How Stigma Affects Information Sharing By Gay Men And Glbt Communities

Kathryn Shephard

University of Central Florida

This Masters Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations, 2004-2019 by an authorized administrator of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

STARS Citation
https://stars.library.ucf.edu/etd/3493
HOW STIGMA AFFECTS INFORMATION SHARING BY
GAY MEN AND GLBT COMMUNITIES

by

KATHRYN R. TAGYE SHEPHARD
B.S. University of Central Florida, 2000
M.A. University of Central Florida, 2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Nicholson School of Communication
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term
2008
ABSTRACT

This study examined how stigma and dialectical tensions affect information sharing by gay men. One specific area that was investigated is the use of interpersonal boundary spanning techniques in managing information related to being gay. The research used a qualitative, interpretive method to gather and analyze data from eleven in-depth interviews. An interview schedule was developed based on the critical incident technique in order to focus the interviews on specific events and direct observation. The questions in the interview covered individuals’ experiences with sharing their sexual orientation with someone else for the first time, times when they have specifically chosen to share or not share their orientation, boundaries that exist between the GLBT community and the larger community in which it resides, and techniques used when sharing general information about being gay. The data was analyzed for relational themes described by Owen (1984) as those that emerge through recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. The themes that emerged were how stigma affects coming out—both initially and continuously, managing stigma and dialectical tension, and techniques used in interpersonal boundary spanning. Two major contributions emerged: the relationship between stigma and intrapersonal dialectical tensions, and interpersonal boundary spanning. Stigma can change how easy it is to manage intrapersonal dialectical tensions, such as a normal-different tension. Interpersonal boundary spanning can help the stigmatized individual to demonstrate his normality, and interpersonal boundary spanning helps to reduce stereotyping and negative perception of the stigmatized group.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Landon, thank you for understanding my love of learning! Thank you for listening to both the thrills and frustrations I have felt during this research, and thank you for always being supportive and for loving me. And thank you ahead of time for understanding when it’s time for another degree.

Dr. Hastings, I would have never started thinking about this research or ever have been able to complete it without your encouragement and guidance. I appreciate not only your understanding while I struggled to keep all of my balls in the air but also your patience with the time that it took for me to complete this research. I appreciate the endless hours, especially the time you spent on your weekends, that you devoted to helping me conceptualize, develop, and complete this research. You have reminded me how passionate I am about discovery.

Many thanks to Dr. Musambira and Dr. Davis for all of the articles you each researched for me, for all of the suggestions you made that helped me to improve my research, and mostly for the support that you offered me throughout the entire process. I know that you rarely hear the ways that you have changed the lives of your students, so I speak for all of us when I say with deepest sincerity, “Thank you.”

Thank you to all of my family and friends who have always supported and encouraged me. Thank you also for that much needed glass of wine and round of laughs. I especially want to thank my parents who instilled in me from a young age to never stop wondering and who taught me that an open mind is the most important tool. Thank you also to Amy and Mike Bosley, who offered their support grammatically, emotionally, and nutritionally. Finally, thank you to Gina
Castle because of whom Panera will never be the same and without whom this research would have likely extended yet another semester.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

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

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW ........................................................................................................ 5

Gay and Lesbian Perspectives ................................................................................................................. 5
Stigma in Society ....................................................................................................................................... 6
Dialectical Tensions in Stigma Disclosure ................................................................................................. 10
Boundary Spanning Related to Interpersonal Relationships ....................................................................... 15
Research Questions ................................................................................................................................. 20

CHAPTER3: METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................. 21

Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 21
The Reciprocators ..................................................................................................................................... 22
Developing the Interview Schedule .......................................................................................................... 24
Data Collection ......................................................................................................................................... 25
Data Reduction .......................................................................................................................................... 27

CHAPTER 4: STIGMA AND DIALECTICAL TENSIONS ........................................................................... 29

How Stigma Affects Initially Coming Out ................................................................................................. 30
How Social Support Affects Stigma .......................................................................................................... 38
Continuing to Contend With Stigma ......................................................................................................... 39
Managing the Stigma ............................................................................................................................... 42

CHAPTER 5: BOUNDARY SPANNING .................................................................................................... 46

Defining the Gay Community .................................................................................................................... 46
Participating .............................................................................................................................................. 49
Passing ....................................................................................................................................................... 58
Summary .................................................................................................................................................... 60

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION ..................................................................................................................... 62
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Where do you work? Are you married? Do you have kids? On a regular basis, we are asked for and often share personal information about ourselves. While deciding how much personal information to reveal in any interaction is a significant issue, it can be a greater risk to men and women, who, at times, know that their responses may stigmatize them. For some the fear of being labeled with a disgraceful stigma may affect how they approach answering questions as well as what information they can share.

One such group of people often stigmatized is individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgerndered (GLBT). Although the United States in general has become more open to same-sex relationships, stigma that result in hate crimes, discrimination, bias, and intolerance on the basis of sexual orientation still exists.

Before moving further, it is important to explore the GLBT grouping. Although the major research on the GLBT community usually focuses on the group as one, it was important to choose one part of the GLBT group because stigma affects gay men, lesbian women, bisexual individuals, and transgendered individuals differently. Although little or no research has examined the differences in how gay men, lesbian women, bisexual and transgendered individuals are stigmatized, it seems to be commonly assumed that stigma does affect each member of the GLBT community differently. In light of that and based on Schwartz and Rutter’s (1998) claim that gay men are typically more stigmatized than lesbian women, gay men were chosen for the focus of this study. In addition to the level
of stigma experienced, limiting the focus of the study is important because the ideas being explored are relatively new and limiting the population of focus will allow for future research to be conducted with different stigmatized groups.

Although stigma will be discussed further in the study, it is essential to have a brief introduction to the concept of stigma. Erving Goffman (1963) in his text, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, describes a stigma that is not easily identified as *discreditable*; this anonymity gives members of the discreditable stigmatized group some choice in who knows about the stigma. The GLBT group is often considered discreditable and one of the choices members may face is if and how they self-disclose their sexual orientation to others. Individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual have some choice in participating both as members of the GLBT community as well as the larger community in which they live. While this sense of choice may provide freedom from the stigma of someone who belongs to the GLBT community, a tension of whether or not to self-disclose the stigma may exist.

The focus of this research is to begin a contribution to both GLBT studies and Interpersonal Communication studies by examining stigma, dialectical tensions, and taking an interpersonal look at boundary spanning to better understand how tensions affect communication and how communication between groups takes place. Specifically, this study will examine how gay men interact within the GLBT community as well as the larger community in which they live. This study will examine the tensions that exist for individuals who are working to maintain their membership in the GLBT and larger
communities. Additionally, the research will review what information, if any, is shared between communities, and how connections are made between communities. Finally, the study will consider the boundary spanning techniques that are used to negotiate both communities.

In order to examine these questions, several perspectives will be considered. First, it is important to consider the perspective of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered in the communication research. After an introduction to the community of interest, communication theories are examined, with consideration given to the relevance of that theory to the GLBT population. At the heart of this research is the study of stigma.

It is impossible to conceptualize any communication boundary without first understanding how stigma affects the individuals who identify as GLBT. In addition to understanding how stigma works, it is important to examine how stigma still exists for gay men and women. Dialectical tensions are a key connection to how stigma affects disclosure in communication. While dialectical tensions are often used to explain the opposing struggles within a relationship, this same theory can be used to explain the intrapersonal struggle an individual may have in determining when and how to disclose stigmatized information. Therefore, stigma research and dialectical tensions in relation to self disclosure will be the focal communication concepts reviewed.

While communication theorists have examined in-group and out-group communication, the separation of groups does not wholly explain how information
sharing to reduce negative presumptions takes place. Borrowing from Organizational Communication Studies, the research will consider how industry has capitalized on the natural abilities of some individuals to disseminate information across business boundaries. Therefore, the final theory that will be examined and applied to this study is a look at boundaries and boundary spanning in order to better understand how individuals manage communication, especially when communicating sensitive information, between different groups.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Gay and Lesbian Perspectives

Census studies in 2000 reported that gay men and lesbians made up between two to ten percent of the total reporting population in the United States (Smith & Gates, 2001). While it is not possible to sum up the experience of over 600,000 lesbians or gay men in the United States in one passage, the experiences of ‘feeling different’ and of ‘coming out’ are often familiar to many gay men and lesbians. These common themes have been reflected in literature focusing on the coming out process.

The Human Rights Campaign’s Coming Out Project asserts that “Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people often grow up feeling ‘different’ from the rest—and are typically keenly aware that the things that make them different may cause them to be rejected or discriminated against” (2006). As is discussed later in this paper, those who identify as GLBT are aware of the social stigma often attached to their sexual orientation. The bias that all people are heterosexual unless otherwise stated helps to create this feeling of differentness and fear of discrimination. It has been reported that gay men and lesbians must choose how, when, and if to correct this assumption (Land & Kitzinger, 2005). This choice will rely, at least in part, on whether or not the individual is publicly out about his or her sexual orientation.

Coming out is often a turning point for gay men and lesbians both in relationships as well as in self-identity. Coming out, or coming out of the closet, is the experience of gay men and lesbians acknowledging for the first time their sexual orientation,
identifying themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual, acting on and/or sharing their sexual desire, and/or publically joining the GLBT community (Yeung & Stombler, 2000). While coming out can be a common mark in the life of those identifying as GLBT, for most individuals coming out is not seen as one event. Instead coming out is often viewed as an experience that occurs more than once and sometimes more than once a day. For each new situation, each new person, and each new place, people who identify as GLBT must decide if and what they will reveal about themselves.

Heterosexist presumption is the assumption “that promulgates heterosexuality as the only normal, healthy sexual identity” (Bronski, 1998, p.141). One result of the heterosexual presumption is the stigmatization of anyone who does not fall within that assumption. Although the effects of stigmatization are quite real, the stigmas themselves are merely perceptions. Stigmas, which are a result of social construction, have existed throughout all of history in different forms and affect different groups of people (Goffman, 1963). As such, it is important to note that rather than a fact or attribute, a stigma is a perceived phenomenon that often differs from society to society and culture to culture. Although it would be preferable to refer to anyone who is affected by stigma as an ‘individual perceived to be stigmatized’ so as not to reify or validate the perception, in order to simplify the reading of this text, the term ‘stigmatized individual’ is used.

Stigma in Society

Stigma is any attribute that is perceived as discrediting or damaging to an individual and his or her reputation (Goffman, 1963). Social stigmas have been identified
in nearly every time period and virtually every society (Goffman; Dovidio, Major, & Crocker, 2000). Individuals may be perceived to have a stigma if they possess a stigmatizing attribute, if they formerly possessed a stigmatizing attribute, or if they associate themselves with someone who is perceived to have a stigmatizing attribute (Dindia, 1998). Social stigmas fall into three types: physical ability, character blemishes or defects, such as a reformed addict, or membership in a particular tribe or group (Goffman). The individuals in the focus of this study, people who identify as GLBT, can be considered part of the second or third group. Most frequently, men and women who identify as gay or lesbian are seen as part of the ‘gay community,’ a group that is stigmatized for holding a sexual preference not recognized as part of the norm (the third stigmatizing group); however, some people within American society believe being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered is something that one chooses. From this perspective, being a member of the GLBT community would be viewed as a character blemish (the second stigmatizing group).

Stigmas are developed and established largely by societies and can be examined along with deviance, prejudice, and marginalization. Although stigmas can be situation specific, people who are stigmatized are often seen as “not quite human,” and stigmatized people are often regarded as flawed or less than “normal” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). These assumptions often result in the varieties of discrimination, prejudice and stereotypes seen in both public and private interactions (Goffman). Threat to physical well-being and access to health care, education, and housing are just a few of the ways that stigmatized people historically have been socially rejected (Dovidio et al., 2000). An individual’s
response to being marked as a stigmatized person may have damaging consequences to his or her self image and feelings of self worth (Goffman). In addition, the stigmatized person may go to lengths to hide, diminish, or correct his or her stigmatized circumstance. However, reactions to and responses of stigmatized individuals may not always appear negative. Goffman indicates that there are times when the stigmatized person is either unaware or untouched by the social stigma, “protected by identity beliefs of his (sic) own, he (sic) feels that he (sic) is a full-fledged normal human being, and that we are the ones who are not quite human” (p. 6). Dovidio et al. argued that negative feelings or attitudes towards stigmatized people may result in feelings such as sympathy and a desire to be fair.

The above discussion regarding social stigma can be applied to the stigma of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual or transgendered. Land and Kitzinger (2005) argue that heterosexism, “the privileging of heterosexuality as the only ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ and taken-for-granted sexuality” (p. 371) is not just the outward, sometimes violent, and often hateful homophobic reactions to the GLBT community, but it is also the interwoven stigma in the very aspect of a society that assumes that its members are heterosexual and expects its members to participate in ‘appropriate’ and predictable activities. As society creates an expectation that being heterosexual constitutes normality, it in turn names anything outside that realm as abnormal leading to stigmatization. Because stigma is socially constructed and because those who are stigmatized also belong to society, stigmatized individuals may also buy into the belief that they, themselves, are ‘less than
normal.’ Therefore, even those who know themselves to be gay may also perceive themselves to be stigmatized.

One specific area of stigma that Goffman (1963) examined is the social interactions between stigmatized individuals and non-stigmatized individuals. Goffman identified several possible reactions of the stigmatized person: uncertainty of how (s)he will be categorized, uncertainty of what others may be thinking about her or him, and uncertainty of what questions might be asked of him or her. At times, people may also avoid such interactions in order to avoid discomfort and uncertainty. The stigmatized person may avoid situations where (s)he has to make accommodations or explain herself or himself to others. The person who is not stigmatized may avoid situations so that (s)he does not have to make accommodations or that (s)he does not have to monitor his or herself from making a social faux pas or so that the stigmatized person does not misread any unintended meaning in actions or words (Goffman, 1963). These anticipations and anxieties may differ depending on whether the stigma is known by others with whom the stigmatized person interacts.

Stigmas have been separated into categories based on whether or not the stigma is immediately known about the person. Goffman (1963) developed the term discredited for individuals whose stigma is easily identified and the term discreditable for individuals whose stigma is not easily identified. In the case of this study, the stigma faced by individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual is considered discreditable because gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals are often able to choose if and when they disclose
their sexual orientation to others. As Goffman saw it, the discredited individual must manage the tension of discussing or ignoring the known stigma while the discreditable individual must manage the information about his stigma. This not only gives the discreditable individual a choice of concealing her or his stigma and to whom information will be revealed, but it also creates a need to control information about the stigma. In relation to the GLBT community as a whole, Bronski (2003) described the often subtle ‘gay codes’ as existing ‘simultaneously visible and invisible’ in order to both sustain the culture and remain ‘obvious’ to other gay people as well as to remain secretive enough to protect itself (p. 138).

Dindia (1998) points out that the choice of whether or not to reveal one’s sexual orientation is not a simple one. Instead, she argued that, “disclosure is an ongoing and ever-changing process” and that revealing or concealing information about a stigma is more likely to occur on a continuum (p. 87). Disclosure occurs on many levels at many times in different relationships and interactions as well as throughout the life of the individual. It is this tension of information management that people within the GLBT community often face. In addition to examining how individuals make decisions regarding self disclosure, this study examines how the GLBT community shares information about themselves in order to lessen the consequences of the stigma.

Dialectical Tensions in Stigma Disclosure

The concept of dialectical tensions comes from Leslie Baxter’s relational dialectic theory that takes the perspective that “relating is a dialogic process, that is, a
communicative process characterized by the unity of opposed tendencies” (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004, p. 448). Central to the theory are the concepts *dialogical* and *dialectical* which were highly influenced by the work by Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogics (Baxter, 2004b). Bakhtin’s major contribution to the future identification of dialectical tensions was his view that “social life was ongoing contradictory flux between centripetal and centrifugal forces” (Baxter, 2004a, p. 184).

Centripetal forces are those that pull together, or in the sense of Bakhtin’s theory, the forces that seek to maintain order; centrifugal forces are those that pull apart, in Bakhtin’s theory, the forces that seek to disrupt order. In this way, things in everyday life are constantly changing and need to be continuously viewed in the context in which they are presented (Littlejohn & Foss, 2008). Bakhtin’s other major concept, *dialogue*, builds on the move away from generalizing and adds to that concept by focusing on interaction. Dialogue happens in a specific situation between specific participants; there is always “somebody talking to somebody, even when you are talking to yourself” (Littlejohn & Foss, p. 208). Although Bakhtin’s theory continues on, what this study examines is that flux and flow of dialectics in interactions that inspired Baxter’s theory of relationship.

Baxter built from Bakhtin’s ideas of dialectics and dialogue in order to frame understanding of how relationships are managed and how relationships change specific to the individuals involved in “the give-and-take interplay of multiple competing themes” in the relationship (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006, p. 33). As in Bakhtin’s theory, the participants’ voices in the relationship (dialogue) and contradiction (dialectics) are at the forefront of Baxter’s theory:
In moving to the between, it is important to recognize that contradictions are not located in the individual heads, serving as dilemmatic goals that direct individual’s communicative strategies. Rather, from a dialogic perspective, contradictions are located in the communication between relationship parties. (Baxter, 2004a, p. 184)

While a list of categories where every contradiction within relationships will fall is not possible to create, there are three abstract groups of contradictions that have continued to occur in research (Baxter, 2004b): dialectics of integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-nonexpression. What is most integral to these contradictions is the understanding that relationships are built on and rely on both forces within each of the polarities. The pairs of polarity can “complete, enhance, and enable one another at the same time that they limit or constrain one another” (Baxter, 2004b, p. 8-9).

This flux and flow is referred to as dialectical tension. All individuals struggle with relational dialectical tensions, defined as contradicting needs that must be simultaneously met that often demonstrate the struggle between individualism and connection in a relationship (Jameson, 2004). It is important to note that dialectical tensions are not merely opposites, synonyms or different perspectives that can be easily compromised; dialectics emphasize change and therefore equilibrium is not only difficult to reach, but when reached it is difficult to maintain; “there is no center, only flux” (Baxter, 2004a, p. 186). In relationships, the tension expression-nonexpression, or openness-closedness, can be felt when one person in the relationship would like to reveal
information about himself or herself but is hesitant to share too much. This tension is
dialectical because the person cannot both share the information and keep it private.

For purposes of this study, dialectical tensions are viewed as the struggle both in
relationships, meaning dialogue with more than one person, and within an individual.
This viewpoint is seen as consistent with Baxter’s theory as it also takes the stance that
any dialogue is “somebody talking to somebody, even when you are talking to yourself”
(Littlejohn & Foss, 2008, p. 208). This is an important consideration when regarding the
disclosure of whether to reveal or conceal a stigma.

Dindia (1998) uses dialectics to explain the tension that often takes place for an
individual who is attempting to determine whether or not to reveal his or her stigma. She
describes these dialectics in the terms of Baxter’s theory while she attempts to help the
reader understand how dialectics and stigma work together. The contradiction involved in
stigma disclosure is that of whether to reveal or not to reveal stigma, and in weighing the
decision, the person who is stigmatized attempts to calculate the consequence of self-
disclosure before making the disclosure. While revealing the stigma may allow an
individual to build closer relationships, it also creates the threat of being rejected. This
constant state of change is an important concept in dialectics that also relates to the
coming out process. The process of disclosing a stigma really occurs along a continuum
as the coming out process never really ends. Individuals who are stigmatized may share
their stigma openly in one situation while not in another situation, and each time that
person enters a new situation or place (s)he must again make the decision about whether
or not to reveal. This also relies on how and when a stigma is perceived. In different situations a stigma may or may not be perceived as anything out of the ordinary. The stigma then is located in situ; in the actual moment in time in any particular situation (Dindia).

Dindia’s (1998) synthesizing of dialectical tensions and stigma creates a different perspective for viewing self disclosure regarding sexual orientation. A person who identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual may feel the need to connect with and belong to the GLBT community including being open regarding his/her sexual orientation. Simultaneously (s)he may also feel the need to connect with and belong to the larger community in which (s)he lives. The tension exists when the larger community threatens, either in reality or in feared perception, to reject individual based on his/her membership to the GLBT community. While all interpersonal relationships maintain a sense of dialectical tension (Jameson, 2004), what makes this more unique is the constructed contradiction between the two communities and the expectations in each community. Often a member of the GLBT community must “downplay differences to integrate into the mainstream” (Yeung & Stombler, 2000, p. 141) that can contradict the building of a collective identity and pride of the diversity within the GLBT community.

Yeung and Stombler (2000) examine these tensions in their study of how Delta Lambda Phi (DLP), a national gay fraternity, balanced participation in Greek life on college campuses with being an organization for uniting gay men. On one hand, DLP “used cultural resources regarding gayness to bind its members, constructing a
microcosm of the larger gay sub-cultural community” and allowed members to “identify, reaffirm, and celebrate their sexual identity as gay men” (p. 138). At the same time, DLP worked to mainstream the fraternity to mirror other ‘straight’ fraternities as a way of seeking legitimacy from the mainstream Greek life. This tension presents the need for specific communication strategies and techniques for maneuvering within the GLBT community and beyond in the larger community.

This study is designed to add to existing research that examines how stigma and dialectical tension affect one another. It is the aim of this study to examine the dialectical tensions present when an individual discloses that he is a gay man and how dialectical tensions are involved during information sharing regarding the stigma of belonging to and/or participating in the GLBT community.

Boundary Spanning Related to Interpersonal Relationships

Research involving boundary spanning can be found in health care, community outreach, social work, and networking, and the boundary metaphor is demonstrated in at least as many more disciplines and domains (Petronio, Ellemers, Giles, & Gallois, 1998). Boundaries can be seen as permanent or temporary, as physical or metaphorical, and as clearly identified or an unspoken understanding. In organizations, boundaries can separate cliques, departments, divisions, or companies.

The term *boundary spanning* is used most frequently in industry to refer to the communication that crosses the organization’s boundaries and connects members within the organization to external organizations (Manev & Stevenson, 2001). In this way,
boundary spanners are people who help bridge communication and information sharing between any boundaries either within the organization or between the organization and outside entities. Traditionally, boundary spanners are employees within an organization whose responsibilities include communicating and working with external groups or individuals. Having a boundary spanning position in an organization “presumes that aspects of such communication outside organizational boundaries can have potentially significant consequences” (Finet, 1993, p. 37). Companies who employ boundary spanners understand that the opinions of those outside of their organization can be as beneficial as those within the organization. Boundary spanning also builds bridges and relationships between the organization and the community. Boundary spanning positions can be found throughout industry from social work to information technology.

Boundary management takes place on more than just the organizational level (Petronio et al., 1998). Boundaries are formed around individuals who share private information with one another, around families, and around communities. It is, therefore, normal for people to manage boundaries at different levels, with different groups, and with different information. It may be more important, for example, that partners protect boundaries around private information within an intimate relationship than they do boundaries around organizational information. People and groups do not always maintain boundaries well; at times, boundaries are impenetrable when information needs to be shared, and, at others, boundaries are too easily permeated when information needs to be protected. In addition, intergroup boundaries are always changing allowing for people to cross and redefine boundaries as needed (Petronio et al.). Because of the many ways that
boundaries can be interpreted and used, it is important that some individuals be especially talented in helping to manage the information shared across boundaries.

In organizations, it has been shown through research that different kinds of boundaries will produce different levels of communication (Petronio et al., 1998). Physical boundaries tend to increase the likelihood that employees will communicate with their superiors; however, in offices where no physical boundaries exist, where cubicles are used, for example, social boundaries often take their place, and coworkers are more likely to communicate with one another. In many cases, though, these social boundaries have stricter rules for access and participation among co-workers. Petronio et al. contend that boundaries should be stable yet permeable so that communication with superiors and coworkers is maximized. When employing the use of a boundary spanner, more flexible boundaries allow for the spanner to move from level to level while stricter boundaries can lead to more difficult and controlling information sharing.

As in the business setting, interpersonal boundary spanners must also be able to identify and navigate social boundaries. Therefore, in the case of the GLBT community, a boundary spanner would need to have a strong understanding of where boundaries lie as well as how to competently negotiate social interaction on either side. GLBT boundary spanners may serve the function to help create more flexible, permeable boundaries so that communication among groups becomes more possible and the stigma of belonging to the GLBT community is reduced.
Boundary spanning can be broken into two categories: information gathering and representation. During information gathering, the boundary spanner searches for and reports back to the organization relevant information. In representation, the boundary spanner represents the organization by sharing information about the organization’s goals and activities with outside audiences. In addition to gathering and sharing information, boundary spanners are responsible for filtering information and helping to buffer the organization from external threats (Finet, 1993) and are responsible for summarizing large pieces of information so that it can then be distributed more easily throughout the organization. By locating, sorting, and summarizing information “boundary spanning takes place, and people within organizations make connections across borders” (Petronio et al., 1998).

This research focused on learning whether boundary spanning performs a similar function in the interpersonal realm. Specifically related to the GLBT community, I hoped to learn whether interpersonal boundary spanning helps to break down stereotypes and stigmas of gay men. Interpersonal boundary spanners have the potential to not only share and filter information but also the potential of building relationships across those boundaries, and it is these relationships that can move to reduce the stigma of being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered.

It takes certain characteristics to be a competent boundary spanner. Williams (2002) profiled a competent boundary spanner as having an ability “to engage with others and deploy effective relational and interpersonal competencies” as well as “a need to
acquire an understanding of people and organizations outside their own circles” (p. 110). This interpersonal awareness allows individuals to work with a variety of people at a range of hierarchical levels within different organizations.

Williams (2002) identified several roles that a competent boundary spanner fills: networker, entrepreneur, engager, and leader. He also asserted that trustworthiness, honesty, diplomacy, tact, dispassionate analysis, and sincerity are several personality characteristics that a boundary spanner must possess. With each of these roles and characteristics, the aim of the boundary spanner must be that of building genuine relationships in order to move both their organization and the outside organization forward.

This study contributes to the current interpersonal communication literature as well as the GLBT literature by applying the notion of boundary spanning in a new way. The concept of boundary spanning has examined in conjunction with the communication practices of a member or members in a social group working together and communicating with those outside of the group. This communication includes information gathering and representation, and the same characteristics that apply to competent boundary spanners within an organization are applied to interpersonal boundary spanners. Boundary spanning is one of the ways that a member of a GLBT group can measure the tolerance and acceptance of an external group as well as to help educate external groups on GLBT identity and group construction.
Research Questions

The aim of the current study was to examine the process of interpersonal boundary spanning by gay men with other individuals and groups by recording the perspective of gay men in dual memberships and exploring with reciprocators the use of and/or need for boundary spanning and the techniques used to successfully navigate stigma and tension. The questions guiding this research are:

RQ1: What challenges in self disclosure do gay men face?
   -What dialectical tensions do gay men face?
   -How is the management of self disclosure for gay men similar or different when they perceive that they may or may not be stigmatized?

RQ2: What boundary spanning techniques are being used within the GLBT community?
   -How are boundary spanning techniques used by individuals to manage the sharing of information about their sexual orientation?
   -How are boundary spanning techniques used to negotiate the tensions felt by the GLBT community?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study followed a qualitative, interpretive method in order to gain a personal understanding both of an individual’s struggle with internal dialectical tensions as well as to begin to understand how a group of similar individuals communicates information about themselves to the larger community. In the data collection stage, I gathered narratives through interviews from gay men to learn more about dialectical tensions of coming out to others as well as perceptions of interaction and tensions between the gay community and the larger community.

The methodology chapter is broken into several sections. First I discuss the role of those who are interviewees and subsequently assist in the collection and interpretation of data. Because I researched a group that can be seen as a marginalized and stigmatized group, it was particularly important for me to remain unassuming and to intentionally avoid misunderstanding or misinterpreting the GLBT population. In order to do this, I recruited individuals who were willing to be reciprocators in the research process rather than simply recruit participants of a research project. The next section discusses the process of developing an interview schedule that reflected previous research, that asked specific questions in order to provide a framework for the conversations, and that included sensitivity to the GLBT community. Finally, both data collection and reduction techniques are presented.
The Reciprocators

Men who identify themselves as gay and who consider themselves part of the local GLBT community were chosen as the targeted population of this study for several reasons. First, gay men belong to a group (GLBT) that is generally stigmatized on the basis of sexual orientation and practices. This stigmatization has been previously researched that provided a theory-rich framework on which this research can build. In order to limit the data, men were chosen over women. While that is a limitation of this research, I decided that a smaller population would possibly provide more similarities and in return more themes with which to work. This study will lay groundwork in this area that future research could follow in examining the experiences of lesbian women, bisexual men and women, and transgendered individuals as well as other stigmatized groups in order to build a stronger picture, over time, of how individuals use boundary spanning in navigating interpersonal relationships.

Because it is vital to this research to properly capture the voice of the men who were interviewed, it was important to establish equality in and focus on the genuine experience of the interviewer/ interviewee relationship. This focus was the major guiding philosophy in how data was collected, reduced, and analyzed. The reflexive conversations at which interviews were aimed are patterned after the argument of reflexive research described by Steier (1995). As such, those being interviewed will be respected as reciprocators of the research driving the conversations. As Steier explained, the term is appropriate “to emphasize the participative role of these others, grounding interpersonal communication in a mutual process, rather than an input-output mode” (p.
This focus allows both the interviewer and the person being interviewed a more relational, interpersonal method of ‘doing’ research. In approaching the interviewees in this manner, I worked with the reciprocators to develop a whole picture rather than to focus solely on my interpretations of their experiences. In order to accomplish this, I asked for assistance from reciprocators within the gay community in the development of the interview schedule, in the gathering of data through interviews, and in reviewing the analysis of those interviews.

In addition to developing a relational, interpersonal mode of research, it was important to keep this research both honest and respectful to the GLBT community. To accomplish this, it is important to once again return attention to the discussion on heterosexist assumption. As has been pointed out in the past, researchers are not exempt from making assumptions about those in the minority. Hendrix (2005), in her dialogue on race-related research, unfolds the often underlying assumption that the ‘mainstream’ holds when addressing research with a homogenized group when she states, “Consequently, I don’t have to address the racial homogeneity between my research participants and me and how diversity might affect the research findings. What applies to me will, undoubtedly, apply to you (regardless of who you are)” (Hendrix, p. 339). This argument can easily be made for other minority groups, specifically in this study the heterosexist assumption that the experience of all is common to the experience of the heterosexual majority. In order to refrain from making the mistake Hendrix pointed out, from conception to the conclusion of this research I endeavored to ensure that it in no way perpetuated stereotypes or encouraged the perception of stigma. Instead, it was the
aim of this research to develop stronger ties between stigmatized or otherwise stereotyped groups and the communities in which they reside in order to breakdown exclusive and marginalizing barriers.

Developing the Interview Schedule

Briggs (1986) suggests that researchers ‘learn how to ask’ by familiarizing themselves with the population being interviewed. For Briggs, this meant directly understanding a new society; for this research reciprocators were recruited from the same general population. However, it was important that I remained sensitive to differences that may exist between myself and the reciprocators, and I wanted to be careful about how I approached the topic of coming out and of sharing information related to sexual orientation in the interviews. I especially wanted to be cautious that I was not viewed as an imposing ‘other.’ Therefore, I asked several members of the GLBT community to examine the interview schedule so they could give feedback regarding the questions and the wording of the questions. The purpose of this step was to ensure that I was not insensitive or asking questions in a way that furthered existing stereotypes and stigmas. This also kept the research in line with my previous goal of maintaining reciprocators from the GLBT community throughout the development and execution of the research.

I developed a set of questions that encouraged reciprocators to reflect on and disclose specific events and experiences while remaining cognizant of the time restraints and need for focus in the conversation. In order to accomplish those goals, I developed questions based on the critical incident technique described by Flanagan (1954). This
technique suggested that the interview questions be designed to focus on specific events, examples, and direct observations rather than general thoughts or hearsay. This structure provided reciprocators the opportunity to reflect on personal experiences yet kept the responses more specific and focused on personal experiences rather than based on assumptions or on imagined situations.

Questions in the interview schedule were modeled after previous research that included Flanagan (1954) and Jameson (2004). Both authors developed very specific questions that were easily adapted for the population and focus of this research. Jameson, who examined dialectical tensions in the workplace, provided some of the framework for developing questions that seek to investigate dialectical tensions in this research. Flanagan’s article provided language that helped develop questions that resulted in specific, observable encounters that the reciprocators experienced. The final interview schedule (APPENDIX A) guided the reciprocators to discuss their experiences in disclosing their sexual orientation, in facing stigma as a result of their sexual orientation, and with group information sharing.

Data Collection

Data collection and analysis took place from August 2008 through October 2008. Information was gathered through in-depth, individual interviews with eleven men. The reciprocators involved in this study were recruited through a snowball convenience sample. The sample began with personal contacts who then invited their friends and acquaintances to participate in the study. Each individual was asked to invite another
person who fit the criteria and was interested in acting as a research reciprocator to also participate in an interview. Individuals who asked an acquaintance to participate in the research first contacted their acquaintance to solicit their interest and approval for contact. After receiving a confirmation of interest, potential reciprocators contacted. As those invited became reciprocators and participated in interviews, they also invited friends and acquaintances to participate. Initially, 15 men showed interest in participating; however, four men were unable to participate for various personal reasons.

All eleven reciprocators were men who self-identified as gay. They ranged in age from 23 to 47 years with a mean of 34.3. All of the men reported coming out to another person for the first time somewhere between age 16 to 28 with a mean of 20.5. All of the reciprocators had been out for at least two years. The mean number of years that the reciprocators reported being out was 13.7 years. All of the men live in the southern region of the United States and reported that they identified in some way as part of the local gay community, though level of identifying with the community varied based on the perceptions of the individual.

The majority of interviews took place in a variety of public settings such as local coffee shops, bookstores, and cafés. One interview took place in the individual’s home, and two interviews took place in the individual’s respective offices. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and an hour. Interviews followed the Interview Schedule discussed above that roughly consisted of 12 questions.
Before the interviews began, reciprocators were informed that participation was voluntary and that any and all information was theirs to share or not share. They were then invited to ask questions about the research. Reciprocators were notified that they did not have to answer any question(s) they do not wish to answer and that they could stop the interview at anytime. All reciprocators freely gave consent for the interview.

Reciprocators were assigned a pseudonym in analysis, results, and all recorded information, and no identifying information was collected in the interview. The consent forms and key to identity were stored separate from the audio recording and the transcriptions. Consent forms, notes, audio tapes, and all forms including participant information are stored in a locked cabinet or saved on a password-protected computer.

Conversations that took place during the interview process were audio recorded in order to create more of a natural dialogue that was not disrupted by note-taking. This also allowed me to more closely observe non-verbal behavior and the climate of the conversation. In addition, as Briggs (1986) pointed out recording interviews provides the benefit of being able to listen to the conversations again and to listen to additional perspectives that were missed in the original conversations.

Data Reduction

After I completed all of the interviews, I searched back through the data for that which directly responds to the research questions regarding stigma, dialectical tensions, and interpersonal boundary spanning. After gathering this information, I transcribed those portions of the interviews that were most relevant and offered the most content specific
information. I found these themes by following Owen’s (1984) criteria for establishing relational themes of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness.

Owen’s (1984) framework encourages researchers to use the data to guide the themes identified in an interview or survey. In order to find these natural themes, Owen suggests three criteria for determining the presence of a theme in a report. There must be a recurrence of meaning in what the reciprocator is reporting. This meaning might be explained in different words, but in order for a theme to emerge into the forefront, the meaning must occur throughout the interview. In addition to a recurrence of meaning, a repetition indicates a theme. While closely related to the first criterion, repetition is specifically using the same working in key words, phrases and sentences. The last criterion Owen describes is forcefulness. Forcefulness describes the way in which a person speaks or writes: vocal inflection, pauses, and volume are examples of verbal forcefulness while italics, underlining, and changing size of print indicate written forcefulness.

Finally, a member check was employed after completing the initial analysis in order to strengthen the validity of the analysis (Lindlof, 1995). The analysis was shared with several of the reciprocators in order to receive their feedback. It is important that the results were validated by the reciprocators who helped to generate the data. In addition, the feedback of those outside the research was gathered in order to develop a well rounded perspective of the analysis.
CHAPTER 4: STIGMA AND DIALECTICAL TENSIONS

Throughout all of the interviews, reciprocators agreed on several things. The themes of agreement centered on stigma, boundary shifts, and individual agency in promoting change. First, they agreed that a stigma still surrounds being gay. Next they agreed that the stigma is being reduced and that boundaries between the gay community and the larger community have become more permeable. Finally they agreed that individuals are responsible for creating the change society is experiencing.

After speaking with the reciprocators, it is quite clear that stigma related to sexual orientation continues to affect those who identify as gay. Several of the reciprocators reported fears that came with initially coming out. As Brad disclosed that his first reaction was to hide the stigma, “It was very odd because I remember not wanting anyone to know [that I was gay]. And everything was very secretive.” While for some the fear of admitting the stigma of being gay initially caused them to hide, for others the fear was that others would somehow attempt to change the part of them that was stigmatized. Pierre explained the underlying fear that kept him from ever sharing his sexual orientation with his parents, “[I was afraid] that they’d try to change me in some way.” While still others felt like they would have to demonstrate that the presence of a stigma did not change their personality or who they were. Jason explained how he was concerned that people might not see him as the same person after he revealed that he was gay, “A lot of times when I first started coming out, I was so worried that they were going to think that I was a different person and they were going to treat me different [sic].” Whether fearing other people knowing that they were gay or feeling anxious about
other people’s reactions, the reciprocators knew from the beginning that a stigma defined their sexual orientation as something that was different.

The reciprocators here demonstrated a few of the ways that people initially attempted to manage the tension that came with recognizing that they belonged to a stigmatized group. These fears and areas of discomfort were strongest during the initial coming out process. This initial decision of when and to whom they chose to come out was affected in particular not only because of the perceived stigma but also because of the relative inexperience in coming out.

How Stigma Affects Initially Coming Out

As each of the men talked about their coming out story, their own struggle between telling and not telling and between their concerns of others accepting and not accepting their sexual orientation emerged. Some of the men were clearly able to express the tensions they faced as they came out to themselves. Greg explained:

Part of me didn’t want it to happen because in my brain, “this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong .” But the actually physical side was like, “this is so right, this is so right .” I want to kiss you, but I can’t kiss you. This is wrong, but I want to. There’s this push and pull, this push and pull through the whole experience. Looking back on it, it was nothing, but at that point in time it was a very traumatic experience.

Here Greg describes what so many of the men reported that they went through during their initial coming out process. This struggle of what is taught, by society, to be appropriate behavior for good members of society and their own feelings of attraction
must be resolved. This tension was not only expressed as whether being gay was ‘right’ or ‘wrong,’ but Ernie had a similar experience of trying to resolve the tension between society’s claim that being gay was ‘bad’ and his own experience of himself:

I thought [at some point that I was gay] and I thought oh, no I’m a good person, so I can’t be gay. There was a very direct correlation between being gay and being a bad person, and I didn’t quite understand that, and I didn’t understand why people thought that way. After I came out to myself then I realized then I realized why I didn’t think gay people were bad, it was because I was gay.

Even though the men knew they were good people and knew that there was something wrong instead with the stigma, many of the men expressed on some level that they knew it would be difficult at times to be ‘different.’ Dan struggled, initially, with this idea that there was something wrong or abnormal about being gay. Dan’s way of resolving this struggle was through prayer. “Every night when I went to bed I would pray that God would make me normal. All through high school, for 5 years, and it never happened, so…”

Eventually the reciprocators all reported resolving the initial stigma that being gay was wrong or bad. For some men, time was a key in resolving the strain. For others, building a support system of loved ones helped them to heal the initial tension between good and bad. But for most of the reciprocators, other gay people’s own lives served as an example to help them see that they were normal, good people. However, the intrapersonal dialectical tension between normal and different remains. As with all
dialectical tensions, there is a struggle between the need to feel normal as well as the truth that individuals have their own differences that make them unique. This tension somewhat relates to the integration-separation tension that is faced in relational dialectical tensions.

Gay men are not alone in facing the normal-different intrapersonal dialectical tension; however, because of the stigma, gay men must face and even discuss this tension anytime they wish to disclose their sexual orientation with someone new. In addition, while some unique aspects of personality may be seen as different, they may also be attributed as positive while society continues to generalize the difference of being gay as negative.

Outside factors can add to the difficulty of managing the normal-different dialectical tension and they add to the strain of managing the gay stigma. Some of these most frequently reported included hometowns, religion, examples of others coming out, and family dynamics.

As Jason explained, growing up in what was seen as a conservative town affected his ability to feel comfortable and safe being ‘out’ in his hometown. “With sexuality, I knew I had attractions towards other guys, but I knew…I grew up [in a place] that was closed minded, so I kept it very much to myself.” Like Jason, Chris is from a small community where he not only faced a conservative point of view, but he also faced the issue of politics in a small town.

[The town] is a small very conservative, southern, Baptist community. It’s 5000 people. I was born and raised there. And of course being gay is not
something that people don’t really look highly on [sic]. So once I moved back [to the town] the reason I was more concerned about being called out or being exposed for being gay was because I was running for City Council. I had already run when I was 18 and I had lost by 24 votes. That was the whole reason I moved back because I wanted to run again and of course if I ever (PAUSE) if people ever found out for a fact that I was gay it would really be detrimental to what I wanted to do [there].

They were not only taking on an initial stigma, but were also taking on the culture of an entire town.

Similarly, Greg explained how religion played a role in how he initially perceived the stigma of being gay.

I prayed, if this is wrong; help me to move past this. I want what you want for my life. The answer that I kept getting was, “it’s all about love.”

That’s what it’s all about. And I get it.

Brad was also affected by the stigma that can exist in religion, but in his case it was not his own religion, but the religion of a co-worker.

I came out [at work]. I’ll never forget, there was this really religious lady, [when she heard] she started crying and saying that she’s been praying for me. And I’m looking at her. And she said, don’t worry you can be saved, and I was just like, um, thank you. And I was pissed, I was really pissed, I can’t stand that, but I didn’t yell at her because in her mind she had good intentions. The [thing that makes it negative is the] automatic assumption
that there’s something abnormal, from her point of view, about being gay.

That we’re going to hell.

So religion played a role in an individual’s acceptance of being gay and in the fear of disclosing being gay to others.

Another factor that often revealed stigma in coming out to the reciprocators was when they had an example from another person’s coming out story. Brad recalled, “I remember one kid who was out in high school, and even I got nervous around him because he was extra flamboyant, over the top. He got a lot of flak for that.” Not only did other people who were out provide examples of the stigma of being ‘abnormal,’ but others who were out could also provide an example of how reciprocators might not be accepted by their family and friend were they to come out. Here, Ernie explains a time when he was witness to another person being made fun of for being gay.

I worked in a ticket booth [in a theater] … they would talk badly about [a gay colleague] behind his back and make fun of him. And there I was right there, and of course they were assuming everyone was straight and it’s ok and acceptable, and assuming that everyone felt the same way.

These examples demonstrate how another person’s negative experience in coming out can work to reinforce the stigma that being gay is bad or that being gay is something that other people will not accept.

While communities and co-workers could play a role in someone’s identification with the stigma of being gay, it seems that the family dynamics could affect a person’s
comfort level with coming out. Jason, Dan, and Pierre discussed how their family
dynamics affected what stigma they anticipated facing while coming out.

Jason

My parents were one of the last to know, and I never have formally told
my dad. But I remember it was when all the attention was on Ellen, when
she came out on her show. And Ellen was on Oprah that day and I was
sitting home with my mom. And my mom made a comment that upset me,
and I don’t remember exactly what the comment was, but it wasn’t a very
open comment, it wasn’t very accepting. Here I am knowing that I’m gay
and thinking she’s not going to accept me.

Dan

I grew up in a military family, so I moved around a lot. We moved pretty
much every 3-4 years. I guess you’d say, I grew up in a family that was
pretty traditional in values and everything and pretty conservative. I didn’t
come out until I was 22. So when I came out to them, it was kind of a big
deal. I had just moved [on my own], and we took a trip [as a family]. I
wanted it to be in a neutral location, not at home. I did it at the end of the
trip. I kind of planned it out. I planned out that I was going to do it that
weekend….Questions started coming. I thought my Dad would take it
better; he was getting his Ph.D., and he was very open-minded. But he
took it worse than my mom. He broke down and started crying. It wasn’t
their fault, it is what it is. I didn’t wake up one morning and just decide [to
be gay]… I was still in school at the time, and honestly I always had that nagging thought in the back of my mind that they could cut me off and not be supportive, and then what was I going to do? And they asked me [why I didn’t tell them before] and they of course said they would never do that, that they would even think of [cutting me off]…this is who you are. You know, I didn’t know.

Pierre

Even though I’m 47 years old, I’ve never come out to my parents. I’ve talked to my brothers and sisters about it. They just don’t think it’s necessary, and I kind of agree. I know they love me. My father has passed. My mom, I think she probably knows, it’s just the communication I usually have with my family is kind of dysfunctional anyway.

The largest tension that most men try to resolve was their families’ reactions to hearing, “I am gay.” The most amount of stress, nervousness, and fear revolved around this anticipated reaction. At the heart of this anxiety is the uncertainty of how their families would perceive the stigma of being gay. The unresolved stigma also ignites the normal-different tension by focusing on what is different between the gay man and his family: sexual orientation.

While some men struggled with coming out to their family and dealt with the uncertainty of how coming out would be accepted, even when reciprocators anticipated that their coming out would be met with positive affirmations, the stigma was still underlying and as a result all of the men reported feeling nervous. Samuel, who’s brother
had come out to his family years before he did, anticipated his parent’s acceptance, but that didn’t reduce the anxiety he felt in sharing his own sexual orientation.

I had an older brother who was six years older than me who was gay. He had already come out to my parents, to my family and so I had seen that from a third perspective and I know that that also played a lot into [my] being comfortable. It broke my parents and the idea and the shock and them coming to terms with (PAUSE) I know that somewhere deep inside my parents they had to know they had gay children… [However], I waited a lot longer to tell my parents—I mean years. I knew that they would be hurt by it most. It would be more disappointing to them than anybody. I was kind of the one that they had the most hope for. I’m the one who went to college, and I think they had just these high hopes. I felt like I was damning their hopes for the perfect kid.

Even though Samuel believed that his family would eventually be supportive of him, his normal-different intrapersonal dialectical tension was thrown out of balance as it is with those men who were uncertain of their families’ reactions. This stigma also affects how one responds to coming out. It was still the assumption of the reciprocators that even if they knew that their families would be supportive, it would still be something that would be difficult to share, something that their families would likely feel disappointed about. Often respondents had a ‘in spite of’ sort of attitude. Their friends and family loved them, ‘in spite of’ their being gay or their friends and family loved them ‘anyway.’
While many of the men couldn’t always remember exact feelings related to coming out, they did report feelings of nervousness, like there was a weight on their shoulders, feeling lonely or alone as they discussed the challenges they faced before coming out to friends and family. Several spoke specifically to the stigma of being gay, of feeling shameful, or of feeling not ‘normal’ as was discussed in detail above. These feelings are in line with Goffman’s (1965) study of stigma. In his discussion of shame, Goffman explores how recognizing the stigma can cause one “if only for moments, to agree that he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be” (p. 7). For the men whose nuclear families proved to be supportive and accepting, the remainder of their coming out processes tended to be less stressful and less negative than the coming out processes for the men who have yet to come out to their nuclear families.

How Social Support Affects Stigma

After coming out to the most important people in their lives, and after finding that most people were accepting and supportive of them, the reciprocators reported that the stigma of being gay was, to an extent, alleviated. For example, Pierre explained how time and age has changed his perception of the stigma of being gay, “I think that time has led me to be a lot more comfortable with my sexuality. I’m really happy to have a lot of people that I know who are really comfortable being out; I really like to see that.”

Several of the men reported that having the support of their family and/or friends made the difference in their confidence and in their ability to be comfortable being out. There was also discussion about the process of building up a sort of momentum in coming out to their friends and family and in doing so creating a stockpile of support as
they made their way through the coming out process. Samuel explains both of these concepts when he revealed, “[My coming out] was very systematic. I [started with] people I was closest to get that comfort and almost feel like you’re building alliances. So going forward if someone does reject you, it’s not as hurtful.” And Ernie explained how after some time, being out and coming out becomes a normal part of developing a relationship.

Each time [I came out] it got easier to do so. Now, if they’re going to be my friend they are going to quickly know that I am gay…I say I’m in a gay/lesbian running group called The Front Runners and I run three times a week. It’s a pretty easy way to let people know that you’re gay. But it’s really still not admitting your gay, it’s giving people information. They say, “oh that’s cool,” or “I like gay people,” or “I have gay friends.” They let you know.

Even though coming out reportedly gets easier and becomes more commonplace in the lives of the reciprocators, the stigma of being gay is never really completely taken for granted. Many of the reciprocators discussed different ways of dealing with the continued presence of the gay stigma.

Continuing to Contend With Stigma

While all of the men with whom I spoke considered themselves completely ‘out,’ I soon discovered that for many of them, being out was relative to the social situation at hand. For instance, Jonah explained how being uncertain of his surroundings and being
grouped in with people who seemed that they might not be accepting of someone who is gay changed some of his behaviors.

I’ll never forget I went to the Jimmy Buffet concert with my roommate. And there were two guys next to us who were very masculine, very straight. They were playing a very traditional male role in terms [of] their behavior. And I went right along with it. I didn’t want them to know (PAUSE) know I was gay.

Some of the reciprocators indicated that feeling as though a situation was unsafe, physically or emotionally, to express their sexual orientation or because they felt as though they wanted to be able to maintain a sense of privacy, there were times when they chose not to come out.

One common place where most of the men discussed being more private about their sexual orientation was in the workplace. Pierre, a construction worker, does not discuss his sexual orientation, for the most part, at work because of the underlying stereotypes that he believes are still employed there.

The construction business has a kind of jock attitude. I can think of a scenario where a boss might second guess sending me on a job site because he knew there would be a lot of construction workers out there, [and the boss might think], “is he going to be distracted”…that’s part of the joke.
Here Pierre demonstrated how employer knowledge of sexual orientation may call his competence as a worker into question. In this example, the organization perpetuates the stigma.

In other situations, the fear that an employee’s sexuality could impact business with external constituencies kept men from sharing their sexual orientation with co-workers. Jake, for example, expressed his concern that being out in the workplace could affect his ability to attract business.

With my career I feel that it’s a different line of friendship and business. I don’t want someone not to do business with me because of my sexual orientation, so I just keep that on the down low. When I worked at [a real estate company] there were a bunch of people who didn’t know because I felt it would change my position in the company. I feel that it’s something that may sway their opinion of me.

In both of the above examples, sharing a stigma holds the threat of causing problems in the workplace, either within the organization or in the image of the organization with whom they do business.

These examples show that it tends to be the interpersonal experience of getting to know someone who is gay in order to begin to dispel common social stigmas and stereotypes. Therefore, as Goffman (1965) reported, the reciprocators also discuss managing the stigma of being gay. There seemed to be a couple of ways that they reported managing sharing being gay as well as the stereotypes that surround the stigma of being gay. Some men remained private about their sexual orientation, only sharing
when they felt it was necessary or that a relationship was at a certain stage for sharing. Of the men I spoke to, only one person expressed a desire to always discuss his sexuality as a way of managing the stigma. Finally, many of the men discussed how they dispelled stereotypes.

Managing the Stigma

Stigma is managed in several ways. Because all of the reciprocators know first-hand the possibility that they may be stereotyped and stigmatized if they reveal their sexual orientation, they find ways to control whether or not people know, for sure, what their sexual orientation is. In this way, individuals take advantage of being discreditable, of the fact that it is not readily apparent that they are gay.

I am the type of person that I don’t feel like…you wouldn’t come up to me and say, hey I’m a straight person. I don’t offer it to anybody. If someone were to ask then yes of course. There’s never been a time where I’ve met someone for the first time where it’s come up in conversation, and I’ve said hey I’m [gay]. Never. I figure let them get to know me first and if they find out, totally fine, but I don’t particularly offer it up. I don’t feel it’s anyone’s business.

As in Jake’s explanation above, the use of privacy was the most common way that the men I spoke with managed sharing the stigma of being gay. Larry echoed Jake’s privacy sentiment, “I certainly don’t hide it, but I don’t advertise either. I don’t think it defines me; this is just part of who I am.”
While some men preferred to keep their sexual orientation private, others chose to break away from the anonymity of being discreditable. Brad explained why he has chosen speaking frequently about being gay as a way of managing the stigma.

When I share it, it makes it [clear] that it’s not wrong. If you’re hiding something you’re either not comfortable with it or it’s wrong. So I don’t hide it, nor do avoid talking about it. A lot of people are like, well you don’t need to talk about it, but that’s like the elephant in the room. It’s a part of me, it’s not just who I am, it’s a major part of me.

Although only one of the men who I spoke to chose this path of managing his stigma, others expressed the commonality of other gay men speaking frequently about their orientation. In general, the reciprocators were uncomfortable with those men who were brazenly open and explained how they had specifically chosen not to be so vocal.

Several of the reciprocators in this study described themselves as ‘breaking a stereotype’ in one way or another. For some men, this meant being masculine and enjoying a more traditional masculine role, for others this meant being educated or working in a ‘non-gay’ career field. For each of the men, it seemed important to point out that being gay was just one part of who they were and that being gay did not take precedence in who they were. Jonah explained how he sees himself defying the stereotype.

And I think now I want everyone to know I’m gay because I want them to see that there are educated, good gay people out there. And I think I defy most of the stereotypes that are out there. I have friends who are still very
much in the closet at work. And I’ll tell them it doesn’t matter (PAUSE) you need to have people see that you are an educated, smart electrical engineer who just happens to be gay.

In this way, breaking a stereotype also addresses the normal-different dialectical tension. Breaking a stereotype means that individuals have more similar, more that is normal about them than they do have things that are different or abnormal. The importance of this normal connection is also demonstrated in the next chapter on boundary spanning. Not only can it be valuable that an individual breaks a stereotype, but dating someone who breaks a stereotype can serve a similar purpose. Chris indicated this when he described a past partner. “He was perfect because to look at him, he was in the Navy before he became [a law enforcement officer], and so to look at him you’d never be able to tell he was gay.” And Samuel found that dating a man who broke stereotypes helped his family to better accept that being gay could be a normal way of life.

But when [my mom] met [my boyfriend], she was like, “Oh, a masculine, intelligent, young good-looking, successful, college guy.” By the time we graduated, my mom got together with [my boyfriend’s] mom and they threw us a joint graduation party. My mom had really fully come on board without saying, “I’m coming on board.”

In both of these examples, a partner who breaks stereotypes can serve the same purpose: to show others that it is possible to be gay and masculine, intelligent, and successful. This is important because it begins to create a disconnect for those people who may have previously held true to the stereotypes of gay men, such as the stereotype that all gay men
are effeminate, and that divide is what may open the door for rejecting the stigma all together.

Dan also spoke about the importance of not only breaking the stereotype but of getting to a place with friends and co-workers that his sexual orientation no longer played a role in how they viewed him. “Sometimes I take a little satisfaction when I want to do something with people, and the fact that I’m gay was never even thought of, that I don’t come across that way. I think I change their mindset they think that I’m just a normal [person].” In this way, Dan has found that by making the ‘normal’ connection with others, he is helping others to manage their own intrapersonal normal-different dialectical tension.

These experiences with stigma, especially when the reciprocators were first coming out, developed the underlying message from society that being gay is likely to be seen, at least initially, as abnormal. This is important not only in the identified development of the individuals dealing with a disconnect between what they know about themselves and what they are being told by society but what will eventually develop into boundary spanning in order to change these assumptions and stereotypes.
CHAPTER 5: BOUNDARY SPANNING

Reciprocators were in agreement that the stigmas and stereotypes that often separate the GLBT community from the larger population are reducing. Some attributed this reduction to the media and to high profile gay celebrities as well as high profile allies, while others were able to identify more specific, interpersonal communication skills for reasons that the boundaries are more and more permeable. However, before discussing those techniques, it is important to first take a look at the response of the reciprocators to the term ‘GLBT community.’

Defining the Gay Community

One aspect that I didn’t anticipate facing was that of defining the GLBT community. However, reciprocators did not always initially identify as belonging to the GLBT community. Some reciprocators were more comfortable with the idea of a ‘gay community’ while others felt like there was not a strong GLBT community in the area where they lived.

In the research, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered people are frequently grouped together. However, as Greg pointed out, “I don’t like having transgendered thrown in there. There’s no level of identification. Sexual identity and gender identity are two different components.” Here Greg explains that although gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals may have commonalities, more frequently the difference between sexual attraction and gender identity are more limited than inclusive.
Secondly, some reciprocators responded that they had a group of gay friends, were patrons of gay restaurants and businesses, perhaps participated in activities designed for gay individuals and were aware of other services and agencies available specifically for gay people, but when asked if they belonged to the GLBT or gay community, these same individuals initially responded, “no.” In these instances, the reciprocators indicated that they weren’t part of the GLBT or gay community because they did not go to clubs or bars. In response to the question, “Do you see yourself as part of the GLBT or gay community?” Chris answered, “Not really, and the reason for that (PAUSE) when it was less convenient I was going out so much more and so much more often. Once I moved here, I no longer have [sic] that desire to go out because I had kind of gotten over the bars and all of the clubs and the stereotypical gay stuff.” Samuel reiterated this sentiment while addressing a relatively invisible group in the gay community. “There’s a whole sect of people that are either in relationships or they’re older and they don’t go out to the bar anymore. They’re just here, we don’t see them.” Samuel was not alone in this perspective; several men indicated a desire for a more professional aspect of the gay community and a more developed area for gay-owned businesses, restaurants, and other gathering spots.

Even though we learned that defining the GLBT or gay community was difficult and somewhat vague, the general consensus of the reciprocators was that a gay community is essential. It is important to have a specific place, be it a group of gay businesses, support groups, social events, sporting activities, and/or simply a group of friends and acquaintances where gay men and women feel comfortable and supported.
This is important not only in talking about issues related to being gay, but in simply knowing that other people can both relate to what is being said and who can understand on a first-hand level the challenges another gay person may face. Ernie explained how, at the beginning of his coming out process, the gay community helped him.

[The gay community] helped more for me earlier on than now. I think that when you’re coming out….you want to immerse yourself in the community. It’s typical to immerse yourself and you’re seeing gay movies, gay plays, hanging out with only gay people, everything’s about gay, gay, gay, gay, gay. Some people stay in that stage, but some people will move on and also re-introduce themselves back in the real world. I look at it as just a resource.

Ernie shared what many other reciprocators agreed upon: that eventually their lives became more balanced with different people and different interests and that they were not focused on being gay, but that instead being gay was just part of who they were. Jonah summed this up perfectly when he stated, “I think that being gay does not define who I am, it’s one little part of me.”

Not only was there a general consensus that each person, in some way, felt part of the GLBT or gay community, but there was also a consensus that there were still gaps or rigid boundaries that existed between the gay community and the larger community. Several people identified these gaps as areas of miscommunication, areas where stigma and stereotypes still existed, and fear or resistance to understand that gay people are not different from straight people. In addition to identifying what the boundaries were,
reciprocators were able to identify several different arenas through which people, both gay and straight, worked to reduce gaps and make boundaries more permeable.

Organizational boundary spanning literature explains two forms that traditional boundary spanning takes: gathering information and representing the organization. While both of these forms is assumed to also be pertinent in interpersonal boundary spanning, the reciprocators in this research focused more on the importance of representation as boundary spanning. By focusing on representing the gay community by dispelling myths, educating, mentoring, and building relationships, interpersonal spanners are better able to reduce the stigma that others may perceive them to have.

Participating

One way that the boundaries are becoming more flexible is through active participation. Although not all reciprocators felt that they actively participated in the GLBT or gay community, they all identified specific actions that they believed helped to reduce the barriers that existed. Actions that they identified were education, acting as a role model or mentor, getting involved in politics and activism, acting as connectors, and employing the use of straight allies.

While many of the reciprocators spoke about educating others as a specific technique for reducing stereotypes and miscommunication, Jason spoke about specific ways that he worked to educate others.

When [gay people] come across being open of who they are, accepting of who they are, I think it’s a lot easier for other people to kind of embrace that and accept them. A lot of times I welcome the opportunity to share
who I am and if they have any questions, you know, answer the questions so that they know I’m a lot more like them than not like them. I think that a lot of times that’s made me a lot closer to a lot of people, having shared that.

In this way, several reciprocators discussed how frequently they represent the gay community through providing information to outsiders and especially by establishing how similar the gay community is to the larger community.

Others also spoke about being open to answering questions not only to straight people but in particular, several of the men talked about either taking a mentoring or role model sort of function in the gay community and/or having someone take that role with them when they were early in their coming out process. Ernie, a counselor who works at a local community college explained his mentoring role.

The idea is that you’re a role model for other people, it’s not like you’re really that much of a role model…the opportunity would be that people who are starting to go through the stages that you’re there to help them. In my job, every once in a while you’ll have a student comes in and they will present the issue about being gay & you bring it up obviously as it pertains to their situation, but you can’t take that away from them, the stages that they are going to go through, you have to realize that they have to go through those as well. You can’t say, oh it’s going to be fine. They deserve the right to go through all the stages.
Samuel also felt that at times he took on a role of modeling a normal lifestyle. “And I think my role is to be able to be a likable, smart, normal person that people can look to and say, ‘that’s a well-adjusted person who happens to be gay.’” In addition, he also spoke about his own experience of having a role model as he was first coming out. “I had a friend who I would talk to and who opened my mind up to the idea that you could have this other life and it’s ok. There’s nothing wrong with it, and you should focus on what’s going to make you happy as a person.”

The roles of representing the gay community through both educator and role model help to establish that being gay does not equate to being abnormal and in return allows for some balance in the normal-different intrapersonal dialectical tension. By embodying the idea that there are more similarities between the GLBT or gay community and the larger community, it also provides more of a balance in the normal-different dialectical tension for everyone in the community regardless of sexual orientation.

Another area that several reciprocators identified as important in the advancement of the GLBT or gay community was politics and activism. Most of the men who participated in this project did not specifically identify themselves as activists, but several did talk about staying current with politics and noted their appreciation to those who did take a particular interest in politics. Jonah, one individual who is more active in the politics of the state and community, explained why politics are important. “There are those people who are active in those groups who try to get the word out, [they] are social, whether that could be helping to make sure that amendment two [an anti-gay-marriage amendment up for election in the state in 2008] does not pass or electing a GLBT person.
or ally to an elected position.” Chris, who works for an openly gay City Commissioner, demonstrated both the importance of a role model and for a voice in politics.

And I’m so fortunate to have someone like my boss to open up my world to a new completely different aspect of the gay community that I knew existed but I didn’t have any interest in getting involved in. And thanks to her I’ve met so many more wonderful people that I probably would have never had an opportunity to meet because I wasn’t intimately involved in what was going on in the gay community especially the way she is. She plays an important part in the whole professional side of the gay community.

While politics seemed like a more obvious avenue for change, among the men I spoke with, a more common path was that of building relationships and connections between the gay community and the larger community. Greg was able to identify himself as a connector.

Probably, though, I would see myself as a connector, connecting two worlds. Connecting being in the ‘normal’ world with [the gay community]. [I do this by] talking about things. Bringing up and stimulating ideas. Raising levels of discussion in and amongst…that’s where I say in interject. I’m fairly well accepted in most social circles because I can keep a conversation going with almost any level with anyone.
Larry, like Greg, was a good conversationalist and made those who spoke with him immediately comfortable. Although at first he didn’t want to “pat myself on the back,” eventually he was able to identify himself as a connector and express what he thought it was that made him unique.

I’m real. I don’t push anything on anybody. I think I’m an accepting person. People want to talk to me about it. There are certainly people who can’t believe, or want to change me. There are people across the spectrum….I like people, I talk to people. I don’t push that. They can hang around me and find much more interesting things [about me than my being gay].

Some people seem to be natural connectors, and they use their own easy going nature as a way to represent the gay community in a positive light. According to several of the reciprocators, those with natural ability for linking people can make accepting another person, regardless of his differences, much more natural. But the reciprocators also agreed that any individual could make conscious decisions to build bridges between the gay and straight communities. In the example below, Jake gives this advice to straight people who want to better understand the gay community.

Get to know us, see that we’re normal any day that go about life, we have the same struggles, get up go to work come home with our significant others and just walk a day in our shoes. That’s the only way people are going to understand how you live. You can read about it, you can hear about it, but if you don’t spend a lot of time with somebody, or walking in
their shoes you’re not really going to learn much of what they have to offer or go through on a daily basis.

These discussions indicate the underlying theme that getting to know someone and finding commonalities between individuals helps not only to build relationships but questions common stereotypes and unexamined stigmas. Not everyone went about building relationships the same way, though. Frequently, individuals reported looking for clues that someone would be open and accepting of their sexual orientation.

At times the reciprocators were able to specifically identify straight allies. The Human Rights Campaign (2008) defines a straight ally as “someone who is not gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (GLBT) but personally advocates for GLBT equal rights” (para. 1). Jonah explained not only what it meant to be an ally but also how allies can help span the boundaries that exist between the gay community and the larger community.

The word ally, you might hear that or a GLBT friend or ally. There are definitely people who are classified as heterosexual who have deep compassion [for gay people]. They may not know anyone who is gay, but they just feel like it is important to help with the fight or help with the cause. So I definitely think that there are other people who may not be part of our [gay] culture but might be part of the [larger] community who want to help and who want to help expand the rights of everyone.

Pierre also explained how allies can present themselves as such to the larger community, “PFLAG [Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] people –they are straight
people, but they’re willing to march in a gay parade to show their support” and expressed how the willingness to ‘out’ themselves as gay supporters creates a connection is a way of developing connections across boundaries.

In both of the examples above, the important idea is that whether allies were presenting themselves as ‘out’ as supporters of the gay community or whether they provided more interpersonal support on an individual level, this support and those individuals are key in the reduction of stereotypes and stigma.

One of the common abilities of all of the reciprocators was the ability to identify whether or not someone is likely to be open and accepting. While most of the men admitted that it was more of an intuition than a science and that there were flaws in their system, they reported looking for different cues that would indicate to them that this person was likely to be accepting of his sexual orientation. Of the things that were reported, most frequently being female, being wholly non-judgmental, especially related to other minority groups, and being open-minded towards other often stigmatized actions indicated that a person would likely be accepting of someone who was gay. Brad picked up not only on individual personality traits but also on the general heterosexist presumption.

You know when people meet they automatically assume your straight unless you’re really flamboyant. I try to pick up on things…usually if someone comes from a diverse background or if they’ve been around gay people before they know not to say certain things like, “So are you dating
a girl” rather than “Are you dating someone” or “Are you married?” Just different things.

Dan, like many of the men, gets a sort of feeling about people, “I kind of just like to feel them out. I try to get to know them. After I get a sense of their social views, you can kind of tell [that they will be accepting].” Jason was able to express the rather vague notion of feeling someone out.

[They have an] altruistic nature; they know that there’s things that are bigger than them. They have a desire to make a difference. They’re true to who they are and at the same time try to make a real difference. They see that there is no color, there is no orientation, there’s no gender, there’s just being human and reaching out to another human.

Beyond being non-judgmental or accepting of someone’s sexual orientation, reciprocators also identified straight allies in the work to make boundaries less rigid. Brad, a Ph.D. student who worked as a Residence Assistant for one semester spoke about a straight friend he made in the dorms.

He has a girlfriend, not gay at all, and he’s a good ol’ boy. We just clicked. We have dinner about four times a week. We just hang out. And it’s funny to watch all these misconceptions change. And he’s actually become like an advocate; I know in the beginning he used to get so much flak: “is that your boyfriend”…But on a communication aspect, it came out a little at a time. I would push it just a little at a time, but not much because I didn’t want to scare him. I was just telling him information.
because you know everyone has questions. Every time that he would tell me something about his girlfriend, I would say oh that’s the same thing as this. We have the same issues, we have the same miscommunications. So I think just relating so that it’s not entirely foreign. It was an exchange. He would tell me a little about his girlfriend and I would tell him about a past relationship.

This experience was not uncommon. While not all of the men could recount stories, several men admitted that they thought there was ‘something’ about them that made it a little easier for people to accept that they were gay. Frequently this ‘something’ extra was an ability to build relationships and to make people feel at ease in their presence. Larry, who also was able to explain his ability to build relationships explained further his ability to cause otherwise unaccepting people to reconsider their opinion. “The way I handle myself, I think that people that might not have been accepting [of my sexual orientation] have taken a second look.”

Greg, who also felt like he was a connector, explained why he felt comfortable sharing information from the gay community back to the larger community.

So the larger community, the heterosexual community, women like me a lot. I represent what our society likes and says it good. They respect me. So when I say, well that’s not true, they are more prone to listen to me because they respect who I am. So I can take things from the gay world that are fallacies and set people straight in the straight world and vice versa.
These were specific areas that reciprocators participated in or witnessed in order to reduce myths, dispel stereotypes, and indicate normality. In addition, though, several reciprocators indicated areas that they may not consciously realize they are using as a boundary spanning technique.

Passing

While traditionally passing means, “how one conceals normal information [such as information about one’s partner] about oneself to preserve, sustain, and encourage others’ predisposed assumption about one’s identity” (Spradlin, 1998, p. 598), reciprocators of this study were using passing techniques to serve an entirely different purpose. Unlike participating, the reciprocators didn’t easily identify how passing worked as a technique of spanning the gaps between the gay community and the larger community. One of the most common strategies discussed by reciprocators was ‘acting normal’ and ‘blending in.’ This was encouraged by reciprocators and even recommended to other gay individuals who wanted to build bridges or reduce gaps in understanding. For example, Dan suggests, “Blend in as much as possible. Don’t try to freak people out. Keep it as normal as possible.”

While this might, at first glance seem to be negative or seem to be a sort of ‘retreat’ from being out, the way that the reciprocators discussed this kind of passing was indeed positive. In the example below from Brad, the most self-reported outspoken of all of the reciprocators, we can see more specifically how demonstrating first that he is ‘normal’ or ‘similar’ allows an initial relationship to be built before the person ever discloses his sexual orientation. Instead of viewing this technique as a side-step or a
traditional attempt at passing as heterosexual, because the person has the intention of sharing his sexual orientation, it is merely a technique at building rapport and developing a relationship before introducing the stigma. While we consider passing specifically a technique employed by members of the GLBT or gay community, the way that passing is used in this context was also observed in research on how persons with disabilities manage their privacy. Braithwaite (1991) explained how individuals with disabilities delayed the “inevitable questions by ablebodied persons [about their disability] until the person with the disability can establish themselves as a ‘person first,’ rather than being seen as a ‘disabled person’” (p.265). In the same way, reciprocators reported time and time again as wanting to be seen as someone who “happens to be gay.”

The passing techniques also proved to be helpful because in each of the reciprocator’s histories, he has learned that the people who know and care for him are most likely going to continue to love and accept him when he reveals stigmatized information. But the reciprocators were adamant about lying. Brad said point blank, “I won’t lie, I’ll never lie. If you ask me questions, I’ll be very honest and up front. I don’t play the pronoun game either. If you ask if I’m seeing someone, I’ll say I’m seeing a guy.” Jason agreed, “When [male co-workers] are going on about some attractive female who’s come in to [the place of employment], I don’t participate in that. I mean I don’t lie and chime in, so I think that the absence of communication means a lot too.” And finally Jonah explained how time and place is an important part of coming out, but lying still takes precedence. “I just think there is a time and a place for everything. I think that,
again, it kind of goes back to the vibe thing a little bit. Um and comfortability [sic]. I mean I’m not going to lie if someone were to ask me, I would say yes.”

This unwillingness to lie if asked, point blank about their sexual orientation is the key difference in how passing has traditionally been used and how it is used as an interpersonal boundary spanning technique. In boundary spanning, the idea is not for someone to lie or attempt to misrepresent who they are. The idea is instead to allow others to first see them as normal, good people and then, if appropriate, later see them as someone who is also gay.

In an added bonus, identifying normalcy before sharing a stigma not only helps to build relationships, but it provides important information that breaks the stigma that people who identify as gay cannot possibly also be normal. In domino effect, after a relationship has been started and after the ‘straight’ person who is newly finding out his/her friend’s sexual orientation has vocalized his or her support, the overall stigma of being gay is reduced. As with most stereotypes, it is difficult to continue to hold a negative view on a group of people once that stereotype has been broken by someone you know on an intimate level.

Summary

The social stigma attached to being gay both defines and stereotypes the GLBT or gay community as ‘abnormal.’ In order to reduce the stigma and fight the stereotypes, some individuals who identify as gay are using interpersonal boundary spanning techniques in order to demonstrate similarities and to reveal how much in common they have with those people who identify as heterosexual. While different people use different
boundary spanning techniques, the end goal is for straight people to recognize that those who identify as gay are normal, good, functioning members of the larger society. This in turn reduces the stigma and allows those who are gay to live with less bias.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The presence of stigma in society affects the way that individuals communicate with one another. For those who are stigmatized, they must choose if, when, and how to disclose their stigma. This choice creates a need to manage the information related to their stigma beginning with the time that they recognize that they are part of a stigmatized group. From this research, we can begin to better understand the connection between stigma and dialectical tensions, intrapersonal dialectical tensions, and how these possible road blocks are negotiated through the use of interpersonal boundary spanning.

One of the areas where this study contributes to the stigma literature is how stigma can be resolved in light of getting to know an individual who is considered a member of a stigmatized group. While stigma is constructed by society, it is adopted and perpetuated by individuals. This individually held view can help not only to explain how society perpetuates stigma, but also how individuals change their opinions about stigma after building meaningful relationships with those who are considered part of a stigmatized group. This change in the perspective of individual may account for how stigma and stereotypes are reduced over time. Such a change in perspective is certainly worth considering and examining further.

An area of contradiction to Goffman’s (1963) research on stigma is that of passing. While Goffman and others have focused on the idea of passing as keeping secret a stigma, this research explored the idea of passing as a boundary spanning tool used in building relationships with others who may or may not initially be accepting of their sexual orientation. Unlike previous accounts of passing when people withhold the truth
about their stigma in order to appear more like mainstream society, the reciprocators of this study adamantly explained their opposition to lying or misrepresenting themselves. Instead, by first using being discreditable to their advantage and aligning themselves as similar to ‘mainstream’ society, they approach the difference between themselves and the mainstream heterosexist assumption. In the experiences reported by many of the reciprocators, this approach of first demonstrating how they are ‘normal’ before introducing their stigma tends to negate the importance of the revealed stigma. This use of passing as a boundary spanning tool is another area that deserves more attention and should be further explored.

It is clear that we not only face dialectical tensions in interpersonal relationships, but we also face intrapersonal dialectical tensions. This finding is in line with the research on dialogue stating that talking to yourself constitutes discourse. Such intrapersonal dialectical tensions, such as the normal-difference tension, are those that we cannot easily resolve within ourselves. Stigma interrupts this normal intrapersonal maintenance of dialectical tensions. Not only do stigmas make management of dialectical tensions more uncomfortable and more conscious, but they also seem to require the stigmatized person to attempt to anticipate and negotiate the intrapersonal dialectical tensions of those with whom they wish to share their stigma. The addition of a stigma in managing a dialectical tension creates a ‘higher stake’ for resolving the anxiety felt. There is more to gain and more to lose in the decision to reveal or keep secret a stigma.

Through the use of passing, gay men are able to first establish themselves as good, normal people before they attempt to manage the interpersonal dialectical tensions
expression-nonexpression. Boundary spanning tools, such as passing, aid in the negotiation of managing the intrapersonal and interpersonal dialectical tensions by allowing first for the resolution of the intrapersonal tension before introducing the stigma that may threaten those same tensions.

Interpersonal Boundary Spanning may have similar characteristics to Organizational Boundary Spanning; however, there are key differences when spanning techniques are employed in order to reduce social stigmas. Although the purpose of connecting members and managing the flow of information between groups is similar in both interpersonal and organizational boundary spanning, the motivation of that purpose is a major difference. In the organizational setting, boundary spanning is used to increase productive communication in order to better maintain the organization and to meet the goals of the organization; therefore the company’s intentions drive the intentions of the individual spanner. This research demonstrated that interpersonal boundary spanning focuses on individuals the way that organizational boundary spanning focuses on the business. For example, the interpersonal boundary spanning techniques in this study focused on reducing stigma and building community ties through activities such as education and role modeling. The motivation of interpersonal boundary spanners is that individuals want to be appreciated and accepted by other individuals as normal members of society. Though in this research, the community was a minor focus rather than a major consideration, it is clear that by using interpersonal techniques to change the way a stigmatized individual is perceived in turn improves the way the stigmatized group is perceived. The personal intentions can have a positive impact on the entire community.
This contribution and future explorations of similar interpersonal boundary spanning uses could uncover a major understanding of how communication plays a major role in reducing stigma in society.

Limitations

The major limitation of this research is that of the limited amount of data with which to work. Little or no previous studies take a look at interpersonal boundary spanning exist and few studies attempt to understand the connection between stigma and dialectical tensions exist. Also, because the group of reciprocators is small and is limited to the same gender, race, perceived stigma, and geographical area, these data are limited in how they can be generalized to other groups including other members of the GLBT community. Finally, because this research was branching in a new direction, my own conceptualization of how interpersonal boundary spanning works was limited especially during the initial review of the literature as well as in initial interviews. One major misconception was the lack of connection to the GLBT or gay community expressed by the reciprocators. Because I anticipated that most of the men would feel as though they were part of the GLBT or gay community in some way, I did not develop interview questions that would ask specifically about the community. This also limited the ability to answer questions related to boundary spanning between the GLBT or gay community and the larger community.
Future Research

Since this is a rather new way of examining how information is shared, it is important that future research continues to explore, in a variety of ways, the correlation between stigma and dialectical tensions, how individuals manage internal dialectical tensions, and how boundary spanning techniques are being utilized in interpersonal relationships.

While this research has discovered some correlation between stigma and dialectical tensions, this relationship needs continued examination and evaluation. Research on all three areas of stigma: physical ability, character blemishes, and membership in a group should be examined to better understand how intrapersonal dialectical tensions are affected by stigma. Research with individuals with disabilities, those with mental illness, and specific minority groups are just a few examples of stigmatized groups that can all reveal different intrapersonal dialectical tensions and ways of managing those tensions.

Because interpersonal boundary spanning is a new concept, this needs the most attention. Further research should examine how traditional boundary spanning techniques are employed in interpersonal communication. It should also work to discover techniques, such as passing, that are unique to interpersonal boundary spanning.

First, this research should be repeated to further explore specific interpersonal relationships. For instance, in this study Brad gave a brief example of how spanning techniques were used in a relationship he had with a straight man. Similar research should focus on straight-gay friendships to understand how spanning techniques are used.
Also, several of the reciprocators discussed the role that stigma held in their workplaces. Future research should explore how interpersonal boundary spanning techniques are being employed to create more open, tolerant work environments. Finally, future research, building on a better understanding of the GLBT and gay communities, should aim to understand how interpersonal boundary spanning techniques are taking place on a larger GLBT group level.

Interpersonal boundary spanning is likely taking place beyond solely in the management of stigma; therefore, future studies could focus on other ways people use interpersonal boundary spanning techniques. Areas of possible research include conflict management, family dynamics, and in close, personal relationships.

The definition of the ‘GLBT’ and ‘gay’ communities needs further exploration. In this research, it was clear that different individuals have different perspectives on what the GLBT or gay community includes. For some it was merely the gay clubs and bars that exist in many cities while for others that definition expanded to include businesses that were owned by openly gay individuals, advocacy centers, and organized recreational activities, such as a gay softball league. Future research should focus on surveying and interviewing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals about their definition of the GLBT community, where it exists, what purpose it serves and what their feelings of connection are.

Another area that future research might focus on is the legitimacy of grouping gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals together in research. Particularly in communication research, future studies may focus on whether or not communication
practices are similar between subgroups in the GLBT community. These common understandings of the GLBT community would help to develop understanding of stigma, intrapersonal and interpersonal dialectical tensions, and interpersonal boundary spanning.

Future research should employ the use of focus groups to allow individuals to build off of one another’s knowledge. This is particularly important when attempting to gather data about a community, and specifically about roles that individuals play in building connections or interpersonal boundary spanning techniques that are used to reduce stereotyping and stigma. In both defining the gay community and attempting to discover spanning techniques, a focus group would be better equipped to brainstorm, build off of one another’s observations, and explain their common experiences.

Finally, future research should focus on understanding how stigma, dialectical tensions, and boundary spanning affect the communication practices of different populations. Other populations should include women, other minority or stigmatized communities, other geographic communities, and international communities. This research is imperative in order to understand the intricacies of information sharing and to better understand how interpersonal communication works to reduce stigma.
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE
Thank you for agreeing to work with me on this project. What I am trying to do is understand different interactions including coming out, interactions with people who know you are out, interactions with people who know or do not know you are gay, and interactions where you may or may not feel comfortable coming out. I am looking for your individual perspective and your experiences. All information will be cumulated before reporting, and anonymity will be kept by using pseudonyms should direct quotes be used.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS:

- Please tell me a little bit about yourself. How long have you been ‘out’ (to yourself, to the public)? Tell me a little about the first time you came out.

- Think of a time when you came out and it was a positive experience. What did (or would) that look like? Feel like?

- Think of a time when you came out and it was a negative experience. What did (or would) that look like? Feel like?

- Think about a time when you have come out to others (whether gay, straight or otherwise) in initial and early parts of relationships? How did you decide that you would share your sexual orientation with another? What are the things that made it safe.

- Think of a time when you decided not to share your sexual orientation with an individual or the group you were with. How did you decide you would not share your sexual orientation? Did it feel unsafe to come out at that point; if so, what were the things that made it unsafe?

- Are there areas in your life where you have not explicitly come out? Can you tell me about those places, people, how and why you made that choice?

- Are there groups you belong to where you are in the minority because you are gay? Tell me about the communication you have with that group.

- Do you think that boundaries exist between the GLBT or gay community and the larger community? If so, can you explain to me what your perception of those boundaries are? Are there things that would make those boundaries more flexible/permeable?

- Think of a time when you saw someone you know who is a great communicator bridging gaps that may exist between the GLBT or gay community and the larger
community. What were the circumstances that led up to the incident? Tell me exactly what this person did. When did this happen? What is your relationship with this person? Is this person gay? How long has (s)he been out? How old is (s)he?

- Do you see yourself assuming a societal role in GLBT or gay community? Do you see others assuming societal roles in the GLBT or gay community?

- What recommendations would you make to a person who is gay who wanted to build better relationships between the GLBT or gay community and the larger community?

- What recommendations would you make to a person who is straight who wanted to build better relationships between the GLBT or gay community and the larger community?
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT
Consent Form for a Recorded Interview

Please read this document carefully before deciding whether to participate. You must be at least 18 years of age.

Project Title: How stigma and dialectics affect disclosure among gay men and GLBT communities

Purpose: To learn about how individuals and groups disclose information related to their sexual orientation.

What you will be asked to do in this study: The interviewer will ask you a series of questions about your experiences and perceptions of coming out as well as your experiences and perceptions of being part of the GLBT community. If you do not want to respond to any of the questions asked, then you do not need to. If you wish to stop the interview for any reason, you are free to do so.

Time Required: up to 1 hour

Benefits/Compensation: There is no compensation or other direct benefit to you for participation.

Confidentiality: Your identity and the name of any other individuals you mention will be kept confidential. In presenting any findings from this study, you will be assigned a pseudonym to protect your identity. The recording of the interview will be stored on a password protected computer and will be destroyed after they are transcribed. Transcriptions and all other documents pertaining to this study will be filed in a locked desk for only as long as they are needed to complete the study and for no longer than three years. After this time they will be destroyed.

Risks: While every effort will be taken to make sure that no breach of confidentiality ensues, this is always a possibility when identifying information is collected. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences which may bring up unpleasant memories. Should these memories lead to other strong emotions, I have included a brief list of local counselors who you may wish to contact.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study: Katie Shephard 407-719-7095; KatieTShephard@hotmail.com and/or Professor Sally O. Hastings, PhD., Assistant Professor, Nicholson School of Communication, University of Central Florida, Comm 255, Orlando, FL 32816, (407) 823-2850.

Whom to contact about your rights in the study: Research at the University of Central Florida, involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). For information about participants’ rights please contact: Institutional Review Board Office, University Of Central Florida, Office of Research and Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL, 32826-3246. The telephone numbers are: (407) 823-2276 and (407) 823-2901. The office is open from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm Monday through Friday except on UCF official holidays.

☐ I have read the procedure described above
☐ I agree to be audio taped
☐ I voluntarily agree to take part in the procedure
☐ I am at least 18 years of age or older

Participant
Date

Principal Investigator
Date

University of Central Florida IRB
IRB NUMBER: IRB 08-00753
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 6/12/2008
IRB EXPIRATION DATE: 8/11/2009
Counseling Referral List

This list is taken from the UCF Counseling Center Referral List. A full list of this list can be viewed at http://www.counseling.sdes.ucf.edu/commcounsel.html

The Center
926 N Mills Ave, Orlando, FL 32803 407-228-8272 www.glbcc.org
Community Center for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning People and Friends in Central Florida. The Center offers: Social & Support Groups and Professional Counseling

Shannon Adams, LMHC

Mandy Albaugh, M.A., LMHC
2006 Town Plaza Ct, Winter Springs, FL 32708 407-547-5802 www.vitabellaconsulting.com

Associates in Psychology and Counseling
2101 Park Center Dr, Ste 270, Orlando, Florida 32835 407-523-1213 www.apc-orlando.com

Center for Counseling & Consulting
661 Seminola Blvd., Casselberry, FL 32707 407-678-6655

Maria Darcy, Ph.D., ABS.
871 Outer Road Unit D., Orlando, FL 32814 407-408-6843 www.drmariadarcy.com

Gregory Lucas, Ph.D.
3203 Lawton Road, Suite 150, Orlando, FL 32803 407-963-1542 www.DrGregoryLucas.com

Keri Nola, MA, LMHC
2006 Town Plaza Court, Winter Springs, FL 32708 407-242-9400 http://www.pathogrowth.com

Joyce Pastorek, M.A., LMHC
550 N. Bumby Ave Suite 105, Orlando, FL 32803 407-491-1288

Michael Ian Rothenberg, Ph.D., LCSW
705-A Executive Dr., Winter Park, Florida 32789 407-797-5468 www.CounselingAndSexualHealth.com

Philip O. Tool, Ed.D., LMHC
2348 Whitehall Dr., Winter Park, FL 32792 407-622-7556

Sean P. Turner, Ph.D.
APPENDIX C: IRB APPROVAL
Notice of Expedited Initial Review and Approval

From: UCF Institutional Review Board
FWA0000351, Exp. 6/24/11, IRB0001138

To: Kathryn T. Shephard and Co-PI: Sally O. Hastings

Date: August 20, 2008

IRB Number: SBE-08-085753

Study Title: How stigma and dialectics affect disclosure among gay men and GLBT communities

Dear Researcher:

Your research protocol noted above was approved by expedited review by the UCF IRB Chair on 8/12/2008. The expiration date is 8/11/2009. Your study was determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and expeditable per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.110. The category for which this study qualifies as expeditable research is as follows:

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

The IRB has approved a consent procedure which requires participants to sign consent forms. Use of the approved, stamped consent document(s) is required. Only approved investigators (or other approved key study personnel) may solicit consent for research participation. Subjects or their representatives must receive a copy of the consent form(s).

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a locked file cabinet for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Additional requirements may be imposed by your funding agency, your department, or other entities. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

To continue this research beyond the expiration date, a Continuing Review Form must be submitted 2–4 weeks prior to the expiration date. Advise the IRB if you receive a subpoena for the release of this information, or if a breach of confidentiality occurs. Also report any unanticipated problems or serious adverse events (within 5 working days). Do not make changes to the protocol methodology or consent form before obtaining IRB approval. Changes can be submitted for IRB review using the Addendum/Modification Request Form. An Addendum/Modification Request Form cannot be used to extend the approval period of a study. All forms may be completed and submitted online at http://iris.research.ucf.edu.

Failure to provide a continuing review report could lead to study suspension, a loss of funding and/or publication possibilities, or reporting of noncompliance to sponsors or funding agencies. The IRB maintains the authority under 45 CFR 46.110(e) to observe or have a third party observe the consent process and the research.

On behalf of Tracey Dietz, Ph.D., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Joanne Muratori

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 08/20/2008 09:58:21 AM EDT

IRB Coordinator
REFERENCES


psychology of stigma. (pp. 1-28). New York: The Guilford Press.


Sage Publications.


Steier, F. (1995). Reflexivity, interpersonal communication, and interpersonal communication research. In W. Leeds-Hurwitz (Ed.) *Social Approaches to*