RURAL LGBT LIFE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TUOLUMNE COUNTY’S
LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY’S
EXPERIENCE

A Project

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by

Tracy Sundstrand

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By 

Tracy Sundstrand 

Approved by: 

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Date
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Abstract

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Statement of Problem

The demographics of Tuolumne County are similar to those of other rural areas, however, little is known about the LGBT community. The purpose of this research project is to acknowledge and document the challenges of living in a conservative rural area for LGBT persons in Tuolumne County. The project aims to document the coping strategies and resources used by LGBT community members in facing those challenges.

Sources of Data

The population for this study includes LGBT residents of Tuolumne County, a rural community set in California’s Sierra Nevada foothills. The study specifically examines the LGBT community as the target population within the community at large. The number of subjects was based on availability and time. This sampling is nonrandom, as the researcher used personal connections to obtain 20 participants with the specific criteria of being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (criterion sampling), and using snowball sampling to find the remainder of needed participants. The study included seven
lesbians, four gay men, nine bisexuals, and three transgender individuals. With respect to gender, there were seven males and 13 females, four of whom were male to female transgender.

Conclusions Reached

Different participants found varying levels of satisfaction and/or fear living within this social environment. Some found the atmosphere intolerable and unsustainable such that they had to leave the area. Others found that if they kept their private lives private, they managed to live peacefully, for the most part in this rural area. The problem remains as how we are to address these concerns. Traditional approaches involve the interconnection of LGBT people and the organizing of these people into a community. This approach requires individuals to be visible enough to be found by others. Furthermore, it requires the group of LGBT community members to be visible as well in order to collaborate with and educate the community as a whole. Unfortunately, in rural areas visibility can mean exclusion, ridicule, and possible loss of personal safety and livelihood (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). Because safe means of connecting with each other was by far cited as the number one desire of the participants in this study, there needs to be a means of finding and carrying out a way to for LGBT members to find and support one another.

_________________________. Committee Chair
Teiahsha Bankhead, Ph.D.

_________________________
Date
DEDICATION
This project is dedicated to the women and men of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community in Tuolumne County, especially the people who participated in this study, for risking trust, that their voices be heard. The researcher hopes that the study may be of use to unite and empower the LGBT community in Tuolumne County, as well as to inspire us all into action, so that future generations have the all resources and support they need, or better yet, that they need a whole lot less of it.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Heterosexism is “an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, 2007, p. 911), and manifests itself on both cultural and psychological levels (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994) leading to social and economic discrimination. This economic inequality and the social rejection of what were considered to be the fringe became an integral part of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. This movement helped to fuel the idea that inclusion and equal rights were something worth fighting for. The civil rights movement of the 1960s, the feminist movement of the 1970s and notably the Stonewall Rebellion of 1969 energized the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). The American Psychological Association’s decision to remove homosexuality from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994) as a mental disorder in 1976 is reflective of this change in perspective.

These social changes led inevitably to political change. In the 1980s, political organizing and community building intensified as the homosexual community sought support for research and treatment services in response to the HIV/AIDS crisis (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). Meanwhile, Gay/Straight Alliance groups were forming as community-based programs in support of LGBT groups and individuals, as well as other support groups, as the LGBT community moved towards acceptance and a degree of social justice (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, 2009).
Social institutions, in particular schools and institutions of higher learning had to respond to these forces of social change. In 1984, the Equality Access Act, which prohibits secondary schools from denying student organizations space for meetings during non-school hours based on religion, politics or philosophy, led to the Salt Lake City School Chapter Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) to file suit against the Salt Lake City School Board for denying that meeting space. The GSA won that suit in 1999 (Russo, 2006). Also, in 1999, a federal court ruled that schools could be liable for ignoring sexual harassment directed at lesbian and gay students, according to Title IX civil rights law as well as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Russo, 2006).

The Christian Right maintains strong opposition to the discussion of lesbian and gay issues in public schools for fear that homosexuals may “recruit” youngsters (Russo, 2006). Depending on the state, control of legal requirements reflective of the cultural consensus determines the social ethos on school and college campuses. In California, the State Department of Education has a sexual orientation policy for all students. This policy includes students’ sexual orientation as well as defining hate crimes and providing for civil rights law that include sexual orientation (Russo, 2006). Of all public school students in grade six or higher, only 9% are in districts with a comprehensive sex education policy due to the control of conservative political powers particularly at local levels (Russo, 2006).

The gay rights movement, however, still has much to overcome. The battles for the right to marry, the right to openly serve in the military, parental rights, and employment non-discrimination protection continue to be fought. These battles are
particularly difficult in a conservative political climate, which is heavily influenced by the religious right (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). Gay and lesbian parents face potential loss of the legal custody of their children, loss of health insurance obtained through domestic arrangements with their partners, and loss of rights of inheritance (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). They may not have a say in the medical treatment of their partner or be able to visit them in the hospital should they become ill because they are not being afforded the basic benefits of marriage (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). These rights violations are indicative of the prevailing negative and homophobic attitudes towards LGBT communities across the country.

The prevalence of these attitudes vary from region to region and demographic to demographic. Negative attitudes about LGBT people have been attributed to a general lack of diversity (Poteat, Espelage, Koenig, 2009), lower income (Goodenow, Szalacha, Westheimer, 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009), lower educational levels (Kosciw et al., 2009), and a higher concentration of conservative and religious individuals (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, 2009).

These demographics are often found in many rural areas, including Tuolumne County. For example, according to city-data.com, Tuolumne is 87.5% white, which makes the county remarkably racially homogenous, i.e. lacking in diversity. With regard to employment, Tuolumne County has an unemployment rate of 11.3%, which is slightly higher than the state average. However, the percentage living below poverty level is 13%, which is slightly below the state average (http://www.city-data.com/county/Tuolumne_County.CA.html). The educational levels of the populace
has 83% with a high school diploma, which is close to both the state and national levels, but only 16% with a bachelors or higher, significantly lower than the state rate which is closer to 30% (http://www.city-data.com/county/Tuolumne_County.CA.html). Perhaps these numbers reflect the high percentage of retirees in the county, 12%, which is almost double compared to state figures and this parallels the retirement age within the county from 65 years of age through 74 years of age. The increase of this population tends to reflect the more conservative/religious values of this age group within Tuolumne County. (http://www.tuolumnecountyprofile.org/economy_and_infrastructure/economy_and_infrastructure_pg44.htm).

Despite Tuolumne’s reputation of religious and political conservatism, the expected numbers regarding religious affiliation is at 27%, only a little more than half of the national average. However, this may not be an accurate picture of the religious make-up of Tuolumne County since it has a large number of non-affiliated congregation members. For example, the Word of Life Church holds highly conservative values and boasts a large congregation of about 400 (http://www.wordoflifeca.com/aboutus.html). With regard to political conservatism, Tuolumne County is 55-60% Republican versus 38-43% Democrat and is described as having a “moderate conservative” base, socially more liberal while fiscally conservative (McGhee & Krimm, 2012). Tuolumne County is much like other rural areas in that it lacks diversity, has a low percentage of people with higher education and is fairly conservative.

There is a dearth of research in general regarding rural life for LGBT adults and youth, and there is even less about this community in the rural towns of California. What
is known is that they are at higher risk for discrimination (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Goodenow et al., 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009, Poteat et al., 2009, Russo, 2006), violence (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Goodenow et al., 2006, Russo, 2006), psychological distress, depression (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008), substance abuse (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008) and suicide (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008). Research also suggests that living in a rural area an LGBT person is more likely to encounter social and economic difficulties due to the higher prevalence of homophobia (Kosciw et al., 2009, Oswald, Gebbie, Culton, 2002, Smith, 1997) and encounter more difficulties in overcoming negative affects (Smith, 1997, D’Augelli & Hart, 1987). For example, low educated and low-income mental health consumers tend to be reluctant to seek treatment because of self-reliance value and mistrust of strangers. Furthermore, services may be limited due to lack of resources in rural areas, and providers subject to these aspects described above and may lack the knowledge and resources, education and experience needed to help the LGBT community members (Smith, 1997, D’Augelli & Hart, 1987).

While Tuolumne County has not been studied to date regarding its LGBT population, one could surmise some connections between the statistics of the general population of the county and the LGBT community within it by applying observations made about other LGBT populations, especially rural ones. For example, the prevalence of attempted suicides among gay youth is twelve to forty-two percent, with up to fifty percent contemplating self-harm at some time in their adolescent years (Beard & Hissam, 2002). Tuolumne County saw nearly twice the number of suicides than the rest of the
nation in the years between 1990 and 2006 in the twenty to twenty-four year age-range (Archibald, 2009). According to a recent suicide prevention training clinic in Tuolumne County, Tuolumne County has almost three times the suicide rate than the state of California, and the suicide rate for males between eighteen and twenty-nine increased 300% in 2010 (Q. P. R. Suicide Prevention, 2011). It is likely, then, that the suicide rate for young gay men would reflect a higher percentage in Tuolumne County than in urban and suburban settings.

There are further connections to be made between the demographics of Tuolumne County and the prevalence of homophobia there. Tuolumne County appears to be a fairly homogenous rural community with a population of 55,175 people who are mostly white, non-Hispanic persons (82.1%) (http://www.city-data.com/county/Tuolumne_County.CA.html). Like many rural areas, Tuolumne County is organized by kinship and where religious connections strongly influence patterns of land ownership. Lack of diversity is associated with a higher prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism (Goodenow et al., 2006). Feelings of exclusion, discrimination and victimization are fostered in the more closed nature of small towns, especially if influenced by a conservative and religious populace, which is the case in Tuolumne County (Oswald et al., 2002).

Problem Statement

The demographics of Tuolumne County are similar to those of other rural areas, however, little is known about the LGBT community. No hypothesis is supposed in this research other than to acknowledge and document the challenges of living in a
conservative rural area for LGBT persons in Tuolumne County as well as the coping
strategies and resources used by the LGBT community members for dealing with those
challenges. Then, what are the points of agreement and difference for individuals within
the LGBT community living in Tuolumne Country and LGBT individuals living within
the surrounding communities at large.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to discover LGBT community members’ concerns,
experiences and suggestions with regard to their interaction with the community at large.
Documenting stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and victimization within the
community and examining the affects homophobia has on this rural area will shed light
on the needs of the LGBT community as well as the larger community. Documenting the
ways in which LGBT community members have coped with the challenges of growing
up as an LGBT person, and of living in a conservative rural area sheds light on the
strengths of the community and offers coping techniques. The purpose of this study will
be to document the factors at work in Tuolumne County that support or denigrate the
LGBT community within it, as well as add to the body of research regarding LGBT rural
life.

Significance of Problem

Because there is a limited amount of research in general regarding rural LGBT
communities, and even less about these communities in rural California, this study will
significantly contribute to the body of knowledge available regarding the challenges of
and methods of coping with homophobia in rural areas. The research that has been done
shows that rural LGBT individuals are at higher risk for discrimination (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Goodenow et al., 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009, Poteat et al., 2009, Russo, 2006), violence (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Goodenow et al., 2006, Russo, 2006), psychological distress, depression (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008), substance abuse (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008) and suicide (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008). Research also suggests that living in a rural area as an LGBT person is more difficult due to the higher prevalence of homophobia (Kosciw et al., 2009, Oswald, Gebbie, Culton, 2002, Smith, 1997).

The traditional approach to alleviating the challenges of homophobia as well as transphobia is the integration of LGBT individuals into the larger community. This approach is more difficult in a rural setting because in order to integrate into the larger community one would have to “come out” as a member of the LGBT community, which could put an individual at risk of discrimination or abuse such as losing one’s job, threats of harm or exclusion from the community. This conundrum poses a challenge to the LGBT individual and community to gaining a sense of community as well as the support that comes from such association. Research such as this study can be used to inform and empower the LGBT communities, their larger communities as well as discover new methods of coping with the challenges of rural LGBT life and ways in which rural communities can move toward more integration.

**Theoretical Framework**

Feminist theory is a systems approach based on understanding the social context of human behavior. Feminism acknowledges the cultural, social and political aspects
affecting the lives of individuals. Feminist theorists recognize gender and power as key influential factors to human interaction. Feminism is a call to recognize and confront multiple oppressions by questioning stereotypes and raising awareness about marginalization based on gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic class. The goal is equalization of power through the empowerment of the oppressed through education and activism (Corey, 2009).

Swift and Levin (1987) offer an excellent example of a feminist approach to the empowerment of LGBT peoples. Swift and Levin suggest a four-step process to translate empowerment into action. They suggest beginning with identifying sources of oppression, which can be done through research and documentation. Education is the second step. It is important that the information gained is assessed and shared within the community to bring awareness. The next step is to mobilize power. This can be done through collaboration with service agencies and organization of support groups with common goals in order to remove barriers, and delegate work and resources. With a collaborative community effort and a common goal in mind, such as creating a safe and positive environment, social structures that have maintained the marginalization of LGBT members can be changed (Swift and Levin, 1987 in Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). Not only do these kinds of activism empower marginalized groups, but marginalized individuals as well.

The Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) emphasizes the connection between stratification and disconnection of people, and inversely, the connection between egalitarianism and connection of people (Comstock & Qin, 2005). RCT suggests that
feelings of privilege and marginalization are derived from stratification that happens around “difference.” These feelings influence human interaction whereby those who are not in a position of privilege and power are denigrated. This effect is evident in racism, sexism, classism, and so forth. At the heart of RCT is the human need for connection. The shame and humiliation of being subject to denigration potentially blocks these connections, leaving individuals stuck in isolation. RCT purports that transforming shame and isolation into self-confidence and connection is best achieved through communities of support, where one can gain visibility and place blame in the right context (Comstock & Qin, 2005). RCT puts forth this compelling need for activism for the sake of community and individual.

Key Terms

Gender- A set of cultural norms and mores whereby humans identify as “men” and “women,” or “transgender.” Gender refers to that which a society deems masculine or feminine (Reicherzer, 2005).

Gender identity – An individual’s self-identification as a man, woman, transgender, gender variant or other identity category (Reicherzer, 2005).

Gender variant – Individuals who stray from socially accepted gender roles in a given culture. This word may be used in conjunction with other collective designations, such as gender variant gay men and lesbians (Reicherzer, 2005).

Heterosexism- “an ideological system that denies, denigrates and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek, 2007) manifesting itself on both cultural and psychological levels. On a cultural
level, it perpetuates the notion that heterosexual forms of affectional and sexual expression are the only ones acceptable or appropriate. “On a psychological level, attitudes and behaviors that reflect heterosexual norms are socially reinforced and victimizers obtain peer approval by expressing antilebian/antigay views.” (Garnet, 1994).

Oppression- “The root of the word “oppression” is the element “press.” . . . Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce. “. . . situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation.” (Frye, 1983, p.149).

Out/Coming out- a term referring to being or becoming open about one’s homosexual erotic attraction, not hiding that one is gay or lesbian, from the phrase “out of the closet” (Segen’s Medical Dictionary, 2012).

Sexual Orientation – This term refers to the gender(s) to whom a person feels attracted.

Examples of sexual orientation include homosexual, bisexual and heterosexual (Reicherzer, 2005). Transgender, transsexual and gender variant people may identify with any sexual orientation, and the sexual orientations may or may not change during their gender transition (Reicherzer, 2005).

Transgender – A range of behaviors, expressions, and identifications that challenge the pervasive binary gender system in a given culture. It is an umbrella term that is used to describe any of a variety of cross-gender identities (Reicherzer, 2005).
Transsexual – A person who is dissociated with his/her birth gender and wishes to use hormones and in some cases, gender reassignment surgery, as a way to correct his/her body to the gender he/she recognized as his/her own. Once surgery is complete, they often designate gender according to their surgical reassignments: female to males (FTMs) designate as males and male to female (MTFs) designate as females (Carrol, Gilroy and Ryan, 2002 in Reicherzer, 2005).

Limitations

The number of subjects available to the researcher limits the scope of this paper. Due to the fact that the research is done in a rural setting, there were simply fewer subjects to be found. Additionally, subjects’ fear of participating if they are not “out,” makes willing subjects even harder to find (Beard & Hissam, 2002), as anonymity can be a matter of survival in rural areas (Smith, 1997). Furthermore, due to the age of the researcher (48), the connections made with subjects were mostly of or near her age group, leaving the perspective of young adults scant. With regard to gender, the female to male transgender perspective is not represented here.

Summary

Heterosexism and homophobia exist in many different places and demographics; however, research shows that it is particularly prevalent in rural areas for specific reasons. Rural areas tend to have higher concentrations of poverty (Goodenow, Szalacha, Westheimer, 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009) and conservatism (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, 2009), as well as lower educational levels (Kosciw et al., 2009) and lack of diversity (Poteat, Espelage, Koenig, 2009). While Tuolumne County fits in
with these observations of rural areas for the most part, no study has been done with regard to its LGBTQ community and it’s members’ experience there. This study intends to explore the LGBTQ experience in Tuolumne County with regard to the challenges of living in this rural area as well as the ways in which members cope with those challenges.
Prejudice and Discrimination in America

Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion of someone based on little or misconstrued information (Tatum, 1997). Misinformation, distortions and omissions foster the development of categorizations of groups of people based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc., creating stereotypes that are unflattering, disrespectful and demeaning (Tatum, 1997).

Discrimination is derived from prejudiced attitudes and behavior by giving advantage to the dominant race, gender, religion or sexuality, consciously or unconsciously, on an individual, organizational or structural basis (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1981). Historically, discrimination against minorities and women was not only accepted, but was also enforced by law, such as the segregation laws of the early 20th century (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1981). While white male supremacy is no longer legally accepted in the U.S., our past is somewhat forgotten as we continue to engage in similar behaviors and attitudes toward, not only blacks and women, but American Indians, Alaskan Natives, Asian Pacific Islanders and Hispanics on both individual and organizational levels (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1981). One only has to look at the distribution of wealth in the United States to see that the large bulk of wealth belongs to a small percentage of the population,
almost exclusively white males, while the vast majority of the population, the poor and working classes, consist mainly of minorities (Manstsios, 2006).

Some define racism and sexism as prejudice based on race and sex. However, they are more than that. They are systems of oppression based on race and sex (Rothenburg, 2010). Differences between races and sexes have been rendered deviant or deficient, which allows a hierarchical distribution of power, privilege, wealth, and opportunity, leaving the white male at the top (Rothenburg, 2010). Once defined this way it is impossible to say that people of color are racist or that women are sexist, as they do not benefit from this system of advantage (Rothenburg, 2010).

Take for example, the difference between sex and gender. Sex is male and female, biologically speaking. Gender, however, is a socially constructed set of ideas and behaviors that are culturally expected based on sex (Rothenburg, 2010). Sexism occurs when role expectations for females are limited in power, privilege, wealth, and opportunity compared to role expectations for males (Rothenburg, 2010). For instance, a primary part of the traditional female role is care of the home and children and the traditional male role is to earn money to provide for the family. This leaves the woman without the power and connections that come from working outside of the home and earning money. Furthermore, because she has not “earned” the money, she is often not part of the decision-making regarding where the money goes. Her role is subsumed under that of the husband. He wields the money, and
the power that goes with it, both in and out of the home. Socially constructed definitions support the power structure of privilege and disadvantage.

The concept of race and ethnicity is somewhat more complex, but the principle is the same. Race has often been defined through biological differences such as skin color. However, when the definition of race includes a social construction based on differences and designed to maintain racial hierarchies, not only is this definition more accurate, but also it describes the racism (Rothenburg, 2010). Ethnicity, however, is more about social commonalities and shared cultural experience, which is a social, not biological distinction (Rothenburg, 2010). In the case of race and ethnicity, both are subject to stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and oppression. If one observes closely, one can see the same systems of privilege and disadvantage at work with regard to heterosexism and homophobia.

**Heterosexism and Homophobia in America**

The use of the term heterosexism parallels racism and sexism. Heterosexism is also a system of oppression. Heterosexual attitudes and behaviors, whereby only heterosexual forms of affection and sexual expression are acceptable, are socially reinforced and have thus remained the norm (Garnet, 1994). When homosexual expressions of affection and sexual desire are rejected and stigmatized, it secures approval for victimizers and keeps the question of one’s own sexuality apparently irrelevant (Garnet, 1994). Heterosexism repudiates and disparages any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community (Herek, 2007).
These notions further white male dominance. Pharr defines heterosexism as the “systemic display of homophobia in the institutions of society” (1988, p. 164).

Eldridge, Mack & Swank define homophobia as “the irrational hatred, fear, or dislike of homosexuals and bisexuals” (2006, p. 40). This feelings cause people to behave in ways that are damaging to themselves and others. By putting down all that is not “manly,” women, homosexuals, as well as other men, women and homosexuals become the “others” who threaten their identities as men. Anyone who steps outside this heterosexist system of oppression risks being labeled with this “otherness.” In fact, one doesn’t even have to step outside the system to reap the consequences of being a minority because the sanctions are already in place in the form of economic inequity, such as lack of or loss of employment, or various forms of violence, such as disapproval and rejection of family, friends and community, loss of parental rights, loss of physical safety and loss of basic human rights (Kimmel, 1994).

In this way, when heterosexual men have to defend their position of power and exalted role expectation, women and homosexuals become the competition. This view extends to emasculate, and thereby disempower, all minorities. For example, in the middle 19th century, slaves were seen as dependent, helpless men. Native Americans were foolish and naïve, childlike. By the end of the century, the new immigrants, Irish and Italian Americans, were seen as too emotional and the Jews were effete and puny. Asians, after WWII and later after the Vietnam War, were cast as small, soft and effeminate (Kimmel, 1994). Those who did not fit into
this feminized stereotype were cast as the evil opposite, for example the strong black man as the “raging savage” or the assertive woman as the “carnal bitch” (Kimmel, 1994). After the Civil Rights movement, it became socially unacceptable to openly put down, mistreat or discriminate against racial and ethnic minorities and women and discrimination become more covert (Kimmel, 1994). This homophobic, power-over definition of manhood harms not only women and minorities, but also men themselves as they compete with and fear each other (Kimmel, 1994). Homophobia is particularly prevalent in rural areas (Goodenow et al., 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009, Poteat et al., 2009).

**Rural Homophobia**

Myths about homosexuality are prevalent in American society, but especially in rural areas. The commonly held beliefs that gays are mentally ill or child molesters, that they are to blame for AIDS, or that they choose to be gay are prime examples (Smith, 1997). The conservative values regarding sexuality and gender roles, as well as religious beliefs that condemn and stigmatize homosexuality and gender non-conformity make negotiating how these attitudes and beliefs affect policy and culture and their reform extremely challenging (Kosciw et al., 2009).

Negative attitudes toward Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) people are typical for rural areas, which frequently experience lack of diversity, low income, low education and conservative values (Goodenow et al., 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009, Poteat et al., 2009). Conservative values and the beliefs of the religious right about sexuality and gender roles condemn and stigmatize many groups, especially LGBTQ groups. Eldridge, Mack &
Swank tested this notion on 123 college students in rural Central Appalachia (2006). They identified how these students felt about homosexuality by noting the impact of contact with a homosexual person, as well as other factors such as gender role prescriptions, religious beliefs, fear of AIDS, gender and age through a multivariate analysis. Not only did they find that a majority of subjects were uncomfortable around homosexual persons, but the degree to which they were uncomfortable intensified in settings that required public recognition of homosexuality and to a lesser degree in individuals who experienced interpersonal peer contact with homosexual persons. In addition, they found a simple correlation between Bible literalism and homophobia.

This disapproval manifests itself in action and attitude, leaving the LGBT community and individuals feeling excluded (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010, Oswald, et al., 2002). Oswald, Gebbie and Culton conducted a survey of 527 LGBT people in various rural communities in Illinois exploring this issue by asking questions regarding levels of fear as well as experience regarding victimization, discrimination, isolation as well as demographic questions. They found high levels of both fear of discrimination and victimization as well as actual discrimination and victimization. Shunning and exclusion in rural areas also significantly contributed to feelings of isolation. Violence and isolation were most often what respondents were afraid of (Oswald, et al., 2002). These fears are evidence of how higher levels of homophobia have negative effects on the LGBT population.
Negative Effects of Homophobia

Beard & Hissam (2002) define homophobia as actions taken based on prejudice against homosexuals. Discrimination and victimization come in many forms, such as someone who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender experiencing anti-LGBT comments being overheard, name calling, shunning, outing, threats, physical harm, vandalizing, refused services, being asked to leave events, being followed, treated worse than others in same situation, driven out or kicked out of their home (Oswald et al., 2002). Some people have even been murdered because of their sexual preferences (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Russo, 2006). Sixty-two to sixty-six percent of gay men have been harassed, attacked or in a fight because of a negative response to their sexuality (Beard & Hissam, 2002). The more they are open about or demonstrative of their sexuality, the more likely they are to have been harassed or attacked (Beard & Hissam, 2002). On a larger scale, homophobia expresses itself as oppression, denying equality of basic human needs such as employment or advancement in their job, substandard services such as housing, medical and mental health treatment (Beard & Hissam, 2002). These forms of oppression and victimization debilitate many gay Americans, with higher rates of depression, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts than that of the general population (Beard & Hissam, 2002).

Seeking treatment for depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts is problematic for two main reasons. One reason is that until the 1970s homosexuality was diagnosed as a pathological disorder and conversion therapy (behavioral therapy designed to convert homosexuals to heterosexuals) was the treatment most frequently suggested
(Beard & Hissam, 2002; Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). Furthermore, finding professional therapists who are comfortable with homosexuality, understand the needs of LGBT clients, and have the knowledge, experience and resources to effectively address LGBT issues may prove even more difficult in rural areas. In addition, rural people tend to be less likely to seek treatment due to emphasis on self-reliance, prevalence of stereotyping and pressure to conform (D’Augelli, 1987). People who have lower levels of formal education and lower incomes tend to be reluctant to seek treatment because of the emphasis on self-reliance and mistrust of strangers (Smith, 1997). These factors are even more troublesome for rural youth (Eldridge et al., 2006).

These problems appear to be magnified for the youth. At school, verbal and physical harassment and assault, sexual harassment, social exclusion and isolation negatively impact LGBT youths’ access to education (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2009; Russo, 2009). These negative physical, socio-emotional attacks are linked to increased absenteeism and high drop out rates, discipline problems and lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement of the LGBT youth (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw et al., 2009; Poteat et al., 2009; Russo, 2009). There are also correlations between these kinds of assaults and these youths being at higher risk for substance abuse, depression and suicide (Beard & Hissam, 2002; Birkett et al., 2008; Goodenow et al., 2006; Russo, 2006). Rural youth often are more isolated as there are fewer social niches to choose from, making group exclusion and rumor spreading difficult to cope with (Goodenow et al., 2006, Poteat et al., 2009). In addition, rural
LGBT youth are more likely to have experienced dating violence than heterosexual youth (Beard & Hissam, 2002; Russo, 2006).

Because LGBT youth very often have to hide their true selves out of fear and shame, development of their sexual identity is hindered (Beard, 2002). Most LGB teens experiment with both sexes as they are navigating realization and/or acceptance of their sexuality. Cox & Gallois (1996, as cited in Beard, 2002) suggest homosexual men, upon becoming aware of their sexual orientation, may cope with feelings of same sex attraction in three ways. One way is to avoid all homosexual activity; some even marry women and join the dominant group. This approach often creates feelings of self-hatred and despair. Some will separate life into two worlds, heterosexual and homosexual, whereby one passes for heterosexual in a heterosexual social group, but in the company of an accepting or homosexual social group, one they will openly homosexual. Acceptance from both communities is the goal of this approach. This path clearly could be problematic, especially in a rural area, where the person’s two worlds are more likely to cross into each other. Other gay people will act straight, and see sexual orientation as irrelevant to other aspects of their lives (Cox & Gallois, 1996, as cited in Beard, 2002). Questioning youth are at the highest risk for attempted suicide and have a higher truancy rate compared to their unquestioning homosexual counterparts (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008).

Coming out is often discussed as a final phase of homosexual identity development. Here ones full sense self-acceptance makes it possible for a person to feel like they no longer have to hide this important part of who they are. The more areas in
which one can be out, the more self-esteem and enhanced personal integrity, decreased feelings of isolation and greater acceptance from others (although this last part has not been studied in rural areas) and overall better adjustment they can feel. This process is challenging as one has many identities in various domains of life such as school, work, family and community life. Identity is an achieved rather than ascribed status (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). The earlier youth are able to come out, the better adjusted they usually are to their sexual orientation (Beard, 2002, D’Augelli, 2002).

For LGBT youth, there are few if any role models or resources to guide the way (Beard & Hissam, 2002). Parents of LGBT youth are not typically homosexual and therefore cannot provide opportunity for modeling or shared LGBT wisdom and are often not accepting of their children’s sexual orientation (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). There is also little opportunity for connection and identification between LGBT youth and LGBT adults in order for the youths to get the modeling and dissemination of resources they need. Opportunity to share and connect around the LGBT experience is often missed by both adults and youth. Even when the opportunity to communicate is present, they are often unable to relate to each other due to differences such as age and subculture (Bohan, Russell, & Montgomery, 2003). In addition, LGBT history and cultural heritage is not readily available (until recently via internet and other media) or integrated in larger cultural history, making a created (as opposed to one you are born into) community development difficult (Garnet et al., 1994). These deficits are even more pointed in a rural setting, however, rural LGBT people do have ways of coping with them.
Supports and Resources to LGBT Community

Researchers suggest there are three dimensions of empowerment. One dimension is having and using knowledge and resources (i.e. fighting ignorance, knowing what one is talking about, knowing one’s rights, exceeding expectations, demonstrating open-mindedness as a tool and modeling). Another dimension is personal empowerment (i.e. feeling good about oneself, having a voice, having control or agency, self efficacy). The third dimension is that of relational empowerment. That is being part of a larger group and alleviating symptoms of isolation creating a sense of solidarity and believing that one can effect change on institutions and their members (Russell et al., 2009).

Rural LGBT individuals, young and old, report that their relationships, especially with friends and partners, even more so than family, act as buffers against homophobia and keep them feeling connected to humanity (D’Augelli, Preston, Kassab & Cain, 2002, Garnet et al., 1994, Oswald et al., 2002, Poteat et al., 2009). They also find connection to the LGBT community and empowerment through activism, if they are able to find ways to bring this about (Glassgold & Drescher, 2007). The majority of individuals in 21st century America have access to computers, so connecting to the LGBT community at large is more possible than ever before (Smith, 1997). Connections made through the Internet allow individuals to keep anonymity and control interactions (Smith, 1997). In a study exploring online social networks as a venue for prevention targeting young lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB), researchers used an automated data collection program to map social connections of self-identified LGB individuals 16-24 years of age. The study revealed that online networking not only supports LGB youth, but also could
potentially reduce the number of suicide attempts (Silenzio, Duberstein, Tang, Naiji, Tu, & Homan, 2009). Many of the aforementioned studies recommend encouraging that such connections be made (Silenzio et al., 2009; Smith, 1997; Glassgold et al., 2007; D’Augelli et al., 2002; Garnet et al., 1994; Oswald et al., 2002; Poteat et al., 2009). This is particularly true as one develops one’s sense of identity (Goodenow et al., 2006).

Adolescence is a time of identity development. To foster this development for LGB youth, it is important, as with other teens, to have social groups, which provide connection and support. LGB support groups, such as the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA), improve high school climates, and lower rates of victimization and suicide attempts (Goodenow et al., 2006). By energizing the GSA, youth are empowered to act on their own behalf. They confront homophobia and heterosexism among peers, but also within the institution of high school (Russell et al., 2009).

Schools can support LGBT youth as well by challenging heterosexism in the school, holding trainings on LGBT issues and diversity for commissioners, superintendents, boards of education, faculty, staff, students, and parents. Surveying students and school personnel to report on climate, assess nondiscrimination policy needs and look at all-inclusive nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation will help formulate new policy and establish grievance procedures. Furthermore, developing LGBT curriculum strategies and library holdings guidelines will foster respect and appreciation for diversity with regard to LGBT issues, including instituting appropriate health education and care for all students regardless of their sexual orientation. Finally, appointing and training compliance coordinators will ensure these supports are honored
(Goodenow et al., 2006, Russell et al., 2009, Russo, 2006). Schools can become overwhelmed by the risk and enormity of these tasks.

Many adults can become overwhelmed as well. However, there are common useful themes among researchers and activists about how to go about confronting prejudice and discrimination. On an individual level, one can speak up when they hear prejudiced remarks or witness discrimination, whether toward or within the LGBT community (Garnet et al., 1994, Oswald et al., 2002). These occasions, while uncomfortable, are opportunities to educate (Oswald et al., 2002). On a community level, one can support or join human rights groups or groups specifically designed to support the LGBT community such as Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) or Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG). These groups can collaborate with others in helping to identify sources of oppression with the community through research and documentation. Community diversity education is imperative to changing attitudes and removing barriers, especially when the information provided has a local basis. Because the voice of many is always louder than the voice of one, community groups are significant in mobilizing power (Garnet et al., 1994; Poteat et al., 2009; Stevenson, 1998). Collaborative efforts also increase visibility and interconnection of LGBT people and the larger community (Oswald et al., 2002).

These kinds of collaborative efforts, such as community organizing and activism in a rural conservative area can be problematic because the visibility necessary to gain power conflicts with the anonymity necessary for survival (Smith, 1997). Drumheller & McQuay conducted research in order to find out how to reach out to the LGBT in
conservative locales that tend to be unsupportive of LGBT individuals. They targeted one community outreach organization in a conservative area and used focus groups to identify obstacles to outreach and fundraising. Understanding these challenges is important in order to overcome them (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). For the focus groups, they targeted a cross-section of the local community with both heterosexual and LGBT community members. They conducted three groups: one consisting of 14 parents and educators of LGBT youth, another consisted of 15 LGBT community members, and the last a mixed group with 10 members. They were asked questions to find out about the needs of the community with regard to the center, what the mission should be and the services should provide. They analyzed the data by reducing it down to themes regarding the marketing of the LGBT organization and used organizational and LGBT theoretical perspectives to explain the data.

Drumheller and McQuay (2010) found several themes. The first theme was that of struggle against the conservative ideology so predominant in the area. The second theme was a tension between apathy and commitment. Lack of interest, fear of ramifications, and being overcommitted were reasons cited for lack of involvement with the center. A stronger, clearer message was needed to motivate and engage both the LGBT community as well as the community at large. The third theme was compartmentalization of the dichotomies that arise as LBGT and heterosexual community members cope with conflicting values, for instance, one compartment for friends supportive of gays and one for friends not supportive of gays. Supportive heterosexuals and LGBT community members have to hide different parts of themselves
depending on the setting. These themes clearly represent the challenges facing community organization and outreach (Drumheller and McQuay).

Drumheller and McQuay suggest starting by expressing common ground and shared values between LGBT community and larger community (2010). In order to prevent apathy in LGBT community, Drumheller & McQuay suggest creating an explicit internal identity, specifically LGBT, while creating an implicit external identity, less specifically and outwardly LGBT, in order not to alienate those who may otherwise help. Another strategy is to get a national or regional organization to host an outreach center, providing overhead funding and facilitate fundraising. It is important that more heterosexuals meet and collaborate with LGBT individuals to challenge conservative mindsets because it is more difficult to discriminate or judge face to face. Furthermore, meeting with smaller groups and individuals, such as church groups, pastors, doctors, and counselors may also improve chances of connection as they might think differently as an individual than as a group (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010).

The study of LGBT people in rural communities has been difficult for many reasons. One difficulty is that large samples are difficult to obtain because the numbers are already small and vary in attitude from region to region depending on local culture (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). However, there are some common trends in rural areas, some of which also contribute to higher levels of homophobia. Higher levels of homophobia mean that “coming out,” being visible in their community, could be threatening to LGBT individuals, which adds to the difficulty of finding subjects (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). Research in this area is limited, so this study will be
beneficial to the body of social work research as a whole. Being a seventeen year resident of this community affords the researcher some connections to and trust of the local LGBT community as well as the helping agencies in the larger community, which will hopefully afford the study decent sample sizes. Furthermore, it appears that this community shares with other rural communities, a higher level of homophobia and should benefit from this research.
Chapter 3

METHODS

Introduction to Study

Because of remote locales, small numbers, and the closed and intolerant nature that all too often accompanies rural locations, research in the area of rural sexual minorities is particularly challenging. The research that has been done reflects some common themes: that levels of homophobia, with all of its trappings, are higher in rural areas because of the influence of the conservative/religious right (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, 2009), lack diversity (Poteat, Espelage, Koenig, 2009), and higher concentrations of a less educated populace (Kosciw et al., 2009). Rural areas, therefore, are in more need of more research with regard to these issues.

The purpose of this study is to document LGBT community members’ experience in rural Tuolumne County with regard to prejudice and discrimination as well as coping strategies and known resources particular to that locale. Therefore, a phenomenological approach using a qualitative exploratory design is most appropriate for this study for exploring attitudes and knowledge of subject groups. This study seeks to gain answers to questions using a grounded theoretical approach, as the researcher proposes no suppositions. The researcher will use the interview of the LGBT subjects to gain a broader picture providing a wider scope richer in detail than statistical studies provide. Richness of detail and breadth of scope are the major advantage of using the interview technique.
Aside from a few closed-ended questions in order to obtain demographic information, the questionnaire relies mainly on open-ended question allowing the interviewees greater latitude in response. The interviews were conducted both by phone and in person, depending on the desire, location and comfort level of the subject. After the researcher informed subjects of the private and personal nature of the interview, the subject chose the means and surrounding environment that best met the subject’s comfort level. Some subjects chose their own home; others chose the home of the researcher. The interviews were designed to elicit responses that revealed the nature and challenge of LGBT life in rural California in general and in Tuolumne County in particular. Themes pulled from interviews reveal the interviewees’ perspectives on the challenges of rural LGBT life, ways to cope with those challenges as well as suggestions for improving the quality of life for the LGBT community in Tuolumne County. Given the diversity within the LGBT community as well as the depth of the information desired, a qualitative study using interviews seemed the best way from which to reveal a rich and detailed picture of LGBT life in Tuolumne County.

**Population Description**

The population for this study is that of Tuolumne County, a rural community set in the California Sierra Nevada foothills. The study specifically examines the LGBT community as the target population within the community at large. Because there has not been a study to date documenting the numbers with regard to this sub-community, the proportional representation of this community with regard to the larger Tuolumne County
community is as yet unknown. However, it is generally accepted that the LGBT community is quite small compared to the population of Tuolumne County.

**Study Sample**

Because the numbers of the LGBT community within Tuolumne County have never been formally measured, a statistical analysis could not be done to determine a reliable number of subjects to assure quantitative validity, which was not the primary focus or intent of the this study. Instead, the number of subjects was based on availability and time.

However, a sample of 20 for an in depth interview study is considered adequate for qualitative studies of this nature (Mason, 2010). This sampling is nonrandom, as the researcher used personal connections to obtain desired participants with the specific criteria of being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (criterion sampling), and using snowball sampling to find the remainder of needed participants. Furthermore, in order to gain a more accurate perspective of each of these subgroups, the researcher purposively chose participants so that each of these subsets of subjects is more fairly represented (purposive sampling). There were seven lesbians, four gay men, nine bisexuals, and three transgender individuals. Gay men were considerably more difficult to find, as were transgendered persons. The researcher found no female to male transgendered persons. The researcher found little difficulty in finding lesbians and did not interview all who offered. Bisexual participants were equally available. With respect to gender, there were seven males and 13 females, four of whom were male to female transgender.


Data Collection Plan

The data collection plan included conducting semi-structured interviews in person as well as by phone. Contact with prospective participants was made in a variety of settings, but primarily by phone. The researcher explained the basis for the study and offered coffee and a snack as incentive. Phone interviewees were sent Starbucks gift cards. The researcher also explained that the setting for the interview would best be in a more private setting due to the personal nature of the topic at hand. At this time, interview appointments were scheduled.

Each interview took about one to two hours. The majority of interviews were conducted in person, about half at the researcher’s home, and half in the homes of the participants. Three interviews were conducted by phone due to the fact that those interviewees had since moved away from Tuolumne County. Two interview sessions were conducted in tandem, i.e. with their partner present. At the end of the questionnaire, the researcher asked the participants if there was anything they would like to add. This allowed the researcher to access important information, which would not have otherwise been obtained.

Instrument

The instrument for this study is a semi-structured interview using a questionnaire. The questions for the LGBT community interviewees were directed to their experience of homophobia in Tuolumne County; the who, what, where, when and why of discrimination.
The interview began with basic demographic questions such as age, income and religion. Factors such as these influence the person’s interaction with their environment. The next set of questions were directed at sexual identity development with regard to living in Tuolumne County (or not) and the factors that influenced coming out (or not). These questions were intended to reveal the life experiences and observations of LGBT individuals in Tuolumne County, including, but not limited to, homophobia. The next set of questions spoke to resiliency; coping strategies, support systems and awareness of resources (if any) as well as suggestions for improvement in the atmosphere and resources of Tuolumne County. The observations were of particular importance in a cash-strapped county evidencing little interest in developing resources to improve the quality of life within the LGBT community.

**Data Analysis Plan**

The interview responses were recorded and read back to the participants in order to assure accuracy and external validity. Following the interviews, the researcher compared responses in search for themes. Furthermore, the researcher looked for contradictory evidence to ensure that the researcher’s bias regarding Tuolumne County having a homophobic atmosphere did not cloud the accuracy of the responses. Through the use of triangulation, using two or more methods of checking for validity, the researcher greatly improves over all validity and reliability of the study. When all the interviews were complete, key points were marked with identifying codes so that they may be grouped into similar concepts. The concepts were then categorized and are the basis for positing hypotheses and suppositions about Tuolumne County’s LGBT life.
Human Subjects Approval

Approval for this project was received on 12/15/11. The Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work at California State University, Sacramento approved this study as minimal risk. The approval number is 11-12-57.

The researcher explained the content of the informed consent form (See Appendix A) to each interviewee as well as gave them a copy to sign and one copy to keep. Phone interviewees were read a copy of the informed consent form for the researcher to gain verbal consent. The researcher then mailed two consent forms to phone interviewees, one for them to sign and return, one for them to keep. Each interviewee was reminded that they could pass on any question or end the interview at any time without penalty.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

Introduction to the Study

This study sought to gain insight into rural LGBT life, specifically, Tuolumne County, with regard to the impact of prejudice, discrimination and victimization as well as the consequences of this treatment such as depression, substance abuse and suicide on the lives of the individuals within the LGBT community. The study also sought to understand the various methods of coping with these challenges employed by members of the LGBT community.

Rural areas pose particular challenges with regard to confronting stereotypes and discrimination. Research shows that being “out” not only provides leadership for the LGBT community, but also normalizes and familiarizes people with lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender individuals in life (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). However, being “out” in a rural community can prove to be anything from uncomfortable to perilous (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). In addition to questions about the consequences of being “in the closet” or being “out”, the researcher asked participants to make comments and observations as they wished, so as to cover issues the researcher may not have thought of. Before delving into these deeper issues, however, it is important to examine the demographics of the target population of the study.
Demographic Findings

Based on the researcher’s personal and professional connections as well as referrals from participants, interviews were conducted with 20 residents of Tuolumne County. This sample consisted of seven males and 13 females, three of whom were male to female transgendered. Participants were self-identified, with seven lesbians, nine bisexuals and four gay men. Annual income varied from $0 to $80,000 with 11 respondents earning $30,000 or less, seven earning more than $30,000 and two passing on the question. The significant majority of the participants were transplants from either urban or suburban areas, 10 urban and four suburban. Three grew up in Tuolumne County and three others in rural areas. These numbers reflect the diversity within the LGBT community, although, no interrelations were found between these numbers.

Table 1: Demographics.

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However, interrelations were found with regard to the subject of religion. The researcher asked participants about their religion in order to determine its influence with regard to feeling accepted. Because religious conservatism has a homophobic bias, the researcher was curious to see if this bias revealed itself in this line of questioning. Out of the respondents who started out in life with a more conservative religious background, only one out of the seven retained their original religious affiliation. The remainder of the group moved to non-conservative congregations or ceased to participate in organized religious activities. Of the ten respondents who started with no religion, three found non-conservative expressions of spirituality.

**Findings of Interviews**

**Age of coming out.**

The researcher designed specific questions around the age of coming out in order to gauge the level of safety and acceptance respondents felt in the given atmosphere (rural, suburban, urban) in Tuolumne County. In addition, the researcher divided these questions into three groups of varying levels of intimacy, meant to discover the trust/safety issues attached to friends, family and community. Of the 20 participants, seven came out to friends and family between the ages of 13 and 20. Two respondents were discovered or outed (pointed out as being lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender) during adolescence, as well as another at 22. One
participant claimed not being out; one claimed to have never been in (in the closet). Six respondents came out to family and friends between 27 and 49, and another just to family at 30 having already been out to friends.

Table 2: Age of Coming Out.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of Coming Out</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age out family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age out to friends</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGBT Status</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>L</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
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</table>

Six participants were consistent in age across all three groups with regard to their age. Some participants responded to the question regarding the age of coming out to community by addressing the community they were in during this process, while others addressed the age they were when they came to Tuolumne County. One person waited ten years after coming out to friends and family to come out to the community. Two people did not come out to the community at all. One person described being neither in nor out to community. It appears that most of the respondents came out to friends first, family second and community last. The fact that the order reflects particular the trust placed in friends, is significant.
There was no significant difference in age of coming out between rural communities and urban/suburban communities. After factoring out transplants and those who were not out, the average age for all rural participants, including Tuolumne County, is 25.3 years of age, with Tuolumne County locals averaging 27.6 years of age. The average for urban and suburban combined is 29.3 years of age. Interestingly, the numbers reflect the opposite of what one might think. However, the sample sizes for these numbers are so small, one can not draw any conclusions from the numbers alone. For a more accurate reflection of the correlation between experiences around coming out within given social communities, one needs a more in depth look at those experiences.

**Experiences with coming out.**

The following questions about the experience of coming out captured the social/emotional influences of family/friends/community on the timing as well as of the consequences. These questions were divided into subsections regarding coming out to friends, family and community. Upon reviewing the interviews, the researcher divided the responses into themes regarding the influencing factors around coming out, and the consequential reactions of friends, family and community as well as the personal feelings and social consequences of having come out to these different groups.

The primary themes found with regard to reasons or influences around coming out are “individuation,” “friends,” “first partner,” “implied” (not announced, not hidden), “examples” (of others being out), “outed/discovered” and “not out.”
Individuation is the process whereby one separates from parental influences and becomes one’s own person, developing one’s own sense of self (Santrock, 2012). Phrases such as “I needed to be myself,” “I needed to be honest,” and “I needed not to hide,” are reflective of this process. The theme of “friends” refers to the support and acceptance received from friends such that coming out to them felt more comfortable. The theme “implied” means that the respondent neither announced nor denounced their LGBT status. People who knew them well tended to know who they were, including their LGBT status. People who did not know them well might not notice or make comment. The theme of “examples” describes respondents’ feelings of inspiration and encouragement by seeing others out before them. The theme of “outed/discovered” describes participants whose LGBT status was announced or discovered by someone other than herself or himself. “Not out” means that their LGBT status is not out in the open, but hidden. While the same themes arose whether with friends, family or community, there was some variation in number of times they appeared in each category.
Table 3: Themes of Factors of Coming Out.

For instance, “individuation” was the number one reason participants cited (eight times) for coming out in both the friends and family categories. However, in the category of coming out to community, “individuation” scored nine times, and “implied” far surpassed this with 15 times compared to only three or four times respectively in the categories of friends and family. In other words, the majority of respondents felt that being out in the community didn’t require open acknowledgment like it did with more personal relationships, nor did it require hiding. However, many suggested that they still felt the need to edit affectional behavior when out in the community. Within more intimate surroundings, such as friends and family, participants wanted people to know who they were, to be more authentic (eight times) and/or to not hide with their partner (four times). The categories of “individuation” and “implied” were by far the largest either way.
Interestingly, only men listed friends as a contributing factor in coming out. The themes of “friends” and “examples” appeared fewer times (seven and three times respectively), and almost entirely in the area of friends. These findings were significant because they reflected levels of acceptance that making one feel safer or more inspired to come out.

In the next two categories, safety and inspiration do not apply. Two participants were in the category of “not out.” One of them is not out to family and one is not out at all. These participants obviously do not feel safe. In the category of “outed/discovered,” two participants were outed by others, and two others were discovered by family. These participants did not have the opportunity to wait for inspiration, as they had no choice.

Regardless of how they came out or why, participants were met with a variety of responses ranging from apparent passivity to angry rejection. Very little was said about the reactions of friends. A few participants mentioned that they lost a few friends in the process of coming out, but for this area, reactions were barely mentioned. In contrast to coming out to friends, reactions of family and community were numerous and varied. This finding parallels the “trust” factor earlier encountered in the apparent willingness to come out to friends before family and community.

Negative reactions of family included fear, anger, verbal abuse, shock and rejection to the point of the LGBT individual being disowned. Negative reactions from community were similar in description, but were less frequently mentioned.
For example, with regard to family, anger was mentioned four times. With regard to community, anger was mentioned twice. Another example would be rejection mentioned three times in family reactions and once in community. Community reactions also included physical threats, physical abuse, destruction of property, loss of business and breach of medical confidentiality. The consequences for coming out can be serious indeed.

Not all reactions were negative, however. Five participants mentioned support with regard to family five times and acceptance twice. Six responses from families were that they already knew or suspected. Like the negative reactions, when looking at the community vs. family, community reactions are similar but less frequently mentioned than family reactions. Support from the community was mentioned twice and acceptance once. In addition, four respondents said there was no apparent reaction at all.

Participant reactions are varied as well. Some participants described a sense of relief at being out, including two of the respondents who were outed. On the other hand, depression, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts were mentioned many times as well during the interviews. Additionally, many used alcohol to cope with difficult feelings, and some respondents used other substances. It is clear from these reactions that the atmosphere into which one comes out makes a difference in how one adjusts to being out as well as one’s perception of the community.
Atmosphere growing up versus atmosphere now.

The questions concerning public attitudes toward the LGBT community were designed to see if Tuolumne County had changed over time in attitude and behaviors toward the LGBT population. However, since only three respondents grew up in Tuolumne County, it is difficult to say with any degree of accuracy. Since one of them is very young, not enough time has gone by to reveal a significant change in attitudes towards LGBT individuals and community, although this youthful respondent mentioned that it is better not being in high school. This same respondent described the high school setting as “homophobic” and “ignorant.” The other two local participants indicated that it was not spoken of when they were growing up. Thus, attitudes toward the LGBT community were more covert. These same respondents both had a small group of accepting people with whom they shared company. Other respondents growing up in rural areas shared similar sentiments about the subject of being LGBT being more hidden, a “Don’t ask; don’t tell” attitude. Along with the “Don’t ask; don’t tell” attitude, some respondents were also subject to verbal and physical altercations. Some of the respondent descriptions of growing up in urban and suburban areas were similar.

Respondents who grew up in urban and suburban areas also described feeling “uncomfortable,” “unwelcome” and “afraid to be out.” They shared heartbreaking tales of verbal and physical abuse as well. One respondent describes growing up in Modesto (a nearby suburban area) this way: “… groups of guys would jump out of their truck and beat me up. It was vicious and shameful. I used to get
the crap beat out of me when I was young. I had bottles broken over my head many times. It was socially accepted. They were heroes.” The same respondent said that in Tuolumne County now, “it’s mostly pretty good depending on where you go and who you’re talking to.” Could it be that there has been a change in attitude toward the LGBT community over time?

**Atmosphere in Tuolumne County now.**

One respondent described the change over time this way: “The younger generation seems more accepting . . . middle-aged people are not really that understanding, and the older generation are not accepting, but they are quiet about it.” Several respondents described the atmosphere in Tuolumne County as “better than it used to be,” “more open,” “more positive than negative,” and “evolving.” Two respondents suggested that increased acceptance might be due to the media. One suggested that media normalized homosexuality by including homosexuals as characters in shows. Another suggested that LGBT issues in the news helped to raise awareness as well as inform the general public that there are legal consequences to harassment. On the other hand, another participant felt that the increased conversation about these issues has created more prejudice.

Another respondent suggested that the acceptance found in Tuolumne County is due the influx of people from urban areas, especially since many of the came from the San Francisco Bay area. However, many of these transplants miss being able to publicly express affection for their mates, feeling that it is not socially acceptable in Tuolumne County. It was also suggested that the LGBT community
has to be more soft-spoken or get made fun of. Again, the “Don’t ask; don’t tell” theme arose. A couple of respondents felt comfortable with this sentiment and that the LGBT community shouldn’t “rub it in their faces” with regard to being publicly out. A “You-do-your-thing-I’ll-do-mine” attitude was used to describe both the attitude of community at large as well as that of a respondent. These attitudes would explain the high number of respondents who described their out status to the community as “implied” or “neither in nor out.” Clearly, despite feeling accepted in some ways or some settings, most respondents felt the need to edit their behavior, especially public expression of affection. Interestingly, women made all but two of the more positive comments in this section. It has been suggested by several respondents that lesbians and female bisexuals are better tolerated in Tuolumne County. Alternatively, the men in this study seemed to have more negative experiences.

More men than women in this study have described the atmosphere in Tuolumne County in a negative light. They used descriptions that varied from mildly negative, such as closed off, not open-minded and non-accepting, to stronger terms such as judgmental, ignorant, hostile, bigoted, and fraught with fear. Three respondents cited the conservative right as influencing negativity towards the LGBT community. Nearly all the respondents described negative experiences in Tuolumne County. However, the gay men tended to have experienced more violence and suffered heavier consequences than the other interviewees, except for one of the transgendered persons. Negative experiences for all the participants
ranged from harassment, verbal assaults directly and indirectly, to discrimination, physical threats, physical violence, false imprisonment, destruction of property, loss of business and breach of confidentiality. The continuing social injustice members of the LGBT community suffer at the hands of the larger community cries out for an effective means of coping with and the curbing of community behavior that is destructive to both the victims and the perpetrators. The following section addresses the supports and resources of which the participants are aware as well as the means of coping they have used.

**Supports and resources to the LGBT community in Tuolumne County.**

In coping with victimization on various levels, participants have been presented with multiple challenges. Some participants have tried to deal with the resulting anxiety and depression on their own. Without support, some of them have turned to negative means of coping such as substance abuse and promiscuous sex; or worse, they have tried to deny who they were, pretending to be straight, even trying to fool themselves.

However, the participants listed various supportive strategies on both the personal and professional levels. Personal support included family, especially “mom,” as well as friends. Family and friends were named by the men and transgendered especially. A few others found personal support among teachers, mentors as well as looking to themselves for answers and solutions. Personal support was particularly important growing up, as the majority of participants said they weren’t aware of any professional supports during coming of age.
The Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) was cited several times as a support in schools for LGBT teens. However, this group was not available to for the majority of the respondents when they were growing up. In addition, the two participants young enough to have taken advantage of the GSA expressed dissatisfaction with the GSA, saying that it was a constant target, and that it was lacking in leadership and helpful information. One might surmise that little institutional support for the GSA exists within the larger community. Regarding growing as an LGBT teen, one participant put it this way: “Of the LGBT people that make it through, their skin is a lot thicker, and they are generally more assertive, and sometimes aggressive. Most bisexual or gay men I knew left the county when they came of age.” This commentary speaks to influence of the overtly hostile and limited environment within the local high school.

Several professional support organizations were singled out as being of use in Tuolumne County. The professional resource most frequently mentioned by respondents was the Center for a Non-Violent Community (CNVC). Its purpose is to help people who have been physically and/or sexually abused. The second most frequently mentioned professional resource was Sierra Hope, the local AIDS Foundation. Only one participant mentioned Behavioral Health, the local mental health agency, and one mentioned a hotline as sources of support. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) was named several times, although it has been disbanded locally for several years. Some of the participants suggested that differing social preferences and needs led to the development of various subgroups,
which then either replaced the larger group or disintegrated completely. Leaping Lesbians and Camping Women, which were named as resources by some of the female respondents, were organized for social outlets for lesbians. Women seemed to prefer these more organized types of supports more than the men. Male participants seemed to prefer social connection in informal groups such as the local theatre and Columbia Community College. Two LGBT-friendly churches were mentioned, Sonora’s Episcopal Church and the Mt. Calvary Church in Sugar Pine. The Internet was also cited as a source of information and social connection. Men more often mentioned these nonspecific groups.

Table 4: Resources Named.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resources Named</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Center for Non-Violent Community</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay Straight Alliance</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior Health</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Hope</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mt. Calvary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaping Lesbians</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camping Women</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotlines</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage Equality (existing only during election)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and Friends of Lesbians And Gays (now disbanded)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Clearly, different LGBT subgroups within the community have differing preferences with regard to how to reach out for help and connection. Some prefer more organized and specific efforts, while others prefer more anonymous associations. Within the small sample, the women tended toward the former, the men the latter. These responses reflect the need for more community education as well as the need for connection and support within the LGBT community. The 20 participants of this study had many suggestions and observations with regard to improving the atmosphere, resources and support systems of Tuolumne County.

**Participant Suggestions and Observations**

In addition to questions regarding the atmosphere, resources and support in Tuolumne County, the researcher asked participants for suggestions as to how to improve and to share anything they felt that the researcher had missed or any particular message they wished to impart. Many of the subjects told stories, which was perhaps the most compelling part of this study because it is more personal than abstractions and summations. The stories are largely centered on the fear and negative consequences of coming out, the difficulty with leadership and connection in a conservative, rural area like Tuolumne County as well as some messages of encouragement and hope. The participants did not differ much in their suggestions. The desire for a safe way to socialize was expressed more than any other suggestion.
The suggestions were overwhelmingly in favor of connection and safe social outlet. Two participants suggested a community resource center for the purpose of safe social connection, education and access to resources. One person suggested that a resource center could be run by a non-profit so that a paid person could be there to educate the public, organize public excursions and rallies as well as be a constant presence of support in the center. Some of the resources suggested are LGBT friendly services such as churches, counselors, lawyers, doctors, mentors and foster care. Several participants expressed the need for education regarding LGBT rights and issues in schools, publications and electronic media. Coming out was also suggested as well as feared, as this is a more complicated issue in a conservative rural atmosphere.

One of the advantages of coming out is that it sets a positive example for those who are afraid to come out as well as young LGBT people, inspiring courage and hope. One respondent also suggested that by coming out and giving back to the community by practicing philanthropy, like building for Habitat for Humanity or helping to pass out food at the food bank, would show people that LGBT people are not be feared or despised. This respondent suggested that participation in community activities could take away the “strangeness,” as “straight” people get used to being with members of the LGBT community and get to know them. It was further suggested that those that are willing to come out and take leadership to the next level could serve in public office and help make policy changes in support of LGBT rights. However, because of the homophobic atmosphere in Tuolumne
County, many respondents had mixed feelings about being out in such a conspicuous way.

Some of the participants were clearly apprehensive about developing LGBT-friendly public meeting places, let alone begin community organizing and activism as others had suggested. One respondent reflected that coming out means embracing a label, and labels make targets. Other participants shared their concern about friends, family and businesses coming out in support of LGBT people that they risk becoming targets for shunning and harassment or worse.

This conundrum of “in or out” is the main challenge of how to go about improving rural LGBT life. The participants’ stories are illustrative of the negative consequences of coming out and the challenges of connection and leadership in this conservative rural county as well as of the success and hope in the face of adversity.

*Stories of adversity and hope.*

*Negative consequences of coming out.*

“When I . . . loved a woman for the first time, there was no support. She had told me her family was gay-friendly, and even hit on me, but when I admitted my feelings, she turned on me, and pushed me out! I did not get my thesis done because of her. My family came for me, but I could not tell them that I had a nervous breakdown because I was gay, and this mean bitch wanted sex, but not me. It was horrible.”
Negative consequences of coming out

“I moved in with a friend when I was very young (14). I saw him standing there and introduced myself because I wanted to know other gay people. He became like a mentor to me. I basically insisted that he be my friend. He and his partner introduced me to art and culture. Later, my friend got a job at Castro Camera. It was there he met and we started hanging out with Harvey Milk. When Harvey Milk got killed, I had agoraphobia for about a year and a half. I had to go and live with my mother for a while.”

Negative consequences of being out / difficulty in rural connection and Leadership.

“If people knew you were gay at school they would give a wide berth in the hallways and derogatory remarks. As soon as someone was obviously out, they would notice and there would be six rednecks waiting for you after school to “beat up the little faggot.” If I hadn’t been there for two of them, one would’ve have killed themselves and the other would’ve been killed. I actually had to watch the door at our GSA meetings because nobody felt safe. Some students didn’t feel any safer just because there was a teacher there. People would run by and throw stuff in the door and yell, “faggots!” The teacher just offered her classroom, but couldn’t offer defense from these attacks.”

Difficulty in rural connection and leadership.

“I worked with the head of Sierra Hope to form a social network. [What] came out of it . . . was a tight lesbian community, but nothing for men. I did a social
event in which about 30 men showed up, and of those, only a few, primarily men I already knew, were people I wanted to have friendship with. Most of them were socially low functioning. The ones who weren’t have already left the county for similar reasons as me.”

*Fear of being out/difficulty in rural connection and leadership.*

“I was chapter leader for Marriage Equality during Prop 8. They were the ones who got the ball rolling. One of the attorneys talked the mayor into starting marriages in San Francisco. I did a couple of rallies in Sonora. I had such a hard time getting help for people to canvas, make calls, etc. They were afraid. There’s always going to be the one who wants to break a bottle over your head, but for the most part, you can’t say no!”

*Influence of conservative religion.*

“The Red Church was Episcopal until the main church decided to allow gays and lesbians as clergy. Then they decided to switch to Anglican. They lost a lot of their congregation, especially young people. A church could come out in support instead of the opposite like what happened with the Red Church.”

*Influence of conservative religion/Consequences of coming out.*

“Everybody should know that they aren’t the only one when they are thinking of coming out to their family. For me it was important because I had family who rejected me afterwards. They had a hard time because they are really religious. It affected me a lot. I was depressed and sad. Then I realized it was their loss and I just needed to deal with it. I became stronger from it. I see my parents, my sisters
and one of my brothers. One brother will not speak to me and won’t allow me to see
my nieces and nephews. It helps so much to find others who have gone through
this.”

_Fear of being out/atmosphere in Tuolumne County._

“A white mother adopted two black girls, and a neighbor put a KKK symbol
on their window. She called the police, and the police said, “Deal with it yourself.” I
could see similar things happening to LGBT as they reach for help with rights
violations and threats. Maybe with the influx of transplants [from the city] things
could change, but not in the near future. More people need to come out, but they
need to feel safe.”

_Substance abuse._

“A problem I know of with the LGBT community is substance abuse. Part of
it, at least for my generation, is that bars are a place to meet up with people. For me
personally, when I got clean and sober, I found support and community there. If you
go to any of the major events for the LGBT community, there is a lot of marketing
from the alcohol industry. I think substance abuse and self-medicating is a real
pitfall to finding self-acceptance. Many people use it to cope.”

_Isolation, drinking, suicide and victimization._

[Not being out] “is a very lonely place because I’m not a guy and I’m not a girl.
I still struggle day to day with suicidal thoughts and binge drink. I binge drink now
and then and call the help line. Every time this happens, the cops come and handle
me roughly, sometimes leaving bruises. Sometimes they arrest me. Sometimes they
take to the hospital. Sometimes they allow me to change out of my women’s 
lingerie, sometimes not. One time I cut my wrists and throat, and I had to go to a 
mental hospital. I don’t trust the police to be sensitive or confidential with my 
situation.”

Male privilege.

“The difference in the way I am treated (since becoming female) is amazing. I 
never knew so much about male privilege until I gave it up. I am noticing a change 
though. The older literature would refer to me as a secondary transsexual because I 
hid for so long (49). Primary transsexuals know early on and are up front about it. I 
see more and hear more about younger people transitioning. We have a day of 
remembrance every year for those who have passed on. Fifteen years ago that 
wouldn’t have been so open. It’s sad the disproportionate numbers of suicide and 
violece.”

Leadership of out LGBT community members.

“Every three years I go to a group called Integrity USA, an organization with 
the Episcopal Church, trying to get trial right to get same sex unions. There is a 
video, Voices of Witness: Out of the Box, on YouTube. The vote finally passed due to 
our efforts. Our goal was to get across to people that we are human beings entitled 
to participate in the church. We added gender discrimination statutes to lay and 
ministry for participation.”

Messages of encouragement and hope.

“I feel good every time I come out.”
“If we are going to get past this problem, we have to be out about it.”

“Kids are the answer. They just need support.”

“I just want to tell people to come out, and there are people who will love them.”

“Don’t be afraid; be careful.”

“The day I quit being honest is the day I go back into the victim mode.”

“You’re not the only one. You’re not alone.”

Summary

The purpose of this study was to document the experiences of a sample of Tuolumne County’s LGBT community with regard to prejudice, discrimination, and victimization as well as to discover how these people cope with the challenges of rural LGBT life and the resources they use for support. The findings revealed that Tuolumne County was not unlike other rural areas in terms of the homophobic atmosphere and actions. All of the participants had experiences involving some level of homophobia from feeling unwelcome to outright attacks on person, property and livelihood.

The findings also revealed that adaptation to rural life seemed focused on coming out. For example, coming out in a more overt way appeared to be a necessary part of the individuation process, a need to be themselves with regard to friends and family. However, when it came to being out in the community, many described being “neither in nor out” or that it was “implied.” Many participants discussed feeling conflicted about public expressions of affection as a line they may or may not cross with regard to being out in the community. The decision seemed to depend on whether their desire to be authentic was more important than fear of social retribution. The majority chose
discretion, and with good reason, as the consequences for being out in such a public way can be very serious. Many participants described the issue of being “out, but not quite” as reason for making connection with other LGBT individuals difficult.

Participants chose to cope with this dilemma in a variety of ways and used various resources for connection and support. While many participants, especially the women, named professional organizations as resources, such as Sierra Hope, Center for Non-Violent Community, and the Gay Straight Alliance, very few of them admitted actually using them. Other formal resources named were two churches, Sonora Episcopal Church and Mt. Calvary Church in Sugar Pine.

Other supports cited were more informal and social in nature as opposed to the more formal, service type resources mentioned above. For example, some of the women organized their own groups such as Leaping Lesbians and Camping Women. The men seemed to prefer more anonymous, but typically more open-minded, places such as theatres and the community college. The men as well as a few women also indicated the importance of the support of friends and family. Other helpful resources included hotlines, books, and the Internet.

Sadly, a large number of the respondents couldn’t think of any resources in Tuolumne County that were supportive of LGBT individuals and with whom the participants could feel safe. This means some participants are at risk of trying to cope with various levels of psychological distress, ranging from anxiety and depression to substance abuse and suicidal ideation in isolation. However, participants freely shared
many ideas about how to deal with these challenges and improve the quality of rural LGBT life in Tuolumne County.

The suggestion most frequently expressed centered on having a safe place for social outlet. Another suggestion was a community resource center for the purpose of support, education and resources. Who better can understand the challenges of rural LGBT life than other rural LGBT individuals? Where else can one seek answers to the questions of LGBT life? Where else than in the company of other LGBT people can an LGBT person feel safe enough to relax, to be oneself and genuinely connect with others?

The problem with these constructs is that if a place becomes dedicated in this regard, it becomes labeled “LGBT” and thusly, a target for retribution, making all who go there targets as well. Again, the “in or out” dilemma is central to the quality of life. Many of the participants had good reason to be concerned about being out in public way and expressed their concerns. The level of fear members of the LGBT community experience makes traditional approaches to reducing discrimination, victimization and oppression, such as community organizing and activism, difficult indeed. In reading their stories, it is clear just how harsh retribution can be. However, they are also stories of resilience and hope as they make lives in the midst of adversity.
Discussion of Findings

Previous research demonstrates that rural areas often have higher levels of homophobia, resulting in victimization and isolation as well as the attendant fear and anxiety resulting from living within a hostile social environment (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Goodenow et al., 2006, Kosciw et al., 2009, Oswald, et al., 2002, Poteat et al., 2009). The religious conservatism that is often found within rural communities was indeed mentioned as a contributing factor of homophobia in Tuolumne County as Eldridge, Mack & Swank suggested in 2006. The findings of this study reflect the findings of other studies with regard to anxiety and negative social experiences. Many of the respondents in this study had experienced various levels of anxiety as well as a range of levels of victimization from negative comments and exclusion to physical altercations and false imprisonment. Some members of the LGBT community found the social hostility in Tuolumne County so severe they left behind their homes and employment for a less hostile and more accepting place to live.

Oppression and victimization often lead to psychological distress such as depression and anxiety, and in some cases suicidal ideation and substance abuse (Beard & Hissam, 2002). The responses from this study reflect that Tuolumne County is no exception. However, seeking professional help for these problems in a rural area is often problematic as many rural professionals are uncomfortable, unknowledgeable, and/or inexperienced with the needs of the LGBT population (D’Augelli, 1987). The fact that
only one person named the local mental health department as a resource for these issues is a reflection of D’Augelli’s observation. In addition, rural areas often lack the resources to support their LGBT communities (D’Augelli, 1987). While a number of professional resources were named as a possible support to the LGBT community, access to them is based on other issues, such as domestic violence and AIDS, which may preclude them from receiving the help directly related to the problems of an LGBT individual. Furthermore, numerous participants responded to the question of resources with “none,” as in, there aren’t any. These responses could reflect a lack of resources for the LGBT community. These responses could also reflect that Tuolumne County’s LGBT community uses other resources and support. Most likely, however, it is a combination of both lacking the appropriate resources as well as the desire for other types of resources. Moreover, the participants tended not to actually use the institutional resources named. The respondents either found other resources for support or constructed their own means of dealing with their problems. Respondents found social outlets and acceptance in places such as local theatre groups and the community college or organized their own groups for connection such as Leaping Lesbians. Participants also cited family and especially friends as important sources for support and connection. Connection with friends often cushioned the negative effects of homophobia by keeping LGBT community members from being too isolated (D’Augelli, Preston, Kassab & Cain, 2002, Garnet et al., 1994, Oswald et al., 2002, Poteat et al., 2009). Additionally, a couple of participants named themselves as a resource, especially with regard to the process of coming out.
Without an accurate sense of oneself, one cannot gain the self-acceptance needed to come out (Beard, 2002, D’Augelli, 2002). Thus, coming out is pivotal to the quality and nature of LGBT life. Coming out is often described as the final phase of identity development for the LGBT community for this very reason (Garnet & D’Augelli, 1994). The more a person can be out, the more self-esteem they experience because they don’t have to hide their true selves out of fear and shame (Beard, 2002). Higher self-esteem has been shown to lessen feelings of isolation, and having a strong sense of self increases acceptance from other (Beard, 2002, D’Augelli, 2002). This positive relationship between self-esteem and acceptance from others contributes to internal well-being and indicates the individual has adjusted to his/herself and to others (Beard, 2002, D’Augelli, 2002).

Coming out is not only self-empowering, but it has other benefits as well, such as providing opportunities to connect with others in the LGBT community and gaining a sense of belonging to a community greater than oneself, essential to coping with the sense of estrangement imposed by the community at large (Glassgold & Drescher, 2007). While several of the lesbians in this study seemed to have the benefits of such a community in Leaping Lesbians, many of the other respondents derived connection elsewhere or struggled with covert behavior and isolation.

Having a connection with others not only empowers the individual, but others as well. Being part of a larger group gives an individual a sense of solidarity and inspires hope and belief that positive changes can be made (Oswald et al., 2002, Russell et al., 2009). Being part of a community can provide the daring and motivation it takes to
confront prejudice and discrimination. A collective spirit empowers the individual to undertake, the overwhelming task of educating a community, community organizing as well as other kinds of activism (Garnet et al., 1994; Poteat et al., 2009; Stevenson, 1998).

This study suggests that Tuolumne County’s LGBT community members may not have interest in such endeavors and/or fear the consequences. As Drumheller & McQuay (2010) suggest, these two reasons are common barriers to organizing rural communities. The visibility that is required in order to connect and empower the LGBT community could cost them their quiet anonymity or possibly lead to some serious social/economic ramifications (Smith, 1997). This seemingly impossible puzzle of whether to be in or out in this conservative rural area remains as yet unsolved for individuals and even more importantly for the LGBT community, for without identity, the opportunity to exist as a viable group or to offer a place of safety within the larger society remains a closed option.

Implications for Future Practice

A word of caution to well-intentioned social workers who wish to confront prejudice and discrimination in rural America: encouraging members of the LGBT community to come out and be counted may result in disastrous consequences for some individuals on both personal and social/economic levels. The observations and experiences of these LGBT community members of Tuolumne County have illustrated this point. However, there are continuing negative consequences in maintaining the status quo as well. Encouraging political activism in hopes of policy change perhaps is less likely to incur the wrath of the local community than “rallying the troops.”
However, this backwards approach doesn’t address the fact that according to Relational Cultural Theory, the stratification of people creates disconnection, isolation and the disempowerment of those deemed “different” (Comstock & Qin, 2005). Are rural people to wait for laws to be made to protect them? Policy change generally happens the other way around. Perhaps further research can point out different directions and means of finding solutions to these problems.

**Implications for Future Research**

It is unclear as to whether or not further research would yield definitive answers to the perplexing question about how to empower rural LGBT people in the face of small town cronyism and religious conservatism. The fact remains, however, that some LGBT people choose to live in this environment. Clearly, the experiences of the participants of this study indicate a variety of feelings, from satisfaction to fear, about being in Tuolumne County. Some respondents are anchored by family, friends and employment, but others are not, and have less obviously compelling reasons for living in Tuolumne County. Do the LGBT people who are happy and satisfied with life in Tuolumne County have higher self-esteem and therefore have greater acceptance from others as suggested by Garnet & D’Augelli (1994)? Or is acceptance from others less important because they accept themselves? Are people who are more personally conservative a better fit for Tuolumne County because their behavior doesn’t give them away? Or is the climate here just as unhealthy for them as it is for the more expressive? The enigma of the LGBT population living in Tuolumne County leaves us with more questions than answers regarding LGBT life in Tuolumne. For this researcher, the fact that many LGBT
individuals choose to continue to live in a community that fails to be supportive and is often hostile remains a riddle.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Tuolumne County is not unlike other rural communities in that it lacks diversity as well as having an under educated populace. In addition, the power and political structures are organized by kinship, which are influenced by religious and political conservatism (http://www.city-data.com/county/Tuolumne_County.CA.html). These social constructs are known to correlate with high levels of homophobia (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010, Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, 2009, Poteat, Espelage, Koenig, 2009, Kosciw et al., 2009). The findings of this study show that Tuolumne County is no exception in this regard.

However, different participants found varying levels of satisfaction and/or fear living within this social environment. Some, primarily gay men, found the atmosphere intolerable and unsustainable such that they had to leave the area. Others found that if they kept their private lives private, they managed to live peacefully, for the most part in this rural area. However, these respondents were mostly women. Several respondents mentioned that they thought women were not subjected to as much overt prejudice and discrimination. Still all were victims of prejudice to vary degrees. The levels of prejudice, discrimination and victimization reflected in the stories of many of these gay men, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people in this study reveal as much about ourselves as about the lives of the individuals in the LGBT community. If a society is judged by the way it treats the vulnerable, then Tuolumne County is found wanting.
Finally, the problem remains as how we are to address these concerns. While there are laws to protect all people from harm, enforcement of these laws is applied unevenly or even neglected. Furthermore, because prejudice is interwoven into the subculture of Tuolumne County, it cannot be addressed simply by changes in policy or traditional approaches.

The fact of prejudice and discrimination in rural areas makes addressing them by using traditional approaches impractical. Traditional approaches involve the interconnection of LGBT people and the organizing of these people into a community. This approach requires individuals to be visible enough to be found by others. Furthermore, it requires the group of LGBT community members to be visible as well in order to collaborate with and educate the community as a whole. Unfortunately, in rural areas visibility can mean exclusion, ridicule, and possible loss of personal safety and livelihood (Drumheller & McQuay, 2010). These forms of victimization have consequences of their own, such as anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicide (Beard & Hissam, 2002, Birkett et al., 2008).

There are few resources available to the LGBT community in Tuolumne County to aid in coping with the pain and suffering of deep discrimination. Furthermore, the few resources that do exist do not appear to be the kind of support members of the LGBT community desire. Because safe means of connecting with each other was by far cited as the number one desire of the participants in this study, there needs to be a means of finding and carrying out a way for LGBT members to find and support one another. Again, the question of coming out and visibility comes to the forefront.
As Americans become aware of the significant subculture of the LGBT population, as evidenced by the Supreme Court hearings on gay marriage, this researcher hopes that the rural communities of America will take heart and move forward towards greater acceptance of all the individuals, and especially LGBT citizens, who live with us and contribute to the quality of our lives. In 1978, Harvey Milk, a gay and lesbian rights activist as well as the first openly gay elected official, made his most famous speech, the “Hope Speech,” which conveys these hopes:

On this anniversary of Stonewall, I ask my gay sisters and brothers to make the commitment to fight. For themselves, for their freedom, for their country... We will not win our rights by staying quietly in our closets... We are coming out to fight the lies, the myths, the distortions. We are coming out to tell the truths about gays, for I am tired of the conspiracy of silence, so I'm going to talk about it. And I want you to talk about it. You must come out. (Shilts, 1998, p. 225)
Appendix A

Consent to Participate in Research:

**Rural LGBT Life:**
A Qualitative Study of Tuolumne County’s Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community’s Strengths, Supports and Resources

Conducted by Tracy Sundstrand, MSWII Student
Division of Social Work

The purpose of this study is to explore the subject of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) experiences and resources in a small rural county such as Tuolumne County, assess the needs and strengths of the community, explore the affect those unmet needs might have, and assess how the community's strengths can be used for addressing them.

This study is important because information gained from interviews of the LGBT community and community service agents and the strengths and weaknesses of community supports and resources with regard to the LGBT community may result in a guide for recommendations to improve the climate of the LGBT community as well as the community at large, and mitigate some of the negative affects of homophobia in the community.

Confidentiality will be protected. All identifying information will be kept separately from the responses to the questions in a locked drawer. All identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the project. Interviews will be conducted in a location in which the conversation can not be overheard.

The other risk for participants is that of stress or emotional discomfort. This risk will be handled in two ways. One is that the researcher will offer referrals to a support hotline as well as the local mental health center for those in immediate need or crisis. The other will be in the form of a guide of resources and supports that come as a result of this study.

The risk involved for service providers is also that of confidentiality in that whether pro-LGBT views are expressed or anti-LGBT views are expressed, these views could be held against them in the workplace and therefore could threaten job security. Again, confidentiality will be strongly protected by separating identifying information from answers in a locked drawer and by conducting interviews where others can not overhear them. In addition, for some, homosexuality is a hot topic in and of itself, which could cause stress. Service providers will also be referred to county mental health services or the hotline for support.

From participating in the research interview, please contact:
Tuolumne County Behavioral Health at (209) 533-6245 or (209) 533-7000
Services are available 24-7 at 101 Hospital Road, Sonora, CA or
National Suicide Lifeline (800) 723-8255

Inducements for participating in this study are a free soft drink and snack. Participants may stop the interview at any time or they can opt out of the study.
completely at any time without penalty or recourse.

For further information regarding the research study, contact the researcher, Tracy Sundstrand, at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx, or her research advisor, CSU Sacramento professor Dr. T. Bankhead, at Bankhead@csus.edu.

_____________________________  _________________________  Date
Participant

_____________________________  _________________________  Date
Researcher – Tracy Sundstrand
Appendix B
Interview Questions for Research Project:
Rural LGBT Life:
A Qualitative Study of Tuolumne County's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community's Strengths, Supports and Resources
Conducted by Tracy Sundstrand, MSWII Student
Division of Social Work

1. How old are you?
2. What gender are you?
3. What religion are you?
4. What is your income?
5. Where did you grow up?
6. As you are aware, when do most LGBT people in Tuolumne County come out (or not)?
7. What influences the decision to come out at this time (or not)?
8. As you are aware, when do most LGBT people in Tuolumne County come out to family (or not)?
9. What influences the decision to come out at this time (or not)?
10. As you are aware, when do most LGBT people in Tuolumne County come out to the community (or not)?
11. What influences the decision to come out at this time (or not)?
10. How would you describe the atmosphere in Tuolumne County toward the LGBT community when you were an adolescent?
11. How would you describe the atmosphere in Tuolumne County toward the LGBT community in Tuolumne County now?
12. What supports and resources did you have growing up?

13. What supports and resources are you aware of in Tuolumne County for LGBT people now?

14. How do you feel the social atmosphere and resources available for the LGBT community could be improved?
References


Peterson, L. (2011, May 1). Center program attempts to get to root of bullying, violence. *The Union Democrat (Sonora, California).*


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