NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES: THE USE OF DISSONANCE REDUCTION STRATEGIES IN RESPONDING TO THE DEFENSE OF MARRIAGE ACT

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ii

ABSTRACT x

CHAPTER

I. A HISTORY OF FEAR AND DISCRIMINATION 1

Sick, Criminal, and Unequal 4

Organization of Chapters 7

II. AN EXPLICATION OF GROUNDED THEORY 11

Origins of Grounded Theory 11

The Evolution of and Developments in Grounded Theory 14

Similarities and Differences with Other Qualitative Methods 18

Grounded Theory Techniques 21

Theoretical Sampling 22

Systematic Coding 23

Memo-Writing 31

III. METHODOLOGY 34

Justification for the Use of Grounded Theory 34

Method 37

Participants 38

Procedures 40

IV. DEFENSE OF IDENTITY ACTS: UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF DISSONANCE REDUCTION IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY 44

Messages 45

Access to Rights 45

Social Acceptance of Homosexuality 47

Stalling Gay Rights 49

Experiencing Dissonance 51

Responding to Messages 54

Decreasing the Relevance of Negative Messages 54

Seeking the Silver Lining 56

Increasing the Value of Affirmative Messages While Decreasing the Value of Negative Messages 58

Rationalizing the Existence of Negative Messages 62

Discussion 67

Reduction is Continual 68

Various Dissonance Reduction Strategies 69

Necessity for Affirmative/Consistent Messages 72

Desire for Escape 73

V. LOOKING BEYOND DOMA 76

Getting to Know the Interpreter 78

Directions for Future Research 81

To Members of the Gay and Lesbian Community 84

Conclusion 87

REFERENCES 88

APPENDICES

A. STATE PROHIBITIONS ON MARRIAGE FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES 95

B. INFORMED CONSTENT FORM 96

C. DETAILED PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS 98

D. INTERVIEW GUIDE 102

ABSTRACT

This thesis utilizes grounded theory to examine the ways in which members of the gay and lesbian community negotiate their identities in light of the Defense of Marriage Act. Interviews with 16 gay and lesbian individuals revealed three types of negative messages communicated by DOMA. Participants also discussed four strategies for reducing the dissonance produced by these messages: decreasing the relevance of negative messages, seeking the silver lining, increasing the value of affirmative messages while decreasing the value of negative messages, and rationalizing the existence of negative messages. Ultimately, this thesis articulates four conclusions concerning dissonance reduction in the lesbian and gay community. Future directions for research in the areas of dissonance reduction and identity negotiation are explored.

CHAPTER I

A HISTORY OF FEAR AND DISCRIMINATION

> *I gather from your letter that your son is homosexual. I am most impressed by the fact that you do not mention this term yourself in your information about him. May I question you, why do you avoid it? Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation. It cannot be classified as an illness.… It is a great injustice to persecute homosexuality as a crime, and cruelty, too.*
>
> Letter to an American Mother
> Sigmund Freud
> April 9, 1935

Each semester I teach a unit on audience analysis in my public speaking classes. As part of that unit my students discuss personal values, political views, and religious beliefs. This discussion often leads to students expressing personal opinions on a number of controversial issues, and I challenge my students to comment on issues that are currently illegal that they feel should be legal. This discussion is often filled with claims that marijuana, underage drinking, gambling, and even prostitution should be legal. Then I turn the discussion and ask what issues are currently legal that should be illegal. Many students want to see driving while talking on a cell phone become illegal, and one bold student in the back will usually demand that 8:00 AM classes be outlawed.

These conversations have always remained fairly light-hearted. My students never seemed to have the courage to publicly acknowledge some of their darker beliefs, until the fall of 2005. It was a Tuesday morning, early in October. I had been lecturing for a while on the importance of adapting messages to particular audiences, and I decided to

wrap class up with the exercise I just described so that my students could engage in a little audience analysis of their own.

The discussion began as any other might; no one was really saying much at all. But soon things began to pick up a bit, and before long all the standard responses had been shouted out. I wish now that I had let the discussion end there. I wish that I had let the class go early, but I did not. Instead, I kept pushing for more and more responses, hoping to coax a few more students out of their usually shy and quiet ways. It worked. I heard someone speak up. Before realizing even what was said, I noticed that the contribution to our discussion had come from a very quiet, sometimes sleeping football player who always, always sat in the back row. “What was that,” I asked.

“I said that being gay should be illegal,” the football player responded, this time with a little more determination. He had said what I thought he had the first time, but I could not respond with the same level of candor. No, I had to bite my tongued. I could not allow my personal concerns, thoughts, or even my lifestyle to interrupt my teaching. So, I acknowledged the comment with a simple nod and continued with the activity, but I was immediately met with an awkward silence. The class had clearly been made uncomfortable by the suggestion that “being gay” should be illegal. Did they somehow know that I was gay? Could they tell how bothered I truly was by this comment? Perhaps, but I was determined not to let this narrow-minded opinion disrupt what had been an otherwise productive conversation. Gradually the conversation picked back up, and we were able to continue our discussion of values for the remainder of class.

When class was over my students quickly filed out of the classroom, but I remained seated on a desk in the front of the room. Now I could feel the emotions I had refused to allow myself to feel for the last fifteen minutes. One emotion, anger, hit me like a freight train. The disbelief that had immediately followed this unimaginable comment was gone, and in its place was anger. I was angry with this close-minded student. I was, once again, angry with every person I had encountered in my life that refused to accept me simply because I was gay, and I was angry with all the close-minded people I had never met but that I knew were out there.

A few moments later I realized I was still sitting on the desk were I had been when class ended. As I slowly walked down the hallway towards my office a new question entered my mind. How legal is homosexuality, really? I knew that I was never going to be sent to prison for being gay, but I also knew that homosexuality still carried a heavy stigma.

My first inclination was to question why this stigma existed. After all, notable psychologist like Sigmund Freud had been fighting this stigma for years. Why was it still there? I finally realized there was no easy answer to my question. In fact, there was no answer to be found that would provide me with any sense of relief, so I began to ask other questions. How do homosexuals experience this stigma and oppression? What are the sources of oppression, and how do we cope with it? These are the questions that drove me to the research that is present in this thesis.

Sick, Criminal, and Unequal

In recent years, the debate over same-sex marriage has become a hot button issue in the United States for many politicians and citizens alike, but the oppression of homosexuals in this country is not nearly as new as the debate over their right to get married. For much of the 20th century homosexuality was officially classified and treated as a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), the World Health Organization (WHO), and countless other medical affiliates. Oftentimes, homosexuals underwent shock therapy, aversion therapy, and were even exposed to libido-reducing drugs in an attempt to "cure" them of their illness (Taylor, 1999). This appraisal and treatment of homosexuality persisted, systemically, in the United States until 1973 when the APA finally removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders, but the WHO continued to categorize homosexuality as a pathological disorder until 1988 (Rose, 1994).

Unfortunately, the stigma of being mentally ill is not the only form of oppression that homosexuals have faced. In the spring of 1919, naval officers at the Newport Naval Training Station in Rhode Island ordered a group of young enlisted sailors into the local community to investigate the "immoral conditions" they suspected of taking place. These young sailors were to uncover all they could about homosexual activity in Newport, and based on the "evidence" discovered naval and local authorities arrested and tried more than 35 individuals. The charge faced by many of these "criminals" – being a lewd and wonton person (Chauncey, 1985). This sort of prosecution went largely unchecked and unnoticed in the United States until fall of 1998.

On September 17, 1998, John G. Lawrence and his partner Tyron Garner were arrested by Harris County Police officers at Lawrence's home in Houston, Texas. Lawrence and Garner were charged with and subsequently convicted of violating the Texas statute prohibiting acts of sodomy (Duggan, 1998). Lawrence and Garner appealed their conviction all the way to the United States Supreme Court where the convictions were finally overturned in a 6-3 decision on June 26, 2003. In addition to overturning the convictions of Lawrence and Garner, the Justices of the Supreme Court also saw fit to rule on the constitutionality of sodomy laws across the nation. Writing for the majority Justice Anthony Kennedy stated that upholding the validity and constitutionality of existing sodomy laws would, in essence, provide credence to the social stigma faced by homosexuals. Moreover, the perpetuation of this social stigma would demean the lives of homosexuals and invite discrimination in both the private and public sphere (Kennedy, 2003). The decision in the case of *Lawrence et al. v. Texas*, however, did not bring the discrimination of homosexuals to a halt. Homosexuals were still denied many rights that their heterosexual counterparts took for granted. The most notable of these rights is the right to marry.

On September 21, 1996, President William Jefferson Clinton had signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act (Winerip, 1996; commonly referred to as DOMA). This piece of legislation, which received overwhelming support in both houses of Congress, was comprised of two primary provisions. The first of these provisions granted each state the authority to decide for itself whether or not it would recognize the same-sex marriages conveyed by other states. The second provision defined marriage, for the

purposes of the Federal Government, as “a legal union of one man and one woman as husband and wife” and defined spouse as “a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife” (Defense of Marriage Act, 1996).

As a result of the first provision, each state has been forced to decide individually how it would regard same-sex marriage. To date, 19 states have ratified constitutional amendments restricting marriage to one man and one woman and 26 states have passed laws restricting marriage to one man and one woman (Human Rights Campaign, 2006; see Appendix A for a list of these states), but on November 18, 2003, in the case of *Goodridge et al. v. The Department of Public Health*, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled (4-3) that the state’s ban on same-sex marriage was unconstitutional since the constitution of the state of Massachusetts prohibits the “creation of second-class citizens” (Burge, 2003; p. A1). The court gave the legislature 180 days to change the law, and on May 17, 2004, the ruling of the court went into effect, and Massachusetts became the first state to recognize same-sex marriages.

Despite the recent events in Massachusetts, the overall tenor of the messages communicated by our government has remained very unwelcoming for members of the gay and lesbian community. Forty-five states have significantly restricted the marriage rights of homosexuals and the Federal Government appears reluctant, at best, to ensure the equal treatment of these individuals. Surely, the actions of politicians on the state and federal level communicate highly contentious messages to roughly 10% of the population that might identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Friedman & Downey, 1994; Stronski-Huwiler & Remafedi, 1998), but beyond the occasional pride march, protest rally, or

PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) meeting the voices of these marginalized individuals are often squelched by the louder, more conservative voices of the religious right who unabashedly support these and other discriminatory policies.

This thesis seeks to provide a space where members of the lesbian and gay community can speak of their experience in a society that is predominantly in opposition to their lifestyle, denies them many rights granted to their heterosexual counterparts, and on occasion even threatens their existence. It is my contention that policies such as DOMA contribute to the process of negotiating identities. This stance stance is founded upon the assumption that these governmental policies contribute to a person's sense of self as these messages are connected to the generalized other consisting of the self, peers, and society (Mead, 1934). In seeking to understand how lesbian and gay individuals perceive these messages it is crucial to hear their voices in relation to such occurrences. As such, this research takes a decidedly interpretive approach void of *a priori* assumptions as a means of privileging the voices of gay and lesbian individuals. Specifically, the overarching research question guiding this thesis is "how do members of the gay and lesbian community negotiate identity in light of the Defense of Marriage Act?"

Organization of Chapters

This thesis is divided into five chapters as a means of effectively exploring how members of the gay and lesbian community perceive the Defense of Marriage Act as they actively negotiate their identities. While a great deal of research has been devoted to the study of identity formation and negotiation (e.g., Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht

& Faulkner, 2000; Petronio, 1991; Taylor, 1999), notably absent from this research is the examination of public policy and its role in identity negotiations. This first chapter has served as a preview of how policies might be examined in relation to identity negotiation.

Chapter Two

Since data collection and analysis during this project has been guided by the assumptions of a grounded theory approach to qualitative research (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), chapter two will offer a comprehensive explanation of this methodological approach. Particular attention will be paid to the history and evolution of the method. Due to recent developments in the area of grounded theory, one would be remiss to ignore the tensions that have developed between Glaser and Strauss over the past two decades (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992). Thus, chapter two will also attempt to highlight some of the differences that exist between Glaser's view of grounded theory and that of Strauss. Additionally, because this thesis attempts to reject the positivist assumptions usually associated with ground theory, this chapter will explain the concept of a constructive grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke, 2003, 2005; Meyer, 2004). Finally, chapter two will conclude with a detailed discussion of the techniques that set grounded theory apart from other approaches to qualitative research.

Chapter Three

The third chapter begins by discussing several justifications for the use of a grounded theory approach. Procedures for the collection and analysis of data are outlined in detail as a means of explicating the path by which these participants' experiences emerged and were subsequently interpreted. Finally, this chapter provides demographic

descriptors for the 16 participants as a way of offering insight in to their cultural identities. Furthermore, the geographic context is given in order to situate participants in a specific place and time.

Chapter Four

In the spirit of interpretive research, this chapter privileges the voices and narratives of participants with the explicit intent of understanding how these individuals make sense of and respond to the messages communicated by the Defense of Marriage Act. The narratives present in my conversations with 16 participants provide evidence for three possible interpretations of DOMA's messages. These interpretations include: messages concerning access to rights, messages concerning social acceptance of homosexuality, and messages designed to stall the gay rights movement. Following a discussion of these interpretations, this chapter also relies on the voices of gay and lesbian individuals to illustrate the existence of psychological tensions produced by these messages. Most importantly, this chapter also reports the use of four dissonance reduction strategies by participants in their attempt to maintain a positive self-image. Participants appear to reduce dissonance by decreasing the relevance of negative messages, seeking the silver lining, increasing the value of affirmative messages while decreasing the value of negative messages, and rationalizing the existence of negative messages. Chapter four closes with a discussion of theoretical conclusions drawn from the experiences and perceptions of participants.

Chapter Five

Chapter five discusses implications of this research for the gay and lesbian community and provides directions for future research concerning the role of public policy in the formation and negotiation of identities. Specifically, direction is given for furthering research among individuals who identify as members of marginalized groups. In order to deepen our understanding of dissonance reduction in the gay and lesbian community this chapter suggests that future research might seek to examine other segments of the gay and lesbian population. Particularly, research might explore individuals who stand in the intersections of sexuality and other cultural locations (i.e., race, gender, non/able-bodiedness, religion; Heuman, 2004). Furthermore, this chapter elucidates numerous suggestions for future research derived for the four conclusions outlined in chapter four. Of particular interest might be: the possible long-term effect of exposure to dissonant messages, the motivating factors influencing the use of certain dissonance reduction strategies, the resilience of affirmative messages, and the possible presence of a desire for escape in other contexts.

CHAPTER II

EXPLICATING THE GROUNDED THEORY APPROACH

In their book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) introduced a new method of qualitative research. This new methodological perspective, commonly known as grounded theory, contested the belief that qualitative research could do little more than produce vividly descriptive case studies. Instead, Glaser and Strauss offered a means of performing qualitative work that provided researchers with the tools necessary for developing theory.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with an understanding of the origins of grounded theory and its evolution over the past thirty-nine years. Additionally, this chapter will highlight some of the similarities and differences between grounded theory and other modes of conducting qualitative research. In doing so, particular attention will be paid to a discussion of grounded theory's unique techniques. This comprehensive overview of grounded theory is necessary for understanding why the utilization of this particular method is appropriate for better understanding how members of the gay and lesbian negotiate their identities in light of the messages communicated by Defense of Marriage Act (see Chapter 3 for a justification of this methodological decision).

The Origins of Grounded Theory

While Glaser and Strauss were both sociologists, they came to the discipline from very different philosophical and research traditions. Glaser studied at Columbia

University under the direction of Paul Lazarsfeld. Lazarsfeld's research and teaching was couched in the philosophical assumptions of quantitative research. Furthermore, the Columbia tradition focused on the use of empirical research to develop theory, and it was while researching in this manner that Glaser realized a need for "making comparisons between data to identify, develop, and relate concepts" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, p. 10). Strauss, on the other hand, studied at the University of Chicago, which unlike Columbia, focused on qualitative based investigations. This qualitative training meant that Strauss was aware of a need for fieldwork and a sensitivity towards the evolving nature of events.

Despite all their differences, however, Glaser and Strauss, while at the University of California at San Francisco, were able to collaborate on a research project aimed at understanding how hospital staff members talked about the impending and eventual death of terminally ill patients. Through this research, Glaser and Strauss uncovered the concept of social loss, which explained how staff members discussed the impact that a particular death might have on a family or even society at large (Glaser & Strauss, 1965, 1968; Strauss & Glaser, 1970). It is important to note here that the monographs produced by this research were highly influenced by one of the few shared Chicago and Columbia traditions – publishing research findings in a way that was accessible to individuals, who could truly benefit from the knowledge provided (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a). Glaser and Strauss made this point clear in the preface of their book *Time for Dying* (1968):

> This book, like our preceding book (*Awareness of Dying*), is directed to two audiences. Because we wish to contribute toward making the management of dying – by health professionals, families and patients – more rational and compassionate, we have written this book, first of all, for those who must work with and give care to the dying. Our discussion is, however, not simple narrative or description; it is a "rendition of reality," informed by a rather densely woven

> and fairly abstract theoretical scheme. This scheme evolved gradually during the course of our research. The second audience we anticipate for this volume, therefore, is social scientists who are less interested in dying than they are in useful substantive theory. (p. vii)

As Glaser and Strauss began their analysis of the management of death in the California hospital system, they utilized the methodological assumptions and strategies of the constant comparative method. Glaser claimed that this method – which combined explicit coding based on the work of Becker and Geer (1960) with constant analytical comparison – would "increase the battery of alternative approaches useful to [qualitative] researchers" (1965, p. 436) as well as aid researchers in developing theories that were grounded in the data.

After publishing their first book, *Awareness of Dying* (1965), Glaser and Strauss codified the principles of the constant comparative method in the book *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967) and thereby entered into the raging methodological debate of the mid-1960s. By this time the tradition of qualitative research was beginning to disappear from the field of sociology (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998b). As methods of quantification became more and more advanced, researchers began to embrace the positivistic assumptions that had traditionally governed research in the natural sciences. These newly devout positivists dismissed qualitative research as invalid and biased as this fresh epistemological framework inspired these social scientists to design research projects that employed replicable experiments, provisional hypotheses, and perhaps most importantly objective analysis of the data. Ideally, these studies would result in the discovery of confirmable evidence and generalizable explanation of an

external world, but rarely did these studies lead to the construction or development of new theory (Charmaz, 2006).

In *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (1967), Glaser and Strauss reject these positivistic assumptions in favor of the pragmatist views of Dewey (1922), Mead (1934), and Blumer (1969). This framework led Glaser and Strauss to produce a methodology that privileged fieldwork, recognized the complexity and variability of human phenomena, embraced a symbolic interactionist view of meaning construction, and that could result in abstract theoretical explanations of human action grounded in the data (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a).

The Evolution of and Developments in Grounded Theory

In order to understand how grounded theory has evolved over the past thirty-nine years, it is necessary to first examine where the method began and what it looked like in its original form. As has been discussed above, grounded theory was developed to challenge the commonly held assumptions about qualitative research. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was written with three main objectives in mind. First, Glaser and Strauss sought to provide a rationale for theory that was grounded. They argued that this type of theory could move towards "closing the embarrassing gap [that existed at the time] between theory and empirical research" (1967, p. vii). Second, in addition to justifying grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss felt the need to legitimatize qualitative research as a whole in light of its ongoing subversion to quantitative research.

The third objective was to propose the specifics of the methodology. Glaser and Strauss posited that the practice of grounded theory should include several defining components (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). First, researchers, employing this mode of research, should alternate data collection and analysis, unlike other modes that would advocate complete data collection prior to beginning analysis. Secondly, grounded theory requires the construction of codes and categories generated through interplay with the collected data as opposed to forcing data into preconceived categories. Memo-writing to expand categories and diagramming to explain the relationships between categories, is another key practice of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998a). Next, grounded theorists should reject the idea of predetermined samples. Instead, they should make use of theoretical sampling – sampling that evolves during the research process (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a; 1998b). Finally, grounded theorists should avoid reviewing literature until after producing their own analysis of the collected data. This ensures that categories, concepts, and ultimately the theory are allowed to emerge from the data and not be influenced by previous research in the area (Charmaz, 2006). While the collaborative efforts of Glaser and Strauss to codify this new methodological approach may well have revolutionized research in sociology, as well as countless other disciplines, they have since moved grounded theory in contrary directions.

On one hand, Glaser has remained fairly committed to his original conception of the method. He has continued to define "grounded theory as a method of discovery, [treats] categories as emergent from the data, [and relies] on direct and, often, narrow

empiricism" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 49). Strauss (1987), on the other hand, has injected into the method a responsibility of verification, and in his work with Juliet Corbin moved grounded theory towards the use of highly technical procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998a, 1998b). Glaser (1992) publicly rejected these trends and argued that Strauss and Corbin had stripped away the flexibility that once allowed the methodology to adapt to countless areas of interest. Furthermore, Glaser contended that Strauss and Corbin's new techniques were forcing data into preconceived categories, and in so doing, violated the fundamental principles of grounded theory. In fact, in his book, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (1992), Glaser devoted an entire chapter to discussing the rift that has evolved between his version of the method and Strauss' newly evolved version. The chapter begins with Glaser claiming that he "has tried to show the slow transition by Strauss from a grounded theory we both developed, to his development of a verificational method which forces the deducting and testing of preconceptions" (p. 89). Glaser's objections, however, seem to have little effect on the success of Strauss and Corbin's collaborative works. Their book, *Basics of Qualitative Research (1998a)*, has been used around to world to instruct graduate students in the ways of grounded theory.

It is also important to note that while Glaser and Strauss originally positioned grounded theory as a rejection of positivistic quantitative research, the methodology is now known for its positivistic assumptions (Charmaz, 2006). Thus, a number of grounded theorists have attempted to move the method away from positivism and back towards its original purpose (see Bryant, 2002; Charmaz, 2000, 2006; Clarke 2003, 2005; Meyer, 2004). Charmaz (2000) attempted to clarify the key differences between a

constructivist approach to grounded theory and a traditional approach to grounded theory. "[T]he [constructive] grounded theorist's analysis tells a story about people, social processes, and situations. The researcher composes the story; it does not simply unfold before the eyes of an objective viewer" (p. 522). This view of analysis illustrates an understanding of the researcher's role in data collection and shows that for Charmaz even grounded theory does not offer a researcher the means by which to remove his or her own biases from the collection and analysis of data. In fact, in her book, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, Charmaz (2006) points out that it is the flexibility and adaptability of grounded theory guidelines that provides ample room for researcher bias to influence the research process. "Researchers can adopt and adapt them [grounded theory guidelines] to conduct diverse studies. *How* researchers use these guidelines is not neutral; nor are the assumptions they bring to their research and enact during the process" (p. 9).

Bryant (2002) claimed that the mantra of grounded theorists, "theory grounded in the data," clearly exhibits the very basic assertions of positivism. A positivistic framework assumes that a knowledge or understanding of reality is only obtainable through repeated, value-neutral observations. These observations then provide the experience and data necessary for a researcher to create general-law like claims or theories. While Bryant acknowledges that grounded theory literature does, at times, discuss the ability of the researcher's personal views to impact the research process, Bryant also points out "a far stronger, clearer, and consistent thread from the late 1960's to the present that is readily identifiable with the characteristics" (2002, p. ??) of positivism. Bryant goes on to cite numerous quotes from both early and later grounded

theory publications to illustrate how data in grounded theory research functions almost identical to the way in which observations function in traditional, scientific, positivist research.

Based on this literature, Bryant concluded that grounded theory was developed from a positivist epistemological position, but that this "dubious legacy can be discarded" (p. 31). Bryant agreed with Charmaz (2000) in proclaiming that "we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing the positivist leanings of earlier proponents of grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510), If we see our research as a process of engagement with actors-in-contexts and understand that we, as the researcher, are also one of these actors. In order to re-align grounded theory with twenty-first century assumptions it is necessary to recognize that the researcher is an active, participating observer. The path chosen through the research process is never neutral nor is the way in which a researcher interprets data. Thus, any theory derived through a grounded theory approach is not born of the data inside some sort of vacuum like chamber but is influenced by the researcher's own personal assumptions, values, and biases. Meyer (2004) explained that this is one of the key flaws in Glaser's work.

"One of the key limitations of Glaser's work (1978, 1992) is that he assumes that researchers can gather data without bias or influence" (Meyer, 2004, p. 501). For Meyer a constructivist approach to grounded theory incorporates self-reflection and recognizes that a researcher's presence and interaction influences emergent themes and data analysis. This self-reflection is clearly seen in Meyer's work (2004) within the GLBT community on the college campus. She claims that the constructivist approach to grounded theory

used in her research focuses "knowing with" the participant as compared to a dictation of knowledge.

In essence, the data collected through qualitative techniques are reconstructed appraisals of actual events; they are not the actual events themselves (Bond, 1990). These reconstructions are then analyzed by the objective, bias eye of the researcher. By acknowledging these assumptions it is possible to combine the guidelines of grounded theory and constructivist assumptions. Ultimately, this thesis will take a largely Glaserian approach to data collection and coding but at the same time reject the positivist concept of induction in favor of a more constructivist view of knowing. (see Craig & Tracy, 1995; Meyer, 2004 for examples of a similar approach to grounded theory).

Similarities and Differences With Other Qualitative Methodologies

Today, the resulting method is commonly referred to by what it seeks to produce, grounded theory. But regardless whether scholars refer to the method as grounded theory or the constant comparative method, this methodology shares numerous similarities with other approaches to qualitative research. Like other modes of qualitative research, Glaser and Strauss's method supports the collection of data through interviews, observations, focus groups, and documents of almost any nature (diaries, letters, newspapers, films, etc; Strauss & Corbin, 1998b). Proponents of this methodology, like many other qualitative researchers, believe that some form of social science is possible and desirable. This desire has led qualitative scholars to amend the traditional scientific cannons to better allow for the study of human action. As stated by Glaser and Strauss:

In this book we have raised doubts about the applicability of these [traditional]

> cannons of rigor as proper criteria for judging the credibility of theory based on the use of this methodology. We have suggested that criteria of judgment be based instead on the detailed elements of the actual strategies used for collecting, coding, analyzing, and presenting data when generating theory, and on the way in which people read the theory. (1967, p. 224)

Part of this redefining of the scientific cannons is the idea that qualitative work, is by definition, interpretive. Furthermore, these interpretations must include the voices of the individuals who participate in the research as sources of data; it simply is not sufficient to reduce the perspectives of the individual down to quantifiable variables. Yet, grounded theorists, as well as many other qualitative scholars, realize that their position as a researcher requires more than simply reporting on the viewpoints of the people, groups, or organizations studied. Researchers must also analyze what is observed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998b).

With these similarities in mind, it is also important to highlight some of the key differences that distinguish grounded theory from other modes of conducting qualitative inquiry. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998b), "the major difference between this methodology and other approaches to qualitative research is its emphasis upon theory development." (p. 274).The grounded theory method of qualitative research seeks to produce new theoretical understandings of often unexplored phenomenon. This theoretical understanding should, as has been stated before, be grounded in the data. Oftentimes qualitative practitioners of other methods will begin their research with a particular existing theory in mind and simply seek to explain what is occurring based on the assumptions of that theory. Grounded theorists, however, begin only with a questions or a desire to better understand an event, a situation, or a phenomenon of some sort. From

here, grounded theorists will allow the data to speak and provide its own theoretical statements instead of forcing some cookie-cutter theory onto the data. Another distinguishing characteristic present with some types of grounded theory (see the previous discussion on the evolution of grounded theory) is a responsibility for the verification of relationships uncovered between concepts. "This is done *throughout the course* of a research project, rather than assuming that verification is possible only through follow-up quantitative research" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998b, p. 274). Strauss and Corbin (1998b) also claimed that this verification can be obtained by employing grounded theory's unique procedures. These procedures include: theoretical sampling, systematic coding procedures, and memo writing (Corbin & Strauss 1988, Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin 1990, 1998a, 1998b). Although, it is important to point out that even constructive minded grounded theorists not concerned with verification will often use these techniques as well (see Charmaz, 2006; 1992; Meyer, 2004).

Grounded Theory Techniques

In order to produce conclusions "grounded in the data" it is necessary for grounded theorist to approach their research in a systematic yet flexible way. The unique procedures listed above provide researchers with means to do just that. Although, it is largely these procedures that set grounded theory apart from other methods of qualitative research, it is important for the researcher to remember that decisions concerning the implantation of this techniques should be guided by the data.

Theoretical Sampling

To sample theoretically means that a researcher allows his or her sampling pool to evolve during the process of collecting data, rather than determining a sampling pool prior to beginning data collection. This method of sampling is vital to gaining understanding of new or unexplored areas (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a) because theoretical sampling allows the researcher to flow the path that will lead to the greatest theoretical return. But what is theoretical sampling? Strauss and Corbin (1998a) define theoretical sampling as, "data gathering driven by concepts derived from the evolving theory and based on the concept of 'making comparisons,' whose purpose is to go to places, people, or events that will maximize opportunities to discover variations among concepts and to densify categories in terms of their properties and dimensions" (p. 201). While this definition is precise and detailed, Charmaz (2006) provides her readers with a more simple understanding of the theoretical sampling. She defines this procedure as, "seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emergent theory" (p. 96).

Theoretical sampling is not sampling designed to address initial research questions. Instead researchers should utilize an initial sampling to begin developing as many categories as possible with relation to the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a). From here, theoretical sampling should be employed to develop, elaborate, and refine categories emergent in the data. Theoretical sampling, also, does not attempt to reflect population distributions. This tends to be a concern of more quantitatively minded researchers who seek to make generalizations about target populations; whereas,

"grounded theorists attempt to fit their emergent theories within their data" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 101). Glaser (1992) sums up theoretical sampling by claiming that it is a process of data collection that is continually guided. In short, this process is guided by asking analytical questions. What if…? How? When? Where? The answers to these questions serve as the guidelines for sampling in a grounded theory research endeavor.

Systematic Coding

The task of analyzing hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, countless fieldnotes, or mounds of other forms of data may seem extremely daunting, but with a solid understanding of systematic coding the task becomes much less frightening. Before discussing the various types of coding that a researcher may employee, it is important to first understand what is meant by coding. Charmaz (2006) offers a clear, concise, and easy to understand definition of coding. She states that "coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data" (p.43). Coding then could be said to be the process of synthesizing hundreds of pages of data in one form or another and determining what the data means. In this way, coding is the first step in the analytical process. With this basic understanding of coding in hand, it is now possible to explore various types of coding that avail themselves to researchers during the research process. These coding procedures are: open/initial coding, selective/focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding.

The first analytical step of the grounded theory process is open coding (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Glaser (1992) defines open coding as "the initial stage of constant comparative analysis, before delimiting the coding to a core category and its

properties – selective coding" (p. 38). In this stage of analysis data are boiled down to segments of information. These segments are then intently examined for similarities and differences, and all parts of the data that appear similar or have related meaning are grouped together in categories. Strauss and Corbin (1998a) explain that "closely examining data for both *differences* and *similarities* allows for fine discrimination and differentiation among categories" (p. 102, stress added). This close examination in the initial stage of coding should be undertaken with an open mind. In this stage of the research should be open to all theoretical possibilities and allow the data to speak. In short, the researcher should not approach the data with preconceived notions of what categories might be present (Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a). Charmaz (2006) agrees with this notion of remaining open, but also acknowledges researchers will always hold prior ideas, thoughts, skills, and beliefs. As Dey (1999) stated, "There is a difference between an open mind and an empty head" (p. 251).

It is now necessary to focus a part of this discussion on the selection of category names. First of all, while the name of each of these categories is arbitrary, it should be suggested by the context or situation in which the data is located. The use of ill chosen categories will prevent ideas from emerging, but well named categories will significantly reduce the "number of units with which he or she [the researcher] is working" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998a, p. 113). Secondly, category names should be short, concise, and active. Researcher might also make use of *in vivo codes* to name their categories. These are named categories where the label is drawn directly from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss

& Corbin, 1998a). For example, during a discussion about the coming out process Robert, a 24 year old Psychology major, said that he knew:

> a lot of gay men and lesbian women have periods of doubt. Crossing the bi-bridge is what it's referred to as sometimes where they're like, "Ok, I feel a little different. I like this person, and I'm told that it's wrong, but I don't really feel that it's wrong, but maybe it's just a phase. Or I'll try harder to do what society tells me I should do." So when they finally come to that understanding and acceptance, then they have personally come out.

This segment of data could have been coded as "periods of doubt," but instead I choose to code it as "crossing the bi-bridge" This is an active, descriptive and particularly catchy phrase, thus it makes a good name for a category. When the researcher draws on the words of participants to name categories in such a way as this then the researcher is using in vivo codes.

Open coding, as discussed here by Glaser and Strauss and Corbin, is synonymous with Charmaz's (2006) discussion of initial coding; however, Charmaz spends more time discussing the actual process by which initial or open coding is done. Thus, the following discussion of how to code will rely heavily on Charmaz. The first option available to grounded theorists during initial coding is word-by-word coding. This type of coding is particularly useful when the researcher is looking for nuances in meaning or word choice. Charmaz (2006) claims that word-by-word coding, while sometimes tedious and unproductive, can benefit researchers engaged in coding certain types of data like Internet documents. For many grounded theorists, however, the first step in initial coding is line-by-line coding. Line-by-line coding means categorizing each line of written data (Glaser, 1978 cited in Charmaz, 2006). This sort of coding will allow the researcher to capture ideas that might otherwise be lost using other coding methods such as thematic coding.

The use of line-by-line coding is particularly vital to research that relies on in-depth interviews as the primary source of data. The reasons for this are two fold. First, engaging in line-by-line coding will help the research to identify those events or situation which the participants find particularly problematic. Secondly, line-by-line coding of early interviews will allow the researcher to refocus interview guides for later interviews (Charmaz, 2006).

The type of coding done by a researcher should depend on the type of data that has been collected. For example, if a researcher has collected observational data, then that researcher might best be served by utilizing incident to incident coding, a third coding option available to grounded theorists during initial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Incident to incident coding is most amenable with observational data because the researcher will have already taken fieldnotes in her or his own words. From this point the researcher is ready to compare nuanced behaviors and interactions that were recorded in the fieldnotes.

Once the researcher has determined which of the three options discussed above best fits with the data that has been collected, the researcher is ready to begin constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to create analytical distinctions in the data. This process of constant comparison allows for similarities and differences in the data to emerge. These emergent similarities and differences are necessary for the researcher to fully understand the relationship between coded chunks of data and categories of data. At this point it is important to note a key distinction between positivist and constructivist approaches to grounded theory. For a positivist, the act of coding offers the researcher a way to create an analytical distance between him or her and the data (Strauss & Corbin,

1998a). The codes and categories created are seen by positivist as somehow creating a type of buffer to prevent the influence of personal opinion. Constructivist mined grounded theorists acknowledge the influence of personal thought. Charmaz (2006) clearly articulates a constructive view of constant comparison:

> If your codes define another view of a process, action or belief than respondent(s) hold, note that. Your observations and ideas do matter. Do not dismiss your own ideas if they do not mirror the data. Your ideas may rest on covert meanings and actions that have not entirely surfaced yet. Such intuitions form another set of ideas to check. Our task is to make analytical sense of the material, which may challenge taken-for-granted understandings.
>
> What you see in your data relies in part upon your prior perspectives. Rather than seeing your perspectives as truth, try to see them as representing one view among many. (p. 54)

This view of the researcher's personal views calls on the researcher to recognize his or her own influence and compare that with other bits of data. In essence, personal view, beliefs, thoughts, and previously held knowledge simply form another piece of data to be compared constantly with bits of collected data. Once an analyst is sure that he or she has adequately coded all the data and has fully explored the relationships between various categories then she or he is ready to cease open coding. During the open coding process, however, the analyst should have become aware of a core variable (Glaser, 1992). This core variable is the category that "accounts for the most variation in a pattern of behavior" (Glaser, 1992, p. 75). The emergence of a core category or variable is key to the success of any effort of grounded theory in that it restricts the focus of analytical endeavors, directs future data collection, and is that category the researcher should seek to saturate (Glaser, 1978, 1992).

The emergence of a core variable signals the end of open coding. At this point the grounded theorist should begin selective coding. Glaser (1978) states that, "to selectively code means to cease open coding and to delimit coding only to those variables that related to the core variable, in sufficiently significant ways to be used in a parsimonious theory" (p. 61). Charmaz (2006) refers to this coding procedure as focused coding. Charmaz, however, makes no mention of a core variable. Instead she contends that "focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data" (p. 59). From this point the researcher is only concerned with coding data that might relate to those categories that offer the most chance at developing solid theoretical statements about the events, action, process, or situation that is being researched.

Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998a; Strauss, 1987) provided grounded theorists with a third type of coding, axial coding, to explore the relationships between categories and subcategories. Strauss and Corbin refer to this as axial coding because "coding occurs around the axis of a category, liking categories at the level of properties and dimensions" (1998a, p. 123). This method of coding serve as Strauss and Corbin's means for reconstituting data that has been left highly fractured after open coding (Charmaz, 2006). While engaged in axial coding the research is concerned with the understanding of a phenomenon. This understanding comes by gaining insight into conditions, actions/interactions, and consequences. Conditions refer to why, where, how come, and when of a phenomenon. Actions/interactions refer to strategic or routine responses by

individuals or groups to problematic situation born of the conditions, and consequences refer to the outcome of actions/interactions.

Glaser (1992) revealed clear disdain for this type of coding as he devotes an entire chapter of his book, *Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*, to debunking Strauss' axial coding. The chapter begins:

> This chapter in *Basics of Qualitative Research* is a very clear example of Strauss' lack of scholarship in his entire book. It [is] also a clear example of the replete, demanding elegance that preconception and forcing of theory on data can take, when it is sanctioned by a formidable sociologist, no matter what its grounded legitimation. But in this writing the confusing legitimation of Strauss' methods are not happening! (p. 61)

He goes on to claim that the concept of axial coding simply neglects the idea of theoretical coding put forth in *Theoretical Sensitivity* (Glaser, 1978). Glaser's objections to axial coding, however, go much deeper than this seemingly egocentric objection based solely on Strauss and Corbin's neglect of Glaser's coding method. Glaser's real objection to axial coding is based on his view of how grounded theory research should be conducted:

> In grounded theory we do not link properties and categories in a set of relationships denoting casual conditions, phenomena, context, intervening conditions, action/interactional strategies and consequences. This would be preconception and forcing theoretical coding to the max. The grounded theorist simply codes for categories and properties and lets whatever theoretical codes emerge where they may. (p. 63)

For Glaser, the act of asking the questions necessary – who, what, how come, where, when, etc - to derive relationships between categories (i.e. perform axial coding) ignores whether or not these answers are emergent in the data. Expecting this sort of full conceptual description is an example of forcing preconceptions on the data. This dislike

of axial coding is not isolated only to Glaser. Robrecht (1995) sees the result of axial coding as making grounded theory more confusing and cumbersome than necessary, and while Charmaz (2006) does acknowledge the possible benefits of axial coding – an increased understanding of emergent ideas – she also recognizes the possibility that axial coding could overshadow the entire research process with preconceived questions and notions about what should be known about categories.

The final step in the coding process is theoretical coding. Theoretical coding is a high level coding procedure that should follow selective coding, and through its use a researcher is able to move his or her data in the direction of a grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser (1978) explains that this method of coding conceptualizes "how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into theory" (p. 72). Glaser (1992) contends that this procedure negates the need for axial coding, as proposed by Strauss and Corbin, because these codes will work to put the pieces of the puzzle together again. In short, the codes developed during the theoretical coding help to shed light on how substantive codes are related.

Glaser (1978) offers 18 theoretical coding families that include: causes, contexts, contingencies, consequences, covariances, conditions (the Sic Cs), degree, dimension, and type. In 1998 Glaser further develops several of these families as well as enlarges the list to include: paired opposites, structural-functional, and unit identity. Through the use of these families of coding a researcher should be able to explain the context and specific conditions in which a phenomenon is present, certain conditions that cause change, the consequences of the phenomenon, and even strategies for negotiating tensions produced

by the phenomenon (if any exist). However, the list of families created by Glaser in 1978 and expanded in 1998 are by no means exhaustive. Nor are the families mutual exclusive. Instead this list simply serves as a guide for the novice grounded theorist, and it is important to remember that when doing theoretical coding, like any other codes, these codes must emerge from the data. Not every data set will exhibit every coding family presented by Glaser, and it is possible the researcher might be best served by creating new codes or a new family of codes to describe the relationships between concepts. In essence, theoretical codes, too, must "earn their way into your grounded theory" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 64).

Memo-writing

Another crucial aspect of grounded theory research is the art of memo-writing. Glaser (1992) defines memos as "the write-up of ideas as they emerge, while coding for categories, their properties and their theoretical codes" (p. 108). When the researcher writes memos, he or she analyzes emergent codes and categories in every way that occurs to the researcher in that moment (Glaser, 1998). These memos document the researcher's thoughts, comparisons, and connections categories or codes to provide direction for the remainder of the research process. By creating a sort of tangible documentation of thoughts, they become concrete and manageable (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a).

In their book, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, Strauss and Corbin (1998a) explain three types of memos that a researcher might create during the research process. (1) Code notes explain thoughts or reflections generated by data analysis regarding how data

might be coded. These notes might also contain discussion of possible properties or dimensions of emergent concepts. (2) Theoretical notes document the researchers questions derived from ongoing data analysis or from a review of relevant literature. For example, if the researcher has recently developed a category dealing with stress management, then a theoretical note might be pinned to pose questions related to stress management. What causes stress? How is stress experienced? What steps can be taken to reduce stress? Is some stress predictable? Do factors such as age, gender, profession, etc affect how one experiences or handles stress? Reflecting on these questions will heighten awareness of what to look for in future data analysis sessions. Additionally, these questions direct theoretical sampling. Theoretical notes can, often times, lead to (3) operational notes. Operational notes document ideas about what task or operations to carry out next. These notes may direct the research to ask specific questions, seek interviews with people of a particular age group or other demographic, observer a certain type of event or situation, or even simply to make further comparisons between emergent concepts.

The act of memo writing helps the researcher to keep her or his thoughts organized in workable way, and in the absence of memos a researcher might find herself or himself questioning why a particular piece of data was coded the way it was or struggling to recall previous insight about the connection between two concepts. Imagine how difficult it would be to remember the justification of each and every coding decision? Imagine how much time would be lost if a potential connection between categories was not jotted down as soon as it occurred to the researcher? Without memos

countless hours would be spent attempting to make sense of previous analytical decisions.

Not only do these procedures assist in the collection and analysis of data; they also provided the researcher with a means of privileging the voices of participants by allowing theoretical arguments to emerge from that data as oppose to imposing theoretical arguments on the data. The privileging of voice is critical in exploring the experiences of marginalized groups, as it these experiences often represent novel or previously unexplained phenomena. It is my hope that the voices of the participants in this study will help in shedding light on identity negations practices in the gay and lesbian community.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Now that a detailed understanding of grounded theory, its history, and its unique techniques has been presented, this information can be used to justify the use of this method in better understanding how members of the gay and lesbian community experience the Defense of Marriage Act. Following the justification, this chapter will also provide detailed explanation of the data collection and analysis process.

Justification for the Use of Grounded Theory

Strauss and Corbin (1998a) state that research designed to understand the meaning and nature human experiences leads itself to grounded theory. A grounded theory approach, in such a case, allows the researcher to spend time collecting data in the field through theoretical sampling. Again, theoretical sampling helps to ensure density and variation in the data. Variation is key to fully understanding human experiences, because different individuals are likely to make sense of even the same situation in different ways. Once this data has been obtained, grounded theory allows the researcher to analyze the data without being influenced by the previously determined assumptions of existing theory. Approaching a phenomenon with certain theoretical assumptions in mind limits the researcher's view of the data. They will simply look for data that affirms or negates the existing theory. Such an approach can result in the researcher ignoring crucial bits of data. It is clear that the project at hand seeks to understand human experiences.

The goal of this project is, after all, to gain knowledge regarding the role of the Defense of Marriage Act in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals.

Furthermore, Strauss and Corbin (1998a) contend that grounded theory is uniquely applicable in research situations where little is known about the phenomenon being studied. This is because a grounded theory approach will allow for the nuances of the phenomenon to be fully understood. Moreover, this approach will allow for the emergence of theoretical conclusions grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998a). Other approaches might force theoretical conclusion onto the data instead of allowing the data to speak for itself. Forced theoretical conclusion might well be grounded in existing theory, and such a situation would be unfortunate because existing theory may not be able to fully explain the novel phenomenon.

While a great deal of research has been conducted within the gay and lesbian community (see Corcoran, 2000; Frankowski, 2004; Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001; Kreiss & Patterson, 1997; Meyer, 2004; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003; Russ, Simonds, & Hunt, 2002; Taylor, 1999), an extensive review of literature failed to produce a single scholarly publication dealing with the role of the Defense of Marriage Act, or any public policy for that matter, in the lives of homosexuals. Because little is known about the phenomenon under investigation in this study, it is logical to conclude that, based on the suggestion of Strauss and Corbin, this project would best be served by taking a grounded theory approach. Doing so will ensure that any conclusions are emergent from the data, and that these conclusions are not forced on the data based on knowledge of some existing theory.

Finally, the current research endeavor demands a grounded theory approach because grounded theory allows for the production of research aimed not only at scholarly audiences but also at audiences that could benefit from its findings (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). The current attitude in the United States towards alternative sexual orientations can leave homosexuals feelings isolated, and a terrifying fear of discovery may greatly hamper self-esteem, personal identity, and maintaining meaningful intimate relationships (Kreiss & Patterson, 1997; Remafedi, 1987). More importantly, however, queer individuals are more likely to engage in dangerous and self-destructive behaviors. Homosexual and bisexual adolescents are more likely to engage in binge drinking and the use of narcotics, such as marijuana and cocaine (Frankowski, 2004). The use of these facilitating substances combined with the rejection and ridicule that often face members of the GLBT community may explain the findings of van Heeringen and Vincke (2000). Van Heeringen and Vincke discovered that 37.7% of homosexuals and bisexuals surveyed had experienced suicidal ideation; that is nearly double the percentage of heterosexuals who claimed to have had similar thoughts.

Based on van Heeringen and Vincke's research, it is clear that homosexuals represent a group of individuals that face numerous obstacles, but scholarly research that demands publication in a manner only accessible to academics insulated in the ivory towers of colleges and universities fails to provide assistance to those who may desperately need it. Following the flexible guidelines of grounded theory will allow for the creation of scholarly knowledge articulated in a way that facilitates understanding at all levels of education. There is simply no justification for publishing the fruits of our

academic labors in a manner that allows only our peers to understand what is being discussed. Through their work with grounded theory, Glaser and Strauss (1965; 1968) were able to "contribute toward making the management of dying – by health professionals, families, and patients – more rational and compassionate" (1968, p. vii). In a similar way, it is my desire to privilege the voices and narratives of participants so that my work might assist members of the gay and lesbian community in knowing that they are not alone, that they are not some sort of social deviant, and others have shared similar experiences. In order to do this, I felt that it was necessary to conduct in-depth interviews as a means of collecting data.

Methodology

This thesis is the product of 16 one-on-one in-depth interviews with individuals who self-identify as part of the gay and lesbian community. The length of these interviews spanned 45-90 minutes with the average interview lasting approximately 80 minutes. All 16 interviews were conducted over the course of three months in the spring of 2006, and participants were given the option of selecting the interview location. Ten interviews were conducted at the participant's home. This was the ideal as the home environment tends to create a more relaxed and comfortable setting. Five interviews were conducted in the participant's office. Two interviews were conducted in a secluded study room in the university's student union, and one interview was conducted in a local coffee shop. Prior to beginning each interview, the interview participant was asked to thoroughly read and sign a consent form approved by the Human Subjects Review Board (see Appendix B for a copy of this consent form). The consent form documented the

participant's willingness to take part in the research, ensured the participant that her or his identity would be kept confidential, and informed the participant that the interview would be audio taped. In order to ensure confidentiality, participants were asked to select pseudonyms for themselves.

Participants

Although the interview participants were originally from a number of different states, all 16 participants were at least temporary residents of a medium sized West Texas city. Participants ranged in age from 20 years to 62 years old. Eleven participants identified themselves as gay men and 5 identified as lesbian women. Participants tended to be highly educated. Eight participants possessed either postgraduate degrees or professional degrees. Of the seven that did not possess such degrees, 4 were still enrolled in undergraduate courses. A more detailed description of each participant can be found in Appendix C.

Participants were initially recruited following purposeful sampling procedures. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) define this sampling technique as one that attempts to select participants who might hold the key to better understanding a particular phenomenon. Essentially, individuals who identified as either gay or lesbian were sought out to being the interview process.

A local church with a special outreach ministry for the LGBT community offered a location to recruit such individuals. I began recruitment at the church by making an announcement during a regular Sunday morning worship service. Members of the congregation were asked to speak with me following the conclusion of the service if they

were interested in taking part in a research project aimed at understanding how members of the gay and lesbian community experience the Defense of Marriage Act. As a result of this announcement I was able to arrange 6 interviews with members of the congregation. Further announcements were later made by the pastor of the church during meetings of the church youth group and other organizations. Ultimately, recruitment efforts at the church produced a total of 8 interviews, 6 resulting from the initial announcement and 2 more from the later announcements made by the church pastor.

The first eight interview participants comprised a largely homogenous sample. These participants tended to be middle aged and Christian. Therefore, purposeful sampling was terminated, and the search for additional participants was guided by the principles of theoretical sampling (see chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of theoretical sampling). At this point I contacted colleagues at the university in hope that they could introduce me to younger members of the college population that might be interested in participating in my research. I also hoped that these contacts would provide participants with different religious views.

Simulations, I engaged in snowball sampling – a sampling technique which relies on referrals provided by interview participants (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Through the use of theoretical and snowball sampling, I was able to double the original sample size from 8 to 16. Perhaps more importantly, these sampling strategies produced a collection of interviews that were no longer as homogenous as the first 8 had been.

Procedures

All 16 interviews were directed by an interview guide. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) explain how interviews directed by an interview guide are more flexible than those directed by an interview schedule. An interview guide provides the interviewer with a list of topics to be covered over the course of the interview, but the guide does not dictate the order of these questions or an exact way of phrasing each question. Furthermore, an interview guide allows the interviewer the freedom to ask impromptu questions as the interview proceeds down a highly conversational path.

The interview guide used in this research project was composed of 10 topic areas (see Appendix C for a copy of the interview guide). Topics suggested by the interview guide included: demographic background information, political knowledge and views, sexual orientation, centrality of sexual orientation to the participant's overall identity, the coming out process, regionalism and the role of geographic local in identity formation, and the Defense of Marriage Act. While the interview guide remained largely the same throughout the data collection process, discussions during later interview were frequently influenced by earlier ones. This adaptation and flexibility is consistent with a Glaserian approach to grounded theory (Glaser, 1992).

Sampling and interviewing continued in this manner until saturation was achieved; Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state that the researcher has reached saturation when she is no longer surprised by what she observes and continue observations only provide further support for existing conclusions. Strauss and Corbin (1998a) share a similar understanding of saturation. They explain that saturation "simply means (within the limits

of available time and money) that the researcher finds that no new data are being unearthed. Any new data would only add, in a minor way, to the many variations of major patterns" (p. 292).

Promptly following the completion of each interview, the audio tapes on which the interview had been recorded were used to transcribe the interview verbatim. No changes for reasons of continuity or corrections of grammar were made during the transcription process. Participants' commentary and vocabulary was preserved as accurately as possible. These interview transcripts served as the data to be analyzed using grounded theory's systematic coding procedures (see Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of systematic coding).

Coding began with a line-by-line analysis and open coding of each transcript. The open coding process was accompanied by extensive memo-writing, and each coding decision was clearly documented with a brief explanation as to why the incident had been coded in such a way. Through the analysis of several transcripts, similarities began to emerge between certain codes, and at this point it became clear that the Defense of Marriage Act was creating a state of cognitive dissonance in many, if not all, of the interview participants. Due to the existence of dissonant cognitions, individuals were motivated to engage in various dissonant reduction strategies. Using this idea of dissonant reduction as the core concept (Glaser, 1992) open coding was retired and focused coding was used to code the remaining transcripts. Additional memos were kept during the focus coding process as well.

Once all 16 transcripts had been coded, analysis of the coded data began following Craig and Tracy's (1995) approach to grounded theory. This approach to grounded theory suggests that when the researcher is ready to begin data analysis he or she should first identify problems. In this case the existence of dissonant cognitions represents the problem present for many members of the gay and lesbian community. Secondly, Craig and Tracy suggest that the researcher should organize technical knowledge. This required identifying the messages communicated by the Defense of Marriage Act and the reduction strategies employed by participants to cope with the dissonant cognitions. Finally, this approach to analyzing data asks the research to explore possible philosophical conclusions that can be draw from the data. Based on the data I collected, I was able to draw four theoretical conclusions relating to the reduction of dissonant messages (these conclusions will be discussed in Chapter 5). Craig and Tracy's approach to analyzing data is consistent with Glaser's commitment to open coding; moreover, their study illustrates a constructivist approach to grounded theory analysis (Meyer, 2004). Thus, this method of analysis is appropriate.

Finally, at regular intervals during this analysis process peer debriefing was used to challenge theoretical conclusions as they developed. Peer debriefing refers to a process of allowing an individual outside the research context to review research materials and listen to concerns or ideas that the researcher may have about the ongoing project (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). In this case, the use of peer debriefing also facilitated the use of narratives provided by the participants to articulate certain conclusions.

While this process of peer debriefing may seem to imply some positivist leaning, in this project the debriefing was not designed to check for accuracy in coding. Moreover, the goal of debriefing, in this instance, was never to increase validity or provide some sort of verification. The goal was to provide an opportunity for the researcher to bounce ideas off another person and to help maintain focus on data.

Through the collection of data via in-depth interviews, the use of systematic coding analysis procedures, detailed memo writing, and the practice of peer debriefing this thesis project has unearthed a greater understanding of how members of the gay and lesbian community negotiate their identities given the messages conveyed by the Defense of Marriage Act. This understanding has offered a great deal of insight into how individuals might interpret and respond to governmental messages concerning homosexuality. Furthermore, the techniques and procedures utilized in this study offer a means by which the voices of participants can be privileged. This is particularly important in this case, as the voices of the gay and lesbian community are often silences or simply overlooked.

CHAPTER IV

DEFENSE OF IDENTITY ACTS: UNDERSTANDING THE USE OF DISSONANCE REDUCTION IN THE GAY AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY

"No matter how you slice it, it's discrimination."
- Gabriel a 20 year old college student

Gabriel, like the majority of participants in this study, maintains a very disapproving view of DOMA even though he, like the 15 other participants, is very comfortable and secure with his sexual orientation. However, for the participants in this study, their comfort and security with their own sexual identities have not fully insolated them against the discriminatory messages communicated by DOMA. Participants admitted to experiencing negative feelings that are synonymous with the psychological tensions frequently associated with cognitive dissonance. These psychological tensions, which usually manifest themselves as depression, anger, distress, and anxiety, motivate individuals to act in ways that might help return them to a state of cognitive consistency (Elliot & Devine, 1994; Fazio & Cooper, 1983; Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). According to Richard R. Troiden (1989), the successful negotiation of stigmatizing messages, like those communicated by DOMA, is crucial to maintaining a positive self identity.

The purpose of this chapter is to articulate the finding of this research endeavor. This chapter will first provide an examination of the ways in which participants interpret the DOMA and its messages. Second, the narratives of participants will be privileged as a

way of illustrating the presence of dissonant tensions. Because these tensions are known to motivate individuals seek a return cognitive consistency, this chapter will also explore the ways in which participants have attempted to cope with dissonance. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a discussion of four theoretical conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of this research.

Messages

Although the notion that societal messages might influence identities is by no means new (see for example: Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1963; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Mead, 1934) scholarly research rarely focuses on the messages communicated by public policy. Therefore, it might be extremely beneficial to begin our discussion of the Defense of Marriage Act with an examination of how participants in this study have interpreted the act. My conversations with the 16 individuals interviewed revealed three distinct message interpretations: (1) messages concerning access to rights, (2) messages concerning the social acceptance of homosexuality, and (3) messages designed to stall the gay rights movement. In order to ensure that the discussion of each of these messages honestly reflects the thoughts of my participants, I will rely heavily on their own words to explain each message category.

Access to Rights

The first message type that emerged during analysis of the interview transcripts deals with the ability of homosexuals to access certain rights and privileges. Messages concerning access to rights can be characterized by discussions of perceived inequality between members of the heterosexual community and members of the homosexual

community, and in many cases, interview participants used the phrase “second-class citizen” when discussing this message. For example, Steve, a 55 year old retired businessman, left not doubt as to what message DOMA was conveying to him. “[DOMA is] telling me that I’m a second-class citizen.” Jason, a 21 year old college student, stated that he feels as if he is being “treated like a second-citizen,” and when I asked Lee, a 50 year old high school teacher, about the messages she saw being sent by DOMA, she told me that the message tells her that “We’re second-class citizens.”

These three individuals and others who expressed feelings of second-class citizenship held fairly similar views of what it meant to be a second-class citizen. Steve explained that being part of a second class of citizens means that “there are certain things that [the government is] going to require of the gays, but there are certain things that [the government is] not going to allow them to participate in.” He went on to explain that he felt as if the government was saying “you can pay your taxes sure enough, but there are certain civil rights that we are not going to extent to you.” Robert, a 24 year old college student, said that when the government tells him there are things that he is not allowed to do because of his sexual orientation he feels like a second class citizen, and Gabriel, a 20 year old college student, says that he feels as if the government is telling him that he doesn’t deserve the same rights as heterosexuals. This idea that he is not entitled to the same rights as heterosexuals simply because of his sexual orientation makes Gabriel feel like a second-class citizen.

What sets this message type apart form other messages is that idea that policies like DOMA communicate to members of the gay and lesbian community the fact there

are certain rights to which homosexuals have little to no access. These rights might include: marriage, adoption, social security benefits, among others. More importantly, heterosexual never have to wonder about their access to any of these and rights. This difference in rights of homosexual and heterosexual is exactly what the Massachusetts Supreme Court was referring to when they determined that to deny marriage rights to same-sex couple effectively created a second-class of citizens.

Social Acceptance of Homosexuality

Interpreting DOMA as denying access to rights is only one way in which participants in this study view the policy. While this denial of rights may indeed be predicated on a lack of acceptance, participants often spoke of DOMA as expressing the views held by members of society, not necessarily politicians. Due to the fact that our political system is founded on the ideals of a representative democracy, participants frequently suggested that the discriminatory sentiments of DOMA originated outside the halls of government. Thus, in order to honor the distinction made by participants between discussions of rights and society's acceptance of homosexuality a second message category has been created. In this way the Defense of Marriage Act might be seen as conduit for expressing society's lack of acceptance of homosexuality.

Peggy, a 53 year old Registered Nurse, provided one example of how members of the gay and lesbian community might interpret DOMA in this way. Peggy told me that she thought that this piece of legislation communicated a message of difference and non-acceptance to members of the gay and lesbian community. She thinks DOMA says:

> You're different, and your difference will never be acceptable. We will keep marriage as an institution between one man and one woman. Your difference;

> your idea of a different family is never going to be accepted because you are not equal. You are not equal….You're not the same, and because you are not the same as me, you are wrong, and you will never be accepted, and your ideas will never be accepted. We will keep pushed back.

While this statement in and of itself may not fully illustrate the idea that these are the sentiments of society and not of politicians, Peggy's later statements do. I asked Peggy if she thought that politicians genuinely held these beliefs. While she admitted that some might she went on to say:

> I think most politicians in Washington are simply trying to appease the people back home. They all want to return to Washington for another term, so sometimes I think they vote for things they really don't believe in just because they know that if they don't there's no way in hell they are going to get re-elected, and I think it's the Jerry Falwell's and Pat Robinson's of the world that have convinced them of that. Those Christian Right people control so much political power that they can manipulate politicians. So…no, I don't think that most politicians really hate homosexuals. I think the Christian Right does, and they get what they want.

Although Peggy's comments provide perhaps the clearest example of this message type, several other participants voiced similar interpretations of DOMA.

Luke, a 24 year old college student, says the thinks that the Defense of Marriage conveys a message which tells members of the gay and lesbian community, as well as members of the heterosexual majority, that differences will not be accepted by the "ultra-conservative" parts of society. He said, "I think they are saying that there is a cookie cutter mold for what you should be, and if you don't fit that then you're not wanted, and you should leave if you feel that way. If you are not that certain way then they don't want it any other way."

Sadie, a 45 year old ordained minister, also feels as if the Defense of Marriage Act was a way to tell members of the gay and lesbian community that they are not

welcome. Sadie said, “I think they would like to throw us somewhere on an island and that would be it.”

The ability of participants to interpret DOMA as means of communicating the views of society-at-large as opposed to the views of politicians sets this message category apart from other interpretations. In this way the Defense of Marriage Act is not designed to deny rights and privileges as discusses above, but instead it is designed by politicians to satisfy the demands of the Christian Right.

Stalling the Gay Rights Movement

While these first two messages represent the views of several individuals, the third message was, by far, the most frequently discussed interpretation of the Defense of Marriage Act. This third message type that participants perceive as being communicated by the Defense of Marriage Act is a message which seems to be designed to stall the gay rights movement. For many individuals that I interviewed, the Defense of Marriage Act is seen as a deliberate move on the part of the government to show the homosexual community that they will no longer tolerate the community’s attempts to secure equality.

Luke characterizes the Defense of Marriage Act as a hegemonic move. He said that he thought the government was “kind of flexing their muscles, showing that they have the power to keep people, certain types of people, in check…” Mike, a 22 year old salesman, holds a slightly different view from that of Luke, but Mike’s view still highlights a desire on the part of those in power to prevent the equal treatment of homosexuals. Mike says that he thinks the government believes “that if they can send a

message that [homosexuality] is unacceptable then we will just simply give up. We will stop being gay."

Ethan, a 31 year old college instructor, and Marty, a 40 year old college counselor, also see the Defense of Marriage Act as an attempt on the part of the government to stall the push for equality, but they both think that the government was responding to a very specific event. Ethan and Marty both believe that DOMA was a direct response to the Hawaii court decision handed down in 1993 which stated that the state of Hawaii must show compelling reason to prohibit same-sex marriages. Marty says he thinks the government "felt like they had to make sure that if Hawaii did that, that it wasn't just a blanket where the marriage had to be recognized everywhere…. They had to stop what was happening in Hawaii from happening in other states."

Although the idea that DOMA is designed to stall the gay rights movement may seem similar to the first two messages explained above, but the implications of this interpretation are distinct. The first message type discussed tells members of the gay and lesbian community that they are not entitled to all the rights of heterosexuals, and the second message tells homosexuals that society does not accept their way of life as "right." The third and final message type, however, seems to function almost like a threat to the gay and lesbian community. Winnie told me that he thinks DOMA says, "If you think this is bad, just keep pushing. Next time we will make things even worse." In this way DOMA tells members of the gay and lesbian community to stop fighting for equality and acceptance because the more they fight the worse it will be come.

It is important to note, however, that these three messages are not mutually exclusive of one another. It is possible for an individual to interpret the Defense of Marriage Act as communicating any of these messages, any two of these messages, or even all three messages at the same time. Furthermore, there exists a share commonality among the three message types; they all communicate negative views of the gay and lesbian community. These negative views could not simply be ignored by participants in this study because the appraisals of the homosexual community embedded in these messages tend to be inconsistent with personally held views of one's self and the community. This lack of consistency will produce troublesome psychological tensions, and as Festinger (1957) states the tensions associated with the presence of dissonant cognitions will motivate individuals to reduce the dissonance. But before we can explore the ways in which participants attempted to reduce dissonance, we must first examine the existence of dissonance.

Experiencing Dissonance

For decades cognitive dissonance scholars have observed the psychological tensions produced by dissonant cognitions. Festinger (1957) suggested that these tensions may result in feelings of anxiety, depression, and frustration among others. The presence of these negative psychological tensions is due to the inconsistency created by exposure to dissonant cognitions. In her research on attitudes towards recycling, Fried (1998) encountered a number of individuals who claimed believe in the importance of recycling, but several of these people did not themselves practice recycling. When this inconsistency was pointed out, Fried notes that individuals often became distressed.

Esienstadt and Leippe (2005) have documented similar tensions in individuals required to write essays advocating counterattitudinal policies. The students observed by Esienstadt and Leippe became very angry with the professor who assigned the essay, nervous about turning in the assignment, and many students reported a great deal of distress resulting from the act of arguing for a position they did not support.

When asked how policies like DOMA made them feel participants in this study repeatedly reported feelings similar to those documented by previous research. Peggy, for example, said, "I was really depressed for about two days after Texas passed that amendment back in November. I mean it didn't effect my relationship with my partner or anything like that, but I was really upset and saddened by the fact that so many people could be so opposed to me an my relationship." Sadie spoke of feeling depressed anytime she thought of DOMA or similar state policies. She said:

> Anytime I hear about DOMA, or the Federal Marriage Amendment, or some state passing laws that define marriage as between a man and a woman, I feel devalued. I feel like my relationship is being invalidated, at least in their eyes. I mean I don't think I am any less of a person than any heterosexual person or that my relationship is less valid that a heterosexual relationship. But it still upsets me that people think that way. I mean if I think about it too long, I get kind of depressed. This interview kind of upsets me because I'm having to think about all the horrible things people think and say about gays and lesbians, and those things depress me.

While Peggy and Sadie are left feeling depressed by these policies, other participants reported feeling anxious or nervous about revealing their sexual orientation. In fact several participants admitted that the negative messages conveyed by DOMA and its state level counterparts make them feel less comfortable with their sexual orientation.

Luke frequently takes part in seminars aimed at educating members of the straight community about the issues faced by gays and lesbians, but he says since gay rights has become a major political issue he now feels less comfortable at times opening up about his sexual orientation. He explained it this way:

> On several occasions I been invited to speak to a class or some other group of people about being gay, and I usually enjoy those opportunities. But if I am getting ready for one of those seminars and there has been a lot of talk in the news about marriage rights or things like that then I am a little more nervous about going. I guess it kind of makes me less comfortable being open. I know there's nothing wrong with being gay. I am comfortable in my own skin, but those policies…they get to me sometimes. They make me a little anxious about being myself in public.

For participants in this study the negative psychological tensions produced by the dissonant messages communicated by the Defense of Marriage Act came in various forms ranging from depression to anxiety to frustration and anger, but these 16 individuals seem to have all found a way to cope with these tensions. As Lee puts it, "You just have to find a way to move on. You can't stay upset and depressed for the rest

of your life just because the government isn't treating you fairly." The following section explores the ways in which participants seek to alleviate these negative tensions.

Responding to Messages

Participants in this study utilized a variety of dissonant reduction strategies to cope with the tensions produced by the three messages discussed above. These strategies include: decreasing the relevance of negative messages, seeking the silver lining, increasing the value of affirmative messages while decreasing the value of negative messages, and rationalizing the existence of negative messages. Like the messages themselves, these reduction strategies are not mutually exclusive; participants frequently employed some combination of the four strategies in their attempt to return to cognitive consistency.

Decreasing the Relevance of Negative Messages

Festinger (1957) suggested that an individual experiencing cognitive dissonance may attempt to cope with dissonance by reducing the importance of the dissonant cognition. If the dissonant cognition holds little or no importance then it can be dismissed with relative ease. Fried (1998) observed this strategy in her study of recycling practices. When confronted with the inconsistency of their beliefs and actions, many of the participants in Fried's study simply decided recycling was no longer important. Nearly half of the participants in this study seem to exhibit a reduction strategy very similar to this; however, instead of claiming that DOMA is not an important policy – as this might be hard for anyone to do – participants here attempt to downplay to relevance of DOMA to their lives. In most cases this strategy was connected to a lack of personal desire for the

right to marry. Antoinette, a 44 year old college professor, exhibits this strategy when she says, "If I was in a relationship where I wanted to get married it would [influence my life], but even when I was in committed relationships I never wanted to get married. I've never been in a relationship with somebody that demanded that either. So, probably it really doesn't affect me." Antoinette further downplays the relevance of DOMA in her life by discussing her disagreements with the institution of marriage and how marriage is not a right that she needs. "I guess for me the thing is that even if gays and lesbians could get married I probably wouldn't do it. I think marriage is…I just don't even agree with marriage so I guess I'm not a good one to ask about the Defense of Marriage Act. I think that I don't need that right because it's set up for the patriarchy anyway." Like Antoinette, Ethan attempts to dismiss the messages communicated by DOMA by claiming that he has "no intention of ever getting married."

Although Antoinette and Ethan may not desire to get married because of some objection to the institution of marriage, Winnie, a 62 year old retired teacher, has never thought of marriage as something that was a part of the gay and lesbian community. "Well, I don't care to get married," he says, "never have. When I was younger marriage just wasn't something that was an option of us gay people. I knew that, and so I've never really wanted to get married." For Winnie the Defense of Marriage Act has not change things. He never thought marriage was an "option" for members of the gay and lesbian community.

Antoinette, Ethan, and Winnie may be able to maintain some level of dissonance reduction through this strategy for the remainder of their lives because they have no

intention of ever getting married, but Gabriel, on the other hand, admits to a desire for marriage someday. At the present moment, however, his inability to enter into marriage as a result of this policy seems to have little impact on his life. Gabriel explains it as:

> At this moment in time, it doesn't have much of an impact. I mean I'm not going to get married anytime soon, maybe in like two or three years down the line, but so right now not much. I do know that there will eventually be an impact because if and when I want to get married I won't be able to do so as long as these policies are still in effect. So, it's still kind of important because while it doesn't matter now it will one day.

Mike shares a similar view of the situation. He knows that one day he too would like to get married, but he says, "At this time it just really doesn't matter to me. I think gays and lesbians will get married in my lifetime, but at the same time it's not something that's an issue to me right now." It is likely that in the future when Gabriel and Mike find themselves in a situation where they do desire to get married this reduction strategy will no longer provide relief from the tensions produced by cognitive dissonance. At that time they may have to rely more heavily on some other dissonance reduction techniques. Perhaps they will choose to seek out the silver lining of an otherwise dark message.

<u>Seeking the Silver Lining</u>

Both Marty and David, a 38 year old entrepreneur, explain the positive aspects of the Defense of Marriage Act. Attempting to reduce dissonance in this manner parallels Festinger's (1957) discussion of reducing dissonance by adding consistent cognitions. To explain this point Festinger used the example of a habitual smoker who is aware of the negative health effects caused by smoking. He suggested that the smoker might seek out the benefits associated with smoking; the smoker may see smoking as a way to prevent weight gain or a way to manage stress. In much the same way Marty and David have

attempted to reduce their dissonance by seeking out the benefits associated with DOMA. When I asked David if his life had been in any way impacted by the Defense of Marriage Act, he had this to say:

> Hell no, actually. I hope they pass more. Even the most conservative judges on the Supreme Court would have to recognize that this is wrong, and they have all said that. They have all said that…and every time it goes to court…even very conservative courts…the Richmond Court of Appeals, Third District Court there, over turned gay hate laws, and they are all Republicans, everyone of them…conservative Republicans. If you are going to have a country that is established in the rights of all people then the more laws that are passed, the more discrimination that happens the sooner it's going to make it to the highest court in the land.

David sees each new discriminatory policy as moving us one step closer towards a major court decision overturning them all, and Marty thinks that the Defense of Marriage Act is a signal that the gay rights movement is actually pushing forward. Marty says, "I think this probably happens with any oppressed group as they start to come forward, and gain rights, and gain recognition, and gain visibility. There's going to be a negative reaction, and we are in the midst of that negative reaction," but for Marty this is a necessary evil that come to an end.

For many individuals adding consistent cognitions many help to negotiate the tensions produced by dissonance in many situations. For example, one participant spoke of a time at college during her second year when her roommate found out that she was a lesbian. Because Lavender – now a 59 year old teacher who considers herself a "triple minority" (African American, female, and lesbian) – admitted to being a lesbian and expressed no desire to change that, the university she attended thought it best to move her into a new dorm room where she could live without a roommate. In order to do this

Lavender, who was a sophomore at the time, was moved into an upperclassman dormitory where she continued to live alone until the university was able to find roommates that were not bothered by her sexual orientation. While Lavender did refer to the incident as her "solitary confinement," she did not seem to hold any real negativity regarding the situation. In fact, in referring to her new room in the upperclassman dormitory Lavender said, "It was mine. It was all mine. I lucked out." If an individual is able to identify some positive aspect of an otherwise negative message then the negative aspects of that messages might be overshadowed and discarded, but the ability to identify some positive aspect many not be present for every individual in all situations. Some members of the gay and lesbian community may find it impossible to look on the Defense of Marriage Act with anything but hostility. In such cases these individuals may opt to reduce their dissonance by increasing the relative value of affirmative cognitions.

Increasing the Value of Affirmative Messages While Decreasing the Value of Negative Messages

Various researchers in several fields have developed theoretical models charting the "coming out" process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). These scholars along with countless others have stressed the importance of social attitudes in the development of a positive personal identity (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; D'Augelli, 1991; Goffman, 1963; Goldfried & Goldfried 2001; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Mead, 1934; Savin-Willimas, 1989). During the identity assumption stage, Troiden (1989) states that, individuals attempting to solidify their identity as either gay or lesbian will submerge themselves in the gay and lesbian community. This submergence exposes the individual to messages that affirm the gay or

lesbian identity. Coleman (1982) also acknowledges the tendency of homosexuals to avoid messages of rejection or non-acceptance during the early stages of "coming out."

Cass (1979), on the other hand, posits that this behavior begins during the identity tolerance stage but will continue through the course of all six stages of the "coming out" process. She states that in order to counter act feelings of isolation and alienation often experiences by individuals during the "coming out" process, individuals will attempt to make extensive contact with other homosexuals while in the identity tolerance stage. Positive contacts at this point will result in an increased significance for the views and appraisals of these other gay and lesbian people. During the next stage, identity acceptance, the individual will likely continue to manage dissonant messages this time by limiting contact with individuals who threaten to increase incongruity, and according to Cass this sort of behavior will continue for the remainder of an individual's life.

The behavior documented by Troiden, Cass, and Coleman appears to be equivalent to Festinger's (1957) explanations rejecting the sources of dissonance and seeking validation of beliefs both of which are heavily present in this study's participants. However, the interviews conducted in study provide evidence that would lead one to believe that such behavior does not occur only during adolescents as is suggested by the models of Troiden and Coleman. The evidence here suggests, as Cass (1979) claims, that this behavior is ongoing.

In an interview with Antoinette, I asked her how she would respond to friends or family if they ever openly supported policies like the Defense of Marriage Act. She said, "I can't image being friends with them. I really can't image being intimate, close friends

with somebody that that was their belief system. I wouldn't. That's so antithetical to my belief that I can't image that that would be somebody I would hang out with." This statement clearly exhibits the type of avoidance document by all three "coming out" models and is an example of what Festinger would consider rejecting the sources of dissonant – or as Antoinette puts it "antithetical" – cognitions, but Antoinette is 44 years old, clearly not an adolescent. She has also moved far beyond the early stages of development in which Troiden and Coleman locate this sort of behavior. Antoinette presents herself as a very confident lesbian who is extremely comfortable with her sexual orientation. Her orientation is well known to coworkers, supervisors, friends, and family. In fact, Antoinette says that she would be very disappointed in herself if she ever felt as if she had to hide or closet her identity.

Marty is also well beyond his adolescent years at 40 years of age, and he seems to a have reached a point in his life that is characteristic of the later stages of all three developmental models. He is very open about his sexual orientation with coworkers, friends, and family; however, like Antoinette, Marty exhibits dissonance reduction strategies that Troiden, Cass, and Coleman might view as symptomatic of early stages in the "coming out" process. When I asked Marty if thought he could remain close to people who possessed negative views of homosexuals, he said, "Knowing myself, I probably would, over time, distance myself from those people. I was moving towards that with my parents until they finally came around." Marty went on to explain that at this point in his life he only gives value to affirmative messages.

While Antoinette and Marty do not speak specifically to rejecting the messages communicated by DOMA in this manner several other participants do. Sadie, for example, acknowledges that DOMA attempts to invalidate homosexuals and their relationships, but she does not believe these messages because the views of the government are not important to her. What is important to her, she says is that, "My family embraces my partner and I." Sadie feels that the support provided by her family offers her an alternative to the negative messages conveyed via the Defense of Marriage Act. Peggy expresses similar sentiments regarding family and the negative messages of others. She says:

> I simply don't care [about the negative messages]. I mean once the people you love know and accept you and love you back, then it really doesn't matter if your neighbor or somebody in Washington knows and accepts you or not…. I think the biggest fear that people have when they come out is that they are going to get rejected by someone that they love. That would usually be a parent or a sibling or perhaps a very close friend. That's what the fear is, and once you've gotten passed that then the person on the next street or in Washington…you don't give a hoot whether they accept you or not.

Similar to Sadie and Peggy, Jason places no value in what the government says about homosexuals and their relationships. Jason told me, "I know a lot of couples who do feel as if their relationship was devalued because of [DOMA]. To me if you love someone, there is nothing that can devalue that…. It doesn't matter what the government says or what anyone else say. If you love each other that's the most valuable thing there is." For Jason, it seems, the most important messages are the messages of love and acceptance shared by two people. When these consistent messages are present then the dissonant messages communicated by the government no longer matter to Jason.

Festinger (1957) considers rejecting the sources dissonant cognitions and seeking validation of beliefs two separate strategies for dissonance reduction. Similarly, Cass (1979) sees these two behaviors occurring at different stages during the identity formation process, but the data in this study seems to highlight the interconnectedness of these two strategies. When Peggy and Jason's comments are closely examined this interconnectedness becomes abundantly clear. Peggy said, "*once the people you love know and accept you and love you back*, then it really doesn't matter if your neighbor or somebody in Washington knows and accepts you or not," and Jason said, "*if you love someone*, there is nothing that can devalue that…. It doesn't matter what the government says" (emphasis added). These statements imply that positive messages regarding one's sexual orientation or relationship status must be present before an individual is able fully reject any sources of negative messages. Rejecting the source of negative messages without the presence of affirmative messages would, in essence, leave the individual void of any cognition. If, however, the individual is able to successful reject the sources of negative messages in favor of my positive appraisals then a positive view of one's self can be maintained.

Rationalizing the Existence of Negative Messages

The final dissonance reduction strategy utilized by participants in this study is present in all 16 interviews. To one degree or another each and every participant in this study displayed a tendency to rationalize the existence of negative messages; however, this dissonance reduction strategy fails to fit with any of the traditionally observed reduction techniques. Dissonance is typically reduced in one of six ways: changing one's

beliefs, adding consistent cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, avoiding sources of dissonance, seeking validation of beliefs, and rejecting sources of dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Worchel & McCormick, 1963).

In fact, a review of dissonance reduction literature revealed only one reduction technique that even remotely resembles the behavior present in this final dissonance reduction strategy. Several researchers have identified a technique by which consistent cognitions are added following a decision that has produced dissonance. Giddens (1990) refers to this technique as the "rationalization of action" (p. 90; see also Bacharach, Bammerger, & Sonnenstuhl, 1996; Lieberman, Ochsner, Gilbert, & Schacter, 2001; Rosenfeld, Kennedy, & Giacalone, 1986), but the "rationalization of action" strategy suggests that an individual might attempt to provide some sort of logical explanation for his or her actions in order to reduce dissonance. In this case participants are providing a rational for the actions of others.

The lack of support in existing literature, however, does not render this strategy invalid. I would content that participants in this study face a situation beyond the scope of existing literature. Existing literature fails to address a single situation where individuals might find it necessary to reduce dissonant messages produced by the government. The uniqueness of the situation examined here warrants latitude and freedom to explore the possibility of new dissonance reduction techniques particularly when adherence to documented techniques would require ignoring a large portion of the data. Therefore, when decreasing the relevance of negative messages, seeking the silver lining, and/or increasing the value of affirmative messages while decreasing the value of negative

messages are not enough, an individual may seek to simply rationalize the existence of dissonant messages concerning her or his sexual orientation.

Steve displays this strategy when he says, “the politicians weren’t saying they don’t like homosexuals. The Christian Right was pushing for it real hard,” and because certain political groups, like the Christian Right, were so adamant about the passage of DOMA Winnie thinks that “the reason the government won’t allow same-sex marriage is because the politicians that run the government are afraid that they wouldn’t get elected.” David’s view of the situation is slightly different, but he still does not appear to believe that the Defense of Marriage Act was motivated by a dislike for homosexuals either. Speaking to the reason behind Clinton’s support of DOMA, David says, “Clinton was trying to win some more moderate votes. Any hot button issue is for political gain.”

Perhaps the best example of this sort of rationalization comes when Basco explains his views as to why DOMA was passed. He says:

> I think because they were afraid. They were afraid of the Right…the fundamentalist and the family rights people are so strong. I think they were just afraid not to do it, even if Clinton…and I don’t think he did feel all that strongly about it, but I think he did it out of pressure from these people, because he was afraid they’d switch their votes or malign him and take voters away from him.

Based on Ethan’s comments during my conversation with him, he appears to agree with Basco on this point. Ethan told me:

> I think Clinton signed it because he was afraid that it was going to scare off my moderate voters. It certainly was used as a wedge issue in the 2000 election and then again in 04 by the Republican Party. I know that there are anti-gay adoption measures that are going on ballots for the upcoming midterm elections. So I think that Clinton recognized that even though, based on what I know, he supports gay rights, and gay marriage, and gay equality, I think politically he felt like it was necessary for him and his party to sign the legislation.

Marty, Gabriel, Robert, Mike, and Lee also suggest that support for the Defense of Marriage Act was simply a political move. Robert, Lee, and Mike contend that DOMA was the result of political pressure from the religious or Christian Right. Marty and Gabriel, on the other hand, think that politicians supported the legislation because it was what their constituents wanted, and they were purely seeking to protect their positions of political power.

This sort of political maneuvering is only one way in which participants rationalized the existence of the negative messages. A second method of rationalization can be seen in the way Jason describes his view of our government. He says, “It’s almost on the verge of embarrassment that I live in country that over and over and over again has discriminated against certain groups of people. And for some reason it doesn’t matter how many times we do it, we still pick out another group of people to go to. It’s just scary.” In Jason’s mind the Defense on Marriage Act is just another way for our government to continue its long history of discrimination, and then I asked Jason why he thinks our government seems to have this insatiable need to discriminate. He contends the needs exist because “people are not allied together in a greater way than whenever they are against a common enemy, and so that’s what government does. They pick on a group of people. They rally a nation to pick on a group of people,” and once the government has firmly allied all by that select target group then the government will have overwhelming support for most anything they want to accomplish.

This theme of historical oppression is seen from other participants as well. Steve comments on what he calls the "whipping boy" and how the gay and lesbian community now fills that role:

> I think the government has to have a whipping boy of some sort. Back in the 40's and 50's it was African Americans. You know pushing them…Jessie Helms being…they lost that. They no longer have a racial minority because of the laws and the way things passed and the way things have been. Now we are the new minority to be picked on. We are the focus group to throw stones at.

Holding on to this belief that our government has a need for a "whipping boy" appears to provide Jason and Steve with relief from the psychological tensions produced by cognitive dissonance.

These psychological tensions necessitate action of some sort to return the individual to a state of cognitive consistency. The participants in this study have all chosen, in combination with the three previously discussed strategies, to rationalize the action that has produced dissonance, namely the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act. If individuals are able to rationalize such an action then they may be able to excuse the action and simultaneously excuse the messages associated with it. When asked about the motivating factors behind DOMA, participants in this study seem very hesitant to recognize a genuine dislike for homosexuality as a possible motivation. Instead they opt to make excuse for the existence of this piece of legislation.

The success of this strategy, however, depends on the ability of the rationalization to not only excuse the action but also the messages stemming for the action. While participants here seem able to excuse the Defense of Marriage Act and the motivations behind it, they all still recognize the negative messages that it communicates. This

inability to fully excuse the messages may explain why participants exhibit this dissonance reduction strategy in combination with others.

Discussion

Following Craig and Tracy's (1995) approach to analyzing data gathered through a Glaserian approach to grounded theory illuminates the tensions created within the gay and lesbian community by the Defense of Marriage Act and how members of the community respond to these tensions. For the participants in this study, DOMA transmits messages which are highly inconsistent with their personal views of themselves, their relationships, their sexual orientation, and the gay and lesbian community as a whole. Moreover, the inconsistency that exists between these personal views and the messages communicated by DOMA produce tensions similar to those identified in numerous studies on cognitive dissonance. In order to alleviate these tensions, participants utilized four dissonance reduction techniques. Based on the findings of this study, it is possible to draw four conclusions concerning dissonance reduction in the gay and lesbian community:

1.) Dissonance reduction is continually occurring process.

2.) Members of the gay and lesbian community may utilize a number of dissonance reduction strategies.

3.) The ability to dispel negative/dissonant messages hinges on the presence of affirmative/consistent messages.

4.) When dissonance reduction is not possible due to a lack of affirmative/consistent messages then individuals are likely to seek some sort of escape from the psychological tensions produced by cognitive dissonance.

Reduction Is Continual

Previous research tends to suggest that individuals who identify as gay or lesbian will experience a great deal of stress during the early coming out process (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Davis & Neal, 1996; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Speer & Potter, 2000; Troiden, 1989). Blumenfeld (n.d.) contends that this stress is more closely related to social stigma and rejection rather than any sort of confusion over sexual desires and that the management of these negative messages during adolescence is key to the construction of a positive self identity. The finding in this study clearly illustrate a continuation of dissonance reduction strategies that Troiden (1989) notes as characteristic of the early stages of coming; however, research in the area of dissonance reduction during later stages of the "coming out" process is all but nonexistent (see Cass, 1979 for one example). The lack of substantial evidence for dissonance reduction during the later stages might lead one to believe that dissonance reduction is no longer a concern for members of the gay and lesbian community who have stabilized their identities. Participants in this study suggest otherwise.

All but one of the 16 interview participants in this study appears to have progressed to the final stage of each of the three models of the "coming out" previously discussed. These 15 participants tend to be very open about their sexual orientation and fail to show any signs of discomfort with their identities. This does not mean, however,

that these individuals are no longer exposed to messages that contradict their self-image. Nor does it mean that these participants are able to immediately disregard these negative messages never to experience distress or tension again. Indeed these individuals openly discuss the negative emotions that aroused by the Defense of Marriage Act, and some admit that these feelings of depression, anger, and frustration lasted for a number of days, but within a relatively brief period of time participants in this study were able to overcome these feelings and move on without experiencing any great disruption in their daily lives.

The participants in this study appear to have learned how to successfully negotiate the tensions produced by the occurrence of dissonant messages. While the negotiation of these tensions may still take time and effort on the part of the individual, dissonance reduction does appear to become easier with time even as it continues to occur throughout an individual's life.

Various Dissonance Reduction Strategies

The findings of this study illuminate four distinct dissonance reduction strategies employed by participants when confronted by the messages embedded in the Defense of Marriage Act. First, several participants attempted to decrease the relevance of negative messages. This option, which is similar to dissonance reduction techniques identified by other scholars (Esienstadt & Leippe, 2005; Festinger, 1957; Fried, 1998), appears to only be available to those for whom marriage is not a pressing desire since this strategy usually manifested itself through discussions concerning a staunch disagreement with the institution of marriage or life long plans that did not immediately include marriage. It is

important to note that when this reduction strategy was utilized it was always in conjunction with some other strategy. The reason for this may be that reducing the relevance of DOMA responds only to surface level messages and fails to address any of the more deeply embedded messages.

Other participants in this study opted to seek the silver lining underlying negative messages communicated to them by the Defense of Marriage Act. This technique is consistent with what Festinger (1957) identified as adding consistent cognitions. When this strategy was employed by participants they frequently discussed a view of DOMA that suggested the policy was simply a hurdle that had to be crossed on the path towards a greater acceptance of homosexuals in the future. By adding these positive or consistent cognitions individuals might be able to overshadow the negative messages rendering them unimportant and easily dismissible. Of course this assumes that the newly added cognitions are sizable enough to outweigh the negative cognitions. If this is not the case individuals might decide to take up a third dissonance reduction strategy.

The third possible way to reduce dissonance, according to the data collected in this study, is to increase the value of affirmative/consistent messages while decreasing the value of negative/dissonant messages. This strategy is not only consistent with Festinger's (1957) discussions of rejecting sources of dissonance and seeking validation of consistent cognitions, but it is also highly present in the "coming out" literature (Cass, 1979; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; Coleman, 1982; D'Augelli, 1991; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Troiden, 1989). When and individual chooses to make us of this strategy he or she will exalt the opinions of others that are consistent with a positive self-

image while downplaying the significance of others whose opinions are more critical. In the case of the Defense of Marriage Act, participant frequently described just how important the positive opinions of friends and family were as compared to the insignificance they placed on the opinions of strangers in Washington.

Lastly, participants in this study make frequent use of a fourth and final strategy. This strategy, referred to as rationalizing the existence of negative messages, was present in all 16 interviews, but only minimal support for could be found in previous literature. Thus, this technique represents the potential existence of new and previously undiscovered dissonance reduction strategies. When participants in this study sought to rationalize the negative messages received from DOMO, they usually did so be claiming that political support for policy was insincere at best. Several participants expressed the opinion that politicians were not acting in a heterosexist or homophobic manner, but instead politicians were simply caving the pressure from the religious right or religiously bent constituents. Other participants attempted to rationalize the existence of negative messages by making other excuses for why politicians supported the legislation, but ultimately each and every participant was attempting to reduce his or her dissonance by rationalizing away the actions which lead to the existence of messages inconsistent with a positive self-image.

It is important here to point out that these strategies were frequently used in combination. It seems as if none of the strategies alone is powerful enough to dispel the messages communicated by DOMA, but when combined participants were able to return

to cognitive consistency and maintain a positive view of themselves, their relationships, and their sexual orientation.

Necessity for Positive/Consistent Messages

The third conclusion drawn from the findings of this study deals with the ability of an individual to engage in dissonance reduction and successful maintain a positive perception of self. Based on my conversations with participants, I conclude that the ability to dispel negative/dissonant messages hinges on the presence of affirmative/consistent messages. Support for this conclusion is not only present in the data obtain during this study but is also present in cognitive dissonance literature. Cognitive dissonance scholars often discuss a cognitions "resistance to change" (Worchel & McCormick, 1963, p. 589). According to Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999) "resistance to change is based on the responsiveness of the cognition to reality and on the extent to which the cognition is consonant with many other cognitions" (p. 12). A similar, and perhaps simpler, understanding of resistance can be seen when Worchel and McCormick (1963) state that, "resistance to change is partly a function of the degree of certainty or confidence one has about his [or her] opinion" (p. 589). With this understanding of resistance to change, it is clear that affirming messages play a vital role in an individual ability to successfully respond to dissonant messages.

Remember what Peggy said about the opinions of certain people? She said, "*once the people you love know and accept you and love you back*, then it really doesn't matter if your neighbor or somebody in Washington knows and accepts you or not." In essence, once an individual is able to find a source of affirming messages about his or her sexual

orientation – or any other cognition for that matter – then the inconsistent opinions of others become much easier to cope with because the amount of dissonance produced by an inconsistent message, and consequently its resistance to change, is further diminished by each and every consistent message that is obtained.

This understanding of how dissonant cognitions may be more or less resistant to change depending on the level of certainty an individual possess about his or her beliefs and knowing that certainty is maintained through a steady flow of affirmative messages, one must question: what happens when an individual faces dissonant cognitions without the support of affirmative messages?

A Desire to Escape

The final conclusion extrapolated from the data in this study flows directly from the idea that affirmative/consistent messages play a vital in the dissonance reduction process. If this is true, as it appears to be, then one might assume that dissonance reduction would be much more difficult, if not impossible, when an individual lacks significant affirmative messages supporting a positive perception of self. This assumption is further supported through the narratives of several people I interviewed. Jason, Mike, Marty, and Gabriel among other recall episodes in their lives when they were unable to negotiate the tensions produced by messages that condemned their homosexual lifestyle because they lacked support in the form of affirming messages. Mike says:

> If my family had been more accepting, they could have been able to be more involved in my life, and I wouldn't have had to hide my behavior from them, and then they could have prevented a lot of things a regret.

Like Mike, Gabriel was bombarded by negative messages form his parents, church, and even several friends. He says every where he looked he felt like someone was telling him that his lifestyle was wrong. In the absence of affirmative messages, Gabriel turned to drugs. When I asked him what motivated the drug use he said:

> Escapism, you know trying to hide an out to not be yourself for a while, to not have to deal with all the crap that you have to deal with. I wanted to not be around my parents and not have to deal with all the crap that they were telling me because I knew it wasn't true, but still when you are so pent up you need an escape. And that's the one that I chose.

These experiences with drugs and alcohol are not uncommon among members of the gay and lesbian community. Frankowski (2004) explains that LGBT youth are much more likely develop problems with alcohol and drugs and are more likely to engage in unprotected sex on a frequent basis.

The rampant abuse of drugs and alcohol may be motivated by a desire to escape as Gabriel says, but this desire for an escape, for a way out, a desire to be someone else ever if it's for only a short period of time is motivated by the unresolved tensions. These tensions are left unresolved because the individual does not have the affirmative messages necessary to engage in successful dissonance reduction, and when left unresolved for an extended period of time the individual may begin to question if drugs and alcohol offer enough of an escape. van Heeringen and Vincke (2000) report that nearly 40% of the GLBT youth have at least considered the ultimate escape – suicide.

This understanding of how members of the gay and lesbian community negotiate their identities in light of the Defense of Marriage Act offers insight in the lives of individuals who identify as part of a marginalized population. Since the voices of these individuals are often shutout of discussions concerning public policy it was necessary to explore their experiences in way what that valued their narratives. The following chapter discusses implications and directions for future research based on the finding of this thesis.

CHAPTER V

LOOKING BEYOND DOMA

The Defense of Marriage Act may be nearing its ten year anniversary, and younger members of the gay and lesbian community might not even remember a time before politicians began taking steps to codify marriage as an institution open only to heterosexuals. But, the messages of this policy still seem to ring loud and clear in the ears of homosexuals even for those like Jason, age 21, who admits that in 1996 he was more concerned with friends, gossip, and the other trivial elements of the life of an 11 year old than he was with any governmental policy. The persistent resonance of this policy may be attributed to the large number of states that have, since 1996, passed laws and ratified constitutional amendments echoing the sentiments of DOMA. It might also be attributed to the fact that each day members of the gay and lesbian community, particularly those in long-term committed relationships who desire marriage, are reminded that they do not have access to the same rights and privileges of their heterosexual counterparts, or it could be because many politicians do not seem satisfied with the Defense of Marriage Act. For some reason, many politicians feel that the Federal Government needs to take an even stronger stand against same-sex marriage.

Regardless of the reason for the continued significance, the Defense of Marriage Act continues to transmit its messages as clearly as it did on September 26, 1996. Participants in this study interpreted these messages in three ways: messages concerning access to rights, messages concerning the social acceptance of homosexuality, and messages designed to stall the gay rights movement. Based on previous literature in the

area of cognitive dissonance, one might suspect that these messages would produce tension for individuals with positive self-images. This was exactly the case for participants; they identified feelings of distress, depression, agitation, anger, and frustration, and in order to relieve these negative feelings while maintaining a positive perception of self, participants utilized numerous dissonance reduction strategies.

Discussing these tensions and the ways in which members of the gay and lesbian community manage them not only provides a voice to a normally silenced segment of the population. This discussion also presents a starting point for future research aimed at understanding the functions of public policy and dissonance reduction in the identity negotiation process, but before discussing the implications of this research and the direction it provides for future scholarly endeavors, it might be interesting to take a look at how the findings in this study differ from what I expected to find when this project first began.

Approaching the question, “how do members of the gay and lesbian community negotiate identity in light of the Defense of Marriage Act,” from a grounded theory angle meant allowing the data to provide its own answers. Unlike other research methods, grounded theory does not being with a set of previously constructed theoretical assumptions. When a researcher decides to engage in grounded theory research he or she is not seeking to support an existing theory. Instead the researcher desires intimate contact with the data so that the data may speak and ultimately explain itself. This does not mean, however, that the researcher is void of any thought as to what might be found in the data. In fact, a constructivist approach to grounded theory would suggest that there

is no possible way for a researcher to ever approach any set of data in a purely neutral way. Regardless of the method employed, every researcher will approach every study with a previously constructed set of beliefs, ideas, and speculations about the possible outcome of the study. Therefore, to better understand the lens through which the data in this study was interpreted it is important to briefly discuss the assumptions and speculations I held as I approach this project.

Getting to Know the Interpreter

In the months leading up to my thesis proposal I had done a great deal of reading in the area of identity formation and negotiation, and during that time a majority of my attention had been focused on the concept of symbolic interactionism. Based on these readings and my experience as a gay man, I began to wonder whose appraisals were relevant in constructing my perception of self. At first, I thought my thesis project would seek to better understand how members of the gay and lesbian community developed their perceptions of self. While this certainly would have been a worth adventure – one that I might still embark on one day – I soon found myself equally fascinated by the legal rhetoric, particularly those legal writings that dealt with issues homosexuality. Then for some unknown reason, I began to develop an interest in gay hate crimes. Perhaps this interest had been motivated by the comments of the usually quiet football player who proclaimed to my public speaking class that he thought "being gay should be illegal."

Somehow in my mind all of these different interests blended together, and I began to wonder what role violent crimes, judicial decisions, and legislative acts played in the process of developing a perception of one's self as a homosexual. Founded on my

knowledge of symbolic interactionism, I suspected that violent crimes, judicial decisions, and legislative acts would all provide members of the homosexual community with a sort of appraisal regarding their orientation. Ultimately, I wanted to understand how these events operated with other aspects of what symbolic interactionists call the "generalized other" (Mead, 1934). Thankfully, however, my thesis committee was wise enough to encourage me to limit my research to only one area, and even more importantly they suggested that I approach the research from a grounded theory perspective instead of attempting to apply symbolic interactionism to a phenomenon that we knew very little about.

With the suggestions of my committee in hand, I began my exploration of how members of the gay and lesbian community respond to the Defense of Marriage Act. I must admit, however, that even though my research was driven by the principles of grounded theory I still suspected that I would eventually return to the assumptions of symbolic interactionism to explain the experiences of my participants, but the interviews I conducted lead me down a decidedly different path than I had expected.

Early on in the interview process I was surprised by what people were telling me. The Defense of Marriage Act did not impact the lives of these people in anyway. They could not care less about what politicians in Washington were saying about them. I did not understand these responses, and I thought if I just kept interviewing people then I would eventually find people who felt that this policy did play a role in their perception of self. It was not until I completed my ninth or tenth interview that I realized I simply was not going to find what I thought I would. In fact, it was about this time that I began

to suspect that I might be nearing saturation. The responses of my first ten participants had been so similar that I almost felt like I knew what they were going to say before they even responded to my questions.

Eventually, I began to notice that the participants had not been able to fully dismiss the messages communicated by DOMA. They often spoke of feeling depressed and devalued, but then they spoke of moving on, getting past those feelings. Shortly thereafter it all began to make sense. These participants were coping with dissonant messages. They were all comfortable with being gay or lesbian. None of them saw anything wrong with their sexual orientation, but they were still bothered, at least temporarily, by what the government was saying about their sexuality. The more time I spend coding the interview transcripts, the more I began to think notice tensions that seemed very similar to those associated with cognitive dissonance and behaviors that seemed to seek dissonance reduction.

Had I forced the data to fit into the symbolic interactionism cookie cutter mold, the findings of this study would not be nearly as rich. All we would have gained is the knowledge that views of the government concerning homosexuality do not impact perceptions of self in the gay and lesbian community. Instead, by allowing the data to speak for itself, this study has revealed a much greater understanding of how participants cope with the messages communicated by DOMA. The remainder of this chapter will provide directions for future research and attempt to explain the implications of this research for members of the gay and lesbian community.

Directions for Future Research

Despite the presence of countless policies capable to communicating messages to every segment of the population, the communicative nature of these policies have yet to capture the attention of scholars outside the field of rhetorical analysis (Hasian, 2003; Hasian & Parry-Giles, 1997; Miller, 2003; Schlag, 2002). Moreover, the "coming out" literature documents the tendency of individuals to seek affirming messages while avoiding negative ones as a means of negotiating a positive self-image (Blumenfeld, n.d.; Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989). The likelihood that an individual might be able to fully avoid the messages communicated by law and public policy is, however, suspect at best. Therefore, I suggest that future research should focus more on public policies as a source of identity influencing messages.

Additionally, in the future, scholars may seek to explore identity negotiations at the intersections of various cultural locations (Heuman, 2004). Houston (2002) argues that in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of African American communication styles it is necessary to recognize the complexity of an individual's identity. Although Houston's research deals specifically with interpersonal communication and African Americans, her suggestions may enhance research in other areas as well. Acknowledging that members of the gay and lesbian community may also identify with other marginalized groups could lead to the investigation of numerous cultural intersections. The participants in this study offered only limited opportunity for such examination; thus the emergent theory was unable to offer insight into role of race,

abled/non-abled bodiedness, socioeconomic status, or other cultural locations in the identity negotiation process of lesbian and gay individuals.

Further direction for future research can be drawn from the four theoretical conclusions presented in chapter four. The first of these conclusions suggests that dissonance reduction is, as Cass (1979) contends, a continuous facet of identity negotiations for members of the gay and lesbian community. Future research might seek to determine if this is the case for individuals who identify as members of other marginalized groups. Scholars might also be interested in exploring the long term effects of exposure to dissonant messages. Although long term effect was not a central component of the emergent theory in this study, the data does at times suggest individuals may be negatively impact by the continuous presence of inconsistent messages. In fact, Elliot and Devine (1994) question whether or not dissonance reduction strategies actually reduce the psychological tensions produced by dissonant messages. If attempts to respond to dissonant messages do not alleviate psychological tensions, then continued exposure to these messages may well result in some sort of long-term effect.

Secondly, I conclude that a variety of different dissonance reduction strategies may be utilized by individuals responding to messages that are inconsistent with their perceptions of self. In the future, researchers may wish to explain why an individual opts to employ a given strategy. Do certain types of dissonant messages beg for a particular dissonance reduction strategy? Are certain strategies frequently used in combination with one another? How are these strategies employed at different cultural locations? These are only a few of the questions that might guide future research.

Related to the conclusion that individuals may employ a variety of dissonance reduction strategies is the fact that this study reveals a previously un-researched dissonance reduction strategy. Again, previous research has noted the tendency of individuals experiencing dissonance to attempt to rationalize their own actions when those actions are the source of dissonance. However, this study finds that individuals may also attempt to rationalize the behavior of those when their actions are the source of dissonance. Moreover, this was the most frequently used dissonance reduction strategy by participants in this study. Future research may seek to explore the use of this strategy in other population groups. Are there other situations in which individuals attempt to rationalize the actions of politicians? Do parents who suspect that their child might be gay or lesbian attempt to rationalize the actions of the child? Do individuals attempt to rationalize the actions of their relationship partner when those actions are inconsistent with relationship expectations? What other situations might exist where the actions of others produce dissonance? The possibilities for this dissonance reduction strategy seem almost endless.

The third conclusion articulated in chapter four contends that dissonance reduction requires the presence of affirmative/consistent messages. This conclusion is supported by both the data and previous research in the field of cognitive dissonance (Worchel & McCormick). Scholars may, at some point, find it necessary to define what exactly constitutes an affirmative/consistent message. More importantly, though, future research may examine the resilience of these affirmative/consistent messages. Are the

dissonant messages really resolved, or do they, overtime, build up to the point that they can overcome even the most strongly held belief?

Lastly, the data appears to imply that when successful dissonance reduction is not possible individuals may desire an escape from reality. This escape is usually achieved through the use of some mind-altering substance, but in extreme situations an individual may pursue a more permanent escape (i.e., suicide). Is this true of other populations, or is this a phenomenon isolated to the gay and lesbian community. Clearly drugs, alcohol, and suicide are problems that face all parts of society, but are the motivations the same; do heterosexuals abuse drugs and alcohol or contemplate suicide as a result of unresolved dissonance? Future research may seek to explore the transferability of this conclusion to other populations.

While the scholarly significance of these finding may be weighty enough for most scholars, my goal in writing this thesis was not just to produce a piece of sound scholarly literature. It has been my aspiration all along to produce research that could assist those outside of academia as well; therefore I have chosen to conclude this chapter and this thesis with a discussion that I hope reaches out to those members of the gay and lesbian community who have not yet become fully comfortable with their identity as a homosexual.

To Members of the Gay and Lesbian Community

As I began this research project several months ago, I quickly became inspired by the work of Barry Glaser and Anselm Strauss. In their early work with grounded theory they sought not only to further academic research but also to provide practical advice and

support to those who spent their lives offering treatment to the terminally ill. Likewise, I do not think that I would be as satisfied with my research if I did not think that it could benefit our community.

The lives of homosexuals are constantly permeated by negative messages. These messages have the power to destroy individuals. We need only look to the astronomical number of suicides in our community to know that this is true, but beyond the suicides a great number of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters have sought refuge in the arms of drugs and alcohol. Others of us have sought similar refuge in the arms of countless unknown lovers. While my conversations with the individuals I interviewed as part of this research lead me to believe that these behaviors are a response to the lack of acceptance we encounter, those who oppose us have repeatedly used it against us. They have categorized us as tweaked out sex driven pariahs, and they use the images of young gay men strung-out on God only knows what drugs, as the poster child of everything that they loath about us. Touting these images our enemies continue to foster support in the halls of government and the homes of everyday Americans. In order to break this vicious cycle we, as a community, must find a healthier way to cope with the lack of acceptance we face, and hopefully this thesis has illustrated at least one alternative to drugs, alcohol, and promiscuity.

Although my conversations with members of the gay and lesbian community as part of this project were limited to individuals who have reached a point in their lives where they are comfortable with themselves and no longer have trouble coping with negative messages, they did offer advice those who have not yet become fully

comfortable with their sexual orientation. One common thread connects all this advice. Because we cannot withstand oppression and hatred alone, it is crucial that we find a stable source of acceptance and affirmation. My conversations with participants in this study revealed several possible sources of such messages. Some participants suggested that developing a social network comprised at least partially of other gay and lesbian individuals might offer the support necessary to cope with dissonant messages. Antoinette and Peggy, for example, both discussed how their coming out process was made easier by the presence of other lesbian friends, and Marty said that during his college years his friends were almost exclusively gay because he needed to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance.

For those that might find it difficult to make friends with other members of the gay and lesbian community, other participants suggested joining organizations that might have other gay and lesbian members. Gabriel said this is why he attends a church that offers a special outreach to GLBT community. Gabriel experienced a great deal of rejection from his family and many friends, but the connections he made at the church assisted him in developing a positive self-image in spite of the rejection. Jason joined the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at his high school for a similar reason. Jason said that he felt isolated, but the GSA allowed him to connect and feel included.

Although some participants found acceptance from friends and others joined organizations, Basco seeks affirmative messages in a different place – the internet. Basco lives in a rural area where he does not know another gay or lesbian person, and he says when he begins to feel isolated he turns to the internet to make contact with other

homosexuals. Regardless of where the acceptance and affirmative messages come from, participants in this study all spoke of how important it is to find them. As Mike put it, “Once you create an inner circle of friends who accept you and support you then it doesn’t matter what anyone outside that circle says or thinks about you.”

Conclusion

The desire of politicians for even stricter policies is perhaps motivated by the uncertain future of DOMA and its many state level spin-offs. This uncertainty appears to have been created by a number court ruling which have deemed these types of policies unconstitutional. The push for stronger legislation recently brought the issue of a Federal Marriage Amendment to Capitol Hill and the floor of the U.S. Senate. Ultimately, the measure was defeated – this time, but no one can be certain as to what the future holds for homosexuals and their rights. What is certain is that these policies to continue communicate messages long after the media buzz around them has died down, and like all messages these messages require a response. This thesis has explained three ways in which participants interpret the messages communicated by DOMA and the four dissonance reduction strategies employed to cope with those interpretations.

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APPENDIX A

STATE PROHIBITIONS ON MARRIAGE FOR SAME-SEX COUPLES[1]

- 19 states with constitutional amendments restricting marriage rights:

Alabama	Montana
Alaska	Nebraska
Arkansas	Nevada
Georgia	North Dakota
Kansas	Ohio
Kentucky	Oklahoma
Louisiana	Oregon
Michigan	Texas
Mississippi	Utah
Missouri	

- 26 states with laws restricting marriage rights:

Arizona	Minnesota
California	New Hampshire
Colorado	North Carolina
Connecticut	Pennsylvania
Delaware	South Carolina
Florida	South Dakota
Hawaii	Tennessee
Idaho	Vermont
Illinois	Virginia
Indiana	Washington
Iowa	Wisconsin
Maine	West Virginia
Maryland	Wyoming

- 4 states with no explicit provision of any sort restricting marriage rights[2]:

New Jersey	New York
New Mexico	Rhode Island

- 1 state issues marriage licenses to same-sex couples
  Massachusetts

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[1] Human Rights Campaign, 2006.
[2] The District of Columbia also has not explicit provision of any sort restricting marriage rights.

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You have been invited to participate in a research interview for the purpose of facilitating a study designed to increase understanding of how legislative acts, particularly the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), influences identity formation in the queer community. The purpose of this form is to provide informed consent for the researcher to record your interview. This research is being conducted by Chris Joffrion as part of his Master's thesis. You may contact him at (806) 742-3967 or by email at chris.joffrion@ttu.edu Dr. Amy N. Heuman of the Department of Communication Studies is in charge of this project, and you may contact her at (806) 742-3912 or by email at a.heuman@ttu.edu

Once this consent form is completed you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher. This interview will be recorded using basic audio recording equipment and is expected to last approximately two hours. The audiotapes of the interview will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the office of Chris Joffrion at Texas Tech University, and only he will hear these tapes. In order to further ensure your confidentiality, the audiotapes will have no identifying information. The tapes will only be marked with pseudonym you provide during your interview.

There are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse/neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, Texas Tech University might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You may refuse to participate or discontinue your participation at anytime without penalty or consequence of any sort.

I anticipate no foreseeable risks or discomfort resulting from participation in this study. However, should you become uncomfortable at any time, we will stop the interview. At that time we will attempt to address any concerns you might have. If we can not adequately address your concerns, we will terminate the interview. In addition, if you feel that you need additional assistance in dealing with an issue that may have arisen during this study, I will refer you to Student Counseling Center at Texas Tech University (806-742-3674). Additionally, participation in this study is not expected to produce any foreseeable benefit to you or others.

Dr. Amy Heuman (806-742-3912) will be happy to answer any questions you might have about this study. For questions about your rights as a subject or injuries caused by this research, contact the Texas Tech University Institutional Review Board for the Protection

of Human Subjects, Office of Research Services, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas 79409. Or you can call (806) 742-3884.If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the research session, please contact Texas Tech University, Office of Research Services at (806)-742-3884.

If you would like to discuss any issue related to this study or have any further questions or information concerning the study, please feel free to contact Chris Joffrion, Department of Communication Studies, Texas Tech University (806) 742-3967.

"I, ________________________, have read and understand the foregoing description of this study. I have asked for and received satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I also acknowledge that I have been given a copy of this consent form for my keeping. Finally, I understand that my participation in this study is strictly voluntary, and that I will receive no compensation for my participation monetary or otherwise."

Note: This consent is invalid after December 31, 2006

Interviewee's Name: ___________________________ (please print)

Interviewee's Signature: ________________________ Date: _________________

Interviewer's Name: ___________________________ (please print)

Interviewer's Signature: ________________________ Date: _________________

Please check:

___ I give consent to be audio taped.

APPENDIX C

DETAILED PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

David:

Age: 38
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Master’s degree in Ministry
Occupation: Self-employed
Relationships Status: Single
Originally From: unknown
Religious Views: Christian

Winnie:

Age: 62
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Master’s degree in Mass Communication
Occupation: Retired high school teacher
Relationships Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Christian

Steve[3]:

Age: 55
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: MBA
Occupation: Retired office manager
Relationships Status: Single
Originally From: Illinois
Religious Views: Christian

Sadie:

Age: 45
Gender: Female
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Bachelor’s degree in Physical Education
Occupation: Minister
Relationship Status: In a long-term committed relationship (more than 10 years)

[3] Steve is also physically disabled as the result of a childhood illness.

Originally From: unknown
Religious Views: Christian

Peggy:
Age: 53
Gender: Female
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Bachelor’s degree in Nursing
Occupation: Registered Nurse
Relationships Status: In a long-term committed relationship (more than 10 years)
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Christian

Lavender:
Age: 59
Gender: Female
Racial Background: African American
Education: Master’s degree in Language and Literacy
Occupation: Teacher
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Spiritual/Christian

Luke:
Age: 24
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caribbean
Education: Bachelor’s degree in General Studies
Occupation: Graduate Student
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Spiritual

Basco:
Age: 56
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education:
Occupation: Registered Nurse
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Christian

Robert:

Age: 24
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Some undergraduate level college courses
Occupation: Student
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Tennessee
Religious Views: Spiritual

Ethan:

Age: 31
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Bachelor’s degree with some postgraduate studies
Occupation: College instructor
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Kansas
Religious Views: Atheist

Mike:

Age: 22
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration
Occupation: Sales
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Christian

Jason:

Age: 21
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Associate’s degree in Government
Occupation: Student
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Non-Christian

Gabriel:

Age: 20
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian

Education: Some undergraduate level courses
Occupation: Student/Sales
Relationship Status: In a committed relationship (less than 2 years)
Originally From: North Carolina
Religious Views: Spiritual

Antoinette:

Age: 44
Gender: Female
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Ph.D. in Health and Exercise Science
Occupation: College Professor
Relationship Status: Single
Originally From: Louisiana
Religious Views: Atheist

Lee:

Age: 50
Gender: Female
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Master's degree in Education, Curriculum and Instruction
Occupation: Teacher
Relationship Status: In a long-term committed relationship (more than 10 years)
Originally From: Texas
Religious Views: Christian

Marty:

Age: 40
Gender: Male
Racial Background: Caucasian
Education: Ph.D. in Psychology
Occupation: Counselor
Relationship Status: In a long term committed relationship (7 years)
Originally From: Ohio
Religious Views: Buddhist

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1.) For the purpose of confidentiality, could you please select a pseudonym (name) for yourself?

2.) It will also be helpful to know about your demographic background.

    a. How old are you?

    b. What is your gender?

    c. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?

    d. Relationship Status?

    e. How would you describe your spiritual views?

    f. What is your education level?

3.) Because this research project is interested in the influence of political messages on identity formation, could you start off by describing your political views?

    a. How aware are you of the political world?

    b. Where do you get most of your political information?

4.) If I asked about sexual orientation, what label would you use to describe your sexual orientation?

    a. What does this label mean to you?

    b. And, why do you choose to identify in this way?

5.) How central is your sexual orientation to your overall perception of self?

    a. How much a part of your daily life is your sexual orientation?

    b. Are there times when you focus more on one part of your identity than others?

        i. Tell me about those times.

c. How important is it that others know about your sexual orientation?

6.) Tell me about your experiences with the coming out process.

a. Do you think coming out is a one time occurrence, or does it happen over and over again?

b. What influenced your decision to first disclose your sexual orientation?

c. What has influenced future decisions to disclose your sexual orientation?

7.) How do you negotiate the tension between public and private self?

Now that you have shared a little bit about yourself and your identity let's look at how this identity was shaped.

8.) How have issues like regionalism (growing up/living in a particular part of the country) impacted your life?

a. Your overall identity?

b. Your feelings about your sexual orientation?

c. The performance of your orientation?

9.) Now let's look at the Defense of Marriage Act passed in 1996, are you familiar with this legislative act?

a. Why do you think the government passed this legislation?

b. What views do you think the government was expressing in passing this legislation?

c. What messages, if any, do you think were conveyed to the public at large by this legislation?

d. What messages, if any, do you think were sent to the queer community?

e. How did these messages influence your life?

f. Your perception of self as a "homosexual"?

g. Your daily behavior?

10.) Are there any other factors that you think have influenced your perception of self that I have not touched on?

11.) Is there anything that you would like to discuss that I have not asked about?

PERMISSION TO COPY

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a master's degree at Texas Tech University or Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center, I agree that the Library and my major department shall make it freely available for research purposes. Permission to copy this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the Director of the Library or my major professor. It is understood that any copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my further written permission and that any user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Agree (Permission is granted.)

____Christopher B. Joffrion________________ ______July 21, 2006____
Student Signature Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

____ _________________
Student Signature Date