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Marla Peterson
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation
and recommend its acceptance:

Joy DeSensi

Mark Hector

Cheryl Travis

Accepted for the Council:

Anne Mayhew
Vice Chancellor and
Dean of Graduate Studies

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COMING OUT AT WORK:

AFRICAN-AMERICAN LESBIANS' EXPERIENCES

A Dissertation

Presented for the

Doctor of Philosophy

Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Melissa Ann Bartsch

August 2004

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who have faced or will ever face the decision whether or not to come out. May they live their lives on their own terms.

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It is only appropriate that I begin my acknowledgements with the two people who have been with me since the beginning- my parents, Jerry and Marilyn Bartsch. Thank you for your love and support over the years. Most of all, thank you for teaching me to believe in myself and my imagination. Encouraging those things in me has helped me believe that all things are possible.

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Abstract

The decision whether or not to come out is an important one that African-American lesbians face. This decision impacts all aspects of their lives, including their vocational life. The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work. There were five participants in this study, each of whom was self-identified as an African-American lesbian. In order to be selected for participation in this study, each participant had to (a) define herself as African-American, (b) define herself as a lesbian, (c) be employed at the time of participation, (d) had to be at least 18 years of age, and (e) not be enrolled in a college, university, or other training program at the time of participation.

Phenomenological interviews were conducted and participants were asked the one question that guided the study: In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experience deciding whether or not to come out at work. Those interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then returned to the participants for them to evaluate for accuracy. After participants gave their approval of the transcripts, a phenomenological research team analyzed the transcripts for themes. These themes were returned to the participants to ensure accuracy in that the themes represented the experiences of the participants.

The thematic structure of this study was represented by a ground with six figures, or themes, which were contextualized by that ground. The experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work was grounded in relationships. From the ground of relationships, six figural themes emerged: process, perceptions, meaning, mentors, disrespect, and identities.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 7

Literature Review.....7

Stage Theories.....7

Career Concerns.....10

Barriers and Issues 11

Identity Management 12

Therapeutic Recommendations.....13

Purpose of Study.....14

Research Question 14

III. METHOD 16

Participants.....16

Informed Consent.....17

Existential-phenomenology 17

Bracketing Interview 19

Phenomenological Interviews and Transcripts 20

Data Analysis.....20

IV. RESULTS.....23

Thematic Structure.....23

Ground: Relationships 25

Theme 1: Process 27
Theme 2: Mentors 28
Theme 3: Perceptions 33
Theme 4: Meaning 38
Theme 5: Disrespect 40
Theme 6: Identities 42
V. DISCUSSION 46
Current Study 46
Stage Theories of Identity Development 47
Self-Silencing 48
Career Theories 50
Person-Environment Theory 50
Theory of Work Adjustment 51
Social Cognitive Career Theory 52
Super's Life-span, Life-space Approach 54
Practice Implications 56
Conclusion 57
REFERENCES 59
APPENDICES 67
APPENDIX A: Cover Letter 68
APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form 70
APPENDIX C: Research Team Members' Pledge 72
APPENDIX D: Sample Transcript 74

APPENDIX E: Participant Profiles 91

VITA 94

Chapter I

Introduction

Tracy Chapman. Alice Walker. What do these women have in common? Each is a public figure, is a lesbian, and is African-American. Each is also "out" at work. Ellen DeGeneres. Melissa Etheridge. What do these women have in common? Each is a public figure, is a lesbian, and is White. Each is also "out" at work. The latter two "came out" to much fanfare in television interviews and cover stories in "major" magazines. The former two received much less publicity when they came out publicly. This same lack of attention to African-American lesbians is reflected in the historical professional literature, as well.

Within the field of counseling psychology, there has been a renewed interest in the integration of career and personal issues in counseling practice and research. Robitschek & DeBell (2002) issued a call to the psychology profession to integrate vocational psychology with counseling psychology because, in their view, ignoring vocational factors prohibits the full appreciation of individuals' lived experiences. There is an assumption that in psychological work (research and practice) which is designated "career" that there is a certain amount of content that is "non-career" content (Swanson, 2002). The same may be said for psychological work that is designated "non-career" (or personal), that there is a certain amount of content that is "career" content. Research has supported the claim that "career" counseling is most effective when "personal" issues are also addressed, and vice-versa (Swanson, 2002). Robitschek & DeBell (2002) further state that the new paradigm in counseling psychology dictates that career concerns are primary and part of an individual's context, and thus are worthy of note.

This emphasis on context within counseling psychology challenges the positivist tradition that has been associated with research in the field of counseling psychology. One of the significant differences between the positivist and contextual (or constructivist) points of view is conceptualization of human behavior (Glesne, 1999). The positivist position is that behavior is quantifiable, and determined by external laws; whereas the constructivist position is that individuals can only be understood within their personal contexts, and that as psychologists, our aim is to try and understand individuals' meanings as they relate to influences within one's lived experiences (McMahon, Patton & Watson, 2003). This emergence of constructivism has impacted many areas of psychology, including vocational psychology. Constructivists within vocational psychology have as their fundamental goal to understand the way individuals make meaning of career issues within the context of their lived experiences (Lyddon & Alford, 1993). Career and personal contexts are blended, with primacy dictated by the individual, and meaning dictated by the individual. The individual tells their stories while the investigator seeks to understand meaning within the individual's experience (McMahon, et al., 2003). Within constructivist research, the participant becomes the expert on her lived experience and the investigator becomes a curious inquirer (McMahon et al, 2003). Constructivism requires active work on the parts of both researcher and participant- with the participant in the role of "teacher" and the researcher in the role of "learner" (Peavy, 1997).

Subich (1996) noted that qualitative research, in general, can serve well the needs of a diverse population. Qualitative research can be of service especially when personal

meaning and lived experience are the foci of inquiry and the population of interest is one that has long been invisible in the professional literature: African-American lesbians.

Within the professional literature, the societal oppression of lesbian women began to be recognized as the result of three things: (a) academics challenged the idea of homosexuality as pathological; (b) the Gay Rights Movement became visible and active; and (c) the American Psychological Association (APA) publicly stated that homosexuality is a healthy sexuality (Phillips, Ingram, & Smith, 2003; Walters & Simoni, 1993). It has been noted that for the field of psychology as a whole, and counseling psychology specifically, to be inclusive, people of color must be included (Phillips et al. 2003; Greene, 1998). Historically, lesbians of color have been excluded from the literature on homosexuality as well as from the literature related to career issues (Greene, 1998). This exclusion has led to the assumptions that the experiences of lesbians of color are identical to those experiences of lesbians who are White (Phillips, et al, 2003) and that multiple identities that individuals have (woman, African-American, lesbian) are compartmentalized (Bowman, 2003). These assumptions severely limit how development may be conceptualized and how meaning is made, but can be rectified by researchers engaging in research that integrates identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and career (Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992) and, specifically inquires about individuals' lived experiences.

Researchers who have focused on African-American women and career have noted the "double jeopardy" that African-American women find themselves in as belonging to a racial minority and also being women (Turner, 1997; Hackett & Byars, 1996. Turner (1997) acknowledges the complexity of having multiple identities and also

recognizes that there are eight themes that African-American women have in common around career issues: (a) African-American women have historically combined roles of worker, wife, and mother; (b) African-American women and men have a history of interdependence with each other in regard to work outside of the home; (c) African-American women have a history of being "breadwinners" due to racial factors that have denied African-American men meaningful employment; (d) African-American women and men historically have been classified as "not human" and have had to overcome this legacy; (e) African-American women have had to overcome the legacy of abuse by White men and then being blamed for that abuse; (f) African-American women have integrated "masculine" characteristics of achievement, autonomy, and independence with "feminine" characteristics of nurturing and caretaking; (g) African-American women have been caught between the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement; (h) African-American women receive fewer benefits for the same amount of work as White men, African-American men, or White women. African-American women's career choices have been impacted by the double jeopardy that racism and sexism create (Evans & Herr, 1991) and they have developed two main strategies to cope with the double jeopardy of oppressions: problem-focused strategies that involve actively changing an unacceptable situation and emotion-focused strategies that involve changing how one feels about an unacceptable situation (Richie, 1992).

African-American women have developed survival skills in order to navigate the multiple oppressions which they face (Turner, 1997). One such skill is what Turner (1997) calls the "chameleon syndrome" where an individual adjusts alliances relative to group membership. Turner further notes that this adjustment strategy may not be

comfortable, but is necessary for survival, and includes “healthy paranoia” that dictates who to trust, how to read people, and how to cope with negative experiences (1997). Another experience Turner (1997) describes is the inclusion/exclusion phenomena in which success may lead an African-American woman to feel separated from her roots and support system and that the same system may test her in order to determine if she can still be trusted and can still relate to the community. Turner (1997) also describes the sense of not belonging to any community because the pressure to conform to majority culture results in difficulty with self-expression. Lastly, Turner (1997) notes that single African-American women who work may live a lifestyle that is not typically supported or understood by the significant others in their lives: extended family, family of origin, spiritual community, and African-American community as a whole. Turner (1997) attributes the lack of support that African-American women receive to the myth that African-American women have impeded the progress and success of African-American men. African-American women have tended to experience difficulty in institutions where their values and cultural orientations are not recognized as significant and when they have been forced to disavow their own cultures in favor of the majority culture (Alfred, 2001). In the case of African-American women, this means sacrificing values oriented to the African-American community for the values of the majority culture.

There is a gap in the professional literature where one might look for the intersection of race, gender, sexual orientation and career. As you will find in Chapter 2, there is literature about lesbian career issues, African-American lesbian issues, African-American women’s career issues, but nothing on African-American lesbians’ career issues. Their invisibility within the professional career development literature mirrors

their invisibility in American culture as a whole. They exist, but are not recognized. Their voices remain unheard. It is my goal as the researcher of this dissertation project to amplify the voices of African-American lesbians by telling their stories in their own words. I have integrated personal and career issues in this study by exploring African-American lesbians' experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work. As the investigator, I have been an active listener and an active learner. The African-American lesbians who have participated in this study are our teachers- your teacher as you read and my teacher as I listened, learned, and wrote. Learn well.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

Literature Review

Stage Theories

For thirty years, researchers have considered the ways that lesbians and gay men come out, the events involved, and the outcomes that are related to disclosing one's sexual orientation. It should be noted that most of the well-known theories of identity development have been based on gay men, and have been generalized to women (Fassinger, 1995). The first of the gay identity development models was articulated by Cass (1984). Cass (1984) proposed the following six-stage model of gay/lesbian identity: (a) identity confusion where the individual has questions about and feels confused about their sexual orientation; (b) identity comparison where the individual tries to understand feeling "different"; (c) identity tolerance where the individual presents themselves as having a heterosexual orientation when around heterosexual individuals and a homosexual orientation when around homosexuals; (d) identity acceptance where the individual develops positive attitudes toward having a lesbian or gay identity; (e) identity pride where the individual seeks out supportive organizations and groups; (f) identity synthesis where the individual is willing to disclose her/his orientation and is willing to deal with the consequences of that disclosure.

Following up on Cass' work, Sophie (1985) developed the following description of lesbian identity formation: (a) first awareness where there is no disclosure of one's identity; (b) testing and exploration where disclosure of one's orientation to heterosexuals is limited, if at all; (c) identity acceptance where the individual prefers lesbian

interactions and disclosure to heterosexuals is limited; (d) identity integration where there is a stable identity and disclosure is widespread. Chapman & Brannock (1987) built on the earlier works of Cass and Sophie with their own description of how individuals come to "self-label." This is also known in the literature as "coming out to oneself." Chapman & Brannock (1987) describe the five-stage process: (a) same-sex orientation where the individual feels different, but has no name for it; (b) incongruence where the individual recognizes that her feelings may not be heterosexual, and she feels confused; (c) self-questioning and exploration where strong bonds with women occur and there may be some exploration of heterosexual relationships; (d) identification where the individual thinks and feels "I am a lesbian"; (e) choice of lifestyle where the individual maintains a lesbian identity.

McCarn and Fassinger (1995) have developed a model which distinguishes between the individual's sexual identity and the membership of the individual in a group. The process which they describe is the process of resolving the question of disclosure rather than the resolution of this question itself. It is about fully addressing issues rather than the decision that is made. McCarn & Fassinger (1995) describe the process of determining disclosure in the following way: (a) awareness where the individual feels different than the heterosexual norm; (b) exploration where the individual assesses her feelings about women; (c) deepening and commitment where the individual solidifies her choices about intimacy and group membership; (d) internalization and synthesis where the individual allows same-sex attractions and group membership to all become parts of her self-concept.

Peck (1986) described the formation of a lesbian identity as being based on one's self-definition and this definition represents many forces which act upon a woman's life. This recognition of multiple forces and influences can be particularly helpful when exploring the context in which a disclosure, or coming out, decision is made- whether to self or to others. On a similar note, Faderman (1984) postulated that if a woman is developing a lesbian identity, that it may be easier to do so within the context of a feminist community because of the female support network.

Knowing about these models for identity development is important when examining experiences of deciding whether or not to come out at work because it is assumed that the individual has created some semblance of an identity and/or self-concept (both of which includes beliefs about one's sexual orientation) prior to disclosing this information to another person. Understanding how these identities and self-concepts emerge is beneficial because this understanding permits description of change and allows meaning to be given to those changes which have occurred.

A major criticism of these stage theories is that they equate coming out with health and do not take into account the multiple oppressions under which an individual may live (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998; Bawer, 1993; Mays, Cochran & Rhue, 1993). These multiple oppressions are part of the lived experiences of African-American lesbians: racism, sexism, and heterosexism (Greene, 1998). Martinez & Sullivan (1998) note that most stage models are relevant for African-American lesbians up to a point. The stage theories are accurate in describing the experiences of feeling different, becoming aware of lesbian feelings, and labeling oneself as lesbian. Where stage theories depart from African-American lesbians' experiences is when they fail to recognize the multiple

oppressions that shade the lives of these women. The choice of disclosing one's sexual orientation must be considered within the context of these multiple oppressions and the meanings ascribed to lived experiences by those who have lived them (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998). Mays, et al. (1993) conducted a study with eight African-American lesbians and found that the participants minimized anticipated discrimination by avoidance. At times, this avoidance took the form of choosing not to disclose their sexual orientation. It was difficult for the participants in the study to determine if discrimination was related to sexism or racism (Mays, et al, 1993).

Career Concerns

Career concerns are important psychosocial issues in the lives of lesbian women and gay men (Croteau & Bieschke, 1996). Career concerns include interests, abilities and values. One such work value that many lesbian women appear to hold in high regard is the ability to be able to express their sexual orientation at work, as well as outside of work (Chung, 1995). This is a value that appears to be more important to lesbian women (and to gay men) than to heterosexuals of either gender because there is an assumption of heterosexuality in most workplaces; and this assumption continues to be made until one discloses her true orientation (Chung, 1995). One's sexual identity is connected to the other parts of one's identity, including one's vocational identity; because of this, it can be expected that each aspect of identity impacts all others (Fassinger, 1995). There has been no career development research done that examines the relationship between race, gender, and sexual orientation. It is this researcher's goal to begin filling that gap.

Barriers and Issues

It has been documented that there tends to be five issues which emerge when an individual is sorting through the process of developing a self-definition, and examining aspects of oneself related to one's sexual orientation. These issues are: (a) lesbian/gay identity development; (b) homophobia and heterosexism; (c) religious concerns; (d) career concerns; (e) family of origin concerns (Morrow, 1996). Within these issues and concerns there tends to be a conflict which includes not only the internal struggle to come out to oneself and to others, but how to live a meaningful life (Browning, 1987). While this may be true for most people, it seems to be especially true for young adults who are defining themselves for the first time as lesbian or gay, and is likely true for those who come out and define oneself as a sexual minority when one is farther into adulthood (McDonald, 1982), but for young adults of college age, there tends to be an immersion in sexual identity exploration that leads to an inattention to developing a vocational identity and exploring occupational options (Mobley & Slaney, 1996). Because of this inattention to vocational development, it is reasonable to expect lesbian and gay young adults to experience higher rates of career indecision, of career confusion, and of change in major and/or career (Mobley & Slaney, 1996). Coming out may create barriers which hinder the attention which an individual is able to give to her vocational needs, such as the following: (a) coming out may interact with vocational stereotypes, thus limiting the perceived possibilities for a career; (b) coming out may result in a loss of support from family and friends; (c) standardized vocational tests have not been normed for lesbian/gay clients (Pope, 1992); (d) coming out may decrease one's self-confidence, which may cause career decision-making to be more difficult (Fassinger, 1996). The two

themes which recur throughout lesbian literature involve isolation and homophobia in the environment (Prince, 1995).

Because vocational identity is one facet integrated into one's identity, both gender and sexual orientation can be expected to affect the vocational experiences of lesbians, particularly in the areas of self-confidence, the expectation of harassment, and the experience of discrimination (Fassinger, 1995). There are some careers for which lesbian, gay, and/or bisexual (LGB) individuals are considered stereotypically to be ill-suited, such as the military and child care because LGB individuals are assumed to behave unprofessionally (Chung, 1995). These erroneous assumptions are rooted in prejudice and exemplify the discrimination with which LGB individuals are faced in the workplace. It seems as though these stereotypes impact the decision whether or not to come out. Self acceptance matters in making the decision whether or not to come out at work, but additionally, so do the fears of rejection and reprimand (Frankie & Leary, 1991). All of these processes are interrelated to career development and to the management of a lesbian identity (Driscoll, Kelly & Fassinger, 1996).

Identity Management

The management of a lesbian identity is important because the strategy with which one manages her identity determines how much or how little she is willing to share about herself with others. Lesbian identity management is a process which is ever-changing and involves creating a strategy for determing how one chooses to express her identity (Boatwright, et al, 1996). Croteau (1996) described some strategies which people implement when managing their identities: (a) counterfeiting where the individual offers a false heterosexual identity; (b) passing where the individual allows others to

assume her to be heterosexual while not correcting this wrong assumption; (c) integrating where the individual discloses to others. Lesbians are different from other minorities in that they may choose whether or not to disclose their minority status (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994; Elliott, 1993). African-American lesbians have a partial choice of disclosure in that their race is (usually) visible, but their sexual orientation is only known if they disclose it. Croteau & Hedstrom (1993) noted that coming out as well as maintaining a gay identity can cause disruption in a typical life, vocationally and otherwise. There has been a description of identity management from a multi-cultural perspective proposed by DeMonteflores (1986): (a) passing as a member of the dominant culture; (b) confrontation and addressing issues of difference; (c) ghettoization where the individual isolates herself from the majority culture and spends the majority of her time with members of her minority group; (d) specialization where the individual views herself as unique and values herself for that uniqueness.

Therapeutic Recommendations

The development of management strategies as well as coping skills are a few reasons that African-American lesbians might choose to receive counseling services. Fassinger (1995) advocates that disclosure management and identity management strategies need to be taught by counseling professionals, especially in cases where there are no role models in the workplace. Pope (1995) charges counseling professionals with the following responsibilities: (a) therapists need to discuss two kinds of coming out with clients- coming out to self and coming out to others; (b) therapists must be knowledgeable about the stage of development which the client is in at the time services are sought; (c) if possible, therapists need to help clients explore the effects of coming out

with clients before the clients come out, so that the clients may make informed decisions; (d) therapists need to be LGB affirmative if they are going to serve LGB populations; (e) therapists need to help clients address issues of internalized homophobia.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to understand African-American lesbians' experiences of deciding whether or not to come out at work. The information that was explored through this study fills a void in the current literature. There are explanations of how women come out (or don't), and explanations of why women come out (or don't), but there is nothing "out there" which describes the experience of making that decision of whether or not to come out, specifically, at work. Understanding the experience of making that decision can assist counseling professionals provide appropriate care to their clients by recognizing the experiences of others. Understanding these experiences can help counseling professionals explore client concerns and, thus, help clients make informed decisions about how they will choose to manage their sexual identity. Understanding the experiences of African-American lesbians can assist counselors in working with clients who are living under multiple oppressions and can help them identify the oppressions they are facing and develop coping strategies to succeed. It has been recognized that vocational research can be used to address issues of social justice (Richardson, 1993) and that it can address issues of multiculturalism (Leung, 1995).

Research Question

The question which guided this research was: what are African-American lesbians' experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work? In the research

setting, this question will be phrased in the following way: “In as much detail as possible, tell me about your experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work.”

Chapter III

Method

This chapter includes a description of the participants and the informed consent procedures that were used to obtain their participation. Also presented are the constructs upon which existential-phenomenology is based as well as the procedures for collecting and analyzing data.

Participants

Each participant in this study was self-identified as an African-American lesbian. In order to be selected for participation in this study, each participant had to (a) define herself as African-American, (b) define herself as a lesbian, (c) be employed at the time of participation, (d) had to be at least 18 years of age, and (e) not be enrolled in a college, university, or other training program at the time of participation.

Participants were recruited through snowball sampling (Walters & Simoni, 1993). Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sample used to recruit a purposive sample and is recommended when the group under study is invisible, where group membership is not obvious, and/or where access to the group is limited (Sommer & Sommer, 1991). In this sampling method, the researcher asks participants to identify other potential participants. In this study, participants were given the researcher's contact information [Appendix A] and asked to pass it on to their contacts who might be interested in participating in the project.

In the present study, there were five participants: two were firefighters, two work in higher education, and one was employed by a national retail store. Participants' ages ranged from 25 to 36. Interviews were conducted in three of the participants' homes, with

one interview taking place in the researcher's home, and one interview taking place at a convention.

Informed Consent

The study's purpose, procedure, benefits, and implications were outlined for participants verbally and in an informed consent form. When each participant contacted the researcher, questions were answered regarding the purpose of the study, taping of interviews, transcription of the interviews, analysis of interviews, confidentiality, and other concerns which the participants expressed; additionally, a day, a time, and a place were set for the interviews to occur. Immediately prior to the interview, the contents of the informed consent form were reviewed with each participant and any other questions that participants had were answered.

Each participant signed her informed consent form [Appendix B] and was given a copy for her records. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym so that her identity and participation were kept in confidence. Each research team member who reviewed a transcript signed a statement of confidentiality in which he/she guaranteed confidentiality. [Appendix C]

Existential-phenomenology

Historically, psychology is rooted in the "objective" world of the natural sciences which adhere to three core assumptions: (a) phenomena must be observable; (b) phenomena must be quantifiable; (c) phenomena must be of a form such that at least two observers agree on its characteristics (Valle & King, 1978). Based on these assumptions, behavior and experience were defined as polar opposites, and psychological research focused on behavior to the exclusion of experience. The formal study of experience did

not emerge until a discipline of philosophy, existentialism, and a method, phenomenology, were founded, developed, and joined together.

Existentialism is a philosophical perspective that has as its purpose "to understand the human condition" (Valle & King, 1978, p.6) as it exists in daily life. Such aspects of the human condition include happiness, fear, and ambivalence. These aspects, in addition to freedom and anger, are a representative though not an exhaustive collection of existential phenomena. Phenomenology emerged from the existentialist movement and most notably from the work of Kierkegaard, Nietsche, Heidegger, Sarte, and Camus to name just a few (Valle & King, 1978). Phenomenology is a method which enables one to grasp phenomena as they exist in one's lived experience.

When combined, existential-phenomenology becomes a "discipline which seeks to understand the events of human existence in a way which is free of the presuppositions of our cultural heritage (Valle & King, 1978, p.7). When applied to psychology, existential-phenomenology became existential-phenomenological psychology, a discipline which has as its goal to "explicate the *essence*, *structure*, or *form* of both human experience and human behavior as revealed through essentially *descriptive* techniques" (Valle & King, 1978, p.7).

Historically, psychological research has been sterile, operationalized, and "objective" so that the researcher's expectations, experiences, and biases have as little impact on the results as possible. When natural science and behavioral science critique existential-phenomenological psychology, the question of objectivity inevitably arises. From an existential-phenomenological psychology perspective, Colaizzi (1978) redefined objectivity as "fidelity to the phenomena" (p.52). This fidelity means taking a

phenomena as it exists and permitting it to define itself rather than imposing an outsider's definition upon it.

Bracketing Interview

The commitment to faithfulness emerges in research when investigators take stock of their own assumptions, experiences, hypotheses, and biases as they gather, analyze, and record the experiences of the participants with whom they work. Colaizzi (1978) suggested that this taking stock come in the form of a bracketing interview which is then analyzed for the purpose of assisting the researcher in the recognition of her own experiences, assumptions, and biases.

I completed a bracketing interview conducted by an individual who has experience doing phenomenological interviews. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. After the audiotape was transcribed, it was erased. The transcript was evaluated in order to assist me in identifying my own expectations and biases and to assist me in recognizing these expectations and biases throughout the research process. This interview lasted for about one hour and I spoke of many topics related to my experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work in addition to my biases and expectations.

I spoke of my experience re-cycling through the decion whether or not to come out in each new work relationship. The importance of work performance was also highlighted in this interview. Early in my own identity development, I viewed my work performance as an apology for my sexual orientation in that I believed that if I just worked hard enough, that others who might otherwise disapprove of my sexual orientation would accept me based on my work performance and in spite of my sexuality.

My expectations related to the role of race and variation of skin color also emerged in this bracketing interview. I spoke of my role models who are lesbian and those who are African-American. I explored my attitudes toward African-American people and also my beliefs about the prejudices they face and the privileges I have.

Phenomenological Interviews and Transcripts

Participants were advised that they could talk for as long as they wished. Each participant was asked the same question: "Tell me about your experience deciding whether or not to come out at work." As the participant described her experience(s), the researcher responded with follow-up questions to clarify points that were made, to encourage the participant to expand on what she said, or with summaries and paraphrases to check her understanding of the participant's experience. Following each interview, each tape was reviewed, transcribed verbatim and was erased. During the transcription process, identifying data was eliminated. Each participant was given a copy of her transcript to review for accuracy and to help ensure trustworthiness of the data during analysis. Transcript review by the participants was done also so that the participants had the opportunity to inform the investigator of any changes or omissions she wished to make. No participant made any such revisions to her transcript. [see Appendix D for a sample transcript]

Data Analysis

According to Giorgi (1985), the theme of phenomenology is to return to the mundane world where phenomena exist. In terms of data analysis, this involves four steps: (a) the researcher must review the entire description (or protocol); (b) the researcher must review the description again for the purpose of finding "meaning units"

(p.10); (c) the researcher must review those units in the search for psychological insights; (d) the researcher must then synthesize those units and insights into a statement about the participants' experiences (Giorgi, 1985). Colaizzi (1978) includes these steps, and also incorporates two additional "musts": (a) the meaning units must include ideas from the words of the participants; (b) the themes must develop into a structure by which experience can be understood.

In the search for meaning, the researcher used a phenomenological research group for assistance. This research group was comprised of two professors and three psychology doctoral students, all of whom have experience in qualitative, and specifically, phenomenological research. Each transcript (or protocol), with identifying data removed, was presented to the research group, read aloud by the members and discussed regarding themes, meanings, and the essence of experiences. All protocols were returned to the researcher for the purposes of maintaining confidentiality and also so that the researcher could use the notes made by research team members during discussions.

After protocols were analyzed by the research group, the researcher returned a summary of her themes and meanings to the participants for the purpose of solidifying trustworthiness of the analysis. Participants made no changes to the meanings offered by the researcher. In qualitative research, trustworthiness means being faithful to the data, or what is referred to as validity in quantitative research (Glesne, 1999). Each participant reviewed the themes and meanings from her interview for the purpose of accuracy- do the themes reflect her experience? The investigator reviewed the themes and meanings further and will noted units of meaning that were salient to the experience that the

participant was conveying, and were recognized by the research group. As units of meaning emerged, they were grouped into similar clusters, which were then grouped into themes. This process was repeated for each protocol, with the final step in the analysis being the construction of a thematic structure which illustrates the experiences described by all or most of the participants. This structure does not represent the experience of any one participant, but is a synthesis of the experiences shared by the participants. It captures the essence of deciding whether or not to come out at work for these women. A detailed description of how the thematic structure emerged is presented in Chapter IV.

Chapter IV

Results

Thematic Structure

The thematic structure of this study is represented by a ground with six themes, which are contextualized by that ground. The experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work was grounded in relationships. Two subthemes were associated with relationships: *connection* and *trust*. From the ground of relationships, six figural themes emerged: process, mentors, perceptions, meaning, disrespect, and identities. These themes combine to form an overall structure of the experience, as is depicted in Figure 1.

Process referred to the dynamic experience of decision-making- that the experience is on-going and not static. Associated with process are two subthemes: *re-surfacing* and *change*. It is out of the figure of process that the other themes emerge. Mentors referred to those who may be looked to for guidance regarding their experiences and decisions. Three subthemes were associated with mentors: *learning* (from a mentor), *encouragement* (from a mentor), and *becoming* (a mentor). Perceptions referred to the points of view of other people. There were three subthemes associated with the theme of perceptions: *stereotypes, comparisons,* and *evaluations.* Meaning referred to what the participants associated with their experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work and was discussed in terms of two subthemes: *happiness* and *anticipated loss*. Disrespect referred to negative experiences participants associated with their experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work. Two subthemes emerged from the theme

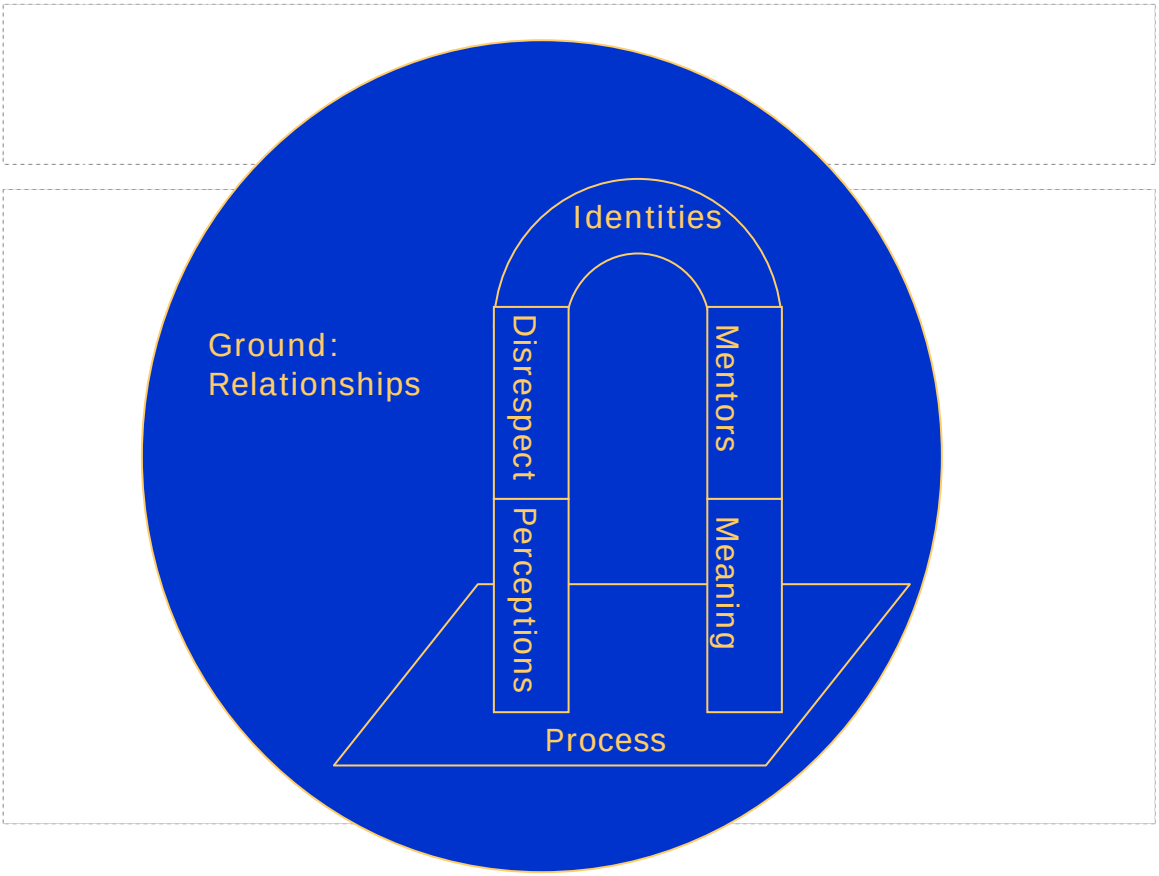


Figure 1. Thematic structure of African-American lesbians' experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work.

of disrespect: *weapons* and *harassment.* Identities referred to the ways in which participants saw themselves in relation to their experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work. Two subthemes emerged from the theme of identities: *compartmentalization* and *self-concept.*

Ground: Relationships

Throughout the interviews, the experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work was grounded in the context of relationships. Participants were deciding whether or not to come out to another person with whom they have/had a relationship. Participants described relationships with regard to the decision whether or not to come out at work in terms of connection and trust. Connection referred to a link or bond that was either present or absent for the participant. Black Flag described how a sense of connection in relationships contributed to her decision whether or not to come out at work:

> In those places where I have been out I would also say to you that is a place where I have felt more connected. In the places where I haven't been connected or felt there was absolutely no trust or interest to get to know others or allow others to know me, certainly there would be no mention of the fact that I was a lesbian.

For her, connection was a key component in deciding whether or not to come out at work. In addition to connection, trust was a crucial component for her. Keke described what connection in work relationships looks like for her, as well:

> A couple of them I just started hanging out with people and everything and I got to know them really well and just started talking and, you know, you kind of open up. Like I just opened up with them with everything and they know.

Trust referred to whether or not there was security that the privacy of a disclosure would be honored by the person with whom it was shared.

> And in some ways, me telling K and D, me trusting them with this information, it did a lot, because they knew that I trusted them. And then the fact that they haven't betrayed that trust has done a lot for me with them. Because like I said they could talk about this stuff to anybody, but they don't. (M)

Keke described her experience with a group of women with whom she works, and all of whom are also lesbian. In her experience of this group, trust is the basis of how they have come to know and know about one another:

> There is just a network of women who are very selective who they tell it to. Very selective. And they have to know or feel comfortable enough to know that you are not going to be the one, even though you are gay too, that you are not going to be the one who wants to out everybody. You are going to be just as discreet as they are. So, I guess, they have to have that certain security with you before they come out to you.

M further described her experience of not having that sense of trust with those with whom she works as she noted that, “things can happen, and catch you off guard. I thought they

were my friend." Within the context of that relationship, M experienced a betrayal of trust rather than an honoring of trust.

Theme 1: Process

"It was a gradual process to come out at work." (Keke) The theme of process referred to the dynamic experience of making the decision whether or not to come out at work and that the decisions was not static or limited to one decision one time, but instead, involved a series of decisions over a period of time.

Keke further described how her experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work had been something that she cycled through and then has continued to re-cycle through when she noted that when she "thought it was all behind me, it resurfaced again, so I had to deal with it all over again in a different place, so it was hard. I mean it was very hard." Black Flag described her experience of having the decision "resurface" in the following way: "I don't think I've made the same decision at each of my places of work… You go in and out of the closet around your employment. At least I have."

Along with the notion that decisions and experiences resurface for the participants, there is also the sense that change is a part of the experience. Black Flag described her experience as "my understanding of this whole issue of being a lesbian, that evolves and changes and depends on certain things and variables. It changes a little bit." For her, the experience of being a lesbian is fluid; consequently, her experience of the decision whether or not to come out at work is fluid, as well, because "it's a personal decision, coming out, and to me it is not one that is made forever." She recognized that in her experience, the decision is not a fixed one in that in another context [relationship], she has the opportunity to

make another choice. Nicole described the changes she observed in herself in regard to deciding whether or not to come out at work:

> I think that holds a lot. Because I come from being scared and weak in the workplace of people finding out to 'I don't care.' So I think I'm doing pretty good. It used to be that I would be like, 'don't do that, you know, someone is watching,' but now it is like 'hey, baby, you know, hope you have a good day.' Give her a hug, get my kiss and that was it. I didn't care who was watching.

Nicole's change involved not only the decision about whether or not to come out at work, but also, the decision whether or not to demonstrate affection for her partner while in her place of employment.

Theme 2: Mentors

Learning from a mentor involved observing how that person dealt with his/her own decision whether or not to come out at work and incorporating that person's behaviors and attitudes into one's own experience.

> I thought about my mentor, my graduate mentor, and the fact that I was in her office one day crying, and she said, "Do you think you're the only gay person in the world?" She didn't say that she was gay but she says, "Trust me. You're not." I kept crying. Finally, she said, "Listen." And I said, "Oh, you are too." I left the office with so much confidence and hope. I said to myself, "This is my opportunity. This is that moment." And it was that moment. Like I said, I had no idea that there was another way that she already knew this about me. You never know. (Black Flag)

When participants spoke of mentors in relation to their experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, they were referring to people to whom they looked for guidance in making those decisions. Three sub-themes emerged from the theme of mentor: learning (from a mentor), encouragement (from a mentor), and becoming (a mentor).

Nicole described how she learned from other women who were out and how they helped her recognize what she wanted for herself: “you know and I had my fair share of seeing women together, I'm just like I wish I could do that. I want to be out like that…open like that.” Keke described how she wants her work, rather than her sexuality to speak for her when she’s “on the job” and went on to describe someone who has portrayed herself in the same way that she (Keke) would like to portray herself:

> Her work has spoken for her and the fact who she sleeps with was not an issue. I still also think that there is the idea that women who work in that field are anyway so it didn't make it a big deal. Because she wasn't going to change who she slept with or who she was. She has actually been with that same female the entire time. They are still together. I think 11 years. Oh yeah. They're great too to hang around. It wasn't going to stop her. She is one of those people where her work spoke for her, you know? That's what I want. I want my work to speak for me and not.... I want that to stand out more than who I sleep with and for her work stood out. It was more of concern than who she slept with, which is the way it should be anyway.

Black Flag described what she had learned from others with whom she has come into contact:

> You're saying to yourself, ‘If they have not chosen to come out and they are at much higher levels than you are, maybe you should take heed that there must be a reason for that’, because, again, I am saying to you I have never seen that disclosure has ever added something positive to anything.

Black Flag continued to describe how she learned about “another way of being” from her mentor:

> At that particular time, I was in a black hole and I was asking for help and I was all alone in this big world. I had just told her "the" secret and in my eyes she had just discounted it. I was not hearing her, but I heard her. This big thing, this ominous thing… Yes, I had been carrying a boulder on my shoulders and you just flipped it off your fingertip, you know like this little thing, and I didn't understand it, you know? Because again it was my perception of how big this thing was. I only knew of one way and that was to be oneself. Not to lie. So if I told people this, I would be facing this. But when she told me, "Oh, you think you're the only one?" That introduced me to another way of being. I don't have to make this known. You are. Nobody else in school knows. You are the head of this department and you could be chairperson of this whole larger department if you chose to. You have been offered it, but you declined it.

Up until this encounter with her mentor, Black Flag believed that the only way to be, or decision to make, was to come out at work. This experience with her mentor opened up another possibility to her, and in opening up this possibility, gave her permission to pursue it.

For the participants in this study, receiving encouragement from a mentor included being given permission to live as one chooses and in learning about the struggles that others have overcome.

> And I always thought if they could have made it, if anyone made it through all the stuff they went through in the 60's, the little stuff I'm going through today in this particular institution doesn't compare, you know? Yeah, but that sort of serves as the encouragement for me. (Black Flag)

Nicole described the encouragement she received from her mentor in the form of assurance in words and in actions:

> I think what kind of made it easier is that there was another lady who worked at the craft store with us and she was with him at the club and she was like, 'You know, everybody there accepts him. They know and so I'm like 'okay'. Still kind of scared cause it's like, you know, I don't want anybody to trying to fight me, or downing me, this, this and that. So, it's just once I seen how they accepted him; it made it a lot easier and I was just like, 'Ok I can do this. This is me. So what if they don't like me? They don't accept me.' but to see him there it really is funny. It made it a lot easier because even he actually sat down and talked to me about it… He was like, 'If this is who you are, be proud of who you are.' You know. I'm going to cry. . . and he told me, he was like, 'just don't be afraid' and I wasn't.

Nicole received encouragement from her both mentor's words and from her actions. Black Flag described an experience she had in which there were no mentors from whom to receive encouragement, support, or help.

> I didn't know there to be many other women like myself. As soon as I quit, I got e-mails. I got calls. I'm saying, 'If you had supported me when I was there, perhaps I might still be there. Yeah. You were there. You saw my struggles. And that is what I'm saying. The shallow...I'm just saying, If you were concerned, I'm curious as to why you didn't speak up earlier because you were most concerned about you and you didn't want these things to be known about you for perhaps the potential for negative things in your direction, but you act concerned about me as a person."

Black Flag's experience of not feeling connected to those who came out to her *after* she left her previous employment left her feeling angry that those same people who reached out to her following her departure chose not to extend support to her when she was struggling. Her experience highlights the importance that each participant gave to the role that her mentor(s) played in her own experience deciding whether or not to come out at work.

Becoming a mentor referred to the experience of having one's own actions looked to for guidance or viewed as a standard by others. Nicole described her experience of realizing that she had been a mentor for others:

> My best friend …we talk every day and she was telling me there are a lot of girls now at that "The Store" who are actually coming out. That it is great. I think it is wonderful that they actually have the courage to go ahead and come out. Of course it makes me feel good to think that I had a part in that. That actually somebody saw what I was doing as a strength and as something to hold on to, to grasp to, and say 'you know what, if she can do

> it, I can do it too.' That is something wonderful to me. It makes me feel good.

Black Flag described an opportunity she had to become a mentor, and although she had intended not to come out, felt the pull to be a role model for another person.

> I know that in this current situation, I had no intention of sharing that with my students. However, on the very first day when I'm going around introducing myself to the students and had them introduce themselves to one another, one student stood up and said, 'I'm gay, and I hope that you will not treat me any differently.' She said, 'Is anyone else in the room gay? I don't expect you to raise your hand, but I just wanted you to know. We live in a community where it is not very gay friendly.' She went on and on. In that moment, I said to myself, 'I should say something, but I'm not. I made a decision that I was not going to do that.' After the students got finished, I did a summary piece. I walked and turned to the board to write what we were going to talk about. I turned back and said, 'No. I should do this because this is right to do this.' So, I told them. Just something came over me. I was thinking to myself, 'If I were a student and I had a professor and I just stood up and said how alone I feel in this community, what would I want my instructor to do?'

Theme 3: Perceptions

Perceptions referred to the points of view of others. Black Flag noted, "Whether you are perceived to be a lesbian or actually a lesbian is the same thing." This statement was made in reference to her experience in a job setting in which assumptions were made about

the sexuality of women in that career field. There were three subthemes associated with the theme of perceptions: stereotypes, comparisons, and evaluations. Stereotypes referred to assumptions about members of a specific group based exclusively on membership in that group without regard for intragroup differences. M described the stereotype of women in her line of work:

> There were a couple of factors that played into that and the first one is that I'm in a male dominated career, and also stereotypically career for females who choose it, you know. I guess a lot of people think that women choose to be firefighters or police officers then, you know they must be gay, and if they ain't, they sure look like it. So, my initial decision was based on not wanting to be categorized by not being the typical, and actually when I first became a firefighter I was married, so when I first entered my job, it was more so, I just wasn't the stereotypical firefighter, married, 2 kids, actually 4 kids, combining his and mine. And, so I wasn't what the world sees as a female firefighter, you know, she has got to be gay. That wasn't me at that particular time in my life, or wasn't addressing that part of me at that time of my life. And, but, coming up here, and relocating, and doing my whole life over, just going to do my things my way when I want to do them, and not really concerned about what other people think or what they view me as, so, but even still, coming to those terms, I still decided not to tell anyone at work. Because, now it was an issue of being stereotyped, which I didn't want to be, so I didn't tell no one

Keke described her encounters with stereotypes of being a woman and what she has had to do to overcome those stereotypes.

> I choose not to because of the fact of where I work. It is a male-dominated area with the fire department. Another reason is the fact that I was one of the first females to come along with that department so I am already dealing with the stipulations of what females can and cannot do. Then to go ahead and jump in there and say that I am a lesbian, too, is a little too much because they already think just being a female inhibits you anyway in the first place, so it's also dealing with the fact of putting other labels on me as well is just something I would rather not deal with. I am still proving myself as a female then have to reprove myself as a lesbian is something I choose not to deal with.

Keke is aware of the perceptions of others with regard to her being a female in "a male-dominated area" and having to prove herself based on being a female. She expressed her expectation that if she disclosed her sexual orientation, that she would have to "reprove" herself with regard to her ability to do her job.

Black Flag described the stereotypes she has encountered with regard to others' perceptions of African-American women in the workplace.

> There is certainly a stereotype associated with being an African-American woman, okay? And one of those stereotypes in the workplace is that she is a superwoman. She is able to take care of everyone's needs, to be the nurturer in the work environment and the home environment, but there is also this thing of, 'Can she contain her emotions?' And the answer would be 'no'.

> That she would fly off and she cannot manage herself in the business setting. So that is the image that you basically live up to. Because they prod you, they prod you, they prod you. Sometimes they keep picking on you until they see that side. And then they forever hold onto that image, you know, and just disregard those things that led up to that.

She further noted that "they" interact with African-American women in such a way as to perpetuate the stereotype of emotional instability. Nicole observed that she has had interactions with those with whom she works and that those with whom she works seem perplexed that she doesn't fit a stereotype and her recognition that there are more intergroup similarities than those with whom she works may realize.

> There are a lot of reactions at work as far as 'you don't look like one. You don't act like one.' How is one supposed to act, you know? It's like you don't carry yourself, how is 'one' supposed to carry them, how are they supposed to carry themselves? What are we supposed to do? We are just like everybody else.

Comparisons referred to contrasts that participants made between perspectives on or experiences of African-American lesbians and White lesbians or African-American women and White women. Black Flag noted:

> And it's culturally because I have seen studies that say that African-Americans look more unfavorably upon the issue of homosexuality than white Americans. So if a white woman were to be a lesbian or to be perceived as such she would have on average less people having an issue with that within her race. . . Because if you take women who are at the

> forefront in our society, Oprah Winfrey, Condoleezza Rice, these are women who are at the top of their professions, let it be added to their name or be associated with lesbians, it would do nothing but discredit them. In some people's eyes, it would start to discount all of the things they have done. Whereas, I say any white woman in that same occupation, it would be something that would hit the spotlight for a moment and everyone's attention would turn away from it and move to something else.

Nicole compared the perceptions how African-American lesbians and White lesbians are viewed.

> Right and it is mostly from guys that I hear it from. That they can see two black women doing the same thing and it is like 'oh my gosh those are black women. What are they doing?' No and it just…sometimes I'm like, 'What is the difference? Wait a minute we are all women'. Why the white women it is okay, you know, they are basically shunned off as they don't know what they are doing, they are just drunk but then the two black women can do the same thing and it's something wrong?

Evaluations referred to how participants would like to or have been assessed by others. M recalled:

> My work speaks for itself…and I don't feel that my sexual orientation would have a play in that because if I am the most qualified for a job, because in the fire department you have to test for promotions. You don't just get it because you are there. . . and I don't feel that my sexual orientation would come into play, because I was the most qualified for the job.

Black Flag noted that her approach to work and to her interactions with whose with whom she works has been:

> Yeah, as I'm thinking about this it becomes clear as to what I have been doing. I have tried to do what ever it is that will keep people attending to the work I'm doing and the quality of work I'm doing and only that. You see? So if it were a situation in which to disclose that I'm a lesbian does not take away from the work I do or I guess their perception of my quality of work, it is something you can put out there. But if it threatens to take away from that which you are trying to accomplish, I always have been aware and not willing to remit into the mix.

It is her wish to be evaluated on the merits of her job performance rather than on "personal" factors such as sexuality. Keke described an experience when she was evaluated and introduced based on merit of work performance and not on any other criteria:

> He introduced me to 500 plus people, but he bragged about me first before he let me speak. To hear him talk about me… it wasn't first lieutenant, lesbian. It was Keke, and he talked about Keke. Lesbian was no where in there. It was in my work. What I've done is what he talked about. That's what you want to be known by.

Theme 4: Meaning

"To a certain extent. I mean, I think it would inhibit my career in certain aspects such as my promotions and the stigma with being a lesbian cause it is already." This is Keke's interpretation of what the decision to come out at work means to her- inhibition of her career. Meaning referred to what the decision whether or not to come out at work

represented to the participants and was discussed in terms of happiness and anticipated loss. Nicole described how coming out means happiness to her as she made the distinction between being out at work but not out in relation to her mother.

> So I think eventually I will tell her so I can be a happier person because right now I wouldn't really say I am happy, I am content with what is going on and I think I'll be happy when I do tell her before somebody at work does.

Loss was also associated with the participants' experiences deciding whether or not to come out and referred to either experienced or anticipated losses in relation to that decision. Nicole described her experience of trying to talk to her mother:

> I guess I can say I am a strong black woman but when it comes to that mom, I am a baby again. Don't want to hurt her. Don't want to lose that relationship. And she has actually asked me and my sister-in-law is like, 'That was your chance, you should have told her.' I was like, 'I couldn't.' I kind of froze like, 'Mom, everybody is not gay you know' and like, I told her, 'if I was, I wouldn't tell you.' And she was like, 'huh?' I was like 'If I was, I wouldn't tell you,' and she asked why and I said, 'because I don't want to lose our relationship with you' and she said, 'you are right and I don't want to talk about this anymore.'

Nicole's fear of loss was confirmed with her mother's words. While she made the decision to come out at work, the risk of potential loss of her relationship with her mother is one that she was not willing to take, and because of not taking that risk, she reported that "I feel I have not yet come out at all."

Keke further described her perceived loss of job advancement related to whether or not she chooses to come out at work, “it does matter because it might inhibit my career in the workplace. That's what I'm saying. They don't need to know. That was not on the job application. So, they don't need to know.”

Theme 5: Disrespect

“Actually I chose not to come out to them because some of the coworkers there were so mean to them, so rude, and just very disrespectful.” This was Nicole’s explanation for why she chose not to come out in a former position of employment. Disrespect refers to negative interactions in the workplace related to one’s sexual orientation. Two subthemes emerged from the theme of disrespect: weapons and harassment. Weapons referred to the experience of information about one’s sexuality being used against the person. M described how she experienced disclosure as a possible weapon that had the potential to be used against her:

> It is kind of like everyone has their own agenda, and they don't have your best interest at heart. And then they, it is really like, it is hard to describe. If anyone wants to know something about you, it isn't because they want to know you. They want to know something about you. They want to have something to sit around the cooler and talk about. And I don't have any... there is no one at my job at headquarters that I would consider a friend.

Black Flag recalled a similar experience in her life:

> I guess the way you work yourself around it is the fact that I am being myself, but I am only sharing a small part of myself with these people because they are not concerned with who I really am. Why give them more

> things to use against me, you know? I cannot think of a time in my life when the disclosure of being a lesbian has been something positive in the workplace or any other place.

Nicole shared an experience she had in which she observed disclosure be used against another person:

> That is one of the things when I started working at "The Store" that made it hard to come out to them because there were so many backstabbing people that would get your information and actually call home. My first girlfriend had someone call her mom and tell her that she was dating women.

In light of Nicole's conflict about whether or not to disclose to her mother, the thought of having a disclosure at work be communicated to her mother without her consent was disturbing. Nicole recalled feeling that being "outed" (having one's sexuality disclosed to a third party without her consent) was incredibly disrespectful.

Harassment referred to unwanted attention or advances that objectifies, belittles, or otherwise creates discomfort for the recipient. Keke described her experience at work, "As a matter of fact, they still flirted and still wanted to get me to do threesome's and stuff like that. I was like, 'No.'" Nicole also described a harassment experience she had at work upon a supervisor discovering her relationship with her girlfriend:

> Then I started working at "The Store" and I was more experienced then and I was actually dating a girl there and one of the assistant managers kind of knew about her and he would give her a hard time. He started making references toward me and I felt very uncomfortable.

Theme 6: Identities

> I would love to speak to other women who share the identity that I have because my speculation is that if they are African-American and lesbian they too would have had a life of in and out unless they have been in one setting for a majority of their work experience. (Black Flag)

The theme of identities referred to the characteristics that participants possess that make them who they are. Two subthemes emerged from the theme of identities: compartmentalization and self-concept. Compartmentalization referred to having distinct parts of oneself that participants experience as being and being kept separate.

> That is compartmentalized. In that moment I'm gay but I'm gay in this setting. Close the door on that. At work, I'm a worker. Yeah, I'm in a persona, work persona, which is not even concerned with all the other personas. When I'm finished with that, close the door on that and open up this one. You know? Some people would say that is dysfunctional, but it is the way that I cope with and I'm happier. Yeah, it doesn't cause me any confusion. It doesn't cause my loved ones confusion. Those I haven't disclosed that information to this very day. It works for me… I guess the last thing I would say to you is, for me, I am never an African-American lesbian. I'm an African-American woman. If ever I am a lesbian, I am a lesbian.

M described her experience in the following way, "... I just think over all in general, that you have your separate areas of your life. They don't have to cross." For her, the parts of her life are separate and distinct. This idea is magnified by the way participants described

two spheres of existence: public and private. This delineation of public and private lives further illustrates the compartmentalization of how the participants experience their decision whether or not to come out at work, because that decision involves the disclosure of private information in a public domain. Keke described it in this way:

> I believe personal life should be kept out of the workplace anyway. No one should know what you are doing all the time or what you do when you are home. That's you business and that's the approach I have now. Who I sleep with or who I date is not for the workplace. It is not for them to know. They are supposed to know my abilities on the job, my capabilities on the job as long as my private life does not have a negative effect on, I mean, the job or where I work at, so it's none of their business.

Expounding on Keke's point, Black Flag noted that:

> When I was growing up, my parents and many of my friends, I'm not speaking for all African-Americans, but I am certainly speaking for my family and community in which I was raised, you really don't bring up the things in your private life into the business setting. You're cordial to one another. You listen to other people, but every day I go home and say, 'Wow. She shared that about her life without any hesitation,' because those two things are supposed to be separate. So, to disclose one's sexual identity in particular, that is a private matter.

M described difficulty with balancing public and private distinctions when she was in a position where she "lived" at work such that she was required to spend a minimum amount of time "in residence". She noted:

> Yea, like uh, my crew, simply because I spend a third of my life with them. You know, you are waking up to them, and going to sleep with them, and it is kind of hard to keep your life a secret when you spend so much time with someone.

Self-concept referred to how participants viewed themselves. Black Flag described her experience of herself in the following way, “In the work setting, I am never absent from the face that I am an African-American woman and I see everything that I do as an extension of that community.” Her self-concept is directly linked to her affiliation with and priority for the African-American community. Nicole described herself in the following terms, “Me being Nicole, a strong black woman who is a lesbian and who doesn't care who knows right now.” M described herself in a similar manner and also, as Nicole did, noted who she has been as well as who she is now.

> And that is why I don't have a problem with my sexuality. I have gone through living my life as others think I should live it. I have gone through being someone's mom, someone's sister, someone's wife, someone's daughter, someone's friend, someone's girlfriend, you know, always something attached to me. And right now in my life, I am M… I am going to keep changing.

In summary, it is the words of the participants that formed the thematic structure which emerged from this study. Participants described their experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work in terms of their relationships, and from those relationships emerged process, mentors, perceptions, meanings, disrespect, and identities. In Chapter V, the thematic structure will be examined in terms of stage theories of identity development, self-

silencing, and career theories such as Person-Environment Theory, Theory of Work Adjustment, Social Cognitive Career Theory, and Super's Life-span, Life-space Approach. Additionally, implications for future study will be explored.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the results of the current study and explore how these results are similar or dissimilar to research in the field. The significance of the current study will be discussed and recommendations for future research will be made.

Current Study

The current study's results suggest that the experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work occurs within the context of a relationship, and that the experience is, itself, a dynamic process rather than a singular event. There were five factors noted that impact how the process is experienced within the context of a relationship: identities, mentors, meaning, disrespect, and perceptions. These factors were mentioned by each participant as being figural in how they experienced their decision of whether or not to come out at work, and each participant described them in relation to the on-going, "resurfacing" process of the decision, and within the ground of relationships.

Each participant described her experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work, and in doing so, highlighted the components of that experience, which ultimately led to how each participant was going to live out her decision. Participants also discussed the ways in which their decisions were lived out: closeted (no disclosure), actively out (disclosure), passively out (accidental disclosure), and being outed (a third party discloses without one's permission). Each participant described the implementation of her decision and also the experiences that followed.

Stage Theories of Identity Development

As noted earlier, a major criticism of stage theories related to lesbian (and gay) identity development is that the assumption is made that only when one "comes out" and fully integrates her sexuality with the other components of her identity is she truly a "healthy" individual. While "outness" has been directly related to psychological well-being (Morris et al., 2001), so has the absence of oppression. If one is able to come out and has no other oppressions to face, it is reasonable that one would experience a significant level of psychological health. However, it is vital to note that support and identification with the lesbian/gay community are also correlated with psychological well-being. It is worthy of note that many African-American lesbians (and other lesbians of color) do not feel connected to the lesbian community, sometimes because of the perception that the lesbian community is embedded in White, Euro-American values and experiences (Mays, et al., 1993). With the presence or absence of other oppressions being regarded, the decision whether or not to come out at work is made, and while "outness" is considered to be "healthier," Black Flag noted this assumption and challenged it with her own lived experience:

> That is compartmentalized. In that moment I'm gay, but I'm gay in this setting. Close the door on that. At work, I'm a worker. Yeah, I'm in a persona, work persona, which is not even concerned with all the other personas. When I'm finished with that, close the door on that and open up this one. You know? Some people would say that is dysfunctional, but it is the way that I cope with and I'm happier.

Black Flag's experience, as well as the experiences of the other participants, reflects the recognition of multiple oppressions related to gender and race as well as sexual orientation. For Black Flag, and for many others, integration (and coming out) may not be adaptive choices in the face of the oppressions that are recognized (Bawer, 1993). The choice of whether or not to disclose one's sexual orientation must be considered within the context of the multiple oppressions one experiences and the importance ascribed to lived experiences by those who have lived them (Martinez & Sullivan, 1998). Mays, et al. (1993) conducted a study with eight African-American lesbians and found that the participants minimized anticipated discrimination (in the present study "disrespect") by avoidance. At times, this avoidance took the form of choosing not to disclose their sexual orientation. In the context of oppressions, for the participants in the present study, as well as the participants in the Mays, et al. study, the decision not to come out demonstrated the participants' abilities to navigate an environment in such a way that, while accepted theory would define it as less developed, it worked for them and met their needs.

Self-Silencing

The decision not to disclose information about oneself- one's attitudes, one's beliefs, one's needs, and even one's sexual orientation- has been described as "self-silencing" and has been correlated with depression (Jack & Dill, 1992). Those authors explored the impact that evaluating oneself by others' standards, censoring oneself so as to avoid conflict and potential loss of relationship, and splitting (in the present study "compartmentalizing") one's life into an outer "acceptable" self and an inner, angry self have on depression. These strategies have as their goal maintaining relationships- the very ground against which women in the present study experienced their decisions

whether or not to come out at work. Jack & Dill further noted that depression in women is also related to oppression and that the oppressive nature of being a "good woman" is directly related to self-silencing, or adherence to the societal norms of womanhood (1992). A similar study exploring the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and self-silencing found a positive relationship between self-silencing and depression (Gratch, Bassett & Attra, 1995).

Based on the present study, I cannot help but consider the following questions: is the depression directly related to the self-silencing, or is the depression related to the oppressions that make the self-silencing the more attractive option? Would women feel more empowered if they spoke up and spoke out about how they feel, how they think, and how they love? These questions may not have simple yes-or-no answers. Which is the "healthier" alternative- disclosing information about how one truly thinks, believes, feels, loves and face increased oppression or silence oneself so as to "fly under the radar" in the hope of minimizing the experience of oppression?

In the present study, participants described times in which they chose to come out at work and times in which they did not. Each participant concluded that the benefits outweighed the risks in the former cases and that the risks loomed larger in the latter cases. While no participant used the word "empowered", they described experiencing themselves in more positive ways when they chose to disclose their sexual orientation to others. Yet, times in which they chose to come out were times in which they felt more connected to others, trusted others more, and felt more secure in the relationships in which the disclosures were made than in relationships in which they chose not to come out at work.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine which occurred first- the secure relationship or the sense of empowerment to share the information. It is important also to consider the power of the word "no". Participants in the present study also noted that they have a choice whether or not to come out at work. For them, there is power in being able to choose to whom they come out, when and how they do so; and if they do so. The decision whether or not to come out at work may be an empowering one either way- the power to share information with another person in one's own time and in one's own way, and also the power to withhold personal information and keep it for oneself.

Career Theories

"Lifecareer" is a term that has been developed with regard to members of oppressed groups (Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993). This term appears to be particularly relevant to the current study because it incorporates life context into the experience of career, and in the life contexts of those who are members of oppressed groups, oppressions are likely to be present.

Person-environment theory.

As life context is considered in relation to the career development of African-American lesbians, it is important also to consider if the environment fits with the person such that aspects of one's identity are affirmed (Chojnacki & Gelberg, 1994). In keeping with the Person-Environment model of career development, those authors describe four levels of workplace heterosexism: overt discrimination, covert discrimination, tolerance, and affirmation. Overt discrimination refers to formal or informal policies that discriminate against homosexual or bisexual persons. Covert discrimination refers to discrimination that occurs in action but not in formal organizational policy. Tolerance

refers to organizations that have a formal nondiscrimination policy but no other support is offered (such as domestic partner benefits). Affirmation refers to having a formal nondiscrimination policy and acting in such a way as to support the needs of homosexual and bisexual workers. Participants in the current study each described experiences of overt discrimination and labeled those experiences as "Disrespect." Participants experienced each level of heterosexism that Chojnacki & Gelberg (1994) describe. Those levels were experienced within the organization in which each worked and also on an interpersonal level, as well.

Theory of Work Adjustment (TWA).

There are four primary components of TWA: satisfaction, person-environment correspondence, reinforcement value, and ability (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). Career satisfaction refers to an individual's experience of their work environment. Degges-White & Shoffner (2002) applied TWA to career counseling with lesbian clients.

For the participants in the present study, the satisfaction with work environment, and with career field, was variable. Each noted needing a certain level of satisfaction (defined by connection and trust) in work relationships in order to consider actively disclosing their sexual orientation. Person-environment correspondence, as noted previously, refers to the degree of harmony between an individual and her work setting. Participants in the present study described varying degrees of harmony, ranging from a substantial amount to nearly none at all. Reinforcement values refer to the degree to which the fulfillment of a need has for an individual. The participants in the present study described how work has or has not met their needs. Abilities refer to the aptitude an individual possesses. Each participant expressed a desire to be evaluated at work based

on their abilities and job performance and not on the basis of their sexual orientation, race, or gender. Each participant was also acutely aware that she was being evaluated on the basis of more than her abilities.

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT).

Studies have failed to investigate the intersection of race, sexual orientation, gender, and career. When studies have investigated race, they have examined racial differences (Hackett & Byars, 1996). Those authors examined how SCCT can be used to understand African-American women's career development and noted that with regard to performance accomplishments, African-American women tend to have difficulty predicting environmental feedback because different standards are applied to African-American women as are applied to their White peers. The participants in the current study noted how this observation is true for the standards that are applied to African-American lesbians as compared to White lesbians. For the participants in this study, there was a sense that in the eyes of others, there was something more wrong with African-American lesbians than with White lesbians, that the idea of a White lesbian is more acceptable.

Hackett & Byars (1996) further noted that in regard to vicarious learning, that there tends to be an absence of visible positive role models for African-American women in the workplace. The importance of role models (or mentors) was figural in the present study. Participants discussed the importance of having mentors, the isolation associated with the absence of mentors, and also the experience of becoming a mentor. Turner (1997) described the messages that African-American women receive: (a) make other African-American people proud, and (b) uplift the race by doing well. These messages

appeared to have been received by the participants in the present study based on their discussions of “representing” and becoming role models themselves.

There were increases in anxiety associated with multiple “-isms” according to Hackett & Byars (1996). The experience of multiple oppressions was associated with a decreased sense of self-efficacy. For the participants in the present study, the presence of multiple oppressions was evident as they discussed the interaction of multiple identities: woman, African-American, lesbian; in addition to worker, partner, daughter, mother, and friend. A factor that Hackett & Byars (1996) describe that may impact the level of anxiety one experiences around self-efficacy is verbal persuasion, or the reception of encouragement, discouragement. In other words, the messages one receives related the meaning of one’s identity. For the participants in the present study, these messages came from co-workers, supervisors, peers, partners, and their families.

This same model (SCCT) has been applied to the career development of lesbian women and gay men (Morrow, Gore & Campbell, 1996). In their work, those authors noted that there were two main points of SCCT that apply to the experiences of lesbians and gays: (a) contextual barriers that impact self-efficacy and expectations of outcomes and (b) contextual barriers related to career choice and in the present study the participants noted that the barriers they perceived impacted the outcomes they expected with relation to both their sexual orientation and to their race further noted that their experiences of barriers with regard to career choice were influenced more by their gender than their sexual orientation.

Super's Life-span, Life-space Approach.

In the present study, the participants each described her experience of deciding whether or not to come out at work as a series of experiences rather than just one. The series of experiences that participants described were within the context of relationships, and the idea that the experiences were part of a process became figural. Process is a dynamic, changing organism that continues to develop and evolve, much like the experiences and self-concepts of the participants themselves. Each participant noted that in each new relationship and work environment, they experience the process of choosing whether or not to come out at work. In other words, the participants re-cycle through the process of making that choice.

Super introduced the concept of re-cycling though experiences and decisions throughout the lifespan in his model of career development (1955) and noted that counseling examines the whole person and in doing so, career and personal concerns become blended. Blended concerns were also noted by the participants in the present study, as each described her experience in relationships, the pull to separate or the pull to integrate the personal and professional, and the recognition of multiple identities (or roles) that the individual has taken on.

Dunkle (1996), described how homosexual identity development impacts the career development process as described in Super's Life Span Model. During the Growth stage, Dunkle noted that gay children may be dissuaded from gender incongruent behavior. In the Exploration stage, Dunkle described how gay persons may focus more on the development of their lesbian or gay identity rather than on their career identity. During the Establishment stage, the individual works to manage his or her gay identity

while at work. During the Maintenance stage, there may or may not be a disclosure of one's sexual orientation in the workplace. During the Decline/Disengagement stage, the individual may experience losses related to one's sexuality. Dunkle's conceptualization of career development is not congruent with the experiences of the participants in the present study and appears to assume a goal of disclosure/integration for those to whom the model is applied. This, again, ignores the presence of other oppressions that may exist in people's experiences. Super's concepts of Life Span and re-cycling; however, do fit with the experiences of those same participants.

The commonality between the participants' experiences and Super's Model is in terms of re-cycling. Each participant described experiencing the decision whether or not to come out at work with each new work environment and in each new relationship. This investigator applies Super's Model to the experiences of the participants in the following way: Growth- participants entered into new relationships and assessed their own attitudes, interests, and needs with regard to those relationships. Exploration- participants tentatively narrowed their choices for "how to be" in the given relationships. Establishment- participants implemented their decision of "how to be" in the given relationships and those relationships began to stabilize. Maintenance- participants continued to adjust to improve the relationships. Decline/Disengagement- participants began to focus on essential activities and focused less on the maintenance of the relationship because the relationship had predictability to it, an understanding of what was expected. For the participants in the present study, Super's model of career development appears to fit- participants described their roles, self-concepts, how they would like for others to appraise them, needs, barriers, and relationships, all of which

comprise Super's "archway model", and through which the participants move as they re-cycle through the process of deciding whether or not to come out at work.

Practice Implications

Those who interact with homosexual and/or bisexual people, specifically homosexual or bisexual people of color can be informed by the present study. The information shared by the participants can inform how Human Resource offices operate by identifying the needs and experiences of one segment of the workforce. Professionals who work in training settings such as colleges, universities, and technical schools can utilize this information in the provision of career, personal, and academic counseling (Croteau & Thiel, 1994). The assumption is that those services exist to promote success and satisfactions for those whom they serve. Professionals who have African-American lesbians as clients may want to assist those clients in determining what is best for them in their current settings and relationships and explore with them how they will go about deciding whether or not to come out in any current/future employment settings. Perhaps the stories shared in this study would make for helpful, supportive reading for clients (and non-clients) who are faced with the decision whether or not to come out.

The present study and the stories shared by the participants can assist practitioners, educators, and clients understand themselves better. This study can assist professionals (and those they serve) in understanding how women's sexualities are conceptualized. For example, participants in the present study discussed "disrespect" in the form of harassment. These incidences of harassment included unwanted sexual advances, comments, and suggestions. These disrespectful experiences support the notion that women's sexualities exist for men rather than for the women themselves (DeMuth,

2002). The participants in the present study struggled with the harassment in many of the same ways that heterosexual women may struggle with sexual harassment in their workplaces. This study may give men pause to consider their views on their own sexualities and on the sexualities of their partners and examine the societal forces that shape their views. By examining the experiences of a marginalized group, the experiences of all persons may be better understood.

Conclusion

The present study represents the cumulative experiences of those who participated. As each participant shared her story, themes emerged, and as the stories were examined, those themes became redundant across participants. In order to understand the meaning and reality of being an African-American lesbian, it is imperative to honor the importance of culture and gender roles (Greene, 1998). Each participant spoke of cultural expectations related to race, gender, sexual orientation, or career, and it is through the lenses of the participants that this dissertation is written.

Alfred (2001) noted that African-American women experience difficulty in institutions when their values and cultural orientations are not held as significant and when they are forced to disavow their own culture in favor of the majority culture. The stories that the participants shared in the present study mirrors this sentiment, not only with regard to race and gender, but to sexual orientation, as well. Participants described potential or experienced losses and also the pull to define themselves to other people.

The significance of the present study is that it describes how African-American lesbians experience their decisions whether or not to come out at work, and does so such that the interactions between career, race, gender, and sexuality are described in the

participants own words and illustrated in their lived experiences. Having African-American lesbians represented in the career literature is crucial because they have been ignored (Greene, 1998).

This study was undertaken using phenomenological methods. The selection of method was important in this study because the study itself represents a starting point. Hopefully, the body of literature around the career development of African-American lesbians (and other lesbians of color) will grow, and predictive studies can emerge. The present study represents the beginning: telling the stories of African-American lesbians in their own words. Let us continue to learn well.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

COVER LETTER

Melissa Bartsch
University of Tennessee
900 Volunteer Blvd.
Knoxville, TN 37996
(865) 974-2196
mbartsch@utk.edu

Hello!

My name is Melissa Bartsch and I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study that examines African-American lesbians' experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work. This research project fulfills one of my degree requirements at the University of Tennessee, where I am a doctoral candidate in counseling psychology.

I am inviting you to participate in this project because I believe your experiences are valuable, and I would like to learn more about how African-American lesbian women decide whether or not to come out at work. This research project is focused on women who identify themselves as African-American (or Black, etc…), identify themselves as lesbian and are at least eighteen (18) years of age. You are invited to participate regardless of whether or not you are out at work. My hope for this project is to have some participants who are not out at work and to have some participants who are out at work. All decisions are important, and the purpose of this project is to understand how these decisions are made, and what the experiences are of those who have made these decisions.

I have my own experiences making this coming out decision, and would like to hear about your experiences. I believe that this information can assist career counselors and employers understand what goes into the decision whether or not to come out at work and can help them be supportive of those with whom they work who are facing such a decision. Additionally, other women who may be facing this decision can be helped by knowing that they are not alone in making this decision, and can make an informed decision with the help of the results of this project. The benefits to you of participating in this project are that you will have the opportunity to tell your story of deciding whether or not to come out at work, you will have the opportunity to help others who may be facing this decision, and you might come to a better understanding of how you made your decision whether or not to come out at work, and how this decision has impacted you.

If you choose to participate in this project, what will happen is that you and I will set up a time to meet in person at a location that will afford you privacy to talk with me. When we meet, I will interview you for as long as you're willing to talk with me, but not longer than two hours (that's a long time!). When I interview you, I would like to have your permission to audiotape our meeting to help me remember what we have talked about. These tapes will be transcribed and then erased. The transcripts will be kept in a locked cabinet when I am not using them. In the transcripts, only your pseudonym (fake name) will be used, so there will be no link between your interview transcript and your real name. I will be the only person (other than you and anyone you choose to tell) who will know that you are participating in this project. Anytime I use information that you share with me, I will always refer to you by the pseudonym that you have chosen.

The most important things for you to know are that: (1) you may choose to stop participating in this project at any time without penalty or prejudice; (2) there are no right or wrong answers in the interview; (3) your participation will be greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in participating, or would like more information, please feel free to e-mail me: mbartsch@utk.edu . Or, if you would like to call me, feel free to call me at work: (865) 974-2196. The person who answers the phone will probably say something like, "Student Counseling Center, how may I help you?" You can ask for me by my first name (Melissa). If you want to include my last name, it is pronounced "Barch". If you leave a message, you may simply say that your call is in response to a letter you received from me. This will ensure that whoever answers the phone will not know that you are calling about the research project.

Attached to this letter, you will find an "Informed Consent" form. This is the form that explains the project and what will be asked of you in formal language. Please feel free to pass this letter/form on to anyone you know who might be interested in participating in this project.

Thank you in advance for your assistance with this project!

Sincerely, Melissa Bartsch

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent

Title of Project: Deciding whether or not to come out at work: African-American lesbian women's experiences

This research is designed to describe the experiences of African-American lesbian women who have decided to come out at work, or have decided not to come out at work.

It is your option to terminate your participation at any time without penalty or prejudice to you. The investigation involves two parts:

(1) An explanation of this study and gaining your informed consent, and
(2) A discussion of your experience deciding whether or not to come out at work.

The length of the interview is anticipated to be approximately one hour, however, you may take any length of time you would like, up to two hours. The interview questions will be open-ended, informal, and conversational in nature. The interviews will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and location.

Your participation in this study entails no unusual risks or discomforts. A dissertation, or research paper, based on this research will be prepared as partial fulfillment of degree requirements in a doctoral counseling psychology program. The knowledge gained from this research may be presented to others through published works and/or presentations and will be a resource for future scholarly work in this area.

The only potential risk is your identification; however confidentiality will be maintained by using a self-selected pseudonym (fake name) during the interview. The interview process requires audiotaping of the interview and the preparation of a transcript of the interview (this is where the tape of the interview is listened to and typed). The audiotapes will be retained in a secure location at the Student Counseling Center, 900 Volunteer Blvd. , University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996. After the transcripts are completed, the tapes will be erased. The transcripts will be retained in a locked file for three years at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. It is your prerogative to review your audiotapes upon request at a mutually agreed upon time and place, between the interview and when the tapes are erased. After that point, if you so request, a copy of the transcript of your interview can be provided to you until the end of the three year period, after which all records will be destroyed. Every precaution will be made to insure confidentiality of records. This informed consent statement will also be kept in the aforementioned locked filing cabinet, along with the transcripts for three years and then will be destroyed.

I have read the above statement and agree to participate in the research. In addition, I am aware that:

(1) My name and audiotapes will remain confidential and the tapes will be erased after transcripts of them are prepared.
(2) I am entitled to have any further inquiries answered regarding the procedures.
(3) Participation is voluntary and I may withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation in this study at any time and for any reason without penalty. For further information about this study or your role in it, contact:
    Melissa A. Bartsch
    University of Tennessee
    Student Counseling Services Center
    900 Volunteer Blvd.
    Knoxville, TN 37996
    (865) 974-2196
    mbartsch@utk.edu
(4) No royalties are due the participant for any subsequent publication.
(5) The primary investigator and other researchers who are graduate students or faculty at the University of Tennessee will review the transcripts for significance.

Signature _____ Date _____

Printed Name _____

APPENDIX C

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS' PLEDGE

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBER'S PLEDGE OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Deciding Whether or Not to Come Out at Work:

African-American Lesbians' Experiences

As a member of this project's research team, I understand that I will be reading transcripts of confidential interviews. The information in these transcripts has been revealed by research subjects who participated in good faith that their interviews would remain strictly confidential. I understand that I have a responsibility to honor this confidentiality agreement. I hereby agree not to share any information in these transcripts with anyone except the primary researcher, Melissa Bartsch (865-974-2196); the research advisor, Dr. Marla Peterson (865-974-5131); or other members of this research team. Any violation of this agreement would constitute a serious breach of ethical standards and I pledge not to do so.

_____ _____

Research Team member (print) Date

_____ _____

Research Team member (signature) Date

APPENDIX D

SAMPLE TRANSCRIPT

I: What I would like for you to do in as much detail as you can, tell me about your experience deciding whether or not to come out to work.

R: Okay. Well, actually, when I went to school in (THE CITY), is when I guess I actually came out of the closet with myself.

I: With yourself?

R: To myself. So, my first job was at the store and I found my first girlfriend. We were going through some things. We really didn't understand what was going on. Scared. So, she used to come see me at work. Well, I realized that my manager and my assistant manager were both gay guys, but actually I chose not to come out to them because some of the coworkers there were so mean to them, so rude, and just very disrespectful.

I: You saw what happened to them and made the decision not to come out there.

R: Yes. So then I moved on. I ended up working at the Arts and Crafts store. My manager there was a gay guy, and I actually, the way I came out to him was I saw him at the club. It was a gay club and he was dressed in drag and he just kind of looked at me and he was like and I was like, "Yeah, yes." So actually told the people there at work that I was and they were like okay we like you for you not, you know, what you do or what you choose not to do, but it was easier then until I got to “the store”. Then I started working at “The Store” and I was more experienced then and I was actually dating a girl there and one of the assistant managers kind of knew about her and he would give her a hard time. He started making references toward me and I felt very uncomfortable.

I: Giving her a hard time in a ...

R: As far as her being a lesbian.

I: So not in a joking way, but in a...

R: In a serious way.

I: In a discriminatory way?

R: Right. So, he made a reference to one of my friends and she came back to me and said something, so me and my girlfriend at that time chose to go higher. Go over his head and have something done about it.

I: Wow.

R: So, he is no longer there, needless to say.

I: Good for you all.

R: Yes. So after that, everybody at "The Store" knew, cause you know, N's this and N's that, you know, but I was like whatever. I am who I am if you don't like me, oh well. So when I moved to (NAME OF CITY), I transferred to this “The Store” here and I was at the point I don't care anymore. You know. I am N. and that is who I am, so if you accept it, you accept it, if you don't then so be it.

I: So at this point, you have made the decision to be out?

R: To be out, regardless.

I: Regardless.

R: Regardless. Just not to my mother.

I: What is different with your mother versus work?

R: Me and my mom have a very close relationship and it has always been me, her, and my brother and just to know that I could actually lose that relationship with her because my mom is a Jehovah's Witness. And what is wrong and bad to them, is they give you a chance to change it and you don't, they leave you alone. They just kind of shun it out.

I: Wow.

R: So, it's...I've tried to tell her and she just told me to hush cause I told her, I said, " You know Ma, I drink a little bit." Why are you telling me this? I don't care. You are perfect to me. So I'm just like, Mom, there are things that I do that... I don't want to know. I just don't want to know. I said "Well, okay." But when I moved here and actually I moved with my girlfriend I told my brother so he was like you are my sister I love you. I don't care.

I: So you've had good experiences.

R: Yeah and some bad. There are some at “The Store” also who choose to disrespect you and talk down and this and that. I'm just like: Don't knock it until you've tried it.

I: I agree with that.

R: I'm just like, accept me for who I am. You know, not for what I do.

I: Well, it sounds like you've been able to accept yourself in that process.

R: I have. I really have.

I: In doing that and I would check that out and I'm not just again putting words in your mouth, but as you came out to yourself, you got to a point where this is N. and I'm not hiding.

R: That is the way it was.

I: Can you speak a little bit about the transition from seeing your supervisor in the gay bar to coming out to the folks at work because it seems as there is a transition there?

R: I think what kind of made it easier is that there was another lady who worked at the craft store with us and she was with him at the club and she was like: You know, everybody there accepts him. They know and so I'm like okay. Still kind of scared cause it's like, you know, I don't want anybody to trying to fight me, or downing me, this, this and that. So, its just once I seen how they accepted me it made it a lot easier and I was just like: Okay, I can do this. This is me. So what if they don't like me. They don't accept me, but to see him there it really is funny. It made it a lot easier. Because even he actually sat down and talked to me about it.

I: Wow. What kind of stuff did he tell you?

R: He was like: If this is who you are, be proud of who you are. You know. I'm going to cry.

I: That's okay.

R: Sorry.

I: You don't have to apologize.

R: Basically that's what really got me is he's like if this is who you are, be who you are. Don't change yourself for anybody. So that kind of stuck in my head because he's just like, you know, he was more in the line of before he even became the manager of that store. He was afraid too because he was like he may not move up. It's just something that had downed him and fault him for, but he was like so be it, you know. If you discriminate against me, I'll take you to court because this is who I am and if I'm getting the job done, this is what I do then I should be able to move up and he told me, he was like, just don't be afraid and I wasn't.

I: He told you it was okay to be you.

R: Yes. He did. I thank him for that. I'm sorry.

I: It's alright. Nothing to apologize for.

R: I said I was not going to cry and not get emotional, but it is an emotional subject.

I: An emotional subject?

R: I still think it is a little fear. I'm not truly, how can I say it? It's like I haven't come out at all because I haven't come out to my mom. So it's like I'm still hiding and still holding it and I haven't come out at all. So that is still kind of touchy because I want to tell her. I really do, but there is still some of that fear there.

I: Fear of …?

R: Loss.

I: It's okay. Do you need a break?

R: I'm okay. That was one thing, too, when I told my brother, actually told my sister-in-law, his wife, and she kind of told him and he called me and he just told me, he said, "Don't you ever be afraid to tell me anything because you are my sister."

I: Wow.

R: He's like: I love you no matter what and, you know, my sister-in-law told me, she said, "It may make it easier for you to tell your mom now because you have your brother backing you." It has always been me, my mom, and brother. We went through everything together. So I actually talked to him about coming out to her and he was like, "Well, if you want me there, I'll be there, but we know momma." I was like yes. He was just like, "If you need me there, I'll be there whenever you want to tell her." He thinks she knows. I don't know. That is one of the things when I started working at "The Store" that made it hard to come out to them because there were so many backstabbing people that would get your information and actually call home. My first girlfriend had someone call her mom and tell her that she was dating women.

I: Oh good Lord.

R: Yes. So you know that made it kind of hard also.

I: There is a lot of fear there not just fear of, you know, getting pushed around on the job or having it used against you there, but also making it a lot more personal bringing it home.

R: Yes, but now I'm just like, well if someone wants to get the number and call my momma, go ahead do it for me. But I have like here some of my coworkers, I have a

good set of friends at work and I actually had a gay guy working with me and me and him became real close cause we kind of picked up on each other.

I: Radar?

R: Yes. It was working.

I: Sometimes it's deafening.

R: Yes. He was having a hard time because he didn't want anybody to know about him and he was like, please don't tell anyone. I was like okay fine I don't have a problem with that, but my friends at work make it easier because we don't deal with everybody in the store anyway so don't worry about it. I'm actually happy here at this "The Store" because people know who I am. They know what I am. If they like me, they like me and if they don't, they don't. Actually when I first transferred, I had to talk to the store manager there, and he is like you know, he's asking me what brought me to (NAME OF CITY). I was like, my significant other. He was like, okay where does he work? I said they work here also. So he is here? They are here already.

I: Ah, the pronouns. Pronoun game.

R: Yes. Well, what department is he in? I said, "She is in housewares." He just kind of looked, you know. I'm like, "Yes, sir." Okay, well you are going to be in the Garden Center alright. It did not phase him. He was just like okay and every morning still to this day he says, "Good morning Nicole, how are you doing." I'm good. So...

I: How was that for you when you said she works in housewares and the next thing he said was you'll be in the Garden Center and he just went with it. How was that for you?

R: I was actually okay. It made me feel kind of good because when he just went on like it didn't bother him, he kind of had his hand on my shoulder like it's okay. You are going to be the Garden Center. So, it actually made me feel good because you know just that little hand on the shoulder patting thing was okay. I was very comfortable with him.

I: Wow. What a great message to receive.

R: It really was. It really was.

I: Something you've mentioned a couple of times is they know who I am and they what I am. Is there a difference between who you are and what you are?

R: I don't know how to explain it. And normally I don't even say that. I say I am N. That's what I am because that is what people ask me are you gay? Are you a lesbian? Are you Bi? I'm (STATED REAL NAME)..

I: That's alright. That will be taken care of.

R: I'm N.. Because pretty much I don't really label myself. Who I am and what I am: I guess is just two different ways to say it because who I am and what I am, I am the same.

I: Yes. What all goes into who you are?

R: Me being N., a strong black woman who is a lesbian and who doesn't care who knows right now.

I: Wow.

R: I think that holds a lot. Because I come from being scared and weak in the workplace of people finding out to I don't care. So I think I'm doing pretty good.

I: It sounds like the presence of other people who are gay helped with that transition.

R: They really did and actually since my roommate came out, she is one of the reasons in (NAME OF CITY) that I came out cause she was so comfortable with me and she shared a couple things with me and I was like, what. It's like well and I told her and she also worked with me at "The Store" and that made it a lot easier also that she helped me out with that too.

I: That's awesome. When I asked you what all goes into being you, the first thing you said was, "I am a strong black woman." How does black woman and lesbian go together or is there a conflict between the two?

R: You know, sometimes I think it is, just by perceiving but what other people say because it is like, I have heard references towards you can see like two white women in the club, oh they don't know what they are doing they are just drunk, you know, and they could be doing their thing. They could be together.

I: Doing their thing?

R; Being lesbians. Having their intimate moment on the dance floor. Kissing. Dancing.

I: Dancing up close and personal?

I: Right. Right and it is mostly from guys that I hear it from. That they can see two black women doing the same thing and it is like oh my gosh those are black women. What are they doing? No and it just. Sometimes I'm like: What is the difference?

Wait a minute we are all women. Why the white women it is okay, you know, they are basically shunned off as they don't know what they are doing, they are just drunk but then the two black women can do the same thing and its something wrong. So within me, I don't think it is a conflict within itself being black and being a lesbian woman, you know, but just how I hear other people talk I think they think it is a conflict and its basically like, okay you are black that's one strike. You are a woman, there is another and then you are gay. That's three strikes you are through.

I: You are not the first person I've talked to how said that very thing.

R: Really?

I: What do you make of it?

R: This is one of those little nonchalant attitudes. It is oh well. You know I'm accept me. I am black, I am a woman and I am gay. Accept it or don't accept it. It's like how my mom used to tell me people get mad at you: Do they pay your bills? No. Do they feed you? No. Do they come home to you every night? No. Then don't worry about it. As long as you household is happy, don't worry about what is going on out there. I guess it is kind of the way I look at it.

I: I like your mom's advice.

R: I guess I can say I am a strong black woman but when it comes to that mom, I am a baby again. Don't want to hurt her. Don't want to lose that relationship. And she has actually asked me and my sister-in-law is like, "That was your chance, you should have told her." I was like I couldn't. I kind of froze like mom everybody is not gay you know and like, I told her if I was, I wouldn't tell you and she was like, huh? I was like if I was, I wouldn't tell you and she asked why and I said because I don't want to lose our relationship with you and she said you are right and I don't want to talk about this anymore.

I: Not really the answer you were looking for I bet.

R; No. No. So I think eventually I will tell her so I can be a happier person because right now I wouldn't really say I am happy, I am content with what is going on and I think I'll be happy when I do tell her before somebody at work does.

I: Lord I hope that is the case because that would be so wrong.

R: It would but I guess that would be something I would just have to face. Sorry.

I: It's alright.

R: I'm going to grab some tissue.

I: That's fine.

R: I'm okay now. I'm okay now.

I: You are okay. What sorts of questions were you expecting me to ask that I haven't asked yet?

R: Actually I felt I would be doing all the talking but it is kind of weird cause I was like okay that one question is going to be what this is all about so that is actually is what I was expecting.

I: Yes.

R: It just for me to explain and talk and finally get my story out. You make it so comfortable. You really do.

I: Well thank you. That is good to hear. How old were you when you came out to yourself?

R: I knew that question was coming. It is like actually, other than my roommate, you would be the first to know. I actually when I was in the sixth grade is when I kind of understood my feelings in what was going on because I met this girl...

I: Gosh.

R: And I guess, at the time, I didn't know what was going on but I knew what was going on, because I was like okay I like this. I like this and that was just like, one of those okay mom, I'm going to spend the night at my girlfriend's house, okay, go ahead.

I: You say you knew what was going on but you didn't. The part that didn't, was that you didn't have a name for it?

R: Exactly. Exactly. Didn't have a name for it. I just knew. I felt good inside. I was just like, I feel good, this feels good, you know. The emotional attachment. It just felt good and with that girl, it didn't last long cause it was like, okay, I'm not sure what this is, I'm not sure if this is right, you know, and I ended up getting a boyfriend in high school and was with him for five years. The thing is he was in school in Iowa and I was in school in Valdosta and he just asked me, "Are you cheating on me?" No because I didn't have the desire to be with him or any other guy and I finally told him cause he was just like, you are such a good girl. Cause actually it took probably three years of the five we were together to actually have sex with him.

I: Wow.

R: And I just did not enjoy it. It was like, this is not what I want and so when I got to college and I met my first real girlfriend, real relationship commitment it was the best thing. Wow.

I: At that point did you have a name for it?

R: Then I knew okay, this is what people call lesbians. You know and I had my fair share of seeing women together, I'm just like I wish I could do that. I want to be out like that. Open like that and then when I met my first real girlfriend, my first real relationship, it was okay. It was like that and the thing too is that I was in a sorority and ...They talk of how they have their high morals and high standards and this and that and my girlfriend went to pledge for my sorority and they turned her down because they heard rumors that me and her were together. That we were girlfriends.

I: But you were already in.

R: I was already in.

I: And not out?

R: Not quite out with them. They heard rumors of that so they were just like, "No, we are not going to accept her." I asked why? Because we have these morals that we hold and this, this and that and I was like, "Okay what is the difference in you being married but you are sleeping around on your husband? That's not considered morals?" And they just really did not see it the same way. So she didn't make it in, but that is okay.

I: Did you stay in?

R: No. I left alone. I did not actually after those group of people left, I did not really participate in any functions until actually I was out of school and I would see them around and I was like, oh, hi, you know, and I would greet them whatever.

I: Not until you were alone.

R: Right. Okay maybe these people were better about it and then there was. I did have a sorority sister that was gay and she was all alone and so me and her talked. At that time, she was one of the ones with me, but she never would say anything because she wanted my girlfriend to be a part of it. Part of the sorority and I did not know she was gay until now and now we are as close as ever.

I: Wow. How is that for you being in the group and having your girlfriend turned downed unable to pledge or go over?

R: It hurt. It really did hurt cause that was something else that was going to bring us even closer cause we were going to be, that was my sister then, and it really hurt so that is why like, I don't want to be part of it anymore. You all can't accept someone for whom they are, then so be it. I don't want to be a part of it.

I: When your sorority asked you if, well, did they ask you if it was true or when they mentioned the rumors?

R: One of them actually asked me if it was true and I looked at her and said, "Do you think it is true because regardless if I tell you if it is or isn't, you are going to believe what you want anyway?" She said, "I believe you are." I said, "So be it. That is what you believe."

I: How is that for you?

R: At the time, it was still kind of scary because I still wanted to be accepted, but then I was like, you are doing this to someone I love so whatever. It is just like I let them think what they want to think. So I did.

I: How do you think that experience helped you to decide how to deal with coming out at work or not coming out at work?

R: I think it actually gave me the strength to actually be able to handle what could be said to me at work so I think it actually gave me the strength to do it. To say, "You know what? I don't care. I can walk in this store holding my girlfriend's hand. I will give her a kiss if I want to. I don't care."

I: Wow and the smile on your face when you say that is just so big.

R: Because I mean it. Like so what? Like I said, don't knock it until you try it and now I realize too that my first girlfriend is now my best friend and she still lives in Boston. We talk every day and she was telling me there are a lot of girls now at that "The Store" who are actually coming out.

I: Wow.

R: And it was some of the ones who were like, that is nasty. How can you do that? Ooh, let me try!

I: Yes.

R: Actually there are a lot of them coming out and since they are black women, so it is like, well, more power to them.

I: What do you think about that?

R: That it is great. I think it is wonderful that they actually have the courage to go ahead and come out.

I: Do you think you played a role in that?

R: I would like to think so. I really would. Especially getting the bad seed out that was there, that manager, that one manager. That is the same "The Store", so I like to think so.

I: Sure sounds like it.

R: I would like to think so.

I: What does it mean to you that you did?

R: Of course it makes me feel good to think that I had a part in that. That actually somebody saw what I was doing as a strength and as something to hold on to, to grasp to, and say you know what, if she can do it, I can do it too. That is something wonderful to me. It makes me feel good.

I: It almost sounds as if you have given that gift to others that the one manager gave to you.

R: I never thought about it. I never thought about that until now. That's good and I hope I can help someone else and pass it on. I really do. I am so emotional.

I: That's alright. That's my forte. It works well. What would you like him to know?

R: That manager? Or Anybody?

I: Anybody. Or both.

R: Actually if I could find him I would tell him thank you and give him the biggest hug and say thank you and to everybody else is don't be afraid. Be who you are because that is the only way you are going to be truly happy.

I: So for you, being out it means being happy?

R: Yes. It really does because I am able to be who I am.

I: Are there other things that it means to you?

R: Being out? I think the main thing is being happy and seeing myself as somebody just a person like everybody else. It is just I choose to love a woman and not a man. Oh well. It is better anyway. I am sorry. I had to throw that in there.

I: That is alright. It is official. You got it on record.

R: Oh, gosh. It just feels good to be me, you know, and not having to worry about hiding this and hiding that at work or me and my girlfriend going into "The Store" and having to walk three to four feet apart.

I: Separate aisles.

R: Yes. And now it is like oh well and even, well, we recently broke up but...

I: Sorry to hear that.

R: We both still work at "The Store" and when we were together she would come back to the Garden Center to see me and she would kiss me.

I: Wow.

R: I usually worked the morning shift and she works the evening shift so she would come back there and kiss me. It used to be that I would be like, don't do that, you know, someone is watching, but now it is like hey, baby, you know, hope you have a good day. Give her a hug, get my kiss and that was it. I didn't care who was watching.

I: What changed for you from the no, baby, someone is watching to it being okay?

R: I think it was actually my girlfriend saying, "Are you ashamed of me?" I'm like, no. Then why not? It really made me think about it. It's like I am not ashamed to be with her. I am happy to be with her so why can't I show my love. Heterosexual people do it every day.

I: And a lot more.

R: Yes. That is the truth. So, you know, and the first day at work, I did it when she came back there and I was like, come here I have to tell you something. She came back there and I gave her a kiss on the cheek and she was just like, I can't believe you done that. I was like, I love you, I said, and I'm not ashamed to tell anybody. That made her feel good.

I: I bet.

R: And it made me feel good cause it's like who cares. Oh, well. You know my only thing then was I can't do this on the clock.

I: I mean if you are getting paid for it that is a whole other story.

R: Yes, but yes, we were able to go to "The Store" after work and hold hands and walk and don't care if a manager sees it, so, you know. It was just good being out.

I: It sounds like it.

R: It is.

I: Are there things that I haven't asked about yet that you think are important to be included?

R: No. I think actually I have kind of said everything. Kind of put it all out on the table.

I: I'm trying to jog my memory and see if there is anything that I haven't asked that I wanted to come back to. It is a down side not taking notes but I think it is better to go with the flow. In a couple different places in the interview, you have very strong emotional reactions, how do you think those emotional reactions relate to what we are talking about?

R: I think it is, the relation is, it is really deep because there are strong points of my emotions are basically towards my mom and for me to come out at work and let everybody else know, but yet and still hide it from her and that is a deep seed there and the thing is I really do want to tell her. Like if I can tell those people at work, I know it is different because I don't care what they think. They don't pay my bills, they don't do this but, you know, my brother told me, too, you are a 28-year-old woman you have to live your life. You have to be happy. You can no longer live it for momma. I think about that often.

I: That is also a tough one to reconcile.

R: Actually I think I will be able to tell her after this. Oh, gosh. I really do so I can stop all this crying.

I: What about what we've been talking about got you there.

R: I guess just my feelings and emotions behind it and to be able to, if someone here sees this, you know, gets a hold of this, its just like, okay there you go again telling everybody else but you can't tell the one person who means the most to you and that is tough, but that is why I think after this because this is something, I just really think it helped. I really do.

I: I am also aware of that situation and sure sounds like you perceive the potential loss as being a lot greater than what you would have at work.

R: Yes. I would say that. That's my mom. That's my heart, but I do have to realize that I am her child and she should love me regardless and she has always told me before, "You are my child and I love you no matter what. I will always love you, you know." It is just one of those things I don't want to disappoint her. Even with work, I don't want to disappoint her.

I: In being other than her expectation would disappoint her?

R: I think so. I really do. Yes.

I: At some point, did you have a similar approach to the folks at work?

R: Actually yes. We actually had a door greeter and her name was (NAME) and she treated me just like her daughter because she had no kids and she actually came up to me one day and asked me, she was like, I hear you talking to some girl who works here, this, this and this. And I was like, "Well, (NAME), you know I have friends here whatever." She's like, "No, I mean together like a relationship." I'm like, "Well, (NAME), why are you saying that?" Okay, I love her to death and that is one person I didn't want to let down either and I was supposed to go eat with her that night and I went to her house and her and her husband were just talking to me and I told her, "I can't lie to you. I have to tell you." She is like what? I said, "I am gay." I said, "I do date a woman." She is like: Have you told your momma? That is the first thing she said. I'm like, "No ma'am." She is like, okay. She didn't treat me any different at work or outside of work and she was perceived to everyone at "The Store" as a Christian woman. She read the Bible and that is what she lived by, this and that and that is what she told me. I will not judge you cause I am not the one to judge. So that should have made it easier to tell momma also but it didn't.

I: You know, you say, it should but who knows what can make it easier?

R: Actually I do think after this I will be able to tell her. I really do. I really do. It makes me feel good to know that I want to tell her. I am ready to tell her. I'm ready to tell her. You look surprised.

R: I am.

I: I realize I am, too. This was unexpected. What surprises you about it?

R: Because I don't want to disappoint my mom and when it comes to my mom, its like I bow down cause I don't want to disappoint her, but I realize there has been other ways I have disappointed her and we survived it. She got mad but she got over it and by her now actually being a Jehovah's Witness and being so strong within it, she

should have to realize, yes they perceive it as wrong, but I am her daughter and she can't judge me. She has to leave that to Jehovah to judge me, so I'm going to tell her. That makes me feel as though something has been lifted off of me now and that was the thing when me and my girlfriend here when we moved here, we first stayed in a two bedroom. It was me and my girlfriend and then my roommate and my mom was like, "Do you have separate rooms?" "No, ma'am, me and (NAME) share this room and (NAME) has hers. It was like, oh, and then she kind of changed the subject. Then one way I tried to tell her, I actually used work, you know, like mom, me and Tiffany are so close, the people at work are like you are all together and this and this and it surprised me because she was like, you all can be close it doesn't matter. Don't worry about what they are telling you and then she goes back to do they pay your bills? Do they do this, do they do that? Its like okay I could use a lot of work issues to try and tell her, but it just hasn't really come out. Actually with my first girlfriend, I kind of told her I had feelings for her (my first girlfriend), and my mom was just like, well there not there anymore, right? And its like, well, we haven't, we don't do anything. We both have those feelings for each other and it was kind of like I stretched the truth a little bit.

I: You were testing the waters.

R: Yes and she didn't stop talking to me. She didn't change, so now some of the people at work who tell me, well my sister is gay or my son is gay and one of my coworkers thinks her son is gay and she has talked to me on how to approach it, how to ask him what he is feeling. It's like he is always talking about boys. He never really talks about, you know, he is 14, it is a guy thing, you know. It is so cute. I was over there after work and he came out in a pair of pumps. He was so precious and he was working those pumps. Oh, gosh. He was working them and she was like, see that? He does that! I'm like, that is your son love him if that is what he chooses to do and she told me that by being around me at work, seeing me and my girlfriend, ex-girlfriend, kind of helped her to understand the feelings that are involved and how deeply and emotional it can be.

I: And how it is not much different than between a man and a woman.

R: Yes and there are guys at work who want to talk to me, you know, how can you do that, you know what's that, and I tell them, you know my feelings for a woman are much more deeper than they were with a man. You guys just don't know how to act. Now it is easy to the guys at work, hey do you want to go out? No I have a girlfriend. It's like oh okay, you are one of them. Yes, I am and go on about my business. Keep working. And like at work on my name badge, I have little rainbow stickers on my badge, good to go and my girlfriend at the time I put little rainbow stickers on her badge. There are a lot of reactions at work as far as you don't look like one. You don't act like one. How is one supposed to act, you know? It's like you don't carry yourself, how is "one" supposed to carry them, how are they supposed to

carry themselves? What are we supposed to do? We are just like everybody else. People at work, they get over it. They will be okay.

I: Is there anything I haven't asked you about that you feel is important or you would like to have included?

R: I think we covered it.

I: Do we feel done?

R Yes.

I: Then we are.

APPENDIX E

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Participant Profiles

Black Flag

Black Flag is an African-American woman in her mid-30's. She works in higher education in the Northeastern United States and has earned two graduate degrees. She has been employed in various settings and in various regions of the United States. With regard to her experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, she described herself as "having a life of in and out." In her present position of employment, she is out; however, in most of her employment positions, she has elected not to come out.

M

M is an African-American woman in her late 30's. She is employed presently in a fire department in the Southeastern United States. She has two children and is planning to return to school and pursue an undergraduate degree. With regard to her experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, she noted that she came out to herself just a few years ago and that in her present employment position, she is not out.

KeKe

KeKe is an African-American woman in her early 30's. She is employed presently in a fire department in the Southeastern United States. She has earned a graduate degree and is seeking advancement in the fire department. With regard to her experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, she noted that she has been out in the past, and has been outed, also, and that, ultimately, she would like to be known for her work performance above all else.

Nicole

Nicole is an African-American woman in her late 20's. She works for a national retail store in the Southeastern United States and has earned an undergraduate degree. With regard to her experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, she is out in her present position of employment and has been out in most of her employment positions. She noted that deciding whether or not to come out to her family has been more difficult than deciding whether or not to come out at work.

SN

SN is an African-American woman in her late 20's. She works in higher education in the Southeastern United States and has earned a graduate degree. With regard to her experiences deciding whether or not to come out at work, she noted that she was out throughout her graduate training and that she is out in her present employment position.

VITA

Melissa Ann Bartsch was born in Ft. Benning, Georgia on June 20, 1974, and lived in Columbus, Georgia. She attended Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic school as an elementary student and, as a high school student, attended Pacelli High School.

Melissa moved to Americus, Georgia in 1992 to attend Georgia Southwestern State University where she completed a Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in Psychology and Sociology. Melissa graduated from Georgia Southwestern State University in 1996. While attending college in Americus, Georgia, she was also a three-sport varsity athlete in basketball, tennis, and softball.

In 1996, Melissa began her graduate work at the University of Georgia in Student Personnel in Higher Education with a counseling emphasis. While completing this degree, Melissa worked in the Division of Academic Assistance and completed an internship at the University's Counseling and Testing Center. She completed her Master of Education degree in 1998.

Currently, Melissa attends the University of Tennessee where she will complete her Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education with a major in Counseling Psychology. While at the University of Tennessee, Melissa has worked in the College of Arts & Sciences Advising Center and has taught numerous courses. At present, she is completing her pre-doctoral internship with emphases in Addictive Behaviors and in Group Therapy at the University of Tennessee Student Counseling Services Center and plans to continue working in a therapy setting and with addictive behavior issues in the future.