Isolated Identities: The Storied Lives of LGB Emerging Adults on a Rural, Community College Campus

Erin J. Ferris  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville, ejferris@northeaststate.edu*

Miriam S. Phillips  
*Northeast State Community College, mspillips@northeaststate.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://newprairiepress.org/aerc](http://newprairiepress.org/aerc)

Part of the Developmental Psychology Commons, Educational Psychology Commons, Gender and Sexuality Commons, and the Higher Education and Teaching Commons

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Recommended Citation

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).
Isolated Identities: The Storied Lives of LGB Emerging Adults on a Rural, Community College Campus

Erin J. Ferris and Miriam S. Phillips
University of Tennessee

Abstract: Community colleges serve diverse populations including LGB emerging adults who are attempting to find their place within society. Through a thematic analysis of narrative interviews and a focus group we found on one, rural campus there is a culture of isolation, which may limit individuals growth both personally and academically.

Keywords: LGB, identity, isolation, rural community colleges

The purpose of this study is to understand the classroom and campus experiences of LGB emerging adults attending a Southeastern United States rural, community college through personal narratives. Community colleges serve diverse, marginalized, and underserved populations by providing opportunity to students who normally would not have access to higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008) with nearly half of these students classified as emerging adults (American Association of Community Colleges, 2013). Emerging adulthood is the developmental stage where young people aged 18-to-29 have the ability to explore their identity before attempting to find their place within society (Arnett, 1998; Erikson, 1968). Higher education serves as an important vehicle offering students the opportunities to explore their identities in an accepting and safe environment (Arnett, 1998, 2004; Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001; Tanner, Arnett, & Leis, 2009).

Even though college campuses are thought of as safe places for diverse populations; campuses are often uninviting, inhospitable, and even dangerous for the LGB population (Draugh, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Rankin, 2003). There is a lack of empirical research conducted on rural, two-year schools (Furrow, 2012) to provide adequate guidance for fostering safe climates for LGB students on community college campuses. Understanding how LGB emerging adults construct their own realities in relation to their college experience is an important aspect for improving campus climates. Through their stories we can better understand how to foster a welcoming atmosphere for this population.

Social Construction of Reality

Through narratives we can understand how social interactions and prior experiences serve as key components in the creation of knowledge suggesting truth is not a stationary phenomenon, but rather constantly evolving as individuals engage with others and their environment. Knowledge and the nature of reality are reciprocal relationships between individuals and their environment because the physical world and social interactions shape our thoughts (Vygotsky, 1962). College students come from culturally diverse backgrounds that help shape their current worldviews through social, motivational, or identity processes (Palinscseser, 1998). Consequently interactions in the college classroom and on campus provide individuals with the opportunity to expand their interactions and thus their reality. This permits the college campus to become a wealth of learning experiences affecting individual and group learning. Positive experiences can lead to healthy identity formation, whereas negative interactions can become a hindrance to the acceptance of one’s personal identity (Marcia, 1966). The following
section describes the research method and design used to understand the lived experiences of LGB emerging adults as they attempt to form their personal identities while navigating their educational pursuits on a rural, community college campus.

**Method and Design**

This pilot narrative study was conducted to understand how LGB emerging adults experienced a rural campus and how this shaped and reshaped their individual and collective identities through the telling of stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000; Spector-Mersel, 2010; Squire, Andrews, & Tamboukou, 2013). The primary researcher held individual narrative interviews, lasting between 30 and 50 minutes, in attempt to collect the lived experiences of our co-constructors. A focus group led by both researchers included four of the five interviewed co-constructors and one co-constructor who was not interviewed. Two primary research questions guided our investigation:

1. What are the lived experiences of LGB emerging adults in the classroom of a rural community college?
2. What are the lived experiences of LGB emerging adults on the campus of a rural community college?

**Co-Constructors**

A convenience sample of co-constructors was recruited from an existing school sponsored club, the Gay Straight Alliance, to serve as a safe point of entry with the presence of the gatekeepers (Rankin, 2013). Contact through their faculty advisor was also encouraged as a more comfortable approach than contacting the researchers directly.

**Interviews and Focus Group**

The primary researcher conducted all the semi-structured, face-to-face interviews in hopes of eliciting stories from the participants through open dialogue. Questions included ideas about their concept of identity, their current identities, their experiences as an LGB member in the classroom, and how rural colleges could create a better campus climate for members of the LGB community. A two-hour, recorded focus group was conducted by the researchers and then transcribed. Observations during the interviews and the focus group were recorded as valuable data for the overall project (Creswell, 2007).

**Analysis**

Narrative coding was used as first round coding to explore the co-constructors’ experiences through their own stories as related to the research questions. The co-constructors’ words were used to examine the essence of the story they told. Emotional coding, which requires the researcher to determine the emotions conveyed through the narrative (Saldaña, 2012), was then used to further understand the co-constructors’ experience through their expressed emotions related to the stories of their experiences. Coding was shared between the two researchers and through collaboration themes emerged. Experiences of stereotyping, the inability to express full identity, and isolation on campus will be discussed in the following section as the three themes emerged from the data.

**Findings and Discussion**
Within a rural community, many LGB stereotypes exist and pass from generation to
generation allowing for ignorance to conquer a person’s ability to base their beliefs on
interactions rather than simply what they have been told about sexually diverse populations.
Experiences of stereotyping were common among the co-constructors as they told stories of
being singled out for their perceived identities. “We are in the middle of the Bible belt” where
people have stickers on their “binder that are super Jesus-y…or if you’re wearing a cross around
your neck, or a giant FCA sticker…it’s an automatic red flag.” “Conservative, old people…don’t
want to learn anything different…exactly why we cannot get anything done” because often their
“points of views is because of their religions”. These stereotypes can lead to the inability for
individuals to express their full identity due to their LGB status being highlighted as their
primary identifier and overshadowing any other positive personal attributes. Due to their known
or perceived identities, the lived experience of LGB emerging adults on a rural campus can be
one of isolation. Being singled out in the classroom and common areas on campus were evident
in the narratives of the co-constructors. Experiences of stereotyping appear to infiltrate the
community college campus extending the biases of the region onto the institution of higher
education, which in turn limits LGB emerging adults’ ability to express their full identity due to
a climate of isolation.

Experiences of Stereotyping
As individuals experience the world, each social interaction assists in forming their
identity (Marcia, 1966) and for LGB students these interactions can often be based on myths
about sexual orientation. LGB students often become the minority “other” riddled with
stereotypes dictating peer-to-peer and faculty-to-student encounters. Lesbians are often resolved
to being more masculine and tomboyish than their heterosexual counterparts. Gay men are
depicted as effeminate and shallow, whereas bisexual people are seen as odd and outliers (Barret
& Logan, 2002). Myths about sexual orientation can perpetuate the stereotypes of LGB
individuals and accentuate their differences rather than allowing them to be more than just what
mainstream society claims they are based on their sexual orientation. One androgynous female
co-constructor indicated a male professor in a class singled her out by posing questions such as,
“They get people to have their babies for them?” and had members of the class answer whether
they thought “its ok for me to marry a man?” In another class the same lesbian co-constructor
was directly questioned by a peer, “how do you know you are gay if you’ve never been with a
man?”

The counter story from a effeminate lesbian on the same campus is one highlighting the
ability for LGB members who appear to fit more into socially acceptable norms on presentation
of self often do not have to undergo such ridicule. Based on her appearance she doesn’t “appear
to fit the stereotype so most people don’t assume that I am,” a lesbian, but topics of stereotypes
still creep into her experiences. “I have had problems here with guys saying things such as
‘you’re too pretty to be gay’ or ‘you have long hair’ or ‘you don’t wear flannel.’” These
comments have the ability to limit the educational experience of LGB emerging adults on a rural
campus and potentially become roadblocks for them during the identity formation process.

Inability to Express Full Identity
Identity formation is a psychological task in which emerging adults are attempting to
integrate the experiences of their childhood mixed with current experiences allowing for a
relationship with society congruent with their personal values and beliefs (Marcia, 1966) and can
lead to the commitment of adult roles (Schwartz, Cote, & Arnett, 2005). Since identity is linked to a person’s group association, LGB students’ association with an oppressed group may have “significant effects on psychological functioning” (Gonsiorek, 1995, p. 30). Identifying as LGB may prevent them from exploring the necessary avenues for development into adulthood. Failure to explore personal identity in emerging adulthood can lead to emotional and psychological difficulties later in life (Johnson, Kent, & Yale, 2012) and can have even further implications for LGB members including poor mental health and exposure to direct prejudice and/or discrimination (Dewaele, Van Houtte, Cox, & Vincke, 2013; Feldman & Wright, 2013).

All co-constructors, except for one gay male, at some point felt they had to hide their identity either on campus or in the community; however, he understands that it could still happen. “I am sure it will arise sometime.” One lesbian hid her identity throughout most of her teenage years by denying accusations of being gay from her mother and not telling her friends at school. Even though she is an out member of the LGB community she still experiences hesitation on the college campus as an emerging adult. “I never had a problem accepting who I was. I had a problem telling other people” because “you just feel it, close-minded people…so I just keep to myself as a safety precaution.” A bisexual female continually referred to her decision not to be out to everyone, “it’s not something I want to bring up until it’s an absolute necessity.” Concealing an identity can be “very frustrating, exhausting” according to another lesbian co-constructor. “I’ve come out a few times in the classroom with certain topics…even then I was still really hesitant…because I’m not going to have a way to defend myself.” These experiences suggest LGB emerging adults do not have the necessary outlets to explore or express their full identity during this crucial developmental period where they attempt to understand their position in the world.

**Isolation on Campus**

Social isolation is defined as the absence of contact with other people with the ability to impact people’s overall health and well-being and more importantly perceived social isolation could be just as harmful (Capioppo, Hawkley, Norman, & Bernston, 2011). Isolation on college campuses can happen when administrators and faculty members ignore the lived experiences of the student body, avoid or ban discussions in the classroom, and engage or ignore insensitive comments. A culture of isolation is not always expressed directly according to one co-constructor “because they’re not physically violent or directly oppressive…they think that they’re not homophobic.” However, feelings of isolation can arise when LGB emerging adults feel campus workers and other students are “denying people privileges and rights, and basic human decency…that’s oppressive.”

Isolation can occur in the classroom in a multitude of ways because heteronormativity is common, which can limit the learning experiences of individuals who feel outside of what is socially acceptable (Fine, 2011). One lesbian co-constructor recalled an English teacher denying paper topics on gay marriage sparking a comment by another student, “no son of mine is going to be a queer.” “I just keep my mouth shut and no one notices me” is a common response when LGB emerging adults consider exposing their sexual orientation or when their expressed identity is the topic of conversation. These comments can have a direct or indirect impact on an individual who is part of the LGB community. Internal stressors such as low self-esteem and feelings of sadness and loneliness can result from classroom interactions both with instructors and other students (Dewaele, et al., 2013). Perceived isolation is one reason why LGB emerging adults drop out, which directly impacts institutional retention rates (Rankin, 2010).
**Implications for Practice**

Based on these findings rural, community college campuses should consider changing their culture by establishing basic best practices for diversity and acceptance into their values, missions and beliefs, which then must be filtered from the top down ensuring all members of the institution are in compliance with the culture of acceptance. Once a new culture of diversity acceptance is established, evaluative measures should be put in place to understand the impact of potential training sessions for faculty to increase the overall mission of the institution (Murray, 2002). Mandatory training on both LGB and emerging adult issues should be required in order to provide education for all employees of rural, community colleges to combat many of the ideas perpetuated through the beliefs of the region on sexual orientation and provide insights on how to foster healthy identity formation. This training should provide empirical evidence from the body of literature available, as well as using the narratives of individual LGB emerging adults as real-life examples of the students walking across campuses every day. Including a voluntary, student panel for administration and faculty to ask questions directly is also a powerful way to give voice to these specific individuals that will greatly benefit from this culture change. To provide further evidence for this practical implication this study should be replicated on other rural, community college campuses within the region and other rural areas of United States.

**References**


