings, I know I have made choices about whom to discuss my work with, as I sometimes choose not to discuss the particulars of my work with, for example, family members or acquaintances whom I know to be homophobic. Was I unknowingly selecting only those who I read as accepting of my research to discuss the project with? Was I discussing the project in more depth with those who were out or whom I read as queer, or those who I thought would be more interested due to their own academic situations? Or, conversely, did some people express more of an interest and elicit more of a response because of their own subject positions that they read as relevant to my research? Likely a combination of factors influenced the situations by which I
found the two participants, but I continue to reflect on what I might have done differently or more consciously to attract a more diverse sample. As discussed in Chapter 7, having a more diverse group of participants in terms of factors such as race or gender identity would have allowed for a deeper intersectional analysis of the factors that contributed to the participants’ experiences.

**Interviews, Transcription, and Data Analysis**

Each participant attended two semi-structured interviews. The first round of interviews took place in December 2014-January 2015, and the second round of interviews took place in April 2015. Each interview was approximately 60-90 minutes in length and was audio-recorded to enable transcription. The interviews took place at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, in one participant’s home, and at a Toronto coffee shop.

The first interview with each participant was loosely structured around the following prompts:

- Tell me about yourself.
  - Prompts for participant to describe their age, racial/ethnic identification, religious identification, gender, sexuality, ability/disability, occupation, location
  - Prompts for a description of the participant’s current life situation
- Tell me about your experiences in school.
- Tell me about the first time that you experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in school.
Were there any other times that you experienced homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in school?

- How did you first have contact with the mental health system?
  - How do you feel about your contact with the mental health system?
- Do you feel that your experiences of homophobia, biphobia, or transphobia in school were connected with your contact with the mental health system?
  - If so, how were the experiences connected?
  - If not, why were they separate experiences?
- Is there anything else you want to tell me today?
  - Is there anything you feel I should have asked you about?
  - Is there anything you want to make sure we discuss in the next interview?

After the first interviews, I transcribed the audio recordings and sent the transcripts to the participants with a note that they could add, take out, change, or clarify anything that they wanted to. One participant (Matthew) clarified his age and corrected where I had mis-transcribed a word. The other participant (Liam) had no corrections. Following Patel (2005), the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed with all hesitations, pauses, and mis-speakings included. My goal in this style of transcription, which I have retained throughout this document, is to reduce some of the stylistic impact of my voice as transcriber and retain as much of the participant’s voice as possible.
The second interviews were loosely organized around themes taken from the first interviews, but most of the data from the second interview was gleaned from allowing the participants to talk about what they were interested in discussing and thought was most important. The themes taken from the first interviews that were used to structure the second interviews are listed in Table 1.

Table 1: Second Interview Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Matthew</th>
<th>Liam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Experiences of homophobia in the church</td>
<td>• Major stressors in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Experiences of homophobia during LDS</td>
<td>• Coping mechanisms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church mission</td>
<td>• Disengagement from queer community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Coping mechanisms</td>
<td>• Representation of queer issues in school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Compulsory heterosexuality” in school</td>
<td>• Strategies for teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strategies for teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Representation of queer issues in school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, the participants were asked if there was anything else that they wanted to discuss as part of the project. The second interviews were similarly transcribed and sent to the participants for member-checking. Neither participant had any changes, additions, or deletions from their second interview transcripts.

After the interviews were completed and the transcriptions were checked by the participants, the data was coded thematically, and analyzed for connections between the participants in relation to the research questions. To maintain the integrity of the participant narratives, coded quotations were then arranged according to the themes which emerged during the coding process and which of the research questions they had potential to speak to. The themes which emerged during the coding process are listed in Table 2.
Table 2: Emerging Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School cultures</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullying of gay/queer youth</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay-straight alliances</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum representations of queer issues</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling and mental health</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers representing/responding to queer issues</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecting with teachers</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homonormative expectations/stereotypes</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalized homophobia</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures outside of school: religion</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultures outside of school: community</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionalities: body image</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionalities: rural life</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intersectionalities: class and access</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health systems</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health systems within organized religion</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming out</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>2/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of others</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengagement from queer issues/community</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjectivities</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stressors</td>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping mechanisms</td>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared experiences and contexts of researcher and participants</td>
<td>Matthew &amp; Liam</td>
<td>1/Analysis of research methods</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jackson & Mazzei (2012, 2013) put forth a method for working with data and theory they call “plugging in,” in which data is considered as it exists in the context
of theories and concepts in the literature and in the context of the researcher’s subjectivity. The authors argue that plugging in involves a continuous reconceptualization of the data and the different theories it works beside, and an understanding that both data and theory are necessarily incomplete (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013). After my initial analysis, I continued to read the coded data within and through the literature, “plugging in” to theory as I began and throughout the writing process. The data that emerged through the “plugging in” can be classified as four sections: homophobic victimization and expectations with regard to sexuality and gender expression (Chapter 3), experiences with queer issues in schools (Chapter 4), experiences with mental health systems in school and religious contexts (Chapter 5), and coming out as gay or queer in school and at home (Chapter 6).

Participant Introductions

I would next like to offer a very brief introduction to each participant. Though this introduction touches on some aspects of the participants’ lives and experiences, it is my hope that their voices will be the predominant focus in the following chapters and that the reader will be able to get to know them there as their complex, nuanced selves.

Matthew

1 In order to maintain the confidentiality of the participants as much as possible, their names, as well as all names of other individuals, schools, and places, and some personally identifiable details have been changed.
Matthew describes himself as a gay male, 23 years old. He is white and grew up in a small city in Ontario. Matthew comes from a middle-class Mormon family and attended one year at Southern Ontario University (SOU) after high school before going on his Church mission. After his mission he returned to SOU where he studied social sciences. Matthew has been diagnosed with general anxiety disorder and has also experienced depression, for which he has taken medication in the past.

Liam describes himself as a queer male. He couches that description with a comment on the words gay and queer:

I would say that I identify as queer, I have problems with both [the words gay and queer], like it, I didn’t have a problem with the word queer, I feel like some people would look at me and say, oh, he’s not queer, he’s gay, and that’s like what the problem, like I don’t, I never want to frustrate anyone that feels like they might be more queer than me, but thankfully queer is like this blanket term that we can apply to so many different things.

Liam is white, 25 years old, and grew up in a working-class family in a rural area outside of a small town in Southern Ontario. He came to Toronto to study social sciences at University of Southern Ontario (SOU) after he attended a second “victory lap” year of Grade 12 in his hometown. Liam has a diagnosis of attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and has also experienced major depression and anxiety.

From Interpretation to Analysis

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to comment on the analysis process and theoretical lenses I used throughout this thesis. In an attempt to be self-reflexive not only on my positionality as an author, but to critique my research and analysis process, I will discuss the methods I used to move from interpretation
to analysis in the following four chapters. In this study, I have used two distinct methods for analyzing the data, as shown in Table 3. In the first two analysis chapters (Chapter 3, which deals with experiences of homophobic bullying and expectations around sexuality; and Chapter 4, which deals with experiences of queer issues in schools), the flow and organization of the writing is guided by the theoretical lenses used in analysis, which I then organized by theme. In the second two analysis chapters (Chapter 5, which deals with experiences of contact with mental health systems; and Chapter 6, which deals with experiences of coming out), the data is organized around the themes which appeared in the data in the form of participant narratives. The first two analysis chapters “plug in” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2013) to multiple theories, and as such take a more uncertain stance on the nature of truth within the participants’ experiences. The second two analysis chapters rely on purportedly more stable conceptual frameworks to which theoretical connections are applied, leading to an analysis which reads as more certain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3: Analytical Frameworks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapters 3 and 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Theoretical connections organized by theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Poststructural lens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Leads to uncertainty of analysis</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After completing the analysis using these two different modes, I struggled to make a determination of which is the better option. Though the critical analysis led by participant narrative in Chapters 5 and 6 perhaps reads as more stable and gives me more authority as the writer, I wonder if that presumed authority defeats one
purpose of this life history study. As a researcher, I aim to position my voice in
concert with the participants’, and to offer my analysis as one of myriad ways that
their experiences might be theorized. The poststructural “plugging in” of Chapters 3
and 4 reads as less certain, and comes at the data from a variety of theoretical
standpoints, but allows for my analysis to stand in awareness that there are other
ways of thinking about the same data. My hope is that as the reader moves through
the rest of this text, they carry an understanding of these two distinct methods of
interpretation, and are able to make their own determination of which they feel
speaks to them more strongly.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed the life history methodology that I used in this
study, and provided a brief introduction to the two participants, Matthew and Liam.
In the following chapter, I begin my analysis of the ways that the participants
experienced and witnessed homophobic victimization and expectations about
sexuality in schools and at home.
Chapter Three: Victimization and Expectations

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the ways that Matthew and Liam experienced homophobic victimization and social expectations of “appropriate” (hetero-) sexuality. Both Matthew and Liam describe the ways that they experienced homophobic bullying in schools and in their communities. Matthew describes experiences which I have analyzed through the lens of heteronormativity, while Liam describes experiences which I have examines as evidence of homonormativity.

With an eye towards “plugging in” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, 2013) these narratives to theoretical constructs, I have read Liam and Matthew’s experiences of homophobic bullying through the lenses of subjectivity, discourse, surveillance, social capital, and hegemonic masculinity. I have also used The Triangle Model (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 1987) described in Chapter 1 to investigate the social and internal expectations of sexuality experienced by Matthew and Liam. These narratives of homophobic victimization and social expectation demonstrate the ways that particular ways of being are made possible, and others are made impossible, in school communities and the broader communities that students come from.

Homophobic Bullying

For both Matthew and Liam, various forms of homophobic bullying were present throughout their youths. These experiences of victimization occurred in schools and in the community; were based on queerness, perceptions of queerness, and social expectations of bodies and masculinities; were perpetrated by peers,
family, and community members; and sometimes acted as a barrier to desired activities or to coming out as queer. In many instances, being witness to the homophobic bullying of others had many of the same negative effects for Matthew and Liam as being the target themselves.

Everyday homophobia

As discussed in Chapter 1, homophobia becomes an everyday occurrence for queer youth in schools. In 2011, over two-thirds of Canadian students heard comments such as “that’s so gay” in school every day, and only one percent of LGBTQ students reported never hearing homophobic comments in their schools (Taylor et al., 2011). In a similar US study, “three quarters of students heard the word “gay” used in a negative way often or frequently at school” (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014). Matthew and Liam both describe experiencing everyday, almost casual homophobia from peers in school. For Liam, there was less “strong” homophobia, but he experienced it often, sometimes by his friends and usually when it was directed towards other people:

It’s funny cause like I never directly experienced a really, like a strong homophobic remark in high school that I can remember, but that doesn’t mean that there wasn’t - that I didn’t feel it, that I didn’t experience people talking about other people, I think that what mostly people talk about, whether or not they’re talking about me behind my back, is like, friends of mine, would talk about... like just like the word fag on the, like, using it casually... that was still like, really popular, or calling everything gay.

For Liam to describe most of the homophobia that he experienced as distinguishable from “strong” homophobia shows that for him, a certain level of homophobia became normalized. In his school context, the terms “that’s so gay” or “fag” were commonplace.
Matthew’s school experience also commonly included homophobic comments or jokes. Matthew described hearing jokes directed towards him that focused on him being gay, and that it became a “normal,” “every day” occurrence:

It’s something that I just got used to, um, you know, there were phrases here and there, or jokes here and there... In Grade 7, um, we were learning about heterogeneous and homogeneous uh, chemical mixtures, for example, um, mm-hmm, and I remember the joke that came out was like, "Oh, Matt’s a homogeneous," [laughs] sort of a thing, and like those sort of phrases and those sorts of things, um, became normal, and so, mm-hmm, for me it was just dealing with it every day.

For both participants, their school culture was such that homophobia was perpetrated on an everyday basis by students. These casually-mobilized, homophobic discourses can be compared to some of the more overt harassment and covert victimization discussed later in this chapter. Together, these forms of homophobia worked together to create a social environment in which students were policed for socially-appropriate (hetero)sexuality.

Witnessing homophobic bullying

Both Matthew and Liam were witness to others’ experiences of homophobia alongside their own. In Matthew and Liam’s schooling experiences, their becoming enmeshed in discourses of homophobia as a witness to homophobic bullying created situations in which queerness was an unacceptable way of being in school. Matthew and Liam both describe witnessing homophobic bullying in their schools, and also describe the ways in which they avoided having labels of queerness associated with them. Becoming aware of the negative discourses of queer subjectivities worked to create a school environment in which being out as queer was not possible for Matthew and Liam.
Matthew said that once he came to understand himself as gay, the homophobic comments that had been made towards others took on a new meaning. He discusses his changing interpretation of comments made towards queer people in his school:

I didn't interpret it as homophobia because, well, it wasn't directed to me, because I didn't know what my sexual feelings were. It wasn't until high school that I realized that I was gay, and I hated that. And so it was even worse, right.

Once Matthew knew that the people that were being victimized were thought of as similar to him in some way, and that given the opportunity, his peers would categorize him as queer, the homophobic harassment of others in his school community became less bearable. The discursive conditions of his school, in which queerness was negative, necessitated Matthew to fight against the label of queer.

As explained below, in Matthew's school queerness was associated with doing something wrong, being “crazy,” being overly sexualized, and being a sexual predator. Matthew was aware of these discourses to an extent, but being witness to the ways that other people experienced homophobia caused him to further understand the social expectations of his school and attempt to resist any association with a queer subjectivity. In one instance, Matthew describes what happened when a friend of his came out to their peers in school and started dating another man:

Um, everybody knew. It was definitely something that they talked about, um, um, and it wasn't a good thing, either.

As a witness to his friend’s coming out and the subsequent social consequences, Matthew became aware of the possible reaction if he were to come
out himself. Matthew’s witnessing of how his friend was talked about by other students gave him a sense of how he might be talked about if he were to come out, and discouraged him from doing so. Here, Matthew learned that in his school, subjectification as queer “wasn’t a good thing.”

In witnessing another incident of homophobic bullying, Matthew learned that queerness was unacceptable, associated with being “crazy,” and that there was social power associated with enacting the victimization of queer subjects. Matthew recalls an occasion in his high school when two girls were called out by a peer for kissing in the hallway:

I remember that there were two girls that were kissing, outside of a classroom one day. And there was, you know, one of the class clowns that was older, he was walking up the stairs, he saw them and he was like, "Hi, lesbians!" like, so the entire, like front foyer of the high school, including everyone in the stairs, like, it’s a big foyer, like, they heard, and they were singled out as like, these crazy people. And like, he was praised, because he was making fun of them. So yeah, I remember that. It was just, no, like it wasn’t acceptable, at all [laughs].

In this incident, the two girls were simultaneously called out and shamed. Because in this school the word “lesbian” was used as an insult, there was an intention of negativity and shaming in the boy’s hailing of the two girls. In the moment of their hailing as lesbian, the girls became attached to the stigma associated with that label in the context of their school culture.

Even though these two girls experienced this shaming for their kiss, the kiss can be interpreted as a moment of resistance. In this school context, the kiss represents a talking back to the whirlpool of discourses that attempt to make this expression of queerness impossible. When the girls kiss in a school that allows the boy to hail them as lesbians in an attempt to humiliate them, they become part of
the “range of disobedience that... an interpellating law might produce” (Butler, 1993, p. 122). In this incident, the school culture of heteronormativity exposed through this attempt to make an expression of queerness impossible is met with a refusal to comply with heterosexist expectations.

Matthew also describes the girls as being recognized as “these crazy people” after this incident. As discussed in Chapter 1, there is a long history of discourses of insanity being associated with queerness. As this played out in Matthew's school, he became further enmeshed in a discourse that made being a lesbian associated with being “crazy.” When this association was made, “sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness” (Foucault, 1990, p. 36), and any validity of queerness was dismissed. This contributed to Matthew’s understanding of the ways that queerness was discussed in his school.

Matthew recalls that the boy who called out the two girls for kissing was commended for this action by other students. Here, the student body awards social capital (Valenzuela, 2005) to one person through the removal of social capital from another. The inaction of teachers in this scenario (see Chapter 4) also worked to guide the flow of social capital (Valenzuela, 2005) between students.

The boy who called out the girls for kissing in the hallway acted to limit the possibilities of sexual expression in the school in two ways: through his intentional victimization of the two girls, and through his unknowing victimization of Matthew. Matthew read the situation as making his desired queer life impossible in his school setting. He sums up the incident through his analysis of the situation: expressions of queerness in the school were met with social repercussions, and thus were
unacceptable. Matthew’s growing understanding of the discourse of queerness in the school caused him to feel that being a queer student was unacceptable.

In Matthew’s school, teachers were also the targets of homophobic comments, including joking allegations of sexual misconduct with students:

Matthew: There were jokes about some of the teachers who were gay, in school, or were gay or lesbian, or bisexual, um, yeah.
Austen: Like what sorts of jokes?
Matthew: Um, so just like they were getting together, or they were fooling around with students and stuff like that, just like all these really offensive rumours, um, just really um, villainizing them, vill-ain-izing, yeah, just making them like, bad and overly sexual and stuff like that and just like, or bringing their personal lives into like, the public sphere um, so again like this is showing that this is a bad thing.

The trope of queer teacher as sexual predator has long been used by those who misunderstand queerness as pathology and aim to repress the rights of queer people. In 1970s Toronto, the sociopolitical context allowed it to be “common knowledge that homosexual teachers promoted homosexuality and preyed on children” (Graydon, 2011, p. 314, original emphasis). Matthew’s experience in his school in 2000s suburban Ontario shows that this trope is still being used to construct queer teachers as negative influences on students.

The sexualization of queer teachers that Matthew describes can also have negative impacts on students and teachers. Russell describes how some of her students misinterpreted her coming out to them: “... most of them equated being lesbian or gay with sex. So, they may have interpreted my coming out as wanting to tell them about sex” (2002, p. 23). This misinterpretation of teachers being open about their queerness as wanting to discuss sex with their students poses a
“dilemma” for teachers wanting to come out to their students to act as positive role models and increase queer visibility in schools (V. Russell, 2010).

What Matthew took out of witnessing these comments about his queer teachers was that in his school, queerness was perceived as a bad and dangerous thing. The discourse of predatory sexuality attached to queerness contributed to a school environment in which Matthew felt that it would be unacceptable for him to come out and associate himself with a queer subjectivity.

Matthew’s experience as a witness to others’ victimization allowed him to absorb the discourse of queerness in his school environment, which included negative assumptions of those who were labeled as queer. For Matthew, this discourse contributed to a school environment in which it was impossible to be queer in a positive and comfortable way.

Liam’s experiences of discourses of queerness at school also contributed to him working to hide his sexuality and minimize any attachment of himself with a queer subjectivity. Like Matthew, Liam also witnessed the negative reactions to a peer who came out. Liam also witnessed covert homophobia directed towards his peers. These factors caused Liam to delay coming out to his peers as queer.

For Liam, his peers’ negative reactions when an older schoolmate came out as bisexual made him not want to come out himself. He recounts his experience as a witness to the comments made about his peer:

One of the kids on my bus, who I, I, and that was the worst part, was like, I felt like I was friends with him, um, and then there was a rumour someone, I think he actually did come out as bisexual, like a friend of mine now, and a friend of my sister’s at the time, he was my sister’s age, his name was Miles, and he came out of the closet as bisexual, like, his last year of university, or sorry, his last year of high school, and that was like pretty, a lot of people
were talking about that, so I think I was about in Grade 10 when that happened, um, and he would have been in Grade 12, and someone on my bus who I was, I was kind of friends with, like thought he was a cool guy, I don’t know, never had a problem with him, and he never really seemed to have a problem with me, but I wasn’t out at the time, and then he just like started talking about like, this gay guy, just like, "Oh, yeah, I’m pretty sure he’s a fag," "Not going to," or like "We can’t talk to him," or, I don’t know, like, not, it was just, it was a topic of conversation and it, and it shut down him as a human being, like it’s like, oh, well now that we know that he’s gay, better ignore him and make fun of him all the time, cause that’s what you do, and that was a pretty big deterrent for like, wanting to come out of the closet.

When Miles came out as bisexual, Liam remembers that a lot of people, including those with whom Liam was friends, began to make fun of him. Liam witnessed Miles being described as “this gay guy” and “a fag” by his peer on the school bus. This hailing (Althusser, 2006) of Miles as gay and a fag was done without Miles’ knowledge or response. As discussed in Chapter 1, hailing “can function without a subject’s acknowledgment” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 74). In this instance, Miles was hailed as gay and a fag, and thus subjectified as such, without his knowledge. For Liam, as a witness to this hailing, the act served to further marginalize the queer subjectivity that he was trying to determine whether or not to embrace.

Liam goes on to explains that Miles was “shut... down as a human being” when he came out. The dehumanizing narrative that went along with the students’ victimization of Miles demonstrated to Liam that one of the outcomes of coming out as queer was being regarded as a lesser being. Liam finally describes how watching Miles get made fun of was a deterrent for him wanting to come out himself. As Liam associated more negative possible outcomes with queer subjectification, he resisted any association of himself with that label.
For Liam, being a witness to covert acts of homophobia against others caused him to act to avoid being the target of the attacks. Here, he describes how the homophobic comments in his school were not always directed towards those who were queer, but were part of the culture of gossip that was more difficult to stem than outright bullying:

People would say things all the time about other people which pushed me to not come out until I was uh, in Grade 11, I think it was Grade 11, and I, I knew that I was gay or that I liked men from probably the age of like, 12 or 13. So I like, hid my sexuality because I was scared of people's reactions and although I didn't experience firsthand usually, the, like the people that I knew or, um, like specifically like men or, young men in my, of my age group, or in my classes, I don't, I, there was only a couple of times where I experienced direct homophobia, but before I came out, I heard them say things to each other about other guys that they thought were gay, and then I never, they never said it directly to me, but they also never said it directly to those people, it just like, it creates this perpetuated fear about coming out, or about um, what my experience could be like as a gay man, and I mean, it was almost better then, when I did come out they stopped saying those things around me, [laughs] because at least I didn't have to hear them say them around me, but I still knew that those conversations were happening, and it's like the type of thing that you can't prove, it's not like you can go to the Vice-Principal and say like, "Oh, someone's probably saying something bad about me somewhere," [laughs] which I almost wish you could do, [laughs] but, nobody wants to live in constant fear of what other people might be thinking.

For Liam, being witness to the comments made about queer youth in his school made him wary of coming out to his peers. Though he says he had not experienced homophobia directed towards him, his knowledge of his school context caused him to "hide [his] sexuality" and resist associating himself with queerness. Because of his experience witnessing the ways that others were treated, Liam was afraid of “what [his] experience could be like as a gay man” and pushed against that possibility of negative life experience by resisting subjectification as queer.
After he came out (see Chapter 5), Liam was relieved that he no longer had to hear the comments made about the queer youth at his school, but he knew that they were still ongoing. By coming out, Liam had lost his membership in the group that was privy to the covert homophobia in the school environment. On one side of the coin, Liam was happy that he did not have to witness homophobia perpetrated against those in the group subjectified as queer, which now included himself. On the other side, however, this opened up new anxieties about how he was possibly being thought of, made fun of, called out, or hailed as a result of his more public association with queerness.

Bullying based on bodies and gender expression

Both Matthew and Liam described how they were targeted with homophobia based on the ways that they expressed gender through their bodies and behaviour, even before they came out as queer. That the social consequences for not adhering to prescribed gender norms involve victimization based on sexuality demonstrates the interconnectedness of gender expectations and heterosexism. As Epstein argues, “that the (performance of) homophobia both polices and constructs heterosexual masculinities in schools, has implications for the school lives of those boys/young men who resist conventional masculine identities” (1997, p. 106).

Matthew describes how he was targeted by his high school peers based on his choice of extracurricular activities and his behaviour, which were deemed “effeminate”:

Like, they made fun of me because of like my effeminate behaviour, apparently, um, I did things, like I was in the musical, um, [laughs], um, um, I did play, I didn’t play football, or rugby, like I played volleyball instead [laughs]. Um, it was just like I wasn’t seen as like the typical masculine
guy. And like, that was a target, like, a reason to, you know, to, to pounce on me.

Liam also felt the pressure to conform to a certain type of masculinity. He describes that the way he felt with other students had “a lot to do with my physical body, and like, I felt like I wasn't attractive.” His body image and the ways he compared himself to his male peers impacted his comfort level in single-sex, body-oriented classes such as physical education:

I was in like, we were, it was all same-sex, like, not co-ed gym classes and like I, I’ve never felt comfortable with other men, [laughs] like, being in the, being in like, uh, I’m a like, much more comfortable now, I can go to gyms and like, change in front of other guys, but that was a really like, that was really nerve-wracking experience uh, probably one of the things that I hated most about high school, about Grade 9 and the reason that I didn’t want to be physically uh, or like, just to be physical in high school, was because I maybe was, maybe was ashamed of my own body but mostly was just like, intimidated by other guys.

Liam and Matthew’s narratives both show how they were impacted by the expectations of particular masculinities in their schools. For Matthew, the social expectation for masculinity was to not take part in ostensibly feminine activities, such as the school musical and the volleyball team, and to play the “right” sports: football or rugby. Epstein writes that in her research, “the homophobia expressed towards non-macho boys was in terms of the assertion of their similarity to girls” (1997, p. 109). Likewise here, when Matthew did not take part in the activities that were deemed masculine, the reason that he was targeted was accusations of effeminacy, but the ammunition was homophobia.

Liam, who saw his physical body as unattractive, was intimidated by his male peers. This caused him to further distance himself from physical education. Using hegemonic masculinity theory, Tischler and McCaughtry argue that “the closer a
boy's masculine embodiment aligns with forms that are most valued and supported, the more likely his masculinities will be privileged” (2011, p. 38). In their study, Tischler and McCaughtry found that boys whose embodiments were not considered masculine, such as those having the “wrong body shape” (2011, p. 41), experienced marginalization in physical education classrooms. Liam’s negative experience of physical education in high school is congruous with the expectation that masculine embodiment includes a particular bodily form.

The participants’ experiences with victimization, Liam’s based on his physical embodiment and Matthew’s based on his gender expression through extracurricular activity choice, both show how power/knowledge operated through synoptical (Mathiesen, 1997) surveillance in their educational contexts, that is, how individuals are surveilled by the collective gaze of their school. When Matthew is deemed non-masculine by his peers, he becomes the subject of a system of surveillance in which those with social power, the conventionally masculine students, simultaneously surveil their peers for exceptions to these codes of masculinity and continuously construct the acceptable and expected masculinities themselves. In short, through power/knowledge, those with power concurrently build social knowledge about what masculinity consists of, and ensure that those with less power comply or face the consequences.

Liam is also the subject of peer surveillance based in power/knowledge. Through their embodiment and continual rearticulation of typical masculinity, Liam’s peers co-construct the social expectations of masculine physicality. That Liam’s transgression of masculinity is based in embodiment (that is, how he looks),
rather than behaviour, necessitates a different approach by the bourgeoisie of social capital in the school. Because he cannot comply with the masculine expectations in physical education, he is pushed out of the space in which he embodies disobedience of these codes.

In these instances, neither Matthew nor Liam was targeted based on their peers’ knowledge that they identified as queer, because neither was out at the time. Rather, they were victimized based on their refusal or inability to reflect the expectations of masculinity that were present in their school cultures.

**Bullying based on perceived queerness**

In their narratives, Matthew and Liam discussed being the targets of homophobic bullying even before they were out to their peers. In these instances, Matthew and Liam were subjectified as gay or queer through processes of hailing and social surveillance. Because of the negative associations of queerness in their school communities, these subjectifications caused them distress and added to a milieu in which being queer was not possible.

Matthew recounted experiences of homophobia that were not based on his sexual orientation as defined or experienced by himself, but rather were based on perceptions of his sexual orientation by others:

I can remember like in grade, Grade 5, for example, um, I was pushing someone on the swing, one of my friends. And someone saw me touch his butt, accidentally. And it exploded, [laughs] in the sense that like, "Oh, Matt is gay, he touched his butt," blah, blah, blah, and um, that was, yeah, that wasn't nice.

In this incident, a culture of social surveillance in the school that is looking out for queerness sees a prohibited sexual act in Matthew’s accidental touching of
his friend. The act of touching is not in and of itself an act of gayness, but it becomes labeled as such and is thus interpreted as a marker of gayness upon the actor. Matthew is then hailed as gay for his part in the action, while the social constructions that allowed for gayness to be interpreted are ignored.

This hailing (Althusser, 2006) of Matthew as gay causes him to fall into the social category of “gay,” which in his school, regardless of his attachment or non-attachment to the category of gay in terms of sexual orientation, “wasn’t nice.” As Jackson and Mazzei argue (2012), Butler’s (1993) use of hailing does not require the subject to respond to the hailing for the subjectification to take place. In this instance, Matthew is subjectified as gay concurrent to his hailing as such. He does not need to confirm his positionality as gay by coming out in order for the discourse of gayness to be attached to him.

These incidents, repeated over time, had an effect on Matthew’s ability to choose extracurricular activities. He describes how these experiences of homophobic bullying caused him to stop playing team sports:

I can remember some specific experiences um, with my teammates, I played sports and uh, they would, you know, make jokes at me, and that was, that was pretty constant um, from Grade 7, Grade 8, Grade 9, Grade 10, until I just like, stopped playing team sports [laughs] because I just didn’t want to be with, like, be around them... It was definitely one of the main reasons, I just didn’t like the people I was playing with, ’cause of this homophobia.

Smith describes how the “ideology of fag,” which involves the social grouping of male students through heterosexism, is “usually organized within a group of male heterosexual students” and requires “identifying a fag” through whose victimization the group achieves social coherence (2005, p. 99). Knowing that sports teams are key places where masculinities are constructed (Tischler & McCaughtry, 2011), and
reading Matthew’s experience through the lens of the “ideology of fag,” Matthew can be interpreted as the necessary victim on which the other team members achieve social capital.

For Matthew, the homophobic comments that were made towards him by his peers on sports teams caused him to leave the teams. As the sports team had become a place where he was subjected to victimization, he chose to extract himself from that environment. What Matthew lost in his inability to play team sports because of the associated social conditions, he gained in moving away from continuous victimization.

Liam was also the target of homophobic bullying before he came out as queer. For Liam, an unexpected homophobic comment during high school caused him to experience surprise, anger, distress, and anxiety:

I remember when I was skating once, this fucking little brat, little shithat, and I, I never even thought that like, anybody would say these sorts of things, I was ice skating, maybe around the tenth grade, and I, and I was just, I don’t even know why, like what, where this would have come from, like, stupid little child, probably like this twelve or thirteen year old, like skated up beside me, and then was like, "Oh, what are you, gay?" like, no, he was just like, "Oh, Liam’s so gay" or something, and I was like, this is, that’s a really weird thing to say, like... yeah, I mean I knew his sister, I knew his older sister, and I don’t think that I was even out at the time, and it was like a really, I, I took it very seriously, I took it really to heart, and I was like [gasp], you know, I was like [laughs], and that was definitely a cause of lots of social anxiety for me.

For Liam, this experience of being hailed as gay showed him that his community members were policing socially-appropriate (hetero)sexuality, and caused him to experience anxiety about what other measures of surveillance might be working to label him. Because Liam was questioning his sexuality and deciding whether to come out as queer in high school, this incident acted as evidence of the
social structures that were in place in his community to make some sexualities possible and some impossible.

When his friend’s brother called out, “Liam’s so gay,” he was working within a social apparatus of power/knowledge that continuously produces and reproduces appropriate sexuality. Where those who are subject to discourses of socially appropriate sexuality gain social capital, they can continually reinforce themselves as socially acceptable through a distinction against what is not acceptable, by mechanisms such as comments like the one Liam’s friend’s brother made. The boy’s actions were representative of the slew of discourses that produces acceptable sexuality in Liam’s community.

For both Matthew and Liam, these experiences of homophobic bullying that were based on perceptions of queerness were made possible through social structures that worked to delineate appropriate (heterosexual) and inappropriate (homosexual) modes of sexuality. Through these mechanisms, Matthew and Liam were both subjectified as queer in different, but consistently negative, ways.

**Heteronormative and Homonormative Expectations in School**

Matthew describes several ways that he was subject to heteronormative expectations in his school, while Liam describes the homonormative expectations that he encountered when he came out as queer. In the following section, I use The Triangle Model that shows how ideas, institutional practices, and individual practices continually co-construct one another (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 1987) as a conceptual framework to work through these narratives.
Matthew: Heteronormativity

Matthew’s narrative demonstrates several instances in which he felt the need to conform to the heteronormative expectations of his environment. For Matthew, the social conditions of his high school would have posed consequences were he to attempt to exist outside of the heteronormative paradigm. As such, the only way he could act in his school was as a mirror of heteronormative ideals. Matthew’s internal reality, that he was attracted to men, was made impossible to enact in the external reality of his school situation.

In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault describes the processes by which “a pedagogization of children’s sex” came to exist through familial, medical, and educational institutions (1990, p. 104). This control over the sexual lives and sexual potential of children is today evident in the ways in which the education system teaches, explicitly and covertly, what acceptable, expected sexuality looks like. Following Foucault, Čeplak (2013) argues that schools are a place where heteronormative ideals are continuously reproduced and naturalized, and where youth are constituted as subjects bound by discourses of gender and sexuality. Matthew’s narrative demonstrates how he was the subject of these discourses of heteronormativity as a student.

In Matthew’s school, heteronormative expectations were built into social and institutional structures. Events in the school calendar relied on conventions of male-female dating. Matthew describes how all male students, even those who identified as gay, brought girls to graduation and prom:

Grade 8 graduation was a big deal, you take a girl, or you take the opposite gender, like that was expected, um, there wasn’t even a discussion of what
would happen if someone decided to take someone of the same sex, because it was just, that didn't happen. Um, but I’m sure, you know, that’s, that’s out there a lot. Same thing with high school graduation, even my friends that came out as gay in high school, still took girls to the prom, and to graduation. It just wasn’t okay to go with another, with the same sex.

In Matthew’s school, the institutional practice of students having graduation and prom dates was responded to by the individual practice of bringing a date of a different gender, which in turn was motivated by heteronormative ideas and expectations of what it means to have a date. In this instance, there is no linearly causative framework; rather, the hegemonic ways that things are done continually create expectations for how they will be done in the future.

Even those students who were working against heteronormative expectations in other ways did not attempt to disrupt the institutional practice of mixed-gender dating at school functions. Matthew describes how his peers who were out as gay had female dates to these school events:

Um, and it wasn’t uh, it didn't seem like it was something that even the people who were out did, like, for example my, one of my friends who was gay, he didn't bring his boyfriend at the time to prom, he brought another girl, one of his friends from school who was a girl, and so, um, yeah.

For students at Matthew’s school, the issue of sexuality was purportedly separate from the issue of whom to have as a prom or graduation date, despite these traditions being rooted in histories of hegemonic heterosexuality. Because the connection between institutional practice and individual practice was so strong, even students who obviously held different ideas about sexuality, as evidenced by their being out as gay, did not attempt to resist the institutional structures in this way.
Interestingly, Matthew later couched his explanation of the social regulations of school event dating. While in the first vignette (Glesne, 2011) Matthew described taking someone of the same gender to a school social event as something “that didn’t happen,” he later changes his description of the situation, clarifying that, “for me it wasn’t an option”:

Like, school dances, um, you take a girl, um, to take a guy it was not an option, [laughs] well, for me it wasn’t an option.

Even though Matthew noted that no student who was out as gay took a same-gender date to a school social event, he seems to be saying that it was an especially insurmountable impossibility for him. Perhaps, given Matthew’s internal expectations stemming from his religious community (as discussed in Chapter 5), he understood himself as an exception to what might be theoretically possible for others.

The representation of sexuality in Matthew’s classrooms was as heteronormative as were the school social events. Matthew describes how homosexuality was absent from the curriculum:

“Um, in terms of like, yeah in the curriculum, um, I can remember sex ed in Grade 10, maybe? When we were like, learning how to put condoms on and like, talking about sex with our, our phys ed teacher, um, again it was never talked about... um, and no discussion of like, homosexual relations at all.

Matthew further describes how he did not understand the lack of inclusion of queer issues in the classroom as noteworthy, because that “was just the way it was”:

But I didn’t interpret it as anything significant, though. But it was just the way it was, and that’s the norm, and this is the way that things are, and you don’t challenge them, cause that’s the way that things are.
In Matthew’s school, the institutional constructions of curriculum, built upon heteronormative ideas, were taken up by individual teachers and manifested as the absence of queer issues in Matthew’s classrooms. This in turn contributed to Matthew’s ideas that the absence of queerness was normal and unquestionable. Again, ideas, institutional practices, and individual practices continually co-create one another.

Outside the classroom, Matthew described how queerness was also absent from student activity in the hallways, while overt displays of heterosexuality were often present:

Matthew: But then you would see, like um, like heterosexual couples like, making out all the time, like, in the corners and everywhere. That was normal. That was fine, didn’t question that.
Austen: So there was sort of a double standard?
Matthew: Totally, yeah, mm-hmm. It was just like, that’s a line that you don’t cross.

Matthew’s ideas about normal and acceptable sexuality were influenced by the individual practices of other students. Where heterosexual displays were common and unremarkable, heterosexuality was similarly unexceptional. Because queerness was absent from public student displays, queerness was similarly relegated to the realm of the abnormal. For Matthew, witnessing the presence and absence of these displays allowed him to create a mental “line that you don’t cross.”

In his school context, Matthew engaged in overtly heterosexual activities in order to demonstrate his non-queerness. Here, Matthew describes how he felt the need to participate with his male peers in heterosexist social bonding activities in order to avoid subjectification as gay:
We would be, we would, Grade 10, we were 15 and 16 years old, and we’re talking about, you know, banging chicks, and like, um, having sex with them, and like, "Who would you have sex with?" or "Who wouldn’t you have sex with?" and for me, like I had, I couldn’t not participate in that, like even though I didn’t want to, I wasn’t into that at all, I had, I felt like I had to participate in order to um, prevent the label of gay or a fag um, being placed on me.

In this instance, the idea of what it means to be “gay or a fag” influenced Matthew’s individual actions of playing along with the game of choosing girls to have sex with. Smith argues that among some groups of boys, “characteristics made visible by the organization of gender are seen as documenting the ‘underlying pattern’ of [what it means to be a] fag” (2005, p. 99). Matthew wanted to hide the “underlying pattern” that might be uncovered if he did not participate in this display of heterosexual masculinity, and thus followed his friends’ ideas of what it meant to be a man by participating in their game.

Matthew also describes that he would attempt to appear “more masculine,” including tenets of heterosexual masculinity such as having a girlfriend:

Um, I often, like, I forced myself to have a girlfriend in grade 11. That didn’t last, obviously [laughs]. Um, but like, just things like that, um, or like, I had to put myself in situations where I would, presenting myself as more masculine, or um, just, not what I wanted to do, but I felt like I had to.

In this instance, Matthew plays along with the social expectation that he act in a masculine way, which to him involves explicit markers of heterosexuality. This is exemplary of the ways that Epstein argues that “the mutual reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality and of conventional gender relations [are] inescapably intertwined” (1997, p. 107). Similarly, Smith argues that social “interpretation
enforces the difference required by heterosexual hegemony, between what is properly male or female” (2005, p. 99). For Matthew to attempt to achieve masculinity through heterosexuality shows that in his social context, the two aspects of being acceptably masculine and acceptably heterosexual went hand in hand.

Matthew’s participation in these rituals was not without personal cost. Matthew says that he did not want to do these things, but that he felt they were necessary to preserve his social status:

So, um, yeah, that was um, tough. In the sense that I had to like, force myself to be someone that I didn’t want to be, in order to prevent, you know, more bullying and more harassment, and most just, uncomfortable situations in general.

In Matthew’s school context, it was easier for him to pretend to be someone he wasn’t rather than to face the victimization that being out would, to him, undoubtedly cause.

These experiences of heteronormative expectations necessitated Matthew’s navigation through a variety of social and institutional frameworks. Because Matthew was not able to be out as gay, his navigation of these structures was mediated by his need to prevent any association between himself and queerness.

Liam: Homonormativity

For Liam, who came out partway through high school, experiences of homonormativity were commonplace. Duggan analyses homonormativity as a neoliberal undertaking, suggesting that queer people who most closely conform to heteronormative standards – in her terms, “the most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream portions of the gay population” (2004, p. 44) –
are those most likely to be considered valuable and deserving. In his analysis of
gender identity disorders and treatment, Bryant argues that some forms of
homophobia can work towards homonormativity, becoming “not solely or primarily
about curing gays, but about shaping (e.g. producing) them in their preferred form –
as gender conforming, upstanding, ‘very straight’ gays” (2008, p. 466). For Liam,
both these neoliberal expectations of good gay citizenship and stereotypical
assumptions of queerness were present throughout his high school experience.

One of the neoliberal practices of queerness that works to replicate
heterosexuality is institutional monogamy, which is increasingly being legalized for
queer people through same-sex marriage. Though this advance is an important step
in the decades-long struggle for social equity, the ubiquity of the marriage
institution itself marks it as a cornerstone of good citizenship and marginalizes
those who fail to adhere to its confines. For Liam, expectations of monogamy, or
having one and only one partner, caused him to feel out of place in queerness. Liam
describes how after he came out, he felt the need to justify his sexuality through
sexual experience and having a partner:

I kind of felt like I didn't, I couldn't justify or like, or I couldn't prove that I
was gay without having a partner, which I didn't think that I, yeah, that
seems, that obviously looking back on that right now, that was a problem, in
terms of like, identifying myself as queer, and like, needing someone else, and
like, needing sex or like, needing a relationship to justify um, queerness,
which is, yeah, that seems like a problem now that I think about it.
I, like, don't know, maybe I thought only people that had boyfriends or had
had sex with other men were allowed to [laughs] tell other people what their
experience [of being gay/queer] is like.

For Liam, the institutionalized practice of monogamy gave him the idea that
legitimate queerness is queerness with a partner, and that his experience of
queerness on his own was indeed inexperience. These ideas contributed to his avoidance of situations where he might have to claim or explain his queerness, such as the school’s GSA (see Chapter 4) or coming out to his father (see Chapter 6). Here, Liam's individual practice of avoidance was influenced by ideas about sexuality that he learned through institutionalized discourse.

    Liam did not feel comfortable in claiming a queer identity before he had a partner or queer sexual experience. For Liam, the idea that he needed to “prove” that he was gay by means of these qualifiers caused him to avoid situations in which he might have to claim his queerness. An early paper by Dank (1971) describes the processes by which people can “come out” in stages. Though the paper can be problematized in several ways, not least of which that it refers to homosexuals as “deviants” and examines queerness in the context of psychiatry, it does explore the ways and reasons that people delay their self-identification as queer or gay. Dank argues that often, men who are sexually attracted to other men do not make the leap to self-identification as gay until they have prolonged personal exposure to a gay community (what he calls a “conducive setting for homosexual behaviour” (1971, p. 186)), or they have a queer sexual experience. For Liam, he felt the need to prove or justify his identification as queer. Without such proof in the form of sexual experience or a partner, he felt that his queer experience was abnormal and unjustifiable. For Liam, normative queerness included having a male partner and sexual experience, and without these markers he felt the need to pass as straight – though he had neither a female partner nor straight sexual experience, there was no need to justify his non-queerness in his social context.
Beyond institutional practices, Liam was also subject to stereotypes of queerness after he came out:

I don't really feel like this is necessarily a horrible thing but in high school, when I did come out, it was sort of like, I experienced that stereotypical, um, oh, yay, you're gay, let's go shopping together, and I like, really embraced that, I kind of still embrace that cause I maybe, cause I like spending money, and that, that has nothing to do with being gay, but at the same time, it's like one of those things that are strongly associated with uh, you know, being a queer person, at least in stereotypical environments... and, it's not that [I] felt at the time that that was like, a problem in my life, that I felt like I was somehow being oppressed through stereotypes, but looking back on it, like, I'm frustrated by, by the, the existence of those stereotypes, and the existence of um, the, or the box that I felt like I was put into in those, in that environment, and that, I mean has nothing to do with uh, at least like I, I guess in, if we're supposed to look at these things and compare them as like, what's worse, it's like, obviously um, physical violence and like, problematic, like, difficult language is like, a lot worse than, than um, seemingly positive stereotypes but I think I've come to a place where I, I'm just as frustrated by those stereotypes as I am with homophobic behaviour.

In this narrative, Liam discusses how though he now considers the stereotypes he was subject to as negative, at the time he embraced them as a mechanism by which to connect to those who seemed to use them as a tool to interpret his queerness. Where Liam became unintelligible after he came out as queer, these stereotypes acted as a means for him to become intelligible. Calling on the ideas of stereotypes allowed Liam to be recognized.

For Liam, experiencing stereotypes of queerness, such as enjoying shopping, was distressing to him. Though he compares these social expectations to more overt homophobia and deems it less important, he nonetheless notes his intense frustration with being stereotyped based on being queer.
Liam similarly describes how a television show, Queer as Folk, that he had used as a resource for learning about and accepting his sexuality later became a point of frustration when he realized that it was reliant on homonormative ideals:

I remember also that I downloaded like, all of the seasons of Queer as Folk on my computer... I was like, oh yeah, this was so instrumental to like, helping me, what, well I thought it was helping me with my sexuality, but then when I actually re-watched, it like, it’s complicated, like, although I got a lot out of it in terms of like, being okay with myself, okay with myself enough that I came out of the closet, I, I feel like it also, you know embraces a lot of the, the gay culture um, stereotypes that maybe frustrate me.

What Liam first saw in the television show was queerness depicted as acceptable and positive. Later, he came to realize that though the depiction was positive, it relied on “gay culture...stereotypes” that he found distressing. What at one point had helped him then became a source of frustration. For Liam, the progression of his ideas from regarding the television show as helpful to finding it frustrating matched his experiences of individual practices, which through this period had also changed. As he moved away from pushing against heteronormativity and towards pushing against expectations of what it means to be queer, the focus of his initial interest in the show, finding positive depictions of queerness, was no longer at issue.

For Liam, experiencing homonormativity as found in institutional practices, individual practices, and ideas was a frustrating experience, and yet he found it useful in some ways. Like the stereotypes that had been placed on him were useful in that they provided intelligibility, the television show similarly provided a positive representation of queerness for him to hold on to when he could not find it elsewhere. These experiences of homonormative expectations showed Liam what it
meant to be a normalized queer subject, and as discussed in Chapter 6, he used these understandings to find coping mechanisms.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have explored the ways that Liam and Matthew experienced homophobia in schools, as witnesses and as targets themselves. I have argued that situated within discursive environments that police sexuality through social surveillance, Matthew and Liam were made subjects of appropriate sexuality. I have also explored the ways in which Matthew and Liam experienced heteronormativity and homonormativity, respectively, and how the ideas, individual practices, and institutional practices at play worked with and through each other to make particular ways of living possible and others impossible.
Chapter Four: Queer Issues in Schools

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Matthew and Liam’s experiences of queer issues in schools, including their contact with their schools’ gay-straight alliances (GSAs), their teacher’s responses to queer issues, and the inclusion (or non-inclusion) of queer issues in their curriculum. I also examine teacher responses to and curriculum representations of queerness through a framework of safe, positive, and queering moments (Goldstein et al., 2007).

Gay-Straight Alliances

National and regional quantitative studies as well as local qualitative studies have examined the influences of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) on school cultures and student experiences. National school climate surveys in Canada and the United States by EGALE and GLSEN, respectively, have both demonstrated the positive impacts of GSAs in schools. In Canada, Egale’s 2011 National Climate Survey found that students attending schools where GSAs exist tend to feel that their schools are supportive and becoming less homophobic, and that they are more comfortable being out with peers. In the United States, the 2013 GLSEN School Climate Survey found that students from schools with a GSA heard fewer homophobic and sexist comments and terms in their schools, had teachers that were more likely to intervene in cases of homophobic harassment, felt safer in their schools, and reported less homophobic bullying (Kosciw et al., 2014). Similar conclusions have been found in smaller studies. A Massachusetts study found that students in schools with GSAs reported a greater awareness of supportive teachers in their schools, and
reported hearing homophobic comments less often in their schools (Szalacha, 2003). In a qualitative study, members of a Utah GSA reported improved academic outcomes, increased comfort with being out, and feeling safer in school (Lee, 2002). Other studies have found improvements in the areas of academic achievement, safety and perceived safety for queer students, access to supportive adults in the school, and reductions in the use of homophobic language and mental distress and suicidality (Hansen, 2007).

Despite these positive impacts on a larger scale, and though both Matthew and Liam’s schools had GSAs, neither participant felt connected to or felt they were able to participate in their school’s GSA. The reasons Matthew and Liam gave for this inability to participate included understanding the GSA as an exclusive group, the fear of social repercussions for participation, and the inability to participate without outing themselves as queer.

In Matthew and Liam’s schools, synopticism (Mathiesen, 1997), fuelled by existing school culture and social expectations, allowed the student body to police the GSAs and their members. Matthew and Liam’s school GSAs and their members were at the centre of a technology of surveillance that served to control what associations the students could form without social repercussion.

**GSAs as exclusive**

Both Matthew and Liam saw their school GSAs as inaccessible due to their exclusivity.

Matthew says his school’s GSA “wasn’t a thing to participate in.” Matthew described the members of his school’s GSA as already belonging to a social group
that he was not a part of. He understands this homogeneity and the group’s small
size as making it inaccessible to him:

My GSA, the GSA club that we had and it was just like, you don’t go to that, it's
not a thing for you to go to, and there was a very select group of people and
they were, they had their, or they were in the same social circle anyways, so
they were a bunch of drama geeks, [laughs] and so um, hm, it was easy for
them to go uh, but it didn’t include anyone else in the high school, and we had
a high school of about twenty-one hundred students, and there were about
four or five in the GSA. So, um, like, that wasn’t a thing to participate in.

For Matthew, participating in the GSA was made impossible by the
uniformity of the existing participants. He did not belong in that social group, so he
did not belong in the GSA. He also read the small size of the group in relation to his
school’s large size as a collective judgment by the student body that participation in
the GSA was not desirable.

Liam attended only the first couple meetings of his school’s new GSA, and
decided not to return because of his disagreement with the group’s leaders about
the direction of the group:

At one of the first meetings that we had, getting back to that, the, one of the
co-organizers said to the rest of the group, like, she, I, I can’t, I’m not going to
remember this verbatim, but like, someone was saying that like, oh, it’s like,
“Why are straight people allowed here,” or like, and of course they were, but
she was like, “Oh, but being straight is so boring,” and I like, automatically
was just like, what the fuck, like, you’re like, trying to run a GSA, trying to
promote diversity, and like, telling people that you're looking to make allies,
that their sexuality is boring, like no sexuality is boring or exciting, [laughs]
just those, like, that's where the beginning of its problems um, arised for me.

Here, Liam’s ideological disagreement with the group’s leaders caused him to
turn away from the GSA. Liam found the singular sanctioned representation of
queer experience, “exciting,” to be insufficient for him, and so he declined to
participate in the group.
Another reason Liam gave for not wanting to participate in the GSA is because he was questioning his own authority to position himself as a worthy member:

It just felt like I, I didn’t know, I didn’t know who I was, and I didn’t know what I was, because I had never even had a relationship, going back to that, like it’s not like I had even kissed a boy, so although I knew I was attracted to men, like, what do I know, like, what right do I have to embrace this sexuality that I’m not even, that I don’t even feel like I’m using, you know what I mean? Like I didn’t even feel like I was really fully engaged with it, I just knew that it was something that I was, it was on the verge of happening, so like, what right do I have to tell other people what my experience is, yet.

In Liam’s understanding of the group’s purpose and dynamics, only those with the correct type of queer experience had a queer experience worthy of sharing. Liam, seeing himself as inexperienced as a queer person, felt that his voice would not be welcome until he had the right sort of experience. That is, for Liam, the experience of living as a queer person was not sufficient; only those who had experienced “using” their queerness through sexual activity were fully queer.

Social surveillance/social repercussions

Both Matthew and Liam hesitated to participate in their school’s GSA because of the social repercussions that they anticipated experiencing if they were to participate. Matthew and Liam felt that as subjects of the system of social surveillance in their schools, they were unable to join their GSAs.

Liam discusses the stigma associated with being queer, and the associated stigma of belonging to the GSA:

I’m trying to think about what the stereotype [of queer people] was in my mind in high school at the time, and like, I can’t really think of anything other than that it was just looked at as bad, like it was just like, gross, and gross is a really good just, word to describe it, and I didn’t want to be thought of as
gross, and so embracing like, a GSA, felt like I was embracing other people’s ideas of me becoming gross, [laughs] in this weird roundabout way.

Liam’s reading of the discourse of queerness in his school associated queerness and grossness, and to avoid being regarded as “gross,” he resisted subjectification as queer by not joining the GSA. Under the system of social surveillance at his school, being queer was “just looked at as bad,” and anyone who associated themselves with queerness, such as by joining the GSA, was associated with this negative stereotype.

Matthew describes his feeling that there would be consequences if he were to join the GSA:

I had the feeling, I can’t, I can’t join this. I had the feeling that, um, it wasn’t appropriate to go there, or it wasn’t socially acceptable to go there, because there’d be more repercussions, social repercussions.

The possible social repercussions that he would face as a GSA member, including harassment, bullying, or social exclusion, made joining the GSA not worth it for Matthew.

In his analysis of a GSA at a racially diverse California high school, McCready (2004) attempts to understand why male youth of colour were not comfortable participating in the group. He finds that some gay Black youth in the school felt that they were being monitored for appropriate behaviour by their heterosexual peers, and that this surveillance did not allow them to participate in a GSA while still belonging to their Black peer group. Though Matthew’s reasons for not attending his school’s GSA were not motivated by a racially-bound peer group, similar technologies of surveillance effected through social expectations, including peer and religious community expectations, disallowed his participation.
Matthew says that his religious community would have reacted to his joining the GSA very negatively. Here, he describes how queerness was taken up in his church:

Um, at church, um, it was talked about as like, the worst thing that you could choose to do. Um, it was conceived of as a choice.

Just as McCready (2004) argues that the needs of queer youth of colour were not understood and therefore not met in the California high school, Matthew’s experience demonstrates that his needs as a gay religious youth were not identified and therefore not met by the GSA. As stated by McCready, “Before starting a social/support program for queer youth in an urban school or when seeking to strengthen these programs, students and educators should consider investigating the social and cultural context of the school and surrounding community, and exploring how these contexts are having an impact on participation in school programs and activities.” (2004, pp. 47–48). Matthew’s community was not accepting of queerness, and because Matthew could not join the GSA without outing himself as queer, he was not able to participate.

Fear of outing oneself

The last reason that both Liam and Matthew described for not wanting to get involved with the GSA was a fear of outing themselves (or increasing awareness of their outness) to the school community.

Though at the time his school GSA was created, Liam was out to his classmates, he still describes not wanting to be involved in the group because of others’ perceptions:
I think a lot of the reasons why I didn’t want to get involved was because I was scared of like, looking more gay than I felt, which obviously that as a statement is pretty problematic for me to say, like I was scared of embracing what my sexuality, or the stereotypes of my sexuality that were being perceived by other people.

Matthew, who was not out in high school, chose not to participate with the GSA or its events in order to avoid being suspected of being gay:

I didn’t want to participate in it, because just like, I don’t want to identify myself with that, I don’t want to, I don’t want anyone to suspect or, suspect more that I’m affiliated with this, and so I chose to, to not participate um, yeah, and it like, it wasn’t important, it was just something that they were doing, um, it was just like, yeah, we can support them, but it’s not what we are gonna do.

Both Matthew and Liam avoided joining their school’s GSA in order to avoid being caught up in the negative discourses of queerness that were located in their schools. Matthew avoided joining the group so he would not be suspected of being queer, and Liam avoided joining his school’s GSA so as not to advertise his queerness and therefore place himself as a target for negative perceptions of others.

In many discussions of GSAs, the groups are assumed to be for queer students only, and the alliance component of the group is forgotten. Talbert (2004) argues that calling a group for queer students and allies a gay-straight alliance is a misnomer, because the groups are intended to be open for all students, including lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer students as well as gay youth and straight allies. Because in Matthew and Liam’s schools, the GSA was code for queer students only, neither was able to join their school’s GSA without outing themselves. Had the groups operated within school cultures in which all students were welcome to join, fewer assumptions may have been made about those students who did join, and
Matthew and Liam may have been able to join their GSAs without being labeled as queer.

Liam believes that regardless of his own non-participation, the existence of the GSA at his school was positive as “a point of contact” and “a point of discussion” for queerness to be introduced to students. This belief is supported by literature on GSAs. Walls et al. (2010) argue that many of the benefits for queer student involvement in GSAs, such as learning about queer issues in a safer space, making connections with supportive teachers, and developing coping mechanisms, as well as the associated lessened risk of suicide and improved academic outcomes, are present for queer students who attend a school where a GSA exists, regardless of whether or not they are a member. Worthen (2014) explores the impacts of school GSAs on student attitudes towards LGBTQ people, finding that beyond the positive impacts for queer youth themselves, the presence of a school GSA is correlated with a more positive view of LGBTQ individuals for youth once they leave school compared to youth who attended a school where there was no GSA.

Liam discusses his hope that the GSA would benefit the school culture by influencing students’ acceptance of queerness:

Just like the existence, that’s what I realized later on, was like, the existence of it, and it being a point of contact, and it being like, a point of discussion to other students, is really the only thing that we could have possibly asked for, we can’t like force any knowledge or any identity or any like, I don’t know, notion of queerness down anybody’s throats, the only thing that we can do is like, give them the spark to think about it, and to talk about it, and then like, through that hope that we come out on the other side as a more gender-diverse and also gender-diverse-accepting society, and that’s like, something that I didn’t really realize at the time, and so, um, yeah, all, all that it needs to be is points of discussion.
For Liam, the existence of the GSA signifies the possibility of a more accepting society. If, as he says, students in the broader school community are given the “spark to think about” queerness in a more positive light, the potential is there for students to leave the school with a broader viewpoint and a more accepting outlook. Liam also notes the importance of a “point of contact” and a “point of discussion” for students. As Worthen (2014) finds, students with this “point of contact” leave their schools looking more positively upon queerness and queer people than those with no such reference point. Despite there being few, if any straight students in Liam’s school’s GSA, he believes that the presence of the GSA offers this possibility.

**Teacher Responses & Curriculum Representations**

For both Matthew and Liam, the responses of teachers to queer issues in schools and the ways that queer issues were taken up in the curriculum had strong impacts on the ways that they felt or did not feel represented, cared for, and secure in their schools.

The response to or inclusion of queer issues in schools can be categorized according to the framework of safe, positive, and queer moments put forth by Goldstein, Russell, and Daley (2007). They suggest that schools as institutions cannot be coherently and consistently safe, positive, or queer, but that the culture of a school’s commitment to anti-homophobia education comes from the constellation of safe, positive, and queering moments. Matthew and Liam experienced safe, positive, and queer moments at school, each of which contributed to their ability to act and live in particular ways. Relying on this framework as a basis, in this section I
explore the safe, positive and queering moments that Liam and Matthew describe, as well as some moments of inaction and absence where queerness could have been at the forefront of teacher actions and curriculum connections.

**Inaction & absence**

The reactions of teachers and school staff to incidents of homophobia in schools are critical to the experience of students. Taylor et al. (2011) report that only one in four students sees school staff consistently intervene against homophobic and transphobic bullying. Hansen (2007) argues that staff intervention into homophobic comments in the school environment is correlated with more positive outcomes for queer youth. Espelage and Swearer (2008) agree, noting that queer youth feel more hostility in a school environment when teachers do not react to homophobic slurs. As argued by Kumashiro (2000), inactions, not just actions by educators, can pose harm to students. This demonstrates the importance of teachers and other adults in schools responding appropriately to incidents of homophobia and transphobia.

Matthew and Liam both discuss the inactions of their teachers. Whereas Matthew recalls a particular incident of inaction, Liam understood the teachers at his school as having a general attitude of dismissiveness towards the needs of queer students. For Matthew, a moment of inaction came in terms of a lack of response to homophobic bullying:

“Nothing happened [when a boy made fun of some girls for kissing in the hallway]. Um, from what I can remember. And like, teachers must have noticed. Because there’s always a teacher, there was a teacher supervising in that foyer all the time, because that was a big student hangout area. So there was somebody there. Um, and you know, there’s a ton of classrooms around the foyer, and it was in a time when, you know, students were moving in
between classes, and like, finishing lunch, and so it was a busy, busy time, and yet he was real loud, everybody heard, and the teachers, I don't think did anything, like, he didn't experience, or he didn't face any punishment at all.

In this incident, Matthew learned from his teachers that homophobia was tolerated in his school. The implicit acceptance of the bullying behaviour that resulted from the teachers’ inaction showed Matthew that working against homophobia was not a priority in the school. This incident is an example of the ways that “the response of... teachers to homophobic banter might play an important role in developing and maintaining a climate that is not supportive of sexually questioning and LGBT youth” (Espelage & Swearer, 2008, p. 157) and make only particular (heterosexual) students feel comfortable and validated in the school environment.

For Liam, however, the inaction was less obvious. In his experience there was no need seen in his school for teacher involvement in queer issues, so no teachers took it upon themselves to take up those issues:

[Teachers] didn't ever do anything that like, felt that they were against, um, like queer people or gay people, however they wanted to identify them, but they also like, it wasn't a big, it wasn't like we had intentional, that I could remember, we didn't have intentional conversations, or we didn't like, have a class about it. I think that maybe had to do with how little they felt they needed to embrace it because they didn't think that their student body was diverse enough, and so, oh if you’re like, ‘Oh there’s no gay people in this country, why would we have, why would we allow gay marriage to be legal, there aren’t any gay people here anyways’... but yeah, it's like, high schools, I feel like my high school teachers said, ‘Oh, well there aren't any gay kids, why do we need to have programs to like, make them feel welcome,’ well, because maybe if you made them feel welcome they’d be, they’d be okay with being gay.

Liam describes how the lack of outright homophobia on the part of his teachers did not mollify his feelings that his teachers were ignoring the needs of
queer youth, perhaps because of their invisibility within the school. In the second quotation, Liam compares teachers’ denial of the presence of queer students to statements such as those made in 2007 by Iran’s then-President Ahmadinejad, who denied his government’s mistreatment of gays by stating, “In Iran, we don’t have homosexuals. In Iran we don’t have this phenomenon,” (Whitaker, 2007). Like the oppressive conditions for gay people in some places often disallows the possibility of their living open lives, Liam interprets the teachers in his school as similarly allowing the invisibility of queer students to mean that no queer students attend the school.

In taking this stance, the teachers also ignore the benefits that anti-homophobia education or queer education has for all students. As discussed in Chapter 1, experiences of homophobia in schools have negative effects on all students, not just queer students, and as such, anti-homophobia education that works to reduce homophobia in schools can have a positive impact for all learners.

Beyond the inaction of teachers, Matthew discussed the absence of queer issues in the curriculum. Initially, his ideas about the absence of queerness in school revolved around sexual education, saying, “Sex ed never talked about sexual diversity or sexual alternatives.” As discussed later in this section, when imagining the possibilities for the inclusion of queerness in the curriculum, he expanded the scope of these opportunities to a variety of subjects.

Generally, Matthew noted that in his school, queerness was absent from both the formal curriculum and the ways that teachers chose to take up the mandated lessons:
These conversations aren’t being included in regular education, and when, you know, we can discuss, like, it’s good education, like what needs to be taught in high school, like it’s easy to just have just insert these conversations into the curriculum, or informally by teachers who want to, to have these discussions, like in law class, in media classes, just like, there’s so much, I think there’s so much opportunity but it wasn’t, none, none was taken.

In his discussion of education about the other, Kumashiro (2000) argues that misinformation about marginalized groups can be perpetuated by schools through their curriculum choices. He notes that “schools often contribute to… partial knowledge through the selection of topics for the curriculum” (2000, p. 32). In Matthew’s case, the combination of queerness being absent in the curriculum and because in his school students “hear and/or engage in few discussions about queers, except when making jokes or disparaging comments, and since these often go unchallenged by the teacher [as described above], they consequently learn that it is acceptable to denigrate queers” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 32). The combination of queer invisibility in the curriculum and teacher inaction compounds the emotional damage to students. As Matthew says, where “teachers must have noticed” incidents of homophobic bullying and harassment, and yet do nothing, students learn that this bullying and harassment is acceptable.

Matthew feels that had queerness been incorporated into the curriculum, he might have been able to feel more positively about himself and would not have been so consistently immersed in thinking of queerness as pathology. He explains how he thinks he and other students in the same situation might be affected by the inclusion of queerness in the curriculum:

The thing that I think it would do would, would just get myself and get other people to start thinking about it as not something that is bad or that is pathologized, or along those lines, because like, I started to change, like the
way I was seeing homosexuality and like, these issues when I was learning more about it, like in my social science education, and so if that started earlier, I think that would have been more beneficial for me.

For Matthew, a nuanced education about the Other poses the possibility of a more positive representation and understanding of queer lives.

**Safe moments & allyship**

Matthew describes how various teachers, at various times, acted as allies and role models to him. These teachers, largely without bringing queer issues into their classrooms on a regular basis, often made Matthew feel safe through their allyship. However, at various points, what could have been safe moments in the school growing from this role model relationship instead were not taken up, causing moments of queer absence, or were taken up ineffectively.

Matthew explained that over the course of his schooling, he “grew very close to” several teachers, including his sports coaches and music teachers. Despite these relationships and his overall strong involvement in the school community, Matthew did not feel comfortable opening up to them about the personal issues he was going through. Matthew describes how despite his close relationships with some of his teachers, he did not want to reach out to them for guidance:

Teachers who I had really good relationships with, um, that, so I was, I was extremely involved in high school, and I got to know my, my music teachers, my two music teachers like, extremely well, and I still talk to them today, but, um, like I never had conversations with them about, about my sexuality, or my relationships or my struggles with the church and stuff like that, um, so even though like, I had really, really solid relationships with them, um, like, I didn’t have any of these conversations with them, if that makes sense.

Despite his close relationships with some of his teachers, Matthew did not feel as if he could have an open dialogue with them about the issues he was facing
regarding his experience of queerness in school and at home. At Matthew’s school, the teachers that he was close to were not the teachers he knew were supportive of queer students. Though there were teachers involved with the school’s GSA, Matthew explains that these were not teachers he felt comfortable approaching:

Austen: And the teachers that were affiliated with the GSA, um, were they ever people that you felt that you could go and, and seek help from, or guidance from?
Matthew: No.
Austen: No? You didn’t, you didn’t know them or you didn’t want to go and do that.
Matthew: There’s both, like I had no personal relationship with them, and, yeah I didn’t want to disclose anything like that to them.

For Matthew, the teachers that he had formed bonds with through music or sports were not people he could go to for help with personal issues, and the teachers that he knew were open to talking to students about queer issues were not the teachers that he was close with. Because Matthew did not feel comfortable in the GSA or opening up to its teacher leaders, he was left without the opportunity to work through the difficulties he was experiencing.

Matthew also recalls how a teacher’s calling of queerness into the classroom backfired. At one point, a drama teacher at Matthew’s school brought up his own experience of depicting a gay love scene in a play to allay Matthew’s anxiety about kissing a fellow actor on stage:

Teachers never talked about homosexuality, um, except one, my drama teacher, uh, when he did um, he was a professional actor, um, and he did a scene where you know, he was engaging in like, a love scene on stage, like a gay love scene on stage, um, but like at the same time, he’s straight, or like, he would um, I wasn’t sure if he was bisexual, or at all, but he was engaged, so, to a woman, so, the conversation of him actually being homosexual or bisexual or on the continuum was just not had, it wasn’t there. Um... and like, he would talk about it, like, yeah, “I had to do this [kiss a man on stage],” and like, because I think the instance came from um, when I was in a musical I
had to like, kiss someone [a girl] on stage, and you know, I was very nervous about doing that, [laughs] and he just, he pulled out that story and I think that’s what happened, it was just like, “Oh you did this, and that’s crazy,” and um, just kind of made a big deal about it, uh, but, it’s funny because it goes back to like, oh, that was his stage performance, he’s actually straight, that’s not real.

What could have existed here as a positive moment, with the teacher bringing up this anecdote in an attempt to normalize queer sexuality, instead backfired. Instead of hearing the message as one of queer acceptance, because the teacher showed markers of heterosexuality, Matthew took away from the teacher’s anecdote that queerness was something that occurred in works of fiction and performance, and not in reality.

Overall, when queerness was made visible in the school, it was not met with a spirit of acceptance and respect. As Matthew explained, in his school, representations of queerness such as the “day of silence” were “more tolerated than accepted.” The distinction between tolerance, acceptance, and their more ambitious cousin, respect, is an important factor for the ways that youth feel in their schools. In Goldstein’s performed ethnography *Snakes and Ladders* (Goldstein, 2010), which represents the work done in a high school by students and teachers around anti-racism and anti-homophobia, the characters work through issues of tolerance, acceptance, and respect. In the performed ethnography, characters alternately call upon discourses of “tolerance” and “respect” as tools to navigate the school politics of queerness. The school’s principal gives her support for a series of Pride events “that teaches tolerance for others” (p. 91). In response, a parent at the school who opposes the inclusion of these events in the school calendar asks “that the school respect my religious beliefs by not bringing any discussion of homosexuality into my
children’s classroom (p. 111). Rachel, a student teacher, resorts to using a discourse of tolerance because she feels that using “respect” or “acceptance” would alienate her audience. Finally, Chris, a gay student, says, “I think we have to do more than teach about tolerance. I don't want to be tolerated. I want to be respected for who I am” (p. 112). In these interactions, ideas of respect for religious belief, tolerance of queerness, and respect for queer identity are used by the characters to advance what they feel is most important to them. In Matthew’s school, where representations of queerness were “more tolerated than accepted,” queer voices were heard, but not respected. Goldstein argues that “while a discourse of tolerance may support efforts to challenge homophobic name-calling in the halls and classrooms of public schools... it is not a discourse that can achieve an inclusive school that respects and affirms LGBQT lives and families” (2004, n.p.). For Matthew, that tolerance was the most that his school could achieve speaks to the general absence of positive and queering moments, and his school’s focus on safety as a goal.

Positive moments

Positive moments exist in schools where the focus moves beyond tolerance to affirmation and validation (Goldstein et al., 2007). At some points, Liam saw the teachers at his school as standing up for the issues that were important to their students. He explains how his teachers valued student action and were supportive of the students’ political movements:

The teachers were pretty cool at, at embracing pretty much everything, like I loved, I think I loved all of my high school teachers, I’m trying to think of someone that ever seemed to be like not standing up for, for whatever we were talking about.
In these moments, Liam’s teachers validate the students’ ideas and allow them to be political agents. However, this student-centered style leaves behind those students who are not comfortable speaking up for the causes that matter to them, and those issues that remain invisible. In a school environment where queerness is already silenced and made invisible through school culture (see Chapter 3), the supportive actions of individual teachers who validates students’ ideas were insufficient.

Potential queering moments

As argued by Goldstein et al. (2007), a queer school cannot exist in a schooling system that is based in heteronormative and positivist traditions. They argue that a queer school would need to reconsider traditional ways of looking at sexuality and push against common understandings of what it means to have knowledge. For Matthew and Liam, however, the possibility of queering moments was not achieved. In Liam’s experience, a potential moment of queer visibility was made unachievable by the position of vulnerability that such visibility would have placed him in. As seem below, Matthew establishes possibilities for queering moments integrated into the school’s curriculum that were not taken up by his educators. In practice, neither Matthew nor Liam’s educational experiences were impacted by queering moments, though the potential for these moments to exist was there.

In Matthew’s school, which did not take up queer issues in classes, he nonetheless saw opportunities for the curriculum to be queered. Here, Matthew
explores the ways that queering moments could have existed in his schooling, had conditions and expectations allowed for them:

I think like, conversations just need to be had in a very open and general space, so like, to have discussions about um, what it means to be not heterosexual in more than just sex ed, which happens once, right? Um, or like, political issues or um, philosophical issues or religious issues or um, these things that could have come up in classes, that didn’t, um, for, just to explain that, um, like I took a lot of university prep courses for like, history, political science, philosophy, like, um, you know, English, and English classes, and um, there’s no reason why when we’re talking about feminist theory in Grade 12 English, that we can’t talk about queer theory in English, um, same thing with politics, like, why weren’t we able to discuss like, the legalization of gay marriage in Canada, when we’re talking about political history, or even in Grade 10 history, when you’re, when you’re first learning about this stuff, like Canadian history, um, it was, it was just a taboo topic, and it was a taboo thing, that is just pushed to the margins and just like this isn’t a thing to discuss.

Whereas earlier he had discussed the lack of inclusion of queer issues in the curriculum only in terms of sexual education, Matthew moves beyond the idea of queerness in sexual education when he explores the possibilities for queerness to exist in a variety of courses. His ideas about queerness in English, philosophy, politics, and history lessons demonstrate a range of options for ways that queerness could have been taken up. The absence of these issues was a missed opportunity for potential queer moments in Matthew’s school.

As Kumashiro (2000) argues in his discussion of approaches to anti-oppression education, education for the other attempts to mitigate the oppressive environments in which othered students exist, by changing educators’ assumptions about and expectations of othered students, and by making spaces of education equally accessible to all students, while education about the other offers students who are not othered the opportunity to learn about the experiences and histories of
groups who experience oppression. Matthew's identification of the ways that queerness could have entered his school through curricular representations acts as an opportunity for both education about the other and for the other.

In Liam's school, an event that had potential as a queering moment ended up causing him anxiety and insecurity instead of being a positive occasion. Soon after the GSA was formed at his school, the group held a queer awareness or queer pride day. Liam describes how he felt anxious about visibly participating in the event and how at the time he did not see the value in the event:

The only events that [the GSA] ever hosted were, I can only really remember one, which was like, uh, some sort of LGBTQ day, and my friend had made me a t-shirt... and that was like, when I felt the most uncomfortable, cause I was like, why am I advertising this to the rest of the world? I get it now, why people do that, why we need to take, why we need to protest... it's like look, I'm, at pride parade, it's like, look how chill we all are, let's um, let's spend time together and like realize that we're all more interconnected than we thought we were, and that's cool to me, but other than that, I, yeah, I just mostly felt uncomfortable, and I think it had a lot to do with uh, how I, like how I felt and how insecure I was, cause I think that if I would have been, um, more, or a less insecure person, maybe I would have wanted to embrace it more.

For Liam, what could have been an opportunity to participate in a queering moment became a moment instead of anxiety and concealment. Whereas others in his school were attempting to make queerness more visible in the school environment, Liam felt uncomfortable being made visible as queer, and shied away from participation. In this instance, what could have been a queering moment contributed to queer invisibility.

**Barriers**

Research shows that teachers and pre-service teachers see a variety of barriers to anti-homophobia education and incorporating queer issues into their
Some educators view parents as a potential barrier to addressing homophobia in schools, while others see a general societal acceptance of heterosexism as a concern in correcting homophobic student behaviour (Clark, 2010). Other educators regard anti-homophobia work as outside of their subject-matter jurisdiction (Macintosh, 2007). Similarly, Liam saw one barrier to a widespread implementation in his school of anti-homophobia education or queer issue inclusion in the curriculum as individual teacher interest. As he describes, in his school, without a school- or board-wide policy, it was up to individual teachers to take on queer issues in their classrooms:

It's really hard to do those things formally, I think it has more to do with like, how much the educational staff wants to embrace it, and I didn't really feel like it was being embraced.

For Liam, queer invisibility in his school was compounded by teachers not taking on the subject matter as a personal interest. As he suggests, where such issues are not embraced by individual teachers, an intentional focus on any level of anti-homophobia work is impossible.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I have looked at the ways that Matthew and Liam experienced queer issues in schools, including the ways that they interacted or chose not to interact with their schools’ GSAs, how their teachers reacted to queer issues, and how queerness was brought into or excluded from their classrooms and their schools. In the next chapter, I will examine the ways that Matthew and Liam had contact with mental health systems.
Chapter Five: Contact with Mental Health Systems

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Matthew and Liam’s experiences with various mental health systems in the context in which the most significant contact (as described by themselves) took place. For Liam, who describes his contact with mental health systems as related to his diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), much of his contact with mental health systems took place in a school context. For Matthew, whose religious upbringing posed ideological conflicts with his sexuality, much of his contact with mental health systems took place within church institutions.

In both of these cases, I return to The Triangle Model (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 1987) to examine the ideas, institutional practices, and individual practices that combined to make possible Matthew and Liam’s narratives of experiencing mental health systems. I also read Matthew’s experience of mental health systems within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church) through the individual and social models of disability (Clare, 2001; Oliver, 2009; Oliver & Barnes, 2012).

Schooling and Mental Health

For Liam, many of his experiences of anxiety and depression were related to the ways that he was experiencing ADHD within his schooling, in both high school and university. The struggles Liam had with meeting deadlines and concentrating on tasks were stressors that caused him to experience anxiety and depression. For the majority of his educational career, Liam avoided disclosing his diagnosis of
ADHD to educators and administrators, and only began using the resources available to him in his final year of university.

For Liam, the process of being diagnosed with ADHD was both disconcerting and illuminating. He describes how he felt after several days of testing and interviews, as he was explained the symptoms of ADHD and he saw his own experience within them:

I always felt weird again in high school, and even maybe today like I still feel a little bit strange, but since I was diagnosed with ADHD, and kind of was told who I am, like it's weird when you're sitting in a room with someone after they've been interviewing you for three days, asking you a million questions after you've filled out a million surveys, and they start telling you how you felt when you were younger, like, it's like, so this maybe happened, and then you're like, oh yeah, and then they're like, this maybe happened, just like, things like, oh, did you ever like, feel like you uh, you didn't get, like, you said something that you shouldn't and you talked too quickly, and you uh, maybe sometimes sound a bit like you're speaking a soliloquy instead of like a normal conversations, and it's like funny things like that that um, it's like almost like magic when someone identifies those sorts of disorders.

For Liam, the experience of having his personal experiences explained to him as symptoms of a disorder felt “like magic,” but also “weird.” In the moment of diagnosis, his lifetime’s worth of experience became part of an organizational system of pathologization, and what had been individual encounters with the world became institutionally mediated.

Similarly, the ways that Liam experienced anxiety and depression were mediated by his experience of ADHD as it related to his education. Not meeting deadlines or accomplishing goals caused Liam stress, and while he was in high school and university, the ways that the educational systems operated were not conducive to his success. Liam describes how he experienced anxiety and depression throughout his education as a result of factors associated with his ADHD:
Anxiety and depression that like, according, I mean, track, backtracking and understanding my diagnosis better, is related, is co-morbid with my ADHD, um, and most of the depressive and anxiety that, depression and anxiety that I’ve experienced is like, generally related to not getting things done, um, not being able to do, to accomplish work that I want to get done, if I don’t, if I get everything done, like, I, I’ve achieved the goals that want to, and like I feel good about it, I’m not depressed and anxious, it’s not like a thing that generally exists in me for no reason, and that, and then for a lot of people depression is, like a thing that they cannot explain, but generally I can go back and say like, well, this didn’t happen, and this didn’t happen, and then I became depressed, and that’s like, that’s a pretty yeah, it’s pretty clear that most of my depression is co-morbid [with ADHD].

The experience of youth diagnosed with ADHD who also experience depression is not uncommon. Youth with ADHD diagnoses experience clinical depression at least five times more often than youth without diagnoses of ADHD (Daviss, 2008). As a result of the stressors caused by the incompatibility of Liam’s experience of ADHD and the school systems he encountered, he experienced symptoms of anxiety and depression. For Liam, the institutional practices he experienced in education, such as assignments and deadlines, were discordant with his own individual experience of ADHD, which caused him distress.

In high school, Liam’s experience of anxiety and depression was related to the ways that ADHD affected his ability to concentrate on tasks and complete assignments on schedule. He describes how in high school, an experience of not meeting a deadline in drama class caused him intense anxiety and caused him to avoid attending school:

My first experiences that really like, that really affected my daily life were um, that was like, my final year of high school when I was in drama class, and I, it was happening before this too, it’s just like one of the first moments that like really, I, I didn’t go to school, and I just like felt, I don’t know, like I couldn’t get out of bed, like I couldn’t, I was just a thing that I thought was normal, that felt normal, and I was like, okay, yeah, I can’t get out bed today, I’m just going to tell my mom I’m sick and then it’s over with, done with, but
really, like, I was experiencing a lot of anxiety, because I didn’t get my lines memorized for a play that we were working on together, [laughs] in drama class, and they needed me, like, I was like the lead in that play, because apparently I was somewhat talented in drama, but like, couldn’t learn the lines cause I like, didn’t sit down and learn them, like I was, I didn’t feel lazy, and I was like, my brain was active, but I couldn’t just physically sit down and read them, and then so I felt really like, I don’t know, I felt depressed, I was depressed about it, and my um, my teacher called me, [laughs] at home, and she was like, Liam, where are you, we, we really need you here, um, what’s going on and I was like, almost crying on the phone, just like, couldn’t really talk to her cause I was so angry at myself for not learning the freaking lines for the play, and I knew I was disappointing people, and I also knew that I was capable of doing it, and I didn’t understand why I couldn’t get it done, and that was kind of one of the first moments like, she asked me, are you, like are you depressed, like, what’s happening, and I don’t know if she asked me as like a wanting to understand my mental illness, so much as why are you so depressed, as a casual tone of the conversation, but I was like, maybe I am, [laughs] like maybe that’s like, what’s going on here.

For Liam, this experience of not meeting the deadline to learn his lines for the class play caused him to feel anxious about disappointing his teacher and his classmates, and disappointed in himself for failing to complete the assigned task. Because Liam did not fully understand the reasons behind his inability to learn his lines, he could not explain to his teacher what was wrong, contributing to his stress about the situation.

In this instance, Liam’s teacher inquired about whether Liam was depressed, causing him to consider for the first time that he might be experiencing symptoms of depression. Because of the generally unobtrusive symptoms of emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression when compared to diagnoses with more behavioural symptoms, teachers are better able to identify children and youth who might be experiencing a behavioural disorder (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). That Liam’s teacher was able to identify Liam as potentially experiencing depression, when he was also experiencing ADHD, shows that in this instance, Liam’s symptoms
of depression were a more visible issue than the problems he was experiencing in school because of his ADHD. Liam had previously not thought of his experience of sadness as potentially being clinical depression, and his teacher’s suggestion, even though he took it as lighthearted, was the impetus for him to consider seeking help.

Johnson et al. (2011) describe some of the ways that teachers can assist students who they identify as potentially experiencing a mental health concern such as depression, including acting as a support person for the student. For Liam, this teacher who called him at home when he was unable to come into school, and attempted to identify the reasons that he was not able to participate, helped him to identify that he needed assistance with his mental wellbeing.

Despite his beginning to better understand his needs and his experiences of ADHD, anxiety, and depression, Liam continued to struggle with meeting deadlines for school. Even though he knew that he was experiencing these issues, he was not equipped to deal with them on his own, or to find strategies for success. He describes how he continued to have difficulty meeting deadlines throughout high school and university:

I continued to experience it in high school, funny enough with the drama teacher’s husband, who was like, a, an English teacher, or yeah, was it Eng[lish], I don’t remember, but I couldn’t, I also couldn’t get an assignment done for him, and like eventually got it done like the day before he had to have the marks in or something, and like, that happened all through university also.

For Liam, the experience of not meeting deadlines was a common phenomenon throughout high school and university. This stressful event was repeated due to the incompatibility of Liam’s experience of ADHD with the ways that his schooling was structured. In university, Liam continued to experience
stress because of his experience of ADHD. He describes how the social construction of ADHD caused him to question himself:

> It was a really drawn-out five-year learning experience [laughs] and I, and I struggle with it a lot, and I struggle with like, you know, mild depression here and there, a lot, and anxiety here and there, it stemmed mostly from my ADHD, uh, which is also very complicated and sometimes not a, socially accepted uh, disorder. So it's sort of like one of those things that I question often, especially when I am not experiencing times when it's really affecting my life. The things that uh, affected me the most were like making sure I got all my work done on time, and being able to set deadlines and actually sitting down and getting stuff done without feeling super restless and being able to like, sit down.

For Liam, the idea of ADHD being socially unaccepted caused him to doubt himself, especially when he was not experiencing it in a severe way. Because the ways he experienced ADHD, such as not being able to meet deadlines or being restless, could be conceived of as a personal failure or personality flaw such as laziness, it was difficult for him to not blame himself for the ways that he was unable to succeed in his classes. This self-doubt, in addition to the stressors of the incompatibility between his symptoms of ADHD and his educational commitments, contributed to his symptoms of anxiety and depression.

This self-doubt also appears in Liam's evaluation of his time at university. Liam explains how he did not enjoy his university experience, but that he does not blame the university for the mismatch between his learning style and the university's structural expectations:

> I didn't really enjoy my experience at University of Southern Ontario [USO], and it is, I don’t really want to knock the university, I don't think that it has anything to do with them, I just don't think it was like the learning style that was really appropriate for me in the long term.
Liam saw his learning needs as fundamentally incompatible with the university’s requirements. Rather than expecting the institution to allow his learning style and support him in succeeding, Liam understood it as his responsibility to conform to the institution's expectations for learners.

While Liam did identify some instances in which his experience of sexuality at home or with family caused him anxiety (see Chapter 3), it becomes clear when he discusses his schooling experiences that the major influence on his feelings of anxiety and depression is not his sexuality or how that is taken up in his world, but the way he experiences ADHD in relation to educational expectations and deadlines. For Liam, who might have been pigeonholed as a queer youth at risk because of his experience of sexuality (see Chapter 1), the much more pressing concern in terms of educational and personal success was the way that his ADHD was taken up in his education.

**Religion and Mental Health**

For Matthew, his upbringing in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), or colloquially the Mormon Church, presented an ideological conflict with the way he experienced his sexuality, which posed him intense stress and anxiety. Throughout his youth, he was presented with ideas about homosexuality that put him in conflict with his own experience. In this section, I will first investigate the ideas, institutional practices, and individual practices that worked to cause Matthew stress and anxiety about his sexuality, and then I will examine the contact with mental health systems that Matthew experienced through the lens of the individual and social models of disability.
Religion and stressors

In the LDS Church, homosexuality is regarded as a sin. For followers of Mormon doctrine, marriage between a man and a woman is required for salvation, and sexual sins such as homosexuality are considered “as serious as murder” (Johns & Hanna, 2011, p. 202). Additionally, in Matthew’s experience, the LDS Church regards homosexuality as a mental illness to be cured. These fundamental conflicts between Matthew’s lived experience of sexuality and his expectations of himself through Mormonism caused Matthew to experience a great degree of stress as a youth.

The Mormon doctrinal and social standards that vilify homosexuality posed a source of stress and anxiety to Matthew. He describes how as he grew up, he learned that homosexuality was an immoral choice:

Um, at church, um, it was talked about as like, the worst thing that you could choose to do. Um, it was conceived of as a choice.

For Matthew, the idea that homosexuality was a sin was rooted in an institutionalized condemnation of anyone who engaged in homosexual acts. He explains that while he did not experience direct harassment within the LDS Church for being attracted to other men, the Church’s messages had an impact on him:

Um, there is a lot of Mormon literature that’s still out there but they don’t talk about it but it’s still out there that you know, compares homosexuality to murder, and um, and like, you know, you’re gay because you masturbate and stuff like that, and like its just a lot of difficult um, messages to, to take on. Um, and so definitely there, like it probably wasn’t as direct like as name-calling, and like harassment, but it was more indirect and like, institutional and structural.

Here, Matthew explicitly names his negative experiences as being rooted in the institutional practices of the LDS Church. For Matthew, knowing that
he was located within a system that considered his sexual feelings as comparable to murder caused him feelings of inadequacy, fear, and anxiety. As argued by Barlow and Bergin (1998) and Johns and Hanna (2011), while for some the strict expectations of the Mormon faith can provide a sense or order, it can also can set up followers to experience depression and anxiety if they do not feel capable of fulfilling these expectations. For Matthew, the ideas about criminality and sin that were associated with homosexuality came to him through institutional practices.

Similarly, Matthew was subject to institutional teachings that showed homosexuality as a treatable mental illness:

Same-sex attraction is something that you possess, um, something that you have, something that is treatable, um, something that can be managed, and overcome, just like a disorder, um... and there are words like conquer and overcome, and master, and um, like that discourse in there, and, or "deal with", "manage," just like, how you would deal with cancer or something like that, um, or a mental disorder. There's a lot of discussion of filling your life with goodness... like re-framing the way that you think things, make sure that you have good physical health so that you can overcome these un, tempting thoughts and so just like thoughts especially, and thought control.

Matthew's personal experience is representative of Church doctrine. A website of the LDS Church argues that homosexuality can be remedied, stating, “a person’s attraction to the same sex can be addressed and borne as a mortal test... [and] should not be viewed as a permanent condition” (Mormons and Gays, 2012). For Matthew, the teachings of his church contributed to his ideas of homosexuality as a mental illness as well as a sin and a criminal behaviour.

The position of the LDS Church as Matthew experienced it is not unique. Queerness has long been treated as a mental illness in the West.

Homosexuality first came of interest to the medical community as a disorder in the
1880s, and was first included in the Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1952 (Conrad & Angell, 2004). The official demedicalization of homosexuality came in 1973 with the removal of homosexuality from the DSM (Conrad & Angell, 2004). Before 1973, homosexuality was diagnosed as a mental disorder on the basis that same-sex attraction was abnormal and pathological (Lev, 2013), while a similar grounds of sin is used today in the Mormon faith to dissuade homosexual behaviour.

As Matthew came of age to go on his mission, he saw this as an opportunity to prove to himself and others that he could succeed as a good Mormon by following the path that had been set forth for him. He hoped that if he went on his mission and was successful, that he would be rewarded:

> It was definitely a hope but um, it's yeah, doctrinally based. Um, um, if I can quote some scripture [laughs], just um, just like, 'Obedience brings blessings,' and blessings to me was like being fixed. And, um, if I did everything that I was supposed to do, then everything would work out. And in the sense that I would be heterosexual, and I would be able to marry a woman, and have a million babies, and just be happy. [laughs] Um, but that wasn't the case... and that was also difficult to deal with.

Several LDS Church leaders have said that "Obedience brings blessings, but exact obedience brings miracles" (Albright, 2012; Lloyd, 2013; Prescott, 2015). In an institutional context where strict obedience is valued and any variation is deemed to have eternal consequences, Matthew’s hope was that he would be able to obey the Church’s teachings and would be rewarded with a fundamental change of outlook in order to have a good life. When Matthew found that despite his best efforts, he was not able to change his sexual feelings, he experienced negative emotions. Because he was not on track to adhere to the “strong doctrinal emphasis
on eternal progression” by means of heterosexual marriage (Barlow & Bergin, 1998, p. 230), Matthew found himself at a loss. The institutional practices that had guided his ideas and individual practices for his whole life were no longer sufficient to make him content, because of the disconnect between his expectations of himself and who he saw himself to be.

Even outside of what is officially sanctioned by the LDS Church as an institution, ideas about homosexuality that Matthew found troubling exist in his religious community. He explains how he asked Church members about their opinions on a dated LDS text on homosexuality:

I posted an open-ended question on Facebook, asking whether Church members still consider a certain text to be valid, and like a lot of the responses that I got were just like, “Yeah, I love that book, um, I love it, it’s absolutely like so valuable, like I’m reading it now,” sort of a thing, um, what this book is, it’s called The Miracle of Forgiveness, and uh, it just talks about the need to be in constant um, frame of mind of, for repenting of your sins, um, and then there’s a, there’s a huge whole chapter on how um, it just talks about homosexuality because you know, everything else is just not talked about back then in 1969, um, homosexuality is a sin, is part of like, a group of sins next to murder, mm-hmm, um, which is like, completely I think, against God’s plan, and like, even though it’s, it doesn’t say that homosexuality is a mental disorder, um, you know in the narrative it talks about like, um, you know, what is the treatment for this, like how can this be solved, how is this problem gonna be resolved.

The text to which Matthew refers is a book written in the 1960s by Spencer W. Kimball, who soon after its publication served as the President of the LDS Church. Though the book is no longer official reading for LDS Church members, in Matthew’s experience its teachings are still widely considered valid. The text describes homosexuality as “revolting,” “perverted,” and laments that “in some countries the act per se is not even illegal.” Further, it notes that homosexuality is curable when given concerted effort, and that “there are numerous happy people
who were once involved in its clutches and who have since completely transformed their lives” (Kimball, 1969, pp. 77–90). As Matthew found, some members of his religious community feel that this text and the principles it espouses are “valuable.” These individuals’ views, even existing outside of an institutional endorsement, contributed to Matthew’s negative views about his sexuality.

In conjunction with his own negative feelings and ideas about himself, Matthew also experienced institutional criticism from the Church. He describes how one he left for his mission, he felt constantly and systematically scrutinized by his peers and leaders:

> It got the worst on my mission because I was being evaluated constantly um, hmm. Whether it was from, um, my teachers, from the missionary training centre, um, from other missionaries, um, or from the people that I was trying to interact with, so I found it to be like, like, their criticism was always, I always interpreted it as negative, for a cost, um, teachers, other missionaries, and people.

While Matthew was on his mission, he felt an additional force of scrutiny to the informal social scrutiny that he had experienced as a youth. For Matthew, the evaluation procedures built into his mission, such as being judged on how many community members agreed to be baptized, posed an additional source of stress and anxiety to the self-scrutiny he was already undertaking because of the way he experienced sexuality. In Matthew’s experience, the institutional practices of evaluation combined with his own ideas about sexuality to cause him to experience a great deal of stress.

As Matthew began and throughout his LDS mission, he had contact with mental health systems which further marginalized him as an individual subject of discourses of sexual deviance.
Experiences of mental health systems

Matthew’s initial experience with mental health systems was based in “reparative” programs\(^2\) that sought to cure him of homosexuality. He found these programs troublesome and says that they impacted him negatively. Later, he had more positive contact with mental health professionals who worked with him to improve his experiences of anxiety and depression.

Matthew first saw a psychologist based in the LDS Church, who understood his depression and anxiety diagnoses as being rooted in his sexuality. Rather than taking an approach that might have allowed Matthew to work through depression and anxiety by becoming more comfortable with himself, the therapist instead recommended therapies to cure Matthew of homosexuality:

Yeah, so I saw a Church therapist, he was a psychologist, like, like, licensed, he was a doctor, like, psychologist, yep. Um, he was the one that diagnosed me, and um, his was of fixing things was to put me into a reparative program.

The first reparative program that Matthew used was based on a series of curriculum written by a since-closed organization loosely affiliated with the Mormon Church. The organization’s website says that the program allows participants to “become more secure in their gender-identity, and develop healthy, nonerotic same-sex relationships that over time can diminish the sexual attraction they feel toward men.” The website also cautions against “‘gay-affirmative’ therapy, which encourages individuals to ‘come out of the closet’ and accept their

---

\(^2\) Though Ontario has recently banned publicly-funded practitioners from engaging in such “conversion” or “reparative” therapy to “cure” LGBTQ youth (Ferguson, 2015), there are fewer protections from private practitioners. For Matthew, who attended two private programs based in the United States, this ban would not have been sufficient.
homosexual orientation, which they say is a natural and healthy sexual variation.”

Initially, Matthew agreed with the treatment approach, and when he did not find the first program was working, he moved onto a similar program of reparative therapy:

And I thought it was like, the right way to go, approach it, and um, I eventually, I stopped doing that program, but I went to another program that was very similar. I didn't recognize it at the time, but it was basically the same thing. And now that I have my educational background, like I can see it as basically the same thing. Um, and they encouraged me to confront people, and tell them like, ‘You did this to me. This is not okay. But I’’m overcoming it, and I’’m moving past it.’ That was like, a big step for us to take in the program. Um, not good.

The second program, which Matthew says “did not associate themselves with any type of denomination or religion, but... was very spiritual,” consisted of weekend retreats and individual counselling sessions which the program’s website say focus on “masculinity,” “authenticity,” “need fulfillment,” and “surrender.” The program’s website advertises that after completing the program, four out of five men report a reduction in same-sex attraction. For Matthew, these programs neither “cured” him of homosexuality nor improved his symptoms of depression and anxiety.

The programs which Matthew attended had a focus on determining the causes of participants’ sexualities as a methodology for changing them. Matthew describes how the second program pushed him to confront his loved ones for causing him to be gay:

It really made me just blame my family and my friends for doing this to me. That’s what it turned me into, which was awful... Like I remember telling my brother like, you know, what you did to me, like, this is the way I am, and like, that’s awful. I can’t believe I said that to him.
While no form of therapy has been found effective for changing a person’s sexual feelings, many harms have been found to come from conversion therapies. Beckstead and Morrow (2004) describe how Mormons who attend programs of conversion therapy generally do not have their feelings of sexual attraction changed, but often experience a loss of self-esteem, conflicted feelings about their sexuality and their religion, and an increase in depression and suicidal thoughts. Whereas Matthew might have benefitted from therapy that helped him to live in his environment and improve his self-esteem, the treatment he received was similar to other forms of conversion therapy that focus “only on treating [participants’] homosexuality and relating their past negative experiences to their attractions rather than treating the distress caused by these experiences” (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004, p. 671). This institutional practice of conversion therapy, influenced by the ideas about homosexuality prevalent in the LDS Church, impacted on Matthew in negative ways.

After Matthew left the second reparative therapy program, and began his mission, he began seeing a therapist through the Church who worked with him on issues of depression and anxiety, but whom Matthew says refused to acknowledge Matthew’s sexuality as a factor in the process.

And when I go to um, on my mission, and I had the CBT, um, the counsellor just like, you know, put aside completely, um, you know, my feelings about homosexuality and um, stuff like that, and then just focused on, just like, the other issues that were going on, especially the perfectionism and not coping well with criticism. That was the focus of that. I didn’t have any coping mechanisms, and that’s what, what led to the increased symptoms of depression and anxiety. Uh, cause I couldn’t deal with it, um, yeah especially um, when I, yeah, or when I um, was getting, receiving CBT [cognitive-behavioural therapy], I kept thinking that it was all associated with my feelings of like, my internalized homophobia, um, but, my
counsellor like, refused to talk about that, that sort of thing, like, let's not talk about that, let's just focus on the now, cause we're not gonna fix that right now, so I was like alright, whatever, but I always felt like I can't really ask my parents or my friends for help because like the main problem and the main issue was my internalized homophobia, and my environment, and so it was just well, I can't get any help from anyone other than a professional but it seems like the professional is not helping me even though they were helping me considerably with the CBT.

For Matthew, who felt frustrated that the therapist would not acknowledge his sexuality as relevant to his depression and anxiety, because the therapist was also a representative of the LDS Church, there was also an underlying threat of being censured if Matthew’s sexuality was seen as too much of a “threat.” Matthew describes how his sexuality was only recognized as relevant insofar as it could pose a barrier to his mission:

I remember there were some sessions where I would just be so frustrated with him, um, just like, this is the issue, why aren't we dealing with this issue, and he just said no, it's not the issue, we don't need to deal with this right now. And I don't want to, I don't want to assume a rationalization for that, I just remember that it was, um, we're not going to deal with this right now, and that's it. If it's not an issue, like if you're not like, gonna go and have sex with someone right now, then it's not an issue to deal with and a threat... 'Cause if they did think it was a threat they would have sent me home [from my mission].

Matthew’s experience with reparative therapy and with his counselors in the LDS Church can be read through the individual and social models of disability. As explored in Chapter 1, the individual model of disability locates disability within an individual, whereas the social model locates disability within the failure of the environment to accommodate that individual’s needs. Because in Matthew's experience the institutional logics at play in the LDS Church treat homosexuality as a mental disorder, the individual model of disability is used by the LDS Church to manage homosexuality. As Clare (2001) argues, common understandings of
disability such as disability as pathology, disability as tragedy, disability as a problem to be overcome, and disability as personal failing all locate disability as a problem occurring within an individual. Each of these understandings was at work in Matthew’s experience of therapies in the LDS Church. The conversion therapy and counseling that Matthew attended held homosexuality as a personal failing located in the individual, which can be overcome. Clare argues that while disability does exist as socially-constructed, outside of the physical bodies of individuals, the individual experience of disability is inextricably linked to the physical reality of bodies. Similarly, homophobia exists in a social context, but the individual experiences of such are associated with body and identity. Matthew might have avoided some of the negative outcomes of the therapies he experienced had the focus been on learning to navigate or learning to challenge the heteronormative expectations of his environment.3

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I discuss the ways that Liam and Matthew experienced contact with mental health systems. For Liam, much of his contact with mental health systems came as a response to his negotiation of his ADHD diagnosis in school. Matthew’s religious context caused him to have a great deal of contact with mental health systems within the LDS Church. I have analyzed these forms of contact through The Triangle Model (Goldstein, 2008; McCaskell, 2005; Thomas, 3

---

3 As will be discussed in Chapter 6, Matthew did come to understand his sexuality in a positive light, and has been living as an out gay person for some time. The way that Matthew went about “coming out” to himself and to his family is described in the following chapter.
1987) and through individual and social models of disability (Clare, 2001; Oliver, 2009; Oliver & Barnes, 2012).
Chapter Six: Coming Out at School and at Home

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the ways that Matthew and Liam describe “coming out” in various forms, at various times, for various reasons, and with a variety of consequences, and argue that the experience of coming out or not coming out is representative of the possibilities for ways of being in each participant’s social context. This discussion will contribute to the answer of Research Question 3: “From these tellings, what can be learned about what ways of being are made possible, and what ways of being are made impossible, in school and broader communities?”

“Coming out of the closet,” or more briefly, “coming out,” occurs when a person chooses to tell a person, group, or their entire social network that they are LGBTQ. The essentiality of this process can be contested, in that the trope of coming out presumes a heterosexual norm. Rasmussen (2004) describes “the coming out imperative” (p. 145) that assumes that coming out is necessary and valuable for all students and teachers. Though Kus (1985) argues that “coming out is a life process unique to the gay person” (p. 179), and something that queer people share as a life experience, Rasmussen points out that many queer people do not come out in some or all situations. Despite any criticisms of the presumed ubiquity of the process, coming out is nonetheless commonly expected of queer people and something that

---

4 “Coming out” occurs when someone chooses to disclose their sexuality or gender orientation. For a discussion of youth being “outed,” when this information is shared without their consent, see Kretz, Adam J. (2013). “The right to sexual orientation privacy: Strengthening protections for minors who are ‘outed’ in schools.” Journal of Law and Education 82(3): 381-416.
both participants discussed at length. In writing this chapter, I want to be clear that I am not attempting to add to the number of “coming out stories” (Saxey, 2008) that treat the process as simple and obligatory; indeed, the coming out process for both Matthew and Liam was necessarily messy and unstable. For both Matthew and Liam, there were barriers to coming out that existed in a variety of contexts including at school, in the family, and within the religious community. After they had come out to their families and peers, there were a variety of positive and negative consequences.

**Barriers to Coming Out**

For Liam and Matthew, social and cultural barriers caused them to avoid coming out for at least a portion of high school. For Liam, his school culture (see Chapter 1), his family’s homophobia, and his experiences with mental health influenced his decision to avoid coming out at school and at home until late in his high school career. For Matthew, the perspective on sexuality of his religious community caused him to avoid coming out until after he had completed his Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church) mission.

In Liam’s school and at home, his experiences of witnessing homophobia influenced his decision to avoid coming out to his family, friends, and peers during high school. As described in Chapter 3, witnessing homophobia towards others can have many of the same effects as being the recipient of those homophobic acts. For Liam, witnessing the homophobia that students in his school perpetrated against a student with a developmental disability, and the homophobia that his father
espoused in the family home, each as described below, influenced Liam to avoid coming out when he first came to terms with his sexuality.

For Liam, his school and family experience caused him to worry about the reaction of his peers and his parents if he came out. At school, he describes how one student at his school with a developmental disability was out as queer, and that he did not want to be associated with them:

No one in my high school was out of the closet, the two people that were, or like the one person that was, also had a mental disability, uh, and I remember that being like really rejected by the student population, or like, a small amount of people, it wasn’t – whoever they were, it was like, ”They’re just fucking retards, they don’t even know how to like, they don’t even know what, like, how to like someone anyways,” like that sort of, and when you’re presented with that as like the only student in your high school, is like the one who people are constantly making fun of, like, was I going to be next? Like, no, I’m not gonna like, come out of the closet or, if I am I’m gonna like keep it as low-profile as possible, to like, avoid having to deal with that.

In Liam’s school, queerness was associated with negative conceptions of disability. This negative connotation caused him to avoid coming out to his peers at school because he feared having that negativity associated with himself.

At home, Liam also had to navigate his father’s homophobia towards others. Liam specifically recalls an incident where his father made a derogatory comment about a movie character:

I remember my dad actually, when I was in high school, um, seeing, I don’t remember what, after it was on TV, like, someone that, we were in a movie, like, he was watching a movie, and he like, referred to someone as a fudge-packer⁵, and at first like I wasn’t really, I don’t think I really knew what that was, and then I realized what he meant, and he didn’t know that his son was a fudge-packer, [laughs] and like, that didn’t really encourage me to tell him, [laughs] it wasn’t like, as soon as he said that, I was like, “Oh, yeah, I’ll just, yeah why don’t I just come out to my dad right now, that seems to be a good

⁵ Fudge-packer: a derogatory term for someone who engages in anal sex
thing to do,” it scared me, like, I didn’t want to talk about being gay with him anymore, like he just like, used a derogatory term to refer to someone that he doesn’t know as like, as gay in a negative way, like, those, and I think that that was one of the most impactful moments for me in high school.

When Liam heard his father refer to a movie character a “fudge-packer,” it showed Liam that his father referred to queer strangers in a negative way, and therefore might think of Liam negatively if he were to come out. Because of his father’s homophobia, Liam avoided coming out to him until he was in university and no longer living with his father.

On eventually choosing to come out to his father, Liam describes that it felt easier to do so when he was dating someone:

My dad said a few stupid things about gay guys before I had come out, and that, this is, I didn't come out to him until university, because I was scared of that, so it was like, a couple of years later, and I think, did I, I can't remember if I was seeing someone, if I was dating someone and then that’s when I decided to tell him.

Here Liam again calls upon the notion of legitimacy of existing within a relationship that he understood as a social expectation (see Chapter 3). One factor in Liam’s decision to come out to his father during university was his dating someone. With the added protection of social legitimacy through relationship status, Liam was able to come out to his father as queer.

For Matthew, his religious context, and the intense entwining of his family life in that religious context, acted as a barrier to him coming out. As described in Chapter 5, Matthew’s experience with the LDS Church was one in which homosexuality was considered a grievous sin, comparable to murder. He describes how in his church, homosexuality was described as a very bad “choice” to make:
Um, at church, um, it was talked about as like, the worst thing that you could choose to do. Um, it was conceived of as a choice.

Because of his religious context, for Matthew coming out meant risking his connection to his religious community, including his family, his religious leaders, and many of his friends. Because for them, queerness had such strong negative associations, Matthew did not want to risk coming out and alienating himself.

Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) describe several factors that when at play within a family can make it more difficult for a youth in the family to come out. These factors that exist in a family’s value system, which include an emphasis on religion, an emphasis on marriage, and an emphasis on having children, are correlated with less familial acceptance of queerness. For Matthew, all three of these factors were very strongly emphasized within his family and their faith tradition. As described in Chapter 5, Matthew was brought up in a family that taught him that if he “would be able to marry a woman, and have a million babies,” he would “just be happy.” As argued by Newman and Muzzonigro, these three emphases of religion, marriage, and children added to a social environment in which coming out was not possible.

**Coming Out to Self and Others**

Kus (1980, cited in Kus, 1985) describes the coming out process as having four distinct stages. He writes, “a gay individual identifies self as gay, changes any previously held negative notions of gays or homosexuality, accepts being gay as a positive state of being, and acts on the assumption that being gay is a positive state of being” (pp. 52-53). Matthew describes his coming out process as occurring in
three stages, with only the final stage matching Kus’s delineation of the process.

First, Matthew acknowledged to himself that he was attracted to other men. Second, he shared this attraction with his parents and friends. In these first two stages, the acknowledgment occurred in the context of attempting to change this attraction through therapy and through his Church mission. Finally, Matthew came to understand himself more positively and in an act of what he deems coming out, began to identify himself to the world as gay.

Matthew distinguishes coming out from telling his parents and close friends at the age of 19 that he was attracted to other men. For him, the act of telling his family about his same-sex attraction was a negative experience, whereas he describes coming out at age 22 as an identification and positive acknowledgment of his sexuality, and an “amazing decision.” For Matthew, the process of coming out involved a period in which he acknowledged what he calls his “same-sex attraction,” but attempted to “fix” it. When we were first discussing the time that Matthew came out to his family, he described how he hoped that going on his mission would resolve the situation:

**Matthew:** Um, when I was um, I told my parents when I was 19. And I told a few people, up to like, 22. Um, and but again, like it was very, like, my parents didn’t take it very well, obviously... but um, like it was really difficult for them, uh, and that was difficult for me because they weren’t supporting and they didn’t understand and that was really hard... Oh, and then I had, I had the impression that if I went on my mission, that everything would be fixed. Mm-hmm. So it was like, this is my form of like, sacrifice. To do this, um, and then I was expecting some miraculous transformation, which obviously didn’t happen [laughs].

**Austen:** Were you expecting you to change, or other people to accept?

**Matthew:** Myself to change.
At first, it was unclear to me whether Matthew had hoped that going on his mission would cause his family and friends to accept him and his sexuality, or whether he hoped that going would cause him to be “cured.” He clarified that he had hoped that going on his mission would change him. Additionally, as described in Chapter 5, Matthew attended reparative therapy inside and outside of the LDS Church in an attempt to cure himself of homosexual attractions. Finally (and in an act of desperation, as described in the following section), Matthew came to identify himself as gay to himself and to his social circles. Matthew says that he “started to identify as gay when [he] was 22.” For Matthew, the time that he started to identify himself as gay is what he regards as “officially” coming out:

When I say coming out officially, um, this means that I wasn't gonna try to change, I wasn't gonna try to marry a woman... because you could say that I came out earlier, um, when you know, when I told my parents, when I told my siblings, when I told my closer friends, but it was like, I am going to try to change this. So I don't really call that coming out entirely.

For Matthew, there was a distinct difference between acknowledging his attraction to other men and identifying himself as gay. Whereas his previous acknowledgment of his same-sex attraction to himself and his family occurred in an attempt to change those feelings, as described below, his “official” coming out and naming himself as gay was an attempt to allow himself to feel positively about himself.

For Matthew, his subjectification as gay and his identification as gay had opposite implications and connotations. When he initially shared his feelings of attraction to other men, he was subjectified as homosexual through his religious context, which led him to undergo attempts to cure himself. Later, when he claimed
a gay identity, this identification had a more positive association. As described in
the next section, for Matthew, the personal control of claiming a gay identity, rather
than being subjectified as gay through negative religious discourses, offered him a
more positive outcome.

**Trying Out Coming Out**

For Matthew, as described above, coming out “officially” offered him hope in
what he saw as an otherwise bleak situation. When he decided to come out,
Matthew was coping with suicidal thoughts and negative feelings about the sin that
he felt he was committing by being gay. After attempting to resolve his attraction to
other men through reparative therapies, and as a last resort, Matthew decided to try
coming out in a positive way to see if he could live happily as an out gay person.

Here he describes his thought process behind coming out:

> The decision for me to actually come out was extremely difficult, and it was,
> um, linked with a lot of suicidal thoughts. Um, like it didn’t get extreme, like,
> there’s stages, right? Um, it didn’t get very high, but like, that was an
> option. Because, and I think that has more to do with my faith. Um, because
> there’s a scripture in the Book of Mormon that says, “Wickedness never was
> happiness.” And so in my mind, I couldn’t be happy if I was um, in the
> church, or no, if I was gay, because I’d be sinning, and that’s the, you can’t be
> happy if you’re sinning. And, um, I couldn’t be happy as a celibate man
> because, I’m sorry. [laughs] Um, and, and like just hiding my sexuality and
> my true feelings and just trying to be somebody else, and so it was, there was
> no solution. There was just like, I, I will be miserable my whole life if I do
> this, or I will be miserable my whole life if I do the opposite, and so there was
> no, I didn’t see like a hopeful path of life, it was just going to be dark and
> dismal and miserable, so that was really difficult. But then, um, I just made
> the decision, just like, I’m not, excuse me, I’m not gonna let this, like I need to
> see for myself if I’m going to be miserable, like, it was almost an
> experiment. And that’s almost how I justified it, like, this will be a little thing
> that I do for a little bit of time [laughs], and I’ll see how it goes. And,
> obviously I haven’t gone back and it’s been, it was an amazing decision.
Belous, Wampler, and Warmels-Herring (2015) found that many gay men were “constantly tormented by hiding their true selves by hiding their sexual orientation” (p. 62) before coming out, and that this anguish was relieved once the “daily necessity for a façade” (p. 61) was eliminated. For Matthew, trying out coming out was a last resort in a situation that he felt had no possible positive outcomes. Matthew found empowerment in being able to define himself. He found that he was able to live happily as an out gay person, and feels that coming out was an “amazing decision.” Though this experience is by no means shared by all or even most queer youth, Matthew’s experience offers one possibility in a multitude of life experiences of queer youth coming out.

**Consequences of Coming Out**

For Matthew and Liam, coming out as gay or queer had both positive and negative consequences. For Liam, coming out brought on the experience of being stereotyped as a queer person, and feeling delegitimized by his family, but also relieved him of the stress of worrying about coming out. For Matthew, coming out allowed him to take control of his feelings and allowed him to form stronger interpersonal relationships.

After coming out to his peers at school and to his family, Liam experienced stereotypes of queer folks, such as gay men enjoying shopping. He describes how the feeling of being stereotyped was stronger than any experiences of homophobia:

More so than I would say I experienced homophobia, I experienced like, a stereotypes that pushed on me and that I felt that I needed to embrace.

In their study of gay men’s coming out narratives, Belous, Wampler, and Warmels-Herring (2015) argue that many gay men feel the need to adhere to
stereotypes about gay men in order to feel a connection to the queer community, including stereotypes about perceived promiscuity and effeminacy. For Liam, feeling the need to embrace stereotypes such as enjoying shopping was a factor in trying to feel accepted by his family in what they saw as a new role for him.

When Liam came out to his parents and extended family, he continued to feel as if his family thought that his relationships were inferior to his heterosexual cousins’. He describes how his grandmother would avoid talking about his partners, while openly acknowledging other relationships within the family:

I was scared of, I was scared of coming out to my dad, and I was scared of my family, um, and they never, we never had conversations, I didn’t ever have conversations with my grandparents specifically like, about being gay, um, my grandmother would occasionally ask, occasionally ask about like, how my friend was doing, or like, she would use his name, um, of the person that I was dating at the time, but would never, like, we never had conversations about like, my experience as a gay man, where it’s like, my cousins and stuff, who had boyfriends, who were women, like who had, um, heterosexual relationships, they got a lot more attention when it came to their relationships than I felt like I did, which again is one of those things that it’s not like, you can’t, I can’t really prove that, there’s nowhere that I can say like, oh, they didn’t want to talk to me about being gay because they didn’t really like me being gay, cause I don’t think that was necessarily the case, I think they obviously didn’t understand it.

Despite these negative experiences of being stereotyped and of having his romantic relationships receive less attention within his family, Liam also experienced relief at finally being “able to define [him]self,” and not having to worry about coming out anymore:

“[Worrying about coming out is] sort of another mental stress that’s in the back of your head… so not having, like not feeling comfortable in the community that I’m in, or the school that I’m in, or in uh, with the people that I’m around, or thinking that people like, I eat more, that’s what I, that’s how I respond to it, and so, when that wasn’t a thing anymore, when that wasn’t like, I wasn’t in a small town, and I wasn’t experiencing all this pressure,
about myself and like, who I should be, and um, what was able to define me, as soon as I was able to define myself, it was like, “Oh, I like, I feel okay now.”

Similarly, as described in the previous section, the main consequence of Matthew’s coming out was being able to be content with himself and live positively. He says that “overall, it was you know, from that moment, progression in terms of, um, lesser and lesser mental distress.” He describes how his outlook changed after coming out:

I didn't feel like I was in control of my environment, um, that I was completely out of control in terms of my happiness, like, I, it was just determined for me that I would be unhappy for the rest of my life, and because I didn’t have that control, um, it was kind of like putting me in this really depressed state, especially on my mission because I knew like, I couldn't do anything because it was just like a stressful environment all the time, and there was nothing I could do to change that, um, and so, if I, if I kind of had more control, and like, realized that I could change things, I think that would have been better, and that was a big turning point for me when I realized I did have that power to change my circumstances and change my life, um, and I kind of started using that coping mechanism when I came out, like, officially and started dating other men, um, because like, no longer was I allowing the church to dictate my happiness, it was just like, no, I'm in charge and I'm determining when I am in a good mood or in a bad mood.

Additionally, Matthew found that he had an increased ability to form interpersonal relationships after coming out and beginning to feel comfortable with himself:

That [my ability to make connections with people] changed when you know, I was more comfortable with who I was, like just deciding that you know, this is who I am, I'm not going to change it anymore, and this is, this is it. Um, like, when I came out for, officially.

For Matthew, coming out lessened his experience of mental distress and allowed him to feel more comfortable with himself. Liam similarly felt relief at not having to worry about coming out. As argued by Belous, Wampler, and Warmels-Herring (2015), many gay men feel “a vast improvement in their life
satisfaction after coming-out, a general sense of comfort and acceptance of one's self” (p.67). For Matthew and Liam, the ability or inability to come out was mediated by their social circumstances. Matthew was able to come out “officially” and in a positive way once his daily life was no longer embedded in his family's home or in the unaccepting environment of his LDS Church mission. For Liam, coming out to his father came after leaving the town where he grew up. Changes in each participant’s environment which had formerly prevented them from coming out allowed them to do so. At the same time, the act of coming out made them co-constructors of those environments. Incremental environmental changes, such as Matthew and Liam finding the space to live openly, introduce additional possibilities for others following them in the future.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the concept of “coming out,” including the social barriers to coming out and the consequences of doing do, both positive and negative. Though for many people coming out remains impossible or undesirable, for Matthew and Liam, coming out was eventually achievable and had many positive outcomes.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Significance of this Study

As discussed in Chapter 1, this study has pedagogical significance for teachers working with queer youth in schools and youth who experience contact with mental health systems. The discussions of homophobic bullying in schools, the ways that queer issues are taken up in or absent from classrooms, the use of GSAs, and the experiences of youth contact with mental health systems allow educators to expand their understanding of these issues and make connections to the lives of the youth they serve. Additionally, this study makes scholarly contributions to the areas of school culture (Prosser, 1999) and individual and social models of disability (Clare, 2001; Oliver, 2009; Oliver & Barnes, 2012). School cultures are discussed at length in the Chapter 3 discussion of school cultures that allow for homophobic bullying, in the Chapter 4 discussion of the impact of gay-straight alliances on school cultures, and in Chapter 6, in the discussion of how school cultures affect one’s ability to come out. The individual and social models of disability are used in the Chapter 5 discussion of Matthew’s experience of pathologized queerness in the LDS Church.

Furthermore, the overarching discussion of what it means to experience queerness has been theorized through the poststructural lenses of subjectivity (Butler, 1993; Coloma, 2008; Sullivan, 2003), and surveillance (Foucault, 1995; Lyon, 2007; Mathiesen, 1997), and the critical lens of social capital (Bourdieu, 2011; Field, 2008; Valenzuela, 2005). The ways that these theories have been used to
analyze Matthew and Liam’s tellings of queerness in schools broaden their scope and offer new possibilities for the discussion of student experience.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to be faithful to the voices of the participants and to focus on where there narratives have led me theoretically. In this concluding section, I would like to step out of what was said in the interviews to theorize the underlying intersections of normativity in terms of sexuality and mental health. As discussed in Chapter 2, throughout this thesis I have made theoretical connections from two perspectives. First, a poststructural lens allowed me to make connections through theories of subjectivity, surveillance, and discourse. Secondly, a critical lens allowed me to work with institutional logics, for instance through The Triangle Model, to discuss the impact of school cultures on participant experiences. Here, I would like to tie these lenses together.

I have used both the poststructural and critical lenses to investigate how logics and everyday assumptions (whether they are named as discourses or institutions) that work to make particular ways of living possible and other ways of living impossible. Such logics work to promote adherence to the norm, both in terms of expressions of sexuality and expressions of mental health. Where a subject of schooling discourses deviates from the expectation of rationality in terms of acceptable (hetero)sexuality, or threatens the logic of productivity through an expression of characteristics associated with ADHD, for instance, their subjectivity is shut down by the schooling machine. In all areas, including sexuality and mental health, students are expected to make sense to the educational system. Throughout this study, I have shown the consequences that occur when a student deviates from
that sense-making. I now argue that the sense-making logics of sexuality and mental health are rooted in the same place of expectations of normativity.

**Future Research**

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one limitation of this life history study of experiences of queerness in schools and contact with mental health systems is the small and relatively homogeneous sample. Both participants identify as white cisgender males, which is a limiting factor in investigating more deeply how racialization, sexism, and cissexism might play a role in experiences of queerness in schools and contact with mental health systems. Future research in this area could involve a larger sample size and might intentionally attempt to attract participants from racialized backgrounds, women, and trans people.

After completing this study, I am left with additional curiosities which went unanswered by this study and might pose an interesting premise for future work. For instance, how do other religious youth navigate sexuality and mental health systems, both inside and outside of schools? How might rural youth, like Liam, have different experiences of queerness in schools than urban youth? Does the size and location of the school or school board play a role in the experiences of students, or is it primarily the individual teachers and students who arrive in the school that structure its philosophy and day-to-day social structure? These questions and more might be better answered by a larger study which investigates student experiences of queerness in schools.

A final thought for future projects is to question how to get at the beauty and possibilities involved in non-normativity, when the project itself focuses on
negativity, for instance on experiences of homophobia or mental illness. How, for instance, does non-normativity in terms of mental health allow for an increased range of possibilities of expression? How can transgressions of expectations of sexualities in schools promote a deepened awareness of the school institution and its associated discursive environment? In this study, the voice of possibility has been muted to allow for a focus on the tellings of the participants. However, the possibility is still there, and a future project might take this possibility as the focus.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As a concluding thought, and with an eye to the possibilities discussed above, I would like to give a quotation from each participant which I feel sums up the implications of this project. Liam says, “As soon as I was able to define myself, it was like, “Oh, I like, I feel okay now.” Matthew tells us, “You know, this is who I am, I’m not going to change it anymore.”

When people exist in environments that allow them to express themselves in a way that makes them feel comfortable, authentic, and validated, they can be more successful. It is the role of educators to ensure that students can learn in an environment that meets those needs. For queer students, thus far we have been only partially successful. There have been many achievements, but there is work yet to be done.
References


