



## An Existential-Phenomenological Investigation of the Experience of Gay Men Acknowledging to Themselves that They are Attracted to Other Men

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### Abstract

*There are an abundance of studies regarding the development of sexual identity and sexual orientation that have served as the foundational underpinnings for exploring sexual orientation development. To date, however, findings from these studies have failed to constitute a significant resource for understanding the gay man's experience of acknowledging to himself that he is attracted to other men. By identifying the essential constituents of this experience, this existential-phenomenological study provides a starting point for further exploration. Written narrative accounts were obtained from seven men who identified sexually as gay and a method of existential-phenomenological analysis was applied to reveal the prereflective constituents of the experience described. The analysis yielded a new perspective on the experience of gay men and their attraction to other men that has the capacity to change the way practising clinicians, educators, counsellors and future researchers treat and understand the Queer community.*

The inherent quandaries existing in sexual orientation development make it difficult for any specific theory to explain either accurately or conclusively how sexual and romantic attractions manifest in gay men. Fundamentally, human experience is subjective and has meaning relevant and pertinent to the individual. No two individuals can experience the same sunset in the same way, nor can two people fall in love or experience attraction and lust in the same way. How, then, can the essence of the experience of a man's realizing his attraction to other men be captured and scrutinized in order to satisfactorily understand how gay sexual orientation is formed?

Bader (2009) stated that "We have always demonized homosexuals because, I believe, we are frightened [of] and guilty about our own longings for closer contact with members of our own sex" (p. 136). He proceeds to comment, "Throughout our history, we have created symbolic narratives rife with incendiary images about

certain groups who psychologically threaten us, and who provoke our moral indignation and justify our defensive retaliation" (p. 136). Even though these deep prejudicial perspectives have been lessening to some degree, with more recent societal opinions reflecting an increasing tolerance of the greater Queer community, experiences pertinent to gay male attraction remain unexamined in the psychological literature. While there are numerous theories regarding sexual orientation development, there are no studies that explore the more salient issue of experiencing attraction in the moment when it is first realized.

This research study, therefore, set out to explore and examine the experiences of gay men acknowledging to themselves, during their coming-out process, that they are attracted to other men, with an existential-phenomenological approach applied. Polkinghorne (1989) noted that the essence of this manner of investigation is "to discover the essential attributes of

phenomena and then express the results in verbal portraits” (p. 45). No attempt was made to examine causal or explanatory factors, the aim of the study having been simply to gain a better understanding of the nature of the experience itself. This focus accords with May’s (1967) definition of phenomenology as “essentially and in its simplest terms the endeavour to take the phenomenon as [it is] given without asking at once for its causal explanation” (p. 204).

The internalization by gay men of the surrounding society’s negative views of homosexuality was also a motivational factor in conducting the current study. Given Sartre’s statement that “we only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us” (cited in Judaken, 2006, p. 168), my hope is that the findings of this study will deepen gay men’s understanding of themselves in a profound and positive way in order to counter any existing self-negative views that they may hold, as well as alleviate any negative consequences related to their coming out process and own sexual orientation development. Hopefully, with a deeper understanding of their lived experience, fear and isolation, for example, will give way to curiosity, openness and acceptance.

In this regard, the following words of Sue (2010) are particularly noteworthy:

It is often difficult for straights to understand the differences in experiential realities because of societal and personal aversions to recognizing LGBTs, the collusive silencing of their voices, and the fears of repercussions from “coming out” that keep them hidden from public view. (p. 185)

This statement touches on the larger notion that the greater Queer community is experiencing various issues and processes pertaining to its struggle for acceptance within the heterosexist norm. These struggles have, in turn, become an integral part of the Queer community’s social evolution, specifically in terms of gay community members’ addressing why it is such a “big deal” to be queer and why segments of heterosexual society find the Queer culture so difficult to understand.

Issues in the formation of sexual orientation arise in those who struggle against a heterosexist society. Not only is there external homophobia to contend with, but external pressure and aggression often lead to an internalized state of struggle and confusion. As pointed to by Herek, Gillis, and Cogan (2009), “Among sexual minorities, the process of self-stigma, self-hate, or internalized oppression is an additional powerful concern that strikes at the core of self-identity and self-esteem” (cited in Sue, 2010, p. 191).

To combat these aggressions, like many marginalized groups in society, the LGBT communities comprising the greater Queer community tend to “form their own communities and connections as a means to validate and support their group identities and as a buffer to a hostile and invalidating world” (Sue, 2010, p. 187). Let us now look at how these community responses might be understood on an individual level.

### Theories of Sexual Orientation Development

Although a detailed discussion of the nature of sexual orientation itself is beyond the scope of this research report, a brief overview (drawn mainly from Ritter & Terndrup, 2002, pp. 90-107) of five major theories regarding sexual orientation development follows.

#### Cass’s Model

The Australian psychologist Vivienne Cass (1979) generated a theoretical model of sexual orientation formation that revolutionized the understanding of men and women with homosexual orientations. Cass proceeded from the assumptions that “identity is acquired through a developmental process” (p. 219) and that “stability and change in human behaviour are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual’s interpersonal environment” (p. 220). In essence, how individuals see themselves, and the consistency or inconsistency with which interactions transpire, shapes the course of their identity formation, with the motivation for development inhering in “the need to ameliorate the incongruence that each stage creates interpersonally and in reference to society” (cited in Cox & Gallois, 1996, p. 5). Cass’s six-stage developmental model has become the classic framework for the study of homosexual identity formation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Gay men work through each stage, remain at a particular stage, or undergo identity foreclosure, terminating forward movement in the homosexual identity formation process (Cass, 1984).

#### Troiden’s Model

Sociologist Richard Troiden (1979) synthesized the work of Cass in formulating his four-stage model of gay and lesbian orientation development. Troiden viewed his developmental theory as “taking place against the backdrop of stigma” (p. 47), developing over time, including a number of critical transitions, and eventually culminating in self-labelling as gay or lesbian. His model further postulates that recurrent themes recollected by gays and lesbians cluster according to the developmental phases in their life histories. “These age specific themes thus provide the content and characteristics of each stage” (p. 47). His stages, rather than being linear, build on one another, sometimes recur, and often overlap.

### Coleman's Model

In his examination of a number of proposed models of sexual orientation development, Eli Coleman (1982) noted that each model offered an additional understanding to the complexity of this developmental process (p. 470). He then offered an alternative five-stage model that is descriptive of many of the life patterns seen in individuals with same-sex sexual orientation. The five stages Coleman postulated are: (1) pre-coming out, (2) coming out, (3) exploration, (4) first relationship, and (5) integration.

### Grace's Model

John Grace (1992) proposed a five-stage model that focuses on "major life tasks and common developmental obstacles that retard or arrest positive stage movement" (p. 33). Grace believed that homophobia needed to be understood before the developmental dilemmas faced by homosexual individuals could be fully explained. In order to facilitate such an understanding, Grace (1992) identified extrinsic impediments to self-identification among four categories of homophobia broadly labelled personal/active, personal/passive, institutional/active, and institutional/passive (p. 34). Ritter and Terndrup (2002, pp. 103-104) clarify the classification of these categories as follows:

- personal – includes both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences;
- institutional – involves a relationship between an individual and a societal institution such as family, school, church, business or government;
- active – expressed through physical assault, verbal abuse, hostile stereotypes, and pressure to conform to heterosexist norms;
- passive – manifests as heterosexist assumptions, ignorance about the experience of lesbians and gay men, and neglect toward their basic human rights and needs.

### D'Augelli's Human Development View

Anthony D'Augelli (1994) maintained that same-sex orientation development must be described using a conceptual model that explicates the many complex factors influencing the development of individuals in context over time (p. 317). This perspective strives to discover variations among individuals as they move through time, through social situations, and through their community, their culture, and their personal history. As such, D'Augelli's theory attempts "to locate an individual's life within a dynamic matrix of ... three sets of factors" ranging from the personal to the interactive to the sociohistorical (pp. 317-319).

### Methodology

In order to investigate the lived experience of men who are attracted to other men, I chose an existential-phenomenological approach as postulated by Giorgi (1970). This research approach does not use methods familiar to investigations in the natural sciences but instead aims dialogically to capture the essence of the focal phenomenon of human experience as it is being lived in the moment, thus allowing for "the full range of experience and behaviour of man as a person ... to come under scientific scrutiny" (Giorgi, 1970, p. 2). In the name of "objectivity", psychology has long attempted to contain and measure human experiences instead of allowing the subjectivity of the person who is living the experience to be the central focus of the research. To this end, Colaizzi (1978) stated, "to be objective means that [the researcher's] statements faithfully express what stands before him, whatever may be the phenomenon that he is present to" (p. 52).

Meaning is manifested on an experiential level as essential structures in consciousness (Hein & Austin, 2001). As Husserl (1913/1931) maintained, "Every intentional experience ... [has as] its essential nature to harbour in itself a 'meaning' of some sort" (p. 257). Essentially, then, every experience we as human beings encounter has the potential to have a deeper meaning, a richer potential for existential significance.

### Descriptive Protocols

Written accounts of their own experiences were obtained from seven co-participants, all of whom self-identified sexually as gay, in response to the following instruction: "Reflect on your experience during your coming out process of acknowledging to yourself that you were/are attracted to other males. Describe the experience in your own words, focusing on the experience itself. Please do your best to describe the experience as completely as possible." The data for analysis comprised these seven written narratives.

### Bracketing

For the existential-phenomenological researcher, a fundamental requirement, both prior to and during the explication process, is bracketing: a rigorous process whereby the researcher attempts to identify and place all his or her presumptions, biases, expectations, and existing knowledge, whether from life experience, scholarly research, or other sources, in conscious abeyance or suspension, with this consciousness to be held in the researcher's awareness throughout the explication process (Hein & Austin, 2001). The goal of this process is to maintain awareness of any already existing biases so that any interpretative influence exerted by them can be acknowledged and minimized.

## Explication

In existential-phenomenological investigations, the participants provide descriptive data via languaged accounts of their experience, these narrative accounts being written or transcribed. The process of distilling essential meanings from the narrative accounts is called explication in that it seeks to “discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participant that reveal the nature of the phenomenon being researched” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 253). Explication develops and then sets forth universal features of the experience being investigated, features that are constant regardless of the context, circumstance or situation in which they manifest. For each of the seven protocols, six steps were followed.

Step 1: Read the whole description straight through. This is done in order to gain familiarity with the narrative as a whole without considering the goal of the investigation (De Koning, 1979; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi & Giorgi 2003; Wertz, 2005). The aim of this general reading is to contextualize and understand the experience of the participant as generally as possible, being open to whatever meanings may emerge.

Step 2: Read the account again, this time with the intention of delineating the narrative into smaller segments or “meaning units” (De Koning, 1979; Giorgi, 1985; Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003; Wertz, 2005) or “significant statements” (Colaizzi, 1978). These units of meaning were delineated by transitions or changes in the narrative without any effort to sort by meaning as it related to the experience under investigation.

Step 3: Formulate condensed expressions of meaning by taking the participant’s meaning units and rewording them in terms of their meaning in common everyday language (Colaizzi, 1973). The goal in this step is to condense the information given in the previous steps by translating the language of the participant into the language of the researcher (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Step 4: Synthesize the reworded meaning units into a psychological narrative. This is the integration of the researcher-distilled participant narratives and their meanings into a coherent and congruent portrayal of the experience being researched (De Koning, 1979; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). The aim of this step is to attempt to see and to understand the essential components of the experience as a whole.

Step 5: Following completion of the psychological narrative, the reworded meaning units were examined in respect of their appropriateness to the experience under investigation. After re-examining each of the psychological meaning units (employing imaginative variation), those that were deemed to be constituents

for that particular participant’s experience were listed and numbered at the bottom of the page.

Step 6: The resultant lists were then compared in order to determine which constituents occurred most consistently across all the narratives. A process of imaginative variation was again utilized, this time to ensure that these constituents were indeed essential parts of the resultant overall meaning structure.

## Findings

Although there are a number of theories regarding sexual orientation development, no study to date has explored the both deeper and more salient issue of experiencing attraction in the moment when it is first realized. The findings of the present investigation offer an opportunity to understand more precisely the essential elements of this experience. By utilizing the six steps described earlier to explicate the data, the following 10 constituents emerged as descriptive of the essence of the experience of gay men acknowledging to themselves that they are attracted to other men:

- acknowledging one’s awareness of an ongoing process;
- being initially aware, at a young age, of being different;
- being different is experienced as negative;
- experiencing sexual exploration;
- experiencing early denial;
- experiencing coping;
- accepting being gay;
- exploring gay sexual orientation;
- integrating being gay;
- reflecting on what else could have happened.

A description of each of these constituents follows.

### *Acknowledging Awareness of an Ongoing Process*

Acknowledging awareness of an ongoing process, rather than a finite moment that happens in time, was the first and most foundational constituent identified. The individual’s awareness or realization that he is attracted to other men does not happen after a singular encounter. It is, rather, a culmination of both very negative and very positive experiences in the individual’s internal and external worlds over an extended period of time. As he progresses through life and gains experience, new light is shed on his awareness of his own attraction to other men, each experience bringing new understanding and revealing additional layers of complexity in his life. It is ultimately the hope and aspiration of the individual that this process will lead to the acknowledgment of his sexual orientation, namely being attracted to other men. It is, however, only when this evolution is sufficiently underway that the individual will have the

tools necessary to acknowledge his attraction to other men and to allow this acknowledgment to come into conscious awareness.

### ***Being Initially Aware, at a Young Age, of Being Different***

Co-participants stated that they first became aware of their attraction to other men at an early age (roughly 6–10 years of age), and this was commonly experienced as feeling different from other boys. Being physically or sexually attracted was not pronounced as yet, but they were aware of “something being different”. Many expressed not wanting to participate in “traditional” boy versus girl roles, even at an early age.

### ***Being Different Is Experienced as Negative***

Co-participants identified feeling as though their “being different” was wrong and that others did not want them around. Early experiences with negative stereotypes are common among those who are beginning to realize that they are attracted to other men. Co-participants indicated that the early HIV/AIDS stereotypes negatively impacted their view of themselves, and many reported a message of feeling unwanted and of having a deep fear of rejection by both family and friends. They experienced society as hostile and judgmental of those who, like themselves, were different, and equated their future to being rejected like those who were like them. These messages were further reinforced by their parents’ religious and cultural influences. Feelings of “being defective” or “broken” were common, most often accompanied by strong feelings of inadequacy. They internalized these feelings and began to form views that their brokenness was unacceptable and needed to be hidden. Consequently, rather than subject themselves to judgment and ridicule, their “secret” was born and placed in their metaphorical closet.

### ***Experiencing Sexual Exploration***

Co-participants indicated that their sexual exploration began at a young age (some as early as 8 years old). They revealed experiencing feelings of attraction and deep connection with other boys early on, which was often accompanied by an increase in fantasy. They began to form same-sex relationships, innocent to the onlooker but holding deeper meaning for those involved. School clubs and social interactions were viewed as a means to an end. Other boys became the object of affection to be obtained and possessed. Friendship with other boys was internalized as a desired intimacy and as an objective.

Feelings of attraction were later replaced by sexual desire. They compared themselves, often physically at

first, to other boys, paying close attention to what society said was acceptable in terms of how boys were supposed to look. They began being attracted to boys who fitted this mould, engaging in exploratory sexual play with themselves and then other boys. Sexual comparison followed as increased sexual play and experimentation developed into puberty, as these experiences led to feelings that reinforced their same-sex attraction.

### ***Experiencing Early Denial***

Co-participants reported initially denying that these sexual interactions meant that they themselves were gay, since these early interactions were compounded by being threatened by others, fears of letting down their family and friends, and balancing feelings of both rejection and approval. Early sexual encounters with “others like them” were limited and often dangerous. When they did occur, they were kept hidden, thus leaving plausible deniability intact. External intervention by others to redirect their urges was often experienced, such as family or others close to the individual attempting to introduce him to more accepted means of social interaction, perhaps a sports team or a more masculine-oriented social group.

As a means of self-protection and in order to avoid being labelled negatively, attempts were made to exercise discretion in public settings. However, this often resulted in a loss of self-acceptance. When others questioned a particular behaviour, explanations that conformed to the normative culture were offered, rather than revealing the underlying truth. Feelings of shame, fear and regret were common at this stage of the process. Co-participants indicated that those who were like them felt alone and isolated, often shunned or ostracized in their homes and communities. The desire to maintain discretion and invisibility added to the feeling of isolation – a predisposing factor for depression, drug experimentation, and even suicide. In their attempts to mitigate their sexual feelings and escape their lived reality, substance abuse was often the result of their attempts to find relief.

Those who had acknowledged their attraction to other men indicated that the experiences associated with their early denial were integral to how they evolved through their process of coming out. The early denial and self-admission of attraction was a time that resulted in these individuals either “making it” and discovering their resilience in the face of challenges (which then led to early experiences of coping and acceptance of their same-sex attraction), or a time when they succumbed to the pressures from others and/or from within themselves without resolving their feelings. Those who succumbed to the pressures felt “stuck in eternal denial” and forever relegated to the “metaphorical closet”.

### ***Experiencing Coping***

Co-participants reported engaging in interactions that began to foster a sense of authentic selfhood that led to self-acceptance. They often sought out the company of others who were like them and spent time in environments where their common experiences could be openly shared, thereby promoting positive interactions and establishing a sense of community. This served to reinforce the feeling of being accepted, and helped to guard against the feeling of being rejected by those outside the Queer community. Feelings of safety, being heard, being seen, and being appreciated replaced earlier feelings of inadequacy, brokenness, and being undesirable.

Co-participants indicated that increased interaction, as well as experiences in learning to cope positively and navigate their way through their own acceptance, helped them to develop safety strategies and to create environments conducive to fostering self-acceptance and understanding. They began choosing relationships that offered support as opposed to those that did not, thus increasing their ability to manage their lives adequately. Increasing self-confidence in this regard enabled them to increase their ability to cope with the negative ramifications of a society that is slow to accept others with a sexual orientation that differs from that of the majority.

A sense of resilience that allowed them to begin to re-engage with hypocritical elements that had been long forgotten or avoided began to assert itself. Co-participants revealed that they felt as though they had “nothing else to lose”, feeling more “empowered” to reach out. They were more open to opportunities to reconnect with friends and family members they had become estranged from. Along with experiencing first-time feelings of self-acceptance and self-worth, they now also felt much more capable of attaining a life without fear of judgment or reprisal.

### ***Accepting Being Gay***

Co-participants reported beginning to share their experiences of same sex attraction by interacting with individuals who acknowledged and approved of their sexual orientation. They began addressing their own needs above those of others, and began seeking out beneficial and committed relationships with other men. They began to change and mould their environments, social circles, workspaces, and even homes, to create open and safe spaces for them to be who they were without concern about external judgment.

Their feelings of being different were replaced with those of feeling “right” and “natural”. They began to feel that they were as deserving of happiness as everyone else, and that the previously internalized notions

of society pertaining to their perceived defect were wrong and misguided. They began exploring options for employment that enhanced their connection to the wider community. They began to feel “a part of something” rather than “apart” from everything else. Co-participants stated that they began to move from the negative and withdrawn to the more positive and involved part of the emotional spectrum in respect of their sexuality. Their narratives revealed that this sometimes manifested in an overzealous participation in political movements advocating the equalization of rights for the Queer community. They felt that the years spent “hidden” must now be “atoned for” by attempts to bring about social change.

### ***Exploring Gay Sexual Orientation***

Co-participants stated that they explored more acutely what it means to be gay. A deep identification with one’s community was often experienced as essential and necessary in the vulnerable stages of the coming out process in order for the individual to thrive. It became important for him to identify with the Queer community and experience Queer-culture-dominated relationships. Co-participants stated that they often associated only with members of the gay community and began to ridicule the lifestyle of heterosexual individuals. A resurgence of hypersexual activity often accompanied this period, as they experienced their attraction to other men on a more purely sexual level.

### ***Integrating Being Gay***

Co-participants reported that they had now begun making attempts to reconnect with others they had previously avoided or lost contact with. This attempt at reconnection included coming out to friends and family members, with feelings of acceptance being sought but not required. They expressed a desire to reconnect and reintegrate parts of their former selves with their new identity in a healthier and more satisfying way. They began to have feelings of optimism about their future with themselves and their family members, and seriously began to entertain thoughts of starting a family, getting married, and creating a family-centred home life. Co-participants did, however, report experiencing feelings of hesitancy regarding balancing aspects of their professional lives with their personal lives.

The men who participated in this study indicated that being gay was experienced by them not as the sum of their identity but, rather, as but a facet of the greater whole of who they were. Identifying as gay could be experienced negatively, positively, or both, depending mainly on environmental factors. Either way, however, acknowledgement of and self-acceptance as being gay included no longer viewing attraction to other men as the single most important element of one’s identity.

Essentially, having a gay orientation had become an integrated part of their self-identities as a whole.

### ***Reflecting on What Else Could Have Happened***

Co-participants viewed their acknowledging of their attraction to other men as a generally positive outcome of what they had experienced as an unfolding process rather than as a singular moment in time or identifiable pivotal event. They had experienced the process as a tumultuous series of challenges that came and went as they progressed through different phases of their lives. While they expressed a sense of gratitude for the greater experience, they did not necessarily desire to relive it. On the one hand, they viewed it as an integral part of their development as individuals, but, on the other hand, they viewed it as something that could have gone terribly wrong, resulting in tragedy. They expressed the fluidity and natural evolution of the experience as something that could not be expressed or packaged as a single event, feeling a sense of wonder and continued curiosity about their experience, reflecting fondly on their own resilience in spite of the many negative obstacles imposed by both society and, at times, themselves.

They expressed concern regarding the personal cost of such an endeavour, measuring such cost in terms of time and relationships lost, opportunities squandered, moments not had, and experiences missed out on. However, their concerns about cost were mitigated by their ability to recognize the immeasurable personal gain. Essentially, despite the cost of the endeavour, they were all “better for it”.

### **Discussion**

This investigation of the experience of recognizing and acknowledging to oneself that one is attracted to other men exposed a very complex and fluid process that these men experienced over time in order to come to the self-assertion that they were gay. There are many experiences in life that occur in the moment and are brought forth into conscious thought. For example, eating chocolate ice cream and then making the assertion “I like chocolate ice cream”. This is a simple statement brought forth from the awareness that one’s recent experience of eating the chocolate ice cream was pleasant and enjoyable. However, can one truly “like” chocolate ice cream without sampling it a second, third, or even fourth time? What if the hypothetical ice cream is presented or prepared in a different way? Will the end result be the same? Repeated experiences with the various presentations of ice cream are necessary to determine if one truly likes chocolate ice cream. How might this awareness, and thus this determination, happen?

Awareness involves a fluid and complex process that

changes in a continuous cycle and in relentless fashion. What impacts this awareness? As human beings, our attention to and awareness of changes in our environment are based on our interactions with said environment. When applied to our internal sense of sexual orientation, awareness is again a complex, ever-changing phenomenon, emerging as a process over time. In order for one to truly acknowledge attraction to other men, this emergent process and exploration of sexual awareness must take place.

### **Comparisons and Connections with the Models of Sexual Orientation Development**

The constituent elements that emerged in this study share commonalities with the five models of sexual orientation development presented earlier. Of fundamental importance is the central finding that the experience of gay men acknowledging to themselves that they are attracted to other men is a process. It is not an experience that occurs at a singular fixed point in time. This finding corroborates Cass’s (1979) claim that “identity is acquired through a developmental process” (p. 219). The 10 constituents identified in the present study highlight this developmental process well and illustrate the various forces at work during the process.

For example, the essential constituents of “being initially aware, at a young age, of being different” and “being different is experienced as negative” further highlight that “stability and change in human behaviour are dependent on the congruency or incongruency that exists within an individual’s interpersonal environment” (Cass, 1979, p. 220). The issues and challenges faced by individuals during this process are in a constant state of conflict with both internalized and externalized elements, which in turn affect their ability to cope effectively, thus affecting whether they succumb to internal or external factors. To illustrate, several co-participants revealed having experienced feeling attracted to other males as early as kindergarten. However, these early experiences were not internalized as attraction at the time they occurred, but were rather expressed as “interest” or “curiosity”. Some recalled that when they told an adult that they liked another boy, they were often corrected. “As a friend, right?” would often be the response.

Cass (1979), Troiden (1979), Coleman (1982), and Grace (1992), all postulated developmental models of the crystallization of sexual orientation. The language in which they chose to express and explain the various stages of their developmental models may have differed, but their essence was markedly similar. For example, the constituent of “being initially aware, at a young age, of being different” fits neatly within what both Coleman and Cass described in their *pre-coming out* and *identity confusion* stages. So, too, the

constituent of “exploring gay sexual orientation” fits with Troiden’s *identity confusion* stage as well as with Grace’s *finding community* stage.

The constituents of “experiencing early denial” and “experiencing coping” are compatible with Troiden’s (1979) *identity assumption* stage. Again, this stage is a combination of the *sexual orientation tolerance* and *sexual orientation acceptance* stages that Cass (1979) postulated. Co-participants reported that tolerating and accepting a new orientation, associating with other members of the greater LGBT community, and exploring the new subculture were tasks during this process. Their narratives also confirmed what both Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982) postulated with regard to this stage: that, with the assumption and initial integration of a gay identity, individuals are confronted with the need to manage the societal stigma associated with homosexuality. This moreover would seem to correspond very specifically with Coleman’s *exploration* stage, which refers to the stage of exploring and experimenting with a new sexual orientation. Coleman also noted that it is at this stage that gay men make contact with the greater Queer community, explore ways of meeting others, and learn new interpersonal skills in interacting with others within the greater Queer community.

Several co-participants reported early experiences of exploring their local gay scene, with many having been disappointed to find that none existed. Some struggled even to find one other person who was willing to acknowledge being gay. One co-participant reported, “Being different brought us together and not the fact that we were gay. It was that he was different like me. That whole gay label came later.” Others reported that it was not until they left their own home towns that they were able to start more freely and fully exploring and connecting with the greater gay community. Once in a new environment, many were able to connect and begin having early experiences with having a gay identity.

Grace’s (1992) five-stage model focused on the “major life tasks and common developmental obstacles that retard or arrest positive stage movement” (p. 33). The experiences of the co-participants revealed in this study closely corroborated formulations presented in Grace’s theory. For example, one co-participant wrote that he was raised in a very conservative Christian home (not unlike many of the other co-participants) where he was constantly bombarded with his family’s thoughts and beliefs. These attitudes and beliefs were not limited to same-sex relationships, but applied to skin colour and religion as well.

Grace (1992) noted that homophobic influences, in this case the constant disparaging remarks about gay people, not only extract large amounts of time and

energy away from growth and sexual orientation development, but present a generalized view of the world as threatening and dangerous. As happened in the case of many of the co-participants, a public and private self were thus created, leading to a sense of shame and alienation that inevitably led to further isolation and depression. The constituents of “being initially aware, at a young age, of being different” and “being different is experienced as negative” both reflect this stage. Grace’s second stage, *acknowledgment*, like the *identity confusion* stages of Troiden and Cass, as well as Grace’s third stage of *finding community* are also consistent with these constituents.

Grace’s fourth stage, *first relationships*, would seem to include the constituent of “exploring gay sexual orientation”. Several reported experiences of meeting other men early in this process correspond with the notions of playing catch-up and hypersexualization as characteristic of this stage, several narratives having included descriptions of the relatively promiscuous nature of men during this stage. The narratives also highlighted the degree to which individual differences played a role, with some co-participants noting that they became “hermit-like” and “a monk” during this phase to avoid contracting HIV. The difference in the co-participants’ ages was also revealed in this regard, as the younger generations of gay men have had very different experiences of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Grace’s (1992) fifth stage, identified as *self-definition and reintegration*, is described as an open-ended, ongoing and lifelong process. This corresponds closely with the constituents of “integrating being gay” and “reflecting on what else could have happened”. In mentioning the “road not taken”, one co-participant referred to an alternate possible story of one’s life, good or bad. Some spoke of a moment where their lives could have gone in two very different directions, while others reflected on their own resilience in having overcome adversity and built a life for themselves in spite of where they were from and what kind of family they had. One co-participant put it aptly, stating that “I can only imagine the life I would have now had I stayed.” Another said, “I could be stuck in a boring desk job, with a wife and kids. Typical, right? Just there, alone and hollow.”

D’Augelli (1994) described same-sex orientation development using a conceptual model that explicates the many complex factors that influence the development of individuals in context over time. His model highlighted the notion of developmental plasticity, which suggests that human functioning is very susceptible to environmental circumstances in addition to physical and biological factors. The implication for sexual orientation is that one’s sexual orientation may be fluid at certain times during the lifespan and more defined, even rigid, at others.

The constituents of “experiencing coping” and “exploring gay sexual orientation” are closely aligned with the process D’Augelli’s presents. Many of the early experiences with their sexual orientation described by the co-participants illustrate this fluid nature that D’Augelli (1994) speaks of. The various ways that this fluidity can manifest are also seemingly endless; as he stated in pointing to interindividual differences in the development of intraindividual behaviour, “Individual [persons] are unique in their own development over the lifespan” (p. 321).

Substantiating the constituent of “experiencing sexual exploration” is D’Augelli’s (1994) observation that “sexual diversity [that] increases during adulthood is the result not only of postadolescent experiential factors, but also of exposure to less restrictive expectations” (p. 322). This is interesting insofar as it implies that part of a larger process of discovering sexual orientation is the smaller process of sexual exploration and experimentation that many gay men go through. An important aspect of the constituent of “reflecting on what else could have happened” is reflected in D’Augelli’s (1994) reference to the power to “self-create”, implying that individuals’ own actions play a significant role in shaping their development. In this regard, D’Augelli emphasizes that, in contrast to the human development perspective, “deterministic views of behaviour ... underestimate *the impact that individuals have on their own development*” (p. 322).

Having discussed the findings in the context of the major theoretical perspectives, let us now turn to more recent contributions that have elaborated on specific elements of the experience of gay men acknowledging to themselves that they are attracted to other men.

### **Role of Sexual Behaviour in the Identification Process**

Several of the co-participants revealed experiences associated with the sexual exploration phase of their process of sexual orientation development. Many reported phases of sexual promiscuity intermixed with periods of celibacy and social isolation. Asserting that “sexual behaviour plays a significant role in the development of sexual-minority (gay and bisexual) males” (p. 123), Dube (2000) postulated that “sexual-minority” males tend to exhibit and engage in greater sexual freedom: they engage in sex with more partners, meet these partners in highly sexualized settings, approve of sex without love, and report a higher number of sexual patterns overall. What I had hoped to explore in this research study was the question of whether men utilize sex with other men as a means of confirming their gay sexual orientation, or whether they use sex as a means of engaging with the gay community after they have labelled themselves as gay. Or, perhaps, both are part of the answer?

Klinkenberg and Rose (1994) and Nardi (1992) viewed sexual behaviour as facilitating the development of close relationships and the garnering of friends. Co-participants revealed that sex was utilized both as an experiment either to confirm or to deny gay attraction, and as a means to connect, sometimes hurriedly, with the community at large. Many of the co-participants told stories of first-time same-sex sexual encounters being internalized as a necessary endeavour that “proved” one’s resolve regarding the pursuit of a gay lifestyle rather than as sexual experimentation per se.

These findings appear to support the notion that gay men utilize sexual encounters as a means to come to terms with their newly realized sexual orientation and gain important experience within the community in order to adjust to their new sexual identity. Part of this process might serve a dual purpose. Several co-participants revealed that it was through their initial sexual encounters that they disclosed to others that they were attracted to other men. Obviously the act of having sexual intercourse with another man would speak volumes in terms of one’s sexual attraction; however, this is not always the case. The narratives of the co-participants revealed that attraction involves deeper and more complex meanings. Thus the act of sexual expression itself and verbally acknowledging one’s attraction to other men seem more intertwined than previously thought. Dube (2000) commented that this process of disclosure, both to oneself and others, is integral not only to successful adjustment, but to managing thoughts and feelings associated with internalized homophobia.

Having expected that sexual experimentation would occur in late adolescence, I was surprised to discover that over half of the co-participants had experienced sexual experimentation in their late, or even middle, childhood. Bukowski, Sippola and Newcomb (2000) noted that a “salient period of change in social needs occurs during the transition from childhood to early adolescence” (p. 147). There is a maturity gap when a child enters early adolescence between 10 and 13 years of age during which he begins to exhibit biological maturity but has not yet attained full adulthood status developmentally.

### **Masculinity**

An unexpected element that emerged during the data explication process was a common understanding by the co-participants of the nature and level of their own masculinity (or, in some cases, perceived level of masculinity). This thread of a shared perspective in most cases presented itself in the later phases of the individual’s evolutionary process, corresponding most closely to the constituents of “being initially aware, at a young age, of being different” and “exploring gay sexual orientation”.

This notion of a seemingly idealized masculinity peaked my curiosity. Might such a stereotype add yet another layer of experience to what is central to acknowledging one's attraction to other men? Indeed, several co-participants made reference to "societal standards", fearing that they would have to live up to these standards as a "measuring stick" of their own masculinity. I grew curious as to the origin of these standard stereotypes, with one image coming to mind. Pleck (1995) viewed the iconic "Marlboro Man", who represented the tough, rugged, masculine persona of the American West, as one of the dominant images partly responsible for this notion of an idealized masculinity. O'Neil (1981a, 1981b) suggested that anything that does not fit this image is thought of as weak and feminine, a fear that O'Neil (2008) went on to explain perpetuates four ideal masculine standards: men should be successful, powerful, and competitive; men should conceal their emotions; men should avoid affection with other men; and men should put school and/or work before other interests. Bearing these stereotypes in mind, it is easy to understand how the masculine ideal can become central to a man's self-concept and interpersonal relationships, as well as how it can become a powerful impediment to his sexual orientation development.

One stereotype in particular seems most prevalent in American society, namely that, even though "many gay men espouse masculinity, traditional masculine ideals exclude gay men because a core standard for this prohibits affectionate behaviour with other men" (Sanchez, Westefeld, Ming Liu, & Vilain, 2010, p. 105). An interesting hypothesis presented by Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, and Meyer (2008), which is also a belief that is prevalent in the gay community, is that men who are overly concerned with their masculinity are struggling with internalized homophobia and may have a more developed heterosexist attitude.

The co-participant narratives provided illustrations of this on several occasions, emphasizing the difficult challenge this posed both within and outside the gay community. The judgement inside the gay community is that one can be "too gay" or "too butch", reflecting the very same labels and attitudes that come from those outside of the gay community. Interestingly, however, Sanchez et al. (2010) affirmed the notion that many gay men endorse traditional masculinity and actually deride effeminate behaviours in other gay men, a notion supported by a number of co-participants reporting a similar phenomenon. One co-participant recalled having to "supervise" younger gay men in how to look more "butch", while other co-participants were told that different kinds of gay men had to follow "certain rules".

Given these stereotypes within the gay community itself, it is not uncommon for individuals within these

substrata to ridicule and taunt members of other gay groups, a source of much controversy and angst. As one co-participant put it, "The stress involved in managing two identities could be exhausting. Trying to prove how gay you were was even worse than trying to convince others I wasn't gay."

The challenge of maintaining a more heteronormative narrative in one's daily life, while simultaneously attempting to develop a gay orientation, can be stressful in the extreme. It has been shown that gay men and lesbians collectively represent one of the most stressed groups of individuals in society. Iwasaki and Ristock (2007) point out that the prevalence of stress within this group is considered to be a consequence of societal discrimination and the lack of social and institutional support (family, workplace, religion, and so on). There is a need, therefore, to promote greater understanding of the unique challenges that members of this population face. There is also a need to educate and train professional clinicians and counsellors to work effectively with members of the gay population in order to help them deal with the inordinate amount of stress they experience. As the co-participants in this study revealed, experiencing a same-sex attraction is, in and of itself, extremely stress-provoking.

Boysen, Vogel, Madon, and Wester (2006) examined the mental health stereotypes regarding gay men held by college students and therapists. Their study found that "gay men seek out counselling disproportionately more than their straight counterparts, and more large-scale, representative, epidemiological studies have shown that gay men tend to suffer more frequently than straight men from certain mental health symptoms" (p. 70), including mood disorders, anxiety disorders, sexual and gender identity problems, and eating and personality disorders.

### Suggestions for Further Research

The underlying dimensions revealed in this research study demonstrate the need for a continued in-depth look at the experience of same-sex attraction. On the other hand, by restricting my engagement with co-participants solely to their written descriptions of the experience, this study did have its limitations. I was, unable, for instance, to investigate further or to question the co-participants when I would otherwise have felt inclined to do so. Allowing for further interaction in a future study, perhaps in the form of follow-up interviewing, would allow for a deeper and perhaps more sensitive interpretation of each narrative. For example, there could have been a deeper exploration of the reported sexual behaviour or the implications of perceived masculinity in relation to the social changes taking place in society today. Implications of the recent changes in same-sex marriage laws would also have been fascinating to

examine within the context of the investigation. Essentially, what I hope to convey is that utilizing a phenomenological method to examine these various experiences within the context of attraction is both extremely promising and seemingly limitless in terms of the possibilities opened up.

As social acceptance and tolerance continues to grow with regard to the greater Queer community, the acknowledgment that attraction transcends gender and stereotype also grows. With social acceptance providing a broader platform of support for future research, one might even more fully explore elements and aspects surrounding the experience, such as the role religion and spirituality play in the awareness of attraction, or the impact cultural values impose on acknowledging one's attraction to other men. In addition, longitudinal studies could look at the long-term trends associated with attraction and its process on a developmental level specific to sexual orientation.

### Implications for Clinicians

It would be helpful for clinicians to explore the list of 10 constituents with their gay clients to ascertain whether these elements match their client's personal experience. As a clinician, there have been times in my practise when I have felt the need to reference more academic or authoritative pieces of literature in order to guide my work with particular clients or shed light on issues that had arisen in the therapy process. Well-conducted studies also provide validating support to clients, especially those who are struggling during the time when it feels so critical to them to fit in with their peers. More specifically, having a concrete tangible tool may help young adolescents realize that their thoughts and feelings about their sexuality are normal and part of a larger unfolding process.

An important clinical implication of this research is that the way in which it sheds light on the process of discovering oneself and exploring one's sexuality as a means to acknowledge one's sexual orientation points especially to the fact that this process can involve a complex, and often tumultuous, series of events that require time, patience, and support before coming to a resolution of some kind. Support can come from an understanding family, friends, accepting social groups and settings, and, with regard in particular to the profession of psychology, competent and knowledgeable clinicians. The findings of this investigation offer clinicians an opportunity to gain further insight into a process that has long been misunderstood, oversimplified, and at times demonized. The information provided by the phenomenological narratives analysed offers meaningful and empowering constituents ripe for exploration with clients.

Interestingly, when I was in the early phases of

conducting this research, nearly all of the potential co-participants commented that they had never been asked to reflect on this experience. Many indicated that it was something they thought they would never share because it was something that society told them was not meant to be shared. Many struggled even to find a place to begin their reflection, asking questions like "How far back should I go?" or "What if I cannot really remember the exact moment?" This told me that offering individuals an opportunity to tell their stories not only allows for clinical exploration and increased insight, but provides an opportunity for the individuals to gain a healthier sense of themselves. The findings also suggest that those who have had the experience of acknowledging to themselves that they are attracted to other men can benefit from revisiting this experience.

The findings also highlighted the need for resources and for support to be made available to individuals who have experienced this phenomenon, or who are currently going through the process of exploring their sexual orientation. Circumstances, many beyond the individual's control, may make it difficult to gain familial or social support in times of crisis.

It may also be helpful to clinicians to become more directly aware of the experience and process involved in the acknowledgment that one is attracted to other men. In other words, clinicians treating members of the greater Queer community would benefit by having an informed illustration of someone who has gone through the process. The 10 constituents of the experience identified in this study may also be applicable to individuals who have experienced any long-term process of evolving towards eventual self-acknowledgment of a realization about themselves. As one co-participant stated in his evaluation, "I thought you were going to ask me when I knew I was a man." This is just one of many experiences available for exploring more deeply as clinically significant moments in these clients' lives.

Regardless of the implications, there is an underlying understanding that the essential constituents of the focal experience of this study are associated with change and process. This understanding increases the clinicians' ability to be helpful to those struggling to accept a certain part of themselves. Findings from this study can be used to provide a basis for engaging clients where they are by providing a clinical intervention to catalyze further growth in a nurturing and compassionate manner.

### Personal Implications of This Research

In attempting to relive my own experience and recall my own narrative, I could not recollect a pivotal event or a particular instance in time that marked my own

acknowledging that I was attracted to other men. What I could recall, however, seemed to consist of a collection of elements that included a series of moments, specific memories, particular encounters with friends, and memorable conversations with various family members. Insofar as my own experience of acknowledging to myself that I was attracted to other men would thus seem to have been made up of the sum of my experiences, it could not be confined or limited to any one time, issue or element standing on its own. When I compared my own experience with what the co-participants in this investigation had written, I was surprised to find many common themes and threads. Indeed, I was not alone in my own world as once I had imagined.

This study revealed the essential constituents of the experience of gay men acknowledging to themselves that they are attracted to other men. The phenomenon, as described by the co-participants in this exploration

of its essential nature and meaning-structure, proved to be a complex and exhausting process, which at every stage demands time, patience, love and support from everyone involved.

The narratives revealed that we are in a continual process of becoming different, while simultaneously remaining the same people that we have always been. It is thus important to revel in the immediate nature of experiencing life in the moment as it is occurring, because in merely reflecting on it later, some of its essence is lost. To that end, the constituent list generated by this study is valuable beyond measure, in that it offers a glimpse into a critical process in a segment of the population that has long endured silencing, suffering, and misunderstanding. To have had the opportunity to shed light on this process and experience it first-hand is not only humbling as a gay man, but also meaningful beyond words as an active participant in this bizarre dance we call life.

### Referencing Format

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Dr Andrew Leone currently serves as a psychologist with Vantage Point Lifestyle Management and Recovery Centre in Westlake Village, California. Vantage Point offers cutting edge integrated evidenced-based therapies in addition to customized treatment plans that are highly collaborative and responsive to an individual's unique needs. Dr Leone recently returned to Southern California after spending 10 years in San Francisco, where he obtained multiple graduate degrees from the American School of Professional Psychology in addition to a certificate in Clinical Hypnotherapy.

In the Bay Area, Dr Leone began his career working with individuals struggling with addiction and other co-occurring disorders in an inpatient setting. Later, he spent two years engaged with children, adolescents and their families providing psychotherapy and school based interventions. He spent an additional two years providing services to the greater Queer community at the Mental Health Clinic in Berkeley. Dr Leone rounded out his clinical training throughout his pre-doctoral year by providing services at both a residential crisis stabilization facility and a day treatment programme for chronically mentally ill clients.

Dr Leone is experienced in working with individuals from a variety of cultural and professional backgrounds, as well as persons from the colourful spectrum of the greater Queer Community. Dynamically trained, Dr Leone hopes to bring a fresh humanistic perspective to psychotherapy rooted in his comprehensive understanding of the multiple components that influence and make up the individuals he works with. Complementing his professional identity at Vantage Point and in private practice, Dr Leone enjoys pursuits in photography, travelling whenever possible, and endeavouring as an amateur cook.

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