Who am I without you?: An autoethnographic exploration of (not) belonging in the gay community and its implications for self-acceptance

by

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my family for supporting me the opportunity to tell our story so that others may heal. I am appreciative of their courage and willingness to be on this journey towards self-acceptance and compassion with me.

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We all have the potential to reveal the truth of our being, for it is that which is within us, that guides us.

Declaration

I, Stephen Charles Hall, hereby declare that this mini dissertation being submitted for the degree Master of Arts, Clinical Psychology at the University of Pretoria is my own original work. I have not previously submitted this document to another university or faculty. Where secondary sources were used, they have been appropriately acknowledged and cited.

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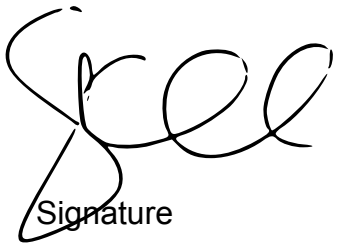

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to critically engage with my personal reflections to explore my sense of belonging in the gay community and how this belonging shaped and influenced my self-acceptance after having experienced family rejection due to coming out. This was approached qualitatively, using autoethnographic methodology which sought to create knowledge through first-person narrative writing, and to advocate for queer voices through my personal experiences. An autoethnography establishes a personal connection between the reader and researcher and encourages reflective, honest, and challenging conversations about social issues. Data for this study took the form of written personal reflections elicited using memories of, and written accounts (e.g., journal entries) related to, salient moments in my life that related to the aim of the study. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in these written personal reflections. Five main themes were conceptualized, namely: Introduction to Heterosexuality and Relationships; Coming Out and Rejection; Navigating my Coming Out Experience; Relationships after Rejection; and Finding my Worth. Although the themes were discussed separately there was overlap between these which highlights the interplay between multiple systemic factors (i.e., gender roles, queer bodies, mental health, familial relationships, and social settings) that influenced my sense of belonging and self-acceptance. In conclusion, navigating my gay identity was (and still is) a lifelong process of self-discovery as I continue to be challenged with a negative self-appraisal and feelings of not belonging in a predominantly heterosexually organized society. Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the limitations and potential recommendations for future research have also been discussed.

Keywords: Coming-out; belonging; acceptance; gay; shame; heterosexism; autoethnography

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

1.1. Coming out and mental health

Living in secret and hiding one's sexual orientation is a common—albeit varied—experience among members of the queer community. Living in secret often perpetuates shame, guilt, and distortions in self-acceptance (Rosario et al., 2009) in the context of a predominantly heteronormatively organized society. Ideally, disclosure of one's sexual orientation is correlated with a reduction in the stress associated with living in secret. However, acceptance is not a guaranteed eventuality and is shrouded in fear for many queer people because of possible social rejection by the people closest to them (Katz-Wise et al., 2016). Intolerance and rejection—as a result of negative feedback from within the queer individual's immediate socio-emotional network—may be introjected. Thus, the introjected negative feedback may propagate an impoverished self-image characterised by low self-worth and a belief in the inherent badness of the self that is worthy and deserving of rejection, laying the foundation for potentially poorer psychological functioning and mental health challenges among queer individuals (Rosario et al., 2009; Rosser et al., 2008).

A comprehensive review by Russell and Fish (2016) on the mental health of queer youth has demonstrated a pattern of evidence showing that sexual minorities are at greater risk for mental ill health—including depressive disorders, anxiety, posttraumatic stress, and substance abuse—across developmental stages. While these studies reflect international trends, South African studies display similar results illustrating the increased risk for substance abuse, mental illness, and HIV infection within the gay community (Parry et al, 2008; Rispel et al., 2011). Marginalization from, and victimization within, mainstream society, which may range from microaggressions to physical violence, may be responsible, at least in part, for these trends regarding the mental health challenges experienced by queer individuals (Matshidze et al., 2017). This may be further compounded for those who have been rejected by their families (Russell & Fish, 2016; Wilson & Cariola, 2019). This is especially pertinent for queer individuals who are particularly at risk of rejection by family due to their sexual identity (Mallon, 2000; Watson et al.,

2019; Wilson & Cariola, 2019). On the other hand, acceptance from family members may serve as a buffer against discrimination and rejection from other social contexts. Studies show, for example, that maintaining a supportive relationship with family members is associated with higher levels of psychological well-being for queer individuals (Mallon, 2000; Roe, 2017; Watson et al., 2019). This buffering system is described by Cohen and Willis (1985) in their so-called Buffering Hypothesis, which explains that social support is a protective factor—a buffer—against the negative emotional effects of experiences such as bullying and other forms of victimization (Siegmann et al., 2018; Eze et al., 2021). Therefore, the absence of such family support in the context of rejection can have a deleterious effect on the mental health of queer individuals, particularly since this population is already subject to marginalization. Garnets et al. (1990) argue that victimization fosters feelings of lack of safety and vulnerability and reduces the general feeling of trust and belonging. Victimization experienced by queer communities creates a perception that society is chaotic and meaningless, which forces those being victimized to question their worth through self-deprecation and devaluation of the self. It is therefore imperative, when understanding the psychological well-being of queer individuals, to consider the interaction between the dominant heteronormative societal conventions and marginalized sexual minority groups.

1.2. Purpose of the study

Rosario et al. (2006) argue that many queer individuals are not raised in communities that support or understand queer identities or identities that defy dominant heteronormative conventions. As such, queer individuals are often left to navigate their sexual identities through self-discovery and in relative isolation (Morandini et al., 2015). It is to be noted that the term ‘queer’ incorporates the LGBTQIA+ acronym which represents ‘Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual’ individuals. The term recognizes the continuum of authentic sexual orientations and gender identities. For my research, although the queer community will be referred to, my focus—rooted in my lived experience—is that of gay men, specifically (individuals who identity as men and are attracted to men). I also acknowledge and recognize that the term ‘gay’ and the experience of being gay does not

speak for the entire queer community, and the intent is not to render all queer people's experience as my own. Furthermore, the queer community can be seen—and experienced—as multiple intersecting queer communities simultaneously and these nuances and subtleties are acknowledged.

Developing a connectedness and sense of belonging within a community of accepting others could therefore be protective against the societal rejection of queer identification (Wilson & Cariola, 2019). When this social connectedness and belonging does not happen, however, there may be implications for the individual. This is what this study will critically explore—wrestling with my interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences influenced by a complex a sense of belonging in mainstream society through which I had internalized homonegative feelings, compounding the original rejection experienced after coming out to my family.

My personal experience involved self-perceptions that were characterised by deviance, worthlessness, defectiveness, undesirability, and powerlessness, catalysed by familial rejection in response to my coming out. In being rejected by my family—a socioemotional space assumed to be unconditional—I felt lost which cultivated the need to find refuge and safety elsewhere, grasping for belonging. I thought I would find this in the gay community, among people who I had imagined would be able to identify with my experience and among whom I would be able to find solidarity. I was met, however, with a similar feeling of being retained on the periphery and not quite belonging within the gay community which was characterised by its own cultural norms and expectations of what it means to be gay—norms which I did not embody. My experience may reflect the possible confusion experienced by other queer youth who, as found by D'Augelli et al. (1998), may have negative experiences with regards to integrating the queer self into the family, with developing intimate relationships due to internalized homo-negativity, creating a sense of community and belonging, and consolidation of personal identity.

The rationale for this study is rooted in the idea that the voices and experiences of sexually diverse individuals continue to be marginalized in

South African mainstream society, despite advancements in the legal and social recognition and acknowledgement of the experiences and needs of the queer community (Judge, 2014). As such, an in-depth qualitative account of queer experiences can play a role in advocating for marginalized voices by continuing conversations, and inspiring dialogue, about the impact of everyday microaggressions and biases that are rooted in personal and political agendas that undermine marginalized groups (Adams & Jones, 2011). Furthermore, queer autoethnographies are needed in research to continue to advocate for queer experiences to be incorporated into critical academic inquiries in order to influence theoretical and political discourses that impact queer communities.

This is of particular prominence in an autoethnography that places the voice of the researcher and their personal narrative at a premium, as the unit of analysis. Furthermore, exploring the phenomenon of belonging—against the backdrop of mental health in queer individuals—could serve to facilitate an understanding of the significance of this to individual experiences while, through autoethnography, offering a critical view of the interplay of the sociocultural and intrapersonal factors in this regard. This allows for an exploration of the complexity and nuance of these interactions to inform—rooted in a first-hand, experience-near, subjective account—comprehensive responses to the mental health and wellbeing of queer people. It is in these experiences and subjective accounts that stories of triumph or even failure may transpire, eliciting a sense of hope for the author as well as the reader (Ally, 2020). These experiences often influence our behaviors infiltrated through cultural and social interactions that are often not shared in the psychological science research. It is in this way that sharing stories creates a deeper understanding of the impact of sociocultural experiences and promotes a sense of meaning-making (Ally, 2020). The lived experience that will be presented in this autoethnography aims to illustrate the need for more dialogue in regards to queer research on belonging and self-acceptance after a rejected experience in a way that is empathically engaged, stimulates advocacy and nurtures contemplation through personal narrative.

1.3. Research aims and objectives

There are many elements to consider when reflecting upon where one belongs as a gay individual. The coming-out process, family dynamics, sociocultural determinants, and internal psychic struggles are all interrelated facets of this matrix, shaping one's sexual identity that may influence and be influenced by the need to belong (Russell & Fish, 2016). The aim of the proposed autoethnography is to critically engage with my personal reflections to explore my sense of belonging—in my family and in the gay community—and how this belonging shaped and influenced my self-acceptance after having experienced family rejection due to coming out.

The research objectives are as follows:

1. To describe, explore and analyse the developments and experiences within and between various sociocultural domains influenced by heterosexually organized society which includes my nuclear family.
2. To critically engage with personal experiences related to friends, interactions with the gay community, and romantic relationships all of which framed and influenced my sense of belonging, and self-acceptance.
3. To make use of Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation model as well the Whitings' Model for Psychocultural Research to integrate and make sense of the interactions between the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural domains under exploration in this study.

1.4. Structure of the report

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to mental health in the queer community, the purpose of the study, as well as the aims and objectives that will be engaged with throughout the study.

Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature to explore previous research relating to society, the self, and the self in relation to society. This will be done through discussing a brief history of the queer community in South Africa, themes related to heterosexism, internalized heterosexism, and shame, belonging and the complexity of belonging in the context of the gay community and rejection and, lastly, self-acceptance.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology of the study. Specifically, the autoethnographic approach used in this study is described. In doing so, the data collection is described as well as the data analysis by thematic analysis, and the measures used to augment rigor. This chapter will also include a discussion of Cass's model of homosexual identity formation (Cass, 1979) and the Whiting Model for Psychocultural Research (Whiting, 1975).

Chapter 4 presents and discusses the findings of the study organized according to themes identified in the analysis process and the related research on identified themes.

Chapter 5 summarizes the findings and presents my personal reflections on the research process. The limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the relationship between queer individuals and a heterosexually organized society. The chapter will first provide a brief overview of queer history in South Africa before discussing the ongoing challenges of being gay in a society that subscribes to heteronormative standards. These ongoing challenges are often presented as emotional and psychological challenges, relationship difficulties, and the interplay between rejection and belonging. Finally, the complexities of belonging in the gay community are addressed, elucidating the interplay of the self-other dynamic and the implications of this on self-acceptance.

2.2. Queer history in South Africa

South Africa is arguably one of the more progressive cases on the African continent with regards to the increasing visibility of queer issues and advancement of queer rights. Grounded in a tradition of advocacy and activism, and buttressed by the inclusiveness of the Constitution, discrimination against marginalized groups including the queer community has received increasing attention since the advent of democracy in 1994.

During the apartheid regime, in the 1980s, South Africa was ostracized and criticised, internationally, for the mistreatment and human rights violations enacted against people of colour as well as other marginalized groups (Isaack & Judge, 2004; De Ru, 2013; Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Moreau, 2017). In response to the injustices meted out during apartheid, the gay and lesbian movement began to emerge as an ally in the interests of promoting and fighting for social justice in South Africa. Amongst the first was the Gay Association of South Africa (GASA) that was established in Johannesburg in 1982. However, GASA was criticised for its preponderance of white, middle class gay men, and was often associated with pro-apartheid ideologies (De Ru, 2013). Other movements recognized the need for discrimination to be abolished in all minority groups, and in Cape Town, in 1986, the Lesbian and Gays against

Oppression (LAGO) advocacy group was formed, which was explicit in their views pertaining to the apartheid regime and allied with anti-apartheid movements (De Ru, 2013). In 1988, the Gay and Lesbian Organization of the Witwatersrand (GLOW) was formed by former Delmas treason trialist Simon Nkoli. His activism in this respect was partly responsible for the ANC agreeing to include gay rights in the South African constitution in 1996. Following this, in the Western Cape, the Organization of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA) was formed, replacing LAGO (De Ru, 2013), which was buttressed by the National Coalition for Gay and Lesbian Equality (NCGLE). During the drafting of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, gay and lesbian advocacy groups such as these ensured that no minority group would be discriminated against, including on the basis of sexual orientation. As a result, gay and lesbian rights were explicitly recognized and included in the proposed Bill of Rights (Isaack & Judge, 2004; De Ru, 2013; Moreau, 2017), contributing to a uniquely inclusive Constitution, by global standards. Although less prominent, in addition to sexual orientation, transgender and intersex persons rights are also protected in the South African legal and social apparatus. For example, the Equality Act's definition of 'sex' includes intersex. Furthermore, transgendered persons can apply to change their sex description and can access gender transitioning resources, although the degree and ease of access is heavily dependent on socioeconomic status.

Although the Bill of Rights within the South African Constitution explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, there have been several social surveys representing dissonant feelings towards queer orientation amongst South Africans. The South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS), for example, conducted between 2003 and 2007 found that 80% of those surveyed, older than 16 years, expressed the view that queer orientation is not accepted (Roberts & Reddy, 2008). Likewise, 78% of the respondents of a study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) in 2004 viewed queer orientation as unacceptable (Koraan & Geduld, 2015). In a more recent survey by the HSRC, 72% of the respondents regarded gay activity as morally wrong (Mahomed & Trangoš, 2016). The Progressive Prudes study indicated similar results regarding South Africans' attitudes towards queer

orientations (HSRC & Other Foundation, 2016). These surveys' findings align with international surveys from the Pew Research Centre which states that in 2014 and 2019, respectively, 61% and 54% of South African respondents thought that queer orientation should not be socially accepted.

Even though non-discrimination is entrenched in law, the sociocultural organization of South African society remains predominantly heterosexist and homophobic, perpetuating the ongoing oppression and victimization of sexual minority communities, which includes acts of discrimination, hate crimes, and hate speech (Judge & Nel, 2018). The continued discrimination against sexual minorities in a heterosexually organized society is argued to have generated a sense of internalized oppression, mental ill health, social isolation, and distress, as well as fear of rejection (Victor & Nel, 2016; Russell & Fish, 2016). For example, research within the South African context has identified that prejudice and discrimination towards the gay community is associated with experiences of depression, substance use disorders, and suicidal ideation (Polders et al., 2008; Nel & Victor, 2016).

In as much as changes have been made at the policy level, real-world experiences of anti-queer prejudice and discrimination continue to be an occurrence. Polders et al. (2008) attribute this to the beliefs and values of mainstream South African society being rooted persistently in heterosexist constructions of gender defined in terms of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia. This is, for example, reflected in the recent death by suicide of a 15-year-old learner in Soweto following mockery by a schoolteacher regarding his declared gay orientation (Mbhele, 2022). Understanding mainstream sociocultural norms regarding sexuality is the cornerstone of understanding rejection related to sexuality, belonging, and self-acceptance. By recognizing that heterosexism continues to be prevalent in South African society is to also recognize that there is an in-group (heterosexuals) and an out-group (those that defy heterosexual norms). What is conveyed, ultimately, is that heterosexism is part of the mainstream culture that others everything that is—or appears to be—not-heterosexual or noncompliant with the dominant narrative of heteromasculinity.

2.3. Heterosexually-orientated society and being gay

Heteronormative societies function according to social ideologies that prioritise traditional heterosexual values and practices as the norm, thus relegating queerness—due to its fundamental violation of heterosexual norms—into the realm of the 'abnormal' which is, hence, ostracized. By virtue of group membership, this differentiation between 'normal' and 'abnormal', influences individual group members' sense of self through their association and affiliation with the standards and roles assigned to those groups (Rosa & Waldus, 2012; Cho & Knowles, 2013). The 'normal' is often defined in terms of heterosexual norms and standards which is perceived as dominant (Cho & Knowles, 2013). Discrimination against the 'abnormal' is used by the dominant group as a tool to sustain its dominance and preserve its self-concept, rejecting the views of others (Rosa & Waldus, 2012).

Nel and Joubert (1997, p.20) define heterosexism as "the attitude which views heterosexuality as the only acceptable, normal pattern for human relationships and tends to view all other sexual relationships as either subordinate to, or perversions of, heterosexual relationships". Polders et al. (2006) postulate that societally maintained normative gender roles have perpetuated attitudes of homophobia and hegemonic masculinity, by which misalignment or deviation from heterosexuality requires punishment. Homophobia, defined as "negative and/or fearful attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality" (Buston & Hart, 2001, p.1), stems from heterosexist ideologies and perpetuates acts of discrimination and violence against those perceived to be queer. However, it is not heterosexuality itself that causes violence; rather, it is heterosexist ideology that supports and encourages violence and discrimination based on its positioning of heterosexuality as superior and 'normal' in relation to queer orientation (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Due to dominating heterosexual group norms, groups that do not subscribe to these norms are perceived as abnormal and are othered, potentially resulting in gender role conflict, internalized heterosexism, and heterosexist discrimination (Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013).

Although heterosexism as a topic is relatively well-represented in the theoretical and empirical literature, my autoethnography offers a unique perspective by considering the influence hegemonic and heterosexist ideologies have on the family unit, which in turn influences the way the family responds to the gay individual's coming out experience. It is also noted that South African queer narratives are often represented in popular discourse or may even be shared from a fictional perspective as with *Queer Africa*, for example. Oluwafemi Adeagbo (2015) commented on *Queer Africa* as being set in patriarchal African societies in which authors tell stories of the challenges queer people experience in heterosexually organized societies. While such platforms are crucial to voicing queer stories, using an autoethnography as a qualitative method allows the research to transcend colloquial storytelling and produce academically robust literature that interrogates the status quo and challenges dominant ideologies and how they shape individual experience. It is to this end that I hope to make a contribution with this study.

Due to the interplay between family and friends, one's community, and the internal processing of one's sexuality, the coming out experience is not a linear process, and my autoethnography highlights the impact one's childhood experiences can have on one's sense of self, which can predispose one to rejection sensitivity even before coming out. The complexity of belonging is rooted in social arenas in which one feels accepted and valued (or not). This, however, is bound up in past and present relational experiences that have already set a precedent for the way a gay individual relates to others in everyday situations. As such, the emotional capacity one has to try fitting in to heterosexist communities or mainstream society is based on an inauthentic representation of their sexuality which is often a way to protect against rejection. However, as noted in Chapter 1, living an inauthentic life can come at a cost to one's mental health and the ability to develop healthy relationships with family, friends, and intimate partners. The following paragraphs will explore the origins of internalized homonegativity and other relational and emotional challenges as a consequence of being a gay man and not being accepted in a heterosexually organized society with a complex sense of belonging.

2.4. (Not) Fitting in with heterosexist ideology

By virtue of heterosexuality being the assumed norm in mainstream society, queer individuals—by defying this assumption—perform the act of 'coming out' as a way of situating themselves and orienting others to their difference. With the changing of policies and the de-pathologizing of queer orientation the coming out experience has been identified by researchers as an integral aspect of a healthy gay identity (McCormick, 2013). However, coming out narratives often highlight the challenges associated with the social, economic, and political context as predisposing factors for non-acceptance (Isaack & Judge, 2004; McCormick, 2013; Livingston & Fourie, 2016; Moreau, 2017). The feelings of non-acceptance may extend to individuals' struggles with disclosing their sexuality due to social expectations informed by ideologies defined by heterosexism, hegemonic masculinity and homophobia which serve to foster fears around rejection and complicating one's sense of belonging (Guittar, 2013; Semon et al., 2017).

The systemic oppression of sexualities that are deemed noncompliant with the dominant heterosexual culture ultimately suppresses authentic feelings and expressions for many queer people (Cook et al., 2013; Guittar, 2014). As such, the process of holding onto normality by means of hiding one's queerness has been described as a queer apology. Guittar (2013, p. 170) has defined the queer apologetic as an "individual's attempt at minimizing disapproval of, and disappointment over, their sexuality by disclosing a public identity that they feel will be more easily accepted by family and friends—or even by themselves". Guittar (2013) proposes that the individual compromises their identity as a way to ascribe to society's expectations of sexuality, which is a common process for gay men (Semon et al., 2017). The queer apologetic, however, is not inherently an apology for one's sexuality, but rather an apology that one's queer identity causes discomfort for someone else (Guittar, 2014). As such, gay men often conform to mainstream gender and sexuality norms to appear, outwardly, to be more masculine and thus heterosexual—known as heterosexual marking—to prevent causing discomfort in others in an attempt to avoid the discrimination and rejection that may come about as a result of overt expressions of queer orientation (Cook et al., 2013; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016). Making sense of

one's sexuality and the expression thereof is part of the intrapersonal challenge involved in the process of coming out (Guittar, 2014). This includes affirmation about oneself, relating to others (from a heterosexual marking presentation), and the presentation of the body. Hence, being confronted with heterosexist notions that contradict one's queer identification can result in dissonance and spur on the adoption of the queer apologetic. The need—not the desire—to portray a more masculine sense of self to avoid discrimination becomes a process of internalized heterosexism (Giuttar, 2013; Morandini et al., 2015).

According to heteronormative standards of identity, the way an individual outwardly presents themselves through their appearance and behavior is a signifier of their sexuality (Duncan, 2007). This assumption is found in historical and political opinions of what a queer or heterosexual body looks like in order to establish distinct boundaries and reify the otherness of queer identification. This has resulted in the promotion of homophobia and, hence, the modification or management of one's appearance as a means of controlling others' evaluations. Oftentimes, this involves rejecting more effeminate self-presentations—by both queer and non-queer individuals—to avoid being typecast as gay (Levitan et al., 2019). However, Levitan et al. (2019) challenge the idea of a masculine gay body by asserting that overcompensating for one's queer characteristics by appearing more masculine is a form of rejecting one's queerness and propagates anti-queer ideologies. Rejecting feminine characteristics or appearances as a gay man perpetuates problematic masculinities by denying, and not celebrating, the idea that men can, and do, embody varying degrees of femininity. As Harris (1999, p.99) has indicated,

> [the gay community] did not succeed in freeing ourselves from our belief in the heterosexual male's evolutionary superiority...In fact, we did precisely the opposite, and became our own worst enemies, harsh, homophobic critics of the campy demeanor of the typical queen. In the process we intensified the instability of the gay body.

The Western idea of the perfect male body is an athletic and muscular physique, with minimal body hair and low body fat. This idealized body type

tends to be a cornerstone for attraction in the gay community that focuses on grooming, excessive exercise, and ultimately looking better than heterosexual men (Duncan, 2007). However, beauty standards are influenced by societal norms dominated by heteronormative, Western, and white perspectives (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011; Kvalen et al., 2016). Within the gay community, an illustration of beauty standards is found in widespread media, interpersonal experiences (such as gyms and clubs), and pornography (Kvalen et al., 2016). Although contentious for some, pornography, for example, provides a safe space to explore and express queer desires without the risk of being shamed and rejected. Pornography geared towards queer men and women—although not without its problems—has facilitated an expression of same-sex body image, intimacy, and relating, that was not otherwise available in the mainstream which favoured heterosexual intimacy. However, the masculine ideal portrayed within pornographic imagery, rooted more deeply in attempts to stave off femininity and, hence, rejection, remains unattainable for many, possibly leading to feelings of failure, inadequacy, inferiority and not belonging. Research reports that gay men who compare themselves, physically, to others may be at greater risk of lower self-esteem, uncertainty, a negative self-perception, and body dissatisfaction when they are unable to meet the so-called standards of beauty and attractiveness (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011; Kvalen et al., 2016).

Regardless of whether the body is perceived as a rejection of femininity or a celebration of gay men being masculine, the premise remains that there is an interplay between masculine and feminine attributes in the gay community. As Ravenhill and de Visser (2019) have suggested, masculinity—as perceived by heterosexist society—is an embodiment of the ‘ideal’ way to be a man, in which men are powerful and independent as opposed to femininity which embodies vulnerability and being in need of protection and dominance. Ravenhill and de Visser (2019) discuss hegemonic masculinity as a way to dominate women (and, hence, the feminine), and viewed it as a toxic form of masculinity. However, same sex attraction and relationships negate the normed hegemonic view of masculinity. As such, gay relationships are the antithesis of heterosexist norms which further propagates discrimination and hostility

towards gay men, especially effeminate gay men. This is consistent with the notion that gay men may unconsciously work towards a more muscular physique to fit into a superficial image of hegemonic masculinity to deter feelings and experiences of rejection, thus proving their manliness, essentially striving for acceptance and staving off social rejection, and feelings of worthlessness (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011).

Kvalen et al. (2016) found that in the gay community there is a feeling between being a subject to and an object of one's own body in comparison to the ideal body type and the prevailing feeling of sexual objectification. This obsession associated with the gay body may be conceived as a manifestation of a desire for belonging, in which physical connection compensates for a lack of emotional connection. Duncan (2007, p. 333) argued "that gay men are more vulnerable to image dissatisfaction and eating disorders as a result of a hostile social world and homophobia and therefore project homophobic feelings onto their bodies, punishing themselves with excessive exercise, bingeing, starving and purging". Duncan (2007) highlights that the methods used to attain physical attraction are used to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in the gay community. This may correspond with the underlying notion of the queer apologetic in that having a muscular and lean physique brings attention from the gay community but also fits into heterosexist norms. Ravenhill & de Visser (2019) argue that due to fear of rejection and shame inherited from not being accepted, and being ostracized, for a stigmatized sexual orientation has resulted in gay men hiding their feminine characteristics or physical expressions. The attempt to hide one's queerness because it is associated with effeminate attributes is linked to heterosexist ideologies projected by society that have been internalized in the gay community. The heterosexual norms and standards entrenched within mainstream society may have implications for the sense of belonging of the queer community.

2.5. Internalized heterosexism, shame, and rejection

Holding apologetic feelings about one's sexuality is associated with negative heterosexist, oppressive and discriminatory views and attitudes related to

sexuality that gay men have internalized—referred to as internalized heterosexism or internalized homophobia (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). This may be perceived as a protective strategy in which attempting to blend into the society that instigates discrimination and microaggressions is used as a survival tactic (Calvo et al., 2021). This process of internalized heterosexism and, subsequently, self-stigmatization is further described by Szymanski and Ikizler (2013, p. 212) as “internal and insidious”, whereby the perception of the queer self has been demolished and shunned due to negative projections from a heterosexist culture. When these ideologies about the self and society are continuously experienced, as with ongoing rejection, shame, guilt, and micro-aggressions, the more the group and the individual becomes convinced that they themselves are wrong and abnormal, and worthy of shame and rejection (Szymanski & Ikizler, 2013). The interplay between discrimination and microaggressions, and internalization, impacts the marginalized individuals’ psychological processes (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). This may include maladaptive coping mechanisms such as risky sexual behavior, substance use, loss of social support, rumination, hyper-arousal to stressors, and negative self-schemas (Hatzenbuehler, 2009). Furthermore, on a psychological level, when internalization occurs, discrimination fosters feelings of shame and inferiority, and elicits self-blame (Puckett et al., 2017). In addition, attempting to avoid social connections due to fears of victimization, discrimination, or rejection, may exacerbate poor psycho-social outcomes, feelings of powerlessness, confusion, and helplessness (Bandermann & Szymanski, 2014). Cho and Knowles (2013) describe this as the egocentric process of social projection (i.e., negative heterosexual evaluations of the gay community) in which social judgment of the self-other relationship is introjected and assimilated as the self.

Traditional patriarchal and heterosexist societal standards and norms, entrenched unconsciously and intergenerationally, sets the precedent for relating to family and social groups (Fishbane, 2019). Sigel and Hartzell (2003, p. 28) state that “when unresolved issues are writing our life story, we are not our own autobiographers, we are merely recorders of how the past continues, often without our awareness, to intrude upon our present experience and shape

our future direction". According to Sanscartier and MacDonald (2019), society's heterosexism permeates the individual's sense of self and presents itself as internalized heterosexism that is a component of sexual minority stress. Understanding how heterosexist ideologies have been internalized by gay individuals and communities could provide an explanation of the association between rejection, self-acceptance, and sense of belonging (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019). The current study hopes to make a contribution in this regard.

Self-deprecation and devalued perspectives of the self often result from internalized negative feedback received—implicitly or explicitly—by queer individuals in the context of victimization and rejection by mainstream society (Garnets et al., 1990; Rosario et al., 2009; Rosser et al., 2008). Fear of anticipated rejection is described in Meyer's (2003) Rejection Sensitivity Model as part of the challenges contributing to mental ill-health within the queer community. The rejection by significant others, according to Baams et al. (2020), experienced within the gay community may lead to inter- and intrapersonal challenges rooted in fear and anxiety. This forms part of a process of anticipation of future rejections—perceived or real—inherent to living in a society organized according to heteronormative values (Baams et al., 2020). While anticipating rejection from historically discriminatory communities is to be expected, what is particularly detrimental in regard to rejection sensitivity is experiencing rejection from safe spaces in which one would ordinarily expect to receive support, comfort and acceptance, such as the family (Johnson & Yarhouse, 2013; Baams et al., 2020).

When the feeling of being rejected is left unresolved, there is often shame which accompanies the rejection which is internalized and reflected as self-blame for 'being wrong' (Johnson & Yarhouse, 2013; Dorahy et al., 2014) and failing to meet societal standards and expectations (Lewis et al., 1994). Shame is described by Brown (2006, p.45) as "an intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging", and may present outwards as anger, resentment, anxiety, or depression (Johnson & Yarhouse, 2013). Distinguished from guilt, which is felt

in response to a particular event or behavior, shame is self-oriented and stems from being made to feel 'wrong' for not subscribing to societal norms (Brown, 2006) and is associated with a perspective of the self as being bad, inferior, or defective (Dorahy et al., 2014; Leeming & Boyle, 2013). Shame is frequently experienced as a response to social rejection (van Vliet, 2009, Johnson & Yarhouse, 2013; Leeming & Boyle, 2013). As such, shame is socially determined and integrated into the self, creating an emotional disconnect between the individual deviating from the norm and mainstream society (Brown, 2006). As a result of being shamed, the individual may feel isolated, trapped, and powerless (Brown, 2006; Johnson & Yarhouse, 2013), and more so, individuals internalize their shame as an intrinsic fault or inadequacy in themselves (Elison & Partridge, 2012). Social rejection is made to feel as though it is a rejection of the self. One is made to feel worthless and insignificant as if they are not accepted or acceptable for whom they are. This is what precipitates shame because it is internalized. It is not guilt for having done something that someone does not like; it is being shamed for being unacceptable, abhorrent, and deviant. The negative perceptions of the self are often based on socio-cultural expectations imposed upon individuals throughout their lives (Brown, 2006). Consequently, shame creates a sense of disconnection between individuals (Retzinger & Scheff, 2000) as it relates to social experiences of discrimination and rejection (Lewis et al., 1994). Shame is often experienced by marginalized groups when attempting to align with mainstream societal norms to prevent experiences of discrimination and rejection, which may be anticipated. Attempting to fit in to societal norms often leads to threatened attachments and connections. The desire for the approval of others and subsequently the external validation of acceptance, threatens an authentic sense of belonging by the maladjustment of one's sense of self (van Vliet, 2019; Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017).

Attempting to fit in threatens the sense of self, and the internalization of shame stemming from rejection may result in an unconscious process of self-protection through denial, suppression, or isolation (Dohary et al., 2014). Nathanson's (1992) Compass of Shame model frames such reactions to a shaming situation as a means for the individual to cope with the resulting painful

negative affect they may experience (Elison et al., 2006). These negative coping strategies associated with shame are described and characterised as Withdrawal, Attack Self, Avoidance and Attack Other (Elison et al., 2006). The individual, at times, is convinced that the situation that elicits shame is valid and internalizes shame as a result (Elison at al., 2006). Consequently, the individual withdraws from social interactions (Elison & Partridge, 2012), which threatens a sense of belonging and self-acceptance. By internalizing their shame, the Attack Self pole describes individuals as perceiving themselves as inadequate. This correlates with self-deprecation, self-criticism, and self-directed anger. In an attempt to avoid shame, individuals then try to change or deny whom they are in order to gain approval (Elison & Partridge, 2012). At the Avoidance pole, there is no internalization of shame as the individual distracts themselves through denial or maladjusted coping strategies. The concern with avoidance, according to research by Hequembourg and Dearing (2013), is that is prevents the acknowledgement and working through of the shame, which are crucial in the process of self-acceptance. Furthermore, when individuals externalize their feeling of shame, as recognized by the Attack pole, they act out against others who they feel victimized or rejected by. This attempt is to feel more accepted by invalidating others (Elison et al., 2006).

A queer individual's conflict with their sexual identity in regard to introjected feelings must be considered in the context of heteronormative standards, which facilitates rejection that fosters shame (Moody et al., 2018). These standards are imposed on sexually marginalized groups, informing what they should be, who they should be, and how they should be in society (Brown, 2006). When the gay self comes into contact with heteronormative society and its associated standards and expectations, the dissonance resulting from tension between the true self and what is expected, may be threatening to the wellbeing of marginalized groups (Murphy & Kiffin-Petersen, 2017).

2.6. Rejection and mainstream society as an object

The processes of projection and introjection (Klein, 1946) may underlie many of the misplaced feelings of inadequacy and inferiority for some individuals in the gay community. According to McWilliams (2011), there are aspects of

others (e.g., peer groups and family) that permeate the psychological self of the individual. Often, individuals experience and express themselves in response to how others perceive them which influences their own self-perception. Furthermore, when the perceptions and opinions of others are introjected by the individual, projective identification may result (McWilliams, 2011). In this way, introjection is the process through which the projections of others are assimilated into the self of the recipient. This occurs most often when the recipient of the projections is attached to objects (e.g., family, and social milieu) whose perspectives about them are considered important and form part of their self-identification (McWilliams, 2011). Projected ideologies based on discrimination, victimization, rejection, and superiority (e.g., heterosexism) that have been internalized create a negative perception of the self (Nuttal, 2000; Kibel, 2019; McWilliams, 2011). In Nuttal's (2000, p.225) view, "the relationship of minority communities to the broader society both reflects and evokes the internal object relations…of the individuals in those communities. In particular, the gay community…has had a turbulent relationship with the wider society".

Just as the parent serves as the object to the infant, so society as well as its institutions (e.g., family, government)—and ideologies (e.g. heterosexism)—could be viewed as an object for those living within its ambit (Hernández de Tubert, 2006). As such, when the 'infant' (i.e., the gay individual) is rejected by the object (i.e. family, heterosexist society) for deviating from the norm, the gay individual may internalize the idea that their sexuality is deviant and as a result, that they themselves are deviant and 'wrong', and develop emotional conflict for being dependent on an object that is abusive (McWilliams, 2011). Although Fairbairn (1954) considered that establishing emotional stability was a result of experiencing a sense of attachment and warmth from the object, when the child (i.e. gay individual) internalizes not feeling safe or nurtured, those internalized representations and perceptions of being 'wrong' or deserving of rejection based on not conforming to mainstream societal standards of sexuality, are unconsciously lived out throughout one's life through relationships (Morey, 2005; McWilliams, 2011). Nuttal (2000) has further postulated that, for some gay individuals, mainstream

society is experienced as the bad object, which propagates feelings of shame, not belonging, and being unaccepted.

More so, psychological attachment suggests that humans are fundamentally social, and remain interdependent throughout life (Fishbane, 2019). Thus, when considering society as an object, it follows that there is an interdependence and inter-influence between society—as the object—and the individual. When the object provides a safe and secure environment that is founded upon nurturance, structure and acceptance, a secure attachment develops that promotes positive emotional and social development (Fishbane, 2019). However, when continuous and prevalent rejection continues, the distress that one feels towards the object drives the individual to find an alternative object that will provide that safety and security, however maladaptive this may be (Morey, 2005; Kibel, 2019).

What may occur after an unaccepted coming out experience, is the rejected individual, such as myself, may reach out to the gay community in the hopes of acceptance and belonging. Yet, with an already established insecure attachment (i.e., through rejecting and unaccepting family and friends), issues of mistrust and insecurity may be elicited and can impede forming stable and meaningful connections with others. Creating connections in the gay community may counter internalized heterosexism (Calvo et al., 2021). However, the problematic and distorted self-perceptions, mistrust of others and insecurity resulting from abusive/rejecting interactions within mainstream society (the object) means that even these connections which could counteract internalized heterosexism can be experienced as threatening. In this way, what may develop, according to Sanscartier and MacDonald (2019), is a discomfort with closeness (attachment avoidance) and a perpetual fear of rejection and abandonment (attachment anxiety). On the one hand, avoidance is a process associated with the perception of others and their inability to provide support, thus not wanting to form connections. On the other hand, anxiety is the negative perception of the self that one is unlovable and will not receive support, and as such are preoccupied with the ideas of abandonment and rejection (Sanscartier & MacDonald, 2019). There are places or events in the gay community that

promote and celebrate queer identities (and, consequently, connection and belonging) such as gay bars, clubs, and gay pride events. However, there are also spaces that represent heterosexist ideologies and stereotypes that create anxiety around rejection for gay individuals such as sporting events and places of religion. These experiences of anxiety about perceived rejection or discrimination based on a place or event for gay individuals are often triggered by previous experiences of trauma such as micro-aggressions, rejection, discrimination, and violence. These very real negative experiences often disrupt the psyche and lead to a disrupted sense of self (Connolly, 2011). As such, continued traumas, such as those of rejection and othering experienced by the gay community in relation to the object (i.e., mainstream society) perpetuate maladaptive coping mechanisms and an insecurity that strains interpersonal and intrapersonal connections (Isobel et al., 2019).

Rejection is an act of exclusion by others who have little desire or need to include another into their social group or to be involved in a relationship and is the antithesis of acceptance (DeWall & Bushman, 2011). Baumeister & Leary (1995), spoke of the need to belong and how people's emotions and behaviors are influenced by how they are perceived and evaluated by others (Leary, 2021). The concern for some individuals is the doubt that they will have meaningful connections with others by creating an acceptable impression. This concern, according to Leary (2021), with others' perceptions of them is the basis for a desire for social acceptance and belonging. As such, an inability to impress, or to fit in, with a desired group creates a threat to one's experience of acceptance and belonging. If one is not deemed to be acceptable to be part of a social group, their sense of belonging is diminished which instigates negative emotions, such as loneliness, hurt feelings, sadness, jealousy, and social anxiety (Leary, 2021). As such, the fundamental need for belonging is wanting to be included by others and to be accepted.

Acceptance, however, is shaped by the situatedness of groups (gay community) within broader social systems (heterosexist society) because these systems determine what is deemed acceptable and—by extension—what and who is, and should be, rejected. This influences, in turn, how those who embody

'unacceptable' characteristics act upon society and come to see themselves in relation to society. The queer apologetic exemplifies this in order to appear more acceptable to mainstream society but also more desirable within the gay community where mainstream norms are internalized. This, however, sets the stage for what can be conceptualized as a double rejection when one defies these norms—rejection both from mainstream society but also from those sectors within the gay community itself that have internalized mainstream norms and standards. Double rejection, therefore, highlights the complexity of belonging in the gay community wherein individuals may experience disapproval or devaluation rather than safety. This rejection may be particularly acute for gay individuals who seek refuge in the gay community due to initial rejection from their families after coming out. Because of the internalized homophobia within the gay community, it is itself not always a safe space and does not offer that belonging to everyone who then experiences a second rejection from a space they thought was a safe refuge. As an example, Hunt et al., (2016) mention that a majority of (masculine) gay men possess a negative attitude towards effeminate gay men, establishing discrimination and prejudice within the gay community. The process of internalizing homonegativity is based not only on the gender norms and standards established by hegemonic and heterosexist ideologies of mainstream society but is also due to the rejection of effeminacy within the gay community itself. It may be this double rejection that promotes an impaired sense of belonging and the challenges associated with self-acceptance. This autoethnography will explore my own sense of belonging and challenges with self-acceptance following my coming out experience that led to rejection by my family. This will be achieved through engaging my personal narrative and analyzing everyday interactions between the self, peers, family dynamics and broader society. The autoethnography will add to previous research literature by focusing on two processes that occur concurrently: firstly, by the subjective experience of not being accepted as a gay man and subsequently experiencing challenges with belonging; secondly, considering the role mainstream society has on a family unit which predisposes one to their understanding and experience of how sexuality is represented and how differing sexualities are accepted—or not—from an ecological (and relational) point of view.

2.7. Belonging

Belonging is associated with feeling "at home" and safe (Udah & Singh, 2019, p. 846), and involves emotional attachment, identification, familiarity, and security (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging is entrenched in psycho-social interactions with the self and others where Calhoun (2003, p. 536) states that "…it is impossible not to belong to social groups, relations, or culture…real people…are necessarily situated in particular webs of belonging [and] people are implicated in social actions which they are not entirely free to choose…". Belonging is regarded as a fundamental human need (Peers & Fleer, 2014; Halse, 2018) that elicits feelings of calmness, contentment, and happiness. A sense of belonging is associated with positive effects on psychosocial well-being including lower levels of violence as well as reduced risky sexual behavior, substance use, suicidality, and emotional distress (Halse, 2018). However, when individuals feel they do not belong, there is an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and loneliness, as well behavioral and relational challenges (Halse, 2018). Research recognizes that a sense of belonging influences one's sense of self, and identity development in relation to society from a political, moralistic, economic, and social perspective (Halse, 2018). According to the Commonwealth of Australia (cited in Peers, 2018, p. 358) the importance of belonging in adolescents lies in its role in shaping identity:

> Experiencing belonging – knowing where and with whom you belong – is integral to human existence. Children belong first to a family, a cultural group, a neighborhood, and a wider community. Belonging acknowledges children's interdependence with others and the basis of relationships in defining identities. In early childhood, and throughout life, relationships are crucial to a sense of belonging. Belonging is central to being and becoming in that it shapes who children are and who they can become.

Furthermore, belonging, according to Yuval-Davis (2006) is constructed along three analytical levels: a) social locations; b) an individual's identifications and emotional attachments; and c) ethical and political value systems with which people judge their own and others' belonging. First, social location refers to the social milieu and intersects along race, gender, sexuality, and class. These categories elicit the differences between in- and out-groups based on

hierarchical systems determined by the dominating societal norms and standards. Secondly, the individual's emotional attachment to their social milieu impacts their sense of belonging. For example, feelings of emotional safety, acceptance, fraternity, and patriotism creates a positive emotional connection of feeling one belongs to the group, in what Ahmed (2004, p. 27) refers to as "belonging as an emotion". These emotions are usually shared and promotes solidarity. However, feelings of otherness and discrimination, creates negative emotions within the group that alienates others and therefore does not promote a sense of belonging (Halse, 2018). As such, belonging is formed with the emotional connection to others in a community. It also speaks of the narratives individuals repeatedly tell themselves shaping the perception of how they feel about themselves in relation to a group or community that either promotes a feeling of self-acceptance or threatens self-worth. Lastly, Yuval-Davis (2006, p.204) refers to the "politics of belonging" which focuses on "who belongs and who does not belong". The politics of belonging involves a hegemonic system that promotes marginalization of groups that is lived and experienced in daily encounters with institutions, places, and people (Halse, 2018).

The politics of belonging is reflected in my research through microaggressions experienced at school, home, and through media. For example, use of derogatory words in school towards boys (and myself) such as "sissy", "fag" or even "gay" have been entrenched in society as acceptable hegemonic terms to ensure those who are indeed queer understand that they do not belong in groups that are heterosexual with prominent homophobia (Cilliers, 2017). This is no different to home life when parents react negatively towards alternative sexualities. These more immediate experiences of "who belongs and who does not belong" (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.204) in what Bronfenbrenner (1977) would refer to as the microsystem are shaped by the broader macrosystem represented by, for example, the attitude of Durban Mayor, Obed Mlaba, comparing Durban and Cape Town, stating that Cape Town "can stay with its moffies and its gays" (Boykin, 2001 cited in Francis & Msibi, 2011, p. 162). Or, Jacob Zuma describing queer orientation as "un-African", claiming that, "Same sex marriage is a disgrace to the nation and to God. When I was growing up unqingili (homosexuals) could not stand in front

of me." (Tapfumaneyi, 2006, p. 2). These are societal attitudes that, although in the background, exert considerable influence on the individual experiences of the queer communities in South Africa.

2.8. The complexity of belonging in the context of the gay community

The interpersonal and psychological implications of rejection from within families of origin underscores the significance of seeking and needing connectedness and belonging for queer individuals. Rejection denies belonging and propagates shame; it follows then that finding belonging could counteract shame, because belonging is associated with acceptance of the self. Indeed, Russell and Fish (2016) highlight this as a protective factor and have shown in their review that queer youth who had sexual minority friends—and, therefore, experienced a sense of belonging—were less likely to be depressed, and that the engagement with this cohort of friends attenuated the effects of queer related victimization. It is noteworthy that this is attributed to the fact that the support accessed in such groups is affirmative of sexual orientation, rather than general forms of support. Wilson and Cariola (2019) note that this kind of support, found in and among queer groups and communities, is a crucial platform for solidarity in the face of isolation from family through the provision of a space for identity-affirming connectedness and belonging. Belonging refers not only to integration into a system, but also to the feeling of being needed, valued, and significant. The queer community can therefore play a crucial role in the identity affirmation and mental wellbeing of its members through facilitating belonging and, therefore, counteracting shame.

It is thus important to recognize the structural circumstances in which queer individuals are embedded, paying attention to the interpersonal experiences and intrapersonal resources as potential sources of risk and resilience (Russell & Fish, 2016). Erikson (1968) highlights the context of the social environment in which identity is shaped, and as such, how identity and a sense of unity or belonging may be impacted by the exchange between the individual and their sociocultural context (Konik & Stewart, 2004). As such, the

process of self-acceptance in relation to others highlights the interaction between the individual and their social milieu as contributing to a positive sense of self, or a distorted sense of self. The question, however, remains regarding the experiences of those who are rejected from social environments that are meant to be supportive and accepting—the family—and enter another social environment—the gay community—in search of this belonging and acceptance but are met, instead, with further rejection. It is the intention of my autoethnographic account to interrogate this process through my own experiences in this regard.

Being gay often involves learning to live in a socially oppressive heterosexual and masculinized society (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Morison et al., 2016; Stewart & Strathern, 2002). Due to the discrimination often encountered, queer individuals are socially excluded and may feel that they lack a sense of belonging (McCallum & McLaren, 2011). May (2011) comments on the way in which belonging to a community promotes self-identification by connecting people of 'sameness'. As such, when one self-discloses their sexual identity, becoming immersed in the so-called gay (sub)culture allows the individual to freely express their identity and gain a sense of (perceived) belonging within a community of acceptance and sameness (Stewart & Strathern, 2002) which, as highlighted above, is of particular significance in the context of experiences of rejection by families following coming out. The socio-cultural milieu therefore plays a major role in either promoting a positive or negative sense of self in large part due to the sense of belonging that this may—or may not—foster in individuals.

Through experiences such as rejection and discrimination, some individuals feel that a need to belong is not necessary and that self-reliance is safer (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006; MacDonald & Borsock, 2010). Consequently, gay individuals who experience discrimination and ostracism from heterosexual society often struggle with low self-esteem, a sense of a meaningless existence, and struggle with a sense of belonging (Ren et al., 2018). However, Carvallo and Gabriel (2006) provided evidence that self-reliance in individuals, although protective against ostracism and oppression, does not negate the

need to belong and may impact psychological wellbeing as people who feel they belong are reportedly happier as well as psychologically and physically healthier and have higher levels of self-esteem (Carvallo & Gabriel, 2006). Thus, those who have come to engage in self-reliance as a defensive strategy in response to experiences of rejection and not feeling a sense of belonging may be at risk of poorer psychological health.

Adopting an autoethnographic approach to my research assists in filling the gap that prior research may not have addressed. Due to the qualitative nature of an autoethnography, the subjective lived experience which is used in the analytic process is vastly different from quantitative studies which may create emotional distance between the research topic and the reader. More so, previous autoethnographic research that speak of the gay experience, belonging, and acceptance have focused on belonging and identity (Hodgins, 2018), cross-cultural and sexual identity experiences (Kedar, 2013), navigating sexuality and masculinity in school sports (Carless, 2012), as well as the South African perspective of the coming out experience and bullying (Cilliers, 2018). My research has incorporated a multilevel perspective that identifies factors affecting one's sense of belonging as part of one's perception of acceptance before the coming out experience that is heavily influenced by South African and patriarchal societal standards and ideologies of sexuality that infiltrate the home environment (Francis & Msibi, 2011). Feeling accepted and thus having a sense of belonging is identified as having an impact on self-acceptance and the relationship between the self and others following an unaccepted coming out experience. However, as it will be highlighted in my autoethnography, belonging for a gay man can be complex and is negatively impacted by rejection from mainstream society, family, and friends, which Leary (2021) describes as the effect of low perceived relational value. According to Leary (2021, p.8) relational value "refers to the degree to which people regard their relationship with another person [or community] as important, valuable, or close". My research identifies challenges that gay individuals may experience in relating to others within mainstream society that represents heterosexist ideologies, which in turn infiltrates familial dynamics regarding queer acceptance. The heterosexist ideologies that permeate the home environment is a catalyst for

the internalization process the individual experiences which affects the way one relates to the self and their social world that may not be accepting to queer orientation predisposing one to internalized homonegativity.

2.9. Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed some pertinent literature related to the research focus. In sum, although South African policy has progressed towards greater inclusivity, indicators point towards persistent societal endorsement of homophobic attitudes. South African families and other social institutions are seemingly influenced in important ways by, and serve to also reify, heterosexist ideologies that place queer individuals at risk for social rejection, feelings of shame and the absence of belonging. However, the process of finding belonging is further complicated for those who identify as gay but who do not experience acceptance from the gay community itself due to internalized homonegativity. The challenge associated with seeking acceptance and subsequently belonging in the gay community—situated, itself, within broader heteromasculine ideologies—may result in further rejection, loneliness, and superficial relationships (Hill et al., 2017). Ultimately, where individuals feel they are valued and wanted is where they have a sense of belonging that promotes self-acceptance, but to experience this is not a linear process. This study, through critical engagement with my own narrative, will explore my sense of belonging—in my family and in the gay community—and how this belonging shaped and influenced my self-acceptance after having experienced family rejection due to coming out.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter describes the research approach, design and methods used in this study. It explores the importance of narratives for queer research and subsequently the components of an autoethnography as a method for sharing those narratives. Autoethnography, as described by Ally (2020, p. 34), is "the interaction between the self (auto), ethnos (culture and social context) and graphy (the research process)". The researcher writes in the first person to express subjective experiences in relation to their socio-cultural context (Ally, 2020). These experiences are influenced by, and speak of, historical, political, cultural, and societal events (Ally, 2020) or ways of living that affects individuals' interactions with those various contexts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The nature of the autoethnography is essentially a relationship between the researcher and the reader, which encourages an interactive and personal exchange. Bochner (2002, p. 87) states that

> stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response; stories long to be used rather than analyzed, to be told and retold rather than theorized and settled, to offer lessons for further conversation rather than truths without any rivals; and stories promise the companionship of intimate detail as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts.

Yet, as a caution, Adams and Jones (2011) have suggested that mere storytelling is not sufficient to be regarded as research. However, theorising through stories correlated with the analysis of cultural perspectives is more rigorous in terms of research methodology.

3.2. The importance of queer narratives and autoethnographic research

Carless (2012) speaks to the autoethnographic process as being two-fold: firstly, provoking readers to recognize their own engagement with social-cultural processes, and secondly, aiming for connection through stories and thus removing the barrier of 'otherness'. As such, the process of reading an autoethnography is to challenge readers to intimately engage with my story,

and to, therefore, engage with their own. According to Adams and Jones (2011), the autoethnographic approach may disrupt the traditional view of what research is, and how research should be done which speaks to the way being queer disrupts the traditional views of sexuality (Adams & Jones, 2011). According to Shefer et al. (2018, p. 143) "… narratives of (un)safety speak poignantly to narratives of belonging". Belonging and social identity are very much akin to each other as, with respect to my research, the individual's acceptance within, or rejection from, heteronormative society often instigates feelings of non-belonging or exclusion (Shefer et al., 2018). Telling stories of marginalized people, however, may be perceived as challenging what society deems appropriate. Not only are narratives of the experiences of queer individuals indicative of inequalities, but they also provide a voice for advocacy to catalyse change and to bring awareness to injustices and misrepresentation of social issues. From this perspective, narratives, which may be personally, socially, or culturally influenced, are gateways to understanding identities (Epstein & Fershtman, 2018). As such, the core of autoethnographies are the narratives of marginalized minorities, providing a platform to educate and advocate. Narratives reflect the lived experiences that other research methods may overlook. *Queering Autoethnographies* by Holman-Jones and Harris (2018) reflects on the expanding use of autoethnographies as a contemporary method to contribute to political and academic literature for queer experiences. In doing so, autoethnographies are able to provide subjective queer experiences from various cultures, races, sexual identities and orientations, and have the ability to bring awareness to the challenges faced by queer communities.

Brown (2006) proposes three processes, applicable to autoethnography, that can facilitate advocacy for change and education. These processes may be used in an autoethnography to promote personal and collective growth: 1) the critical awareness continuum; 2) the reaching out continuum; 3) the speaking shame continuum. In the critical awareness continuum, awareness is brought about by recognizing the impact of socio-cultural perspectives on shaping an individual through their interactions with their social context. As such, critical awareness acknowledges a correlation between personal

experience and socio-cultural perspectives, as does an autoethnography. The reaching out continuum proposes reaching out to others to not only receive empathy, but also to give empathy. In this way, the giving and receiving of shared stories, advocating for change, and being empathic creates a sense of connection and belonging (Chisman & Brooks, 2018). When considering the speaking shame continuum, the primary function is to advocate for and educate others in a way that accurately identifies and externalizes shaming experiences (Bendure, 2014). These three processes are inherent in my research because autoethnographic narratives critically engage socio-cultural perspectives that have discriminated against others, and brings awareness through a personal, subjective, and lived experience. It is important for individuals to speak of their stories of discrimination and make sense of their history which could elicit conversations of change (Salway & Gesink, 2018). By deconstructing the experiences, an individual is able to recognize that while their personal feelings and experiences may be unique to varying degrees, they are not alone in those experiences and their feelings are valid. In this way, questions elicited from an autoethnographic approach provide an opportunity for introspection and an unfolding of experiences associated with social context that may be threatening, exposing, and eliciting of vulnerability (Synnes & Malterud, 2019). When understanding societal expectations, the purpose of an autoethnography, is to perhaps reveal meaning making associated with those societal norms, and how individual narratives are influenced by such societal expectations (Diversi & Moreira, 2016; Synness & Malterud, 2019).

3.3. Research design

This study adopted an autoethnographic approach—a variant of ethnography—which is a qualitative research methodology that situates the self of the researcher as the subject of inquiry (Adams et al., 2017). The nature of the autoethnography is rooted in self-awareness and self-transformation (Chang, 2008). Using this approach, I have critically analysed—as an expression of an insider's view within a particular social context—and written reflections on my own life experiences in relation to the research topic. My autoethnography has reflected on my struggles with self-acceptance in an unaccepting family system following 'coming-out', and its impact on interpersonal relationships with both

heterosexual and gay communities, by attempting to understand where I belong. Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 748) argue that with autoethnography, "The goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue…in conversations with ourselves [where] we explore our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values…Our accounts … showing how we changed over time as we struggled to make sense of our experience".

The key features of an autoethnography are also dependent on the way the researcher chooses to write and express themselves in relation to their experiences and the social implications thereof. Mendez (2013) describes the difference between different types of autoethnography—analytic autoethnography emphasizes writing objectively for the analysis of a particular topic and social group, whereas evocative autoethnography promotes introspection from the researcher on a selected topic which elicits a connection with the researcher's feelings and experiences from the readers. As such, an evocative autoethnography elicits a vulnerable writing style of personal experiences to draw the reader's attention, engagement, and contemplation (Crawford, 2018). However, considering the different elements of an autoethnographic approach, the narrative of my coming out experience encompasses a need for vulnerability and engagement, but it also speaks to the social dynamics of mainstream society and the gay community which critiques gender and sexuality norms and standards. The critical nature of challenging heterosexist ideologies is described by Boylorn and Orbe (2016, p.20) as a critical autoethnography approach by "incorporating three aspects of critical theory: to understand the lived experiences of real people in context, to examine social conditions and uncover oppressive power arrangements, and to fuse theory and action to challenge processes of domination". Although there are different foci associated with an analytical, evocative, or critical autoethnography, there is a systematic approach that critiques cultural dynamics that impacts certain groups of people, by linking personal experiences to political, social, and cultural issues (Wall, 2016). As such, by focusing on both social interactions and the self, what Wall (2016) refers to as a moderate autoethnographic approach has been used in this study, incorporating elements from analytical, evocative as well as critical

autoethnography. Wall (2016) speaks of the balance between capturing meaning through personal experiences and reflections and challenging collective thinking of social norms and standards, which is the product of a moderate autoethnography.

Through this, autoethnography develops a connection to the stories and contexts of people in a personal way and, in doing so, attempts to produce dialogue that may spread in an organic fashion from author to reader, provoking thoughtfulness and sharing. Furthermore, autoethnography encourages one to critically examine oneself within a given context and, through personal engagement, the reader is encouraged to critically explore and observe their own realities. The emotional content encourages indulgence in personal interaction with the narrative, which has the potential for eliciting empathic responses to the content (Mendez, 2013). Educating and informing others from an autoethnographic perspective occurs through creating a platform for emotional and empathetic identification and engagement.

Autoethnography combines aspects of autobiography and ethnography. When undertaking an autoethnography, one does not only write and reflect on the individual's life but considers specific situations or circumstances of significance within a social or cultural context. This is relevant to this study as the implications of rejection and the subsequent impact on belonging exceeds the confines of the family which itself is situated firmly within a social system informed by dominant heteronormative cultural standards. The layered account (Ellis et al., 2011) attributed to autoethnographic exploration involved emotionally engaging with my history and applying theory to facilitate academic sense-making. This was done through vignettes, reflexivity, and introspection. The timeline under investigation in my research, from 2009 (the year of my coming out) until the present, reflects the constant emergence of experiences and the continuous process of change, acceptance, and growth. The study, through its layered account, has entailed the simultaneous analysis and interpretation of abstract personal and subjective reflections on experiences as well as relevant popular and academic literature (Ellis et al, 2011).

The study was therefore paradigmatically interpretivist which assumes that the only way to understand a phenomenon of social reality is from the perspectives of the individuals involved in it (Willis et al., 2007). Interpretivism understands that reality is constructed through participants' subjective experiences of phenomena. Ontologically, the study is relativist. As suggested by Willig (2013), research conducted from a relativist perspective explores how constructs, especially culture, are used to understand the views of participants regarding a phenomenon. The epistemological stance of this study is subjectivism. Such a position argues that our understanding of our surroundings and its actual existence are not independent of one another (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This means that the interpretations of the data that researchers make cannot be separated from their own experiences and existing knowledge, but that their role is continuously acknowledged throughout the study (Scotland, 2012), which is firmly and inherently in keeping with autoethnographic exploration.

According to Wall (2016) autoethnography has the capacity to give voice to marginalized perspectives on certain topics, such as queer experiences. Autoethnography thus serves as a tool of empowerment of the individual voice whereby a sense of emancipation is brought about in the author's ability to speak freely about their story or truths without waiting to be represented by others (Mendez, 2013).

3.4. Participant

Chang (2008) considers the autoethnography to be a reflective methodology in which the researcher assigns meaning to personal experiences. Given that autoethnography is a "personal experience method" (Wall, 2016, p. 2), I—as the researcher—was the only participant, reflecting upon my experiences in relation to belonging after an unaccepted coming out and its impact on my self-acceptance, and, subsequently, on my interpersonal relationships within and outside of the gay community. The challenges experienced during the process of self-acceptance in relation to belonging within the gay community mediated my experience of oscillating between others and myself in an attempt to align my idea of self with other's perceptions and expectations. This often left me

feeling alienated, and with a desire to belong to something, somewhere, or even to someone as a way to validate my worth. It is acknowledged, however, that such experiences are mediated intersectionally and that issues of race, class, socioeconomic status, and privilege intermingle with sexuality to differentiate the experiences of individuals. This is an important distinction in my experience, due to my white, middle-class background which necessarily introduces axes of intersection that have colored my experiences in ways that are different to those otherwise situated in terms of race, class, and privilege. This was taken into consideration in the critical analysis of the proposed autoethnography. However, it has been noted that regardless of cultural background, a common experience across the queer community are the interpersonal losses resulting from rejection by friends, family, and the broader society and culture (Puckett et al., 2017). Due to the relationality inherent to the experiences of focus in this study, it necessarily involved others, most notably family members, friends, and ex-boyfriends. My narrative, therefore, included reference to these individuals. They were, however, not directly involved in the research which has centred, instead, on my own personal reflections on these relationships as it pertains to the aims of the study.

3.5. Data collection

The primary method of data collection was through in-depth written personal reflections, located in journals produced during specific moments after my coming out experience, on memories focused on central experiences and moments of importance, and my associated emotional engagement with these, related to the research aim. Roughly 8 personal journal entries were used for the purposes of this study. These entries were written at irregular intervals over the course of 2 years from 2018 to 2019 during my therapy process. The primary area of interest was my experience of myself and of others after my coming-out experience as it relates to my experiences of belonging in the gay community and the influence of this on my self-acceptance. As such, reflections centred on these experiences were extracted and subjected to further reflection and analysis for this study, instead of including all journal entries indiscriminately. I also reflected—in writing—on poignant contemporary discussions in my various personal psychotherapeutic processes over the

years, as well as on previous personal blog posts related to the aims of the study, engaging with my emotional responses during specific moments and the potential meanings thereof. My stories have been reflected upon and discussed in my personal psychotherapy sessions as well as within clinical and research supervision sessions during my MA Clinical Psychology training, which have all facilitated a journey towards understanding my process of self-acceptance and serves as the basis for this autoethnographic exploration—these have also formed part of the body of data for this study. Furthermore, other research surrounding the impact of the coming out experience, which speaks to acceptance and belonging, have been referenced and critically engaged with to make sense of my experiences.

These personal reflections have been used as the 'raw data' upon which I have reflected further as means of accessing thoughts and feelings surrounding my topic. Furthermore, I have had discussions with family members, and began an open conversation regarding this reflective work. Due to the necessarily highly subjective nature of the work, I felt it was important to openly discuss this process with others who I trusted to put forth an alternative perspective to further illuminate my experiences, providing additional space for reflection and thus data for inclusion in this study (Sparkes, 2021). However, only my written personal reflections on these conversations have served as data for analysis, not the conversations themselves.

3.6. Writing for data collection

Adams et al. (2017) encourage autoethnographers to begin writing from a reflective stance that feels most comfortable. Due to the challenging psychological stressors elicited through relational trauma and often-hurtful memories associated with the autoethnography, the primary function of writing for data collection was to engage with my experience and other literature in a way that makes sense of the dynamics between individual psychological processes in relation to the sociocultural context. Writing for data collection was focused on significant events in my life related to the research aim and the associated emotions in order to identify my feelings, the feelings of those closest to me, and how these intersected with the sociocultural context.

3.7. Data analysis

It is acknowledged that the issue of data analysis in autoethnographic research is controversial (Ellis, 2007). There is indeed no standard or singular manner in which autoethnographers analyse data due to the diversity in forms, nature and approach to autoethnography. Qualitative researchers are therefore afforded a level of freedom with regards to choosing options for analysis that are suited and relevant to their individual study (Ellis et al., 2010). For the purposes of the current study, I have made use of inductive thematic analysis which is advocated for by Wall (2016) and has previously been used in the analysis of data for the purposes of autoethnographic research (e.g., Harrison, 2018). The data analysis began by drawing data from my reflective journals through repeated re-readings of the texts I have created. This allowed for my re-familiarisation with the body of data as the first step in the process of thematic analysis (Gray, 2009). Initial thoughts regarding pertinent themes related to the research focus were noted during the first step. The second step in the analysis process—open coding—involved strategically identifying words, sentences and phrases within the texts that were relevant to the research question and labelling these with codes that captured their essence (Wall, 2016). The codes were allowed to emerge from the text itself in an inductive process rather than applying predetermined codes to the text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Following the procedure outlined by Wall (2016), I—in step three—organized groups of codes together which then constituted themes. These themes were then explored and interrogated further and potentially revised in an iterative process during which themes may be combined, divided, redefined, or eliminated before engaging the themes in interpretation and critical discussion with the existing research. Although the analytic process was inductive in nature, what was determined as relevant in terms of codes and themes was guided by the research aim. The final step in the analytic process involved writing up the findings up.

3.8. Rigor

While there are no ‘rules’ for establishing rigor in autoethnographic research, LeRoux (2017) suggests that there is consensus amongst autoethnographic researchers with regards to certain markers for excellence in

autoethnographies—subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility, and contribution—which, together, can be used to ensure trustworthiness and rigor.

By virtue of autoethnography situating the self as subject (Schroeder, 2017), *subjectivity* is inherent to the methodology. A rigorous autoethnography is one in which the researcher re-tells a noteworthy personal relational experience necessarily self-consciously involving themselves in the construction of the narrative. As such, this autoethnography involved my intimate re-telling of my coming out experience and the impact of its non-acceptance on my acceptance of self and belonging within the gay community. This was enacted through thick and detailed accounts of my personal relational experiences with significant people in my life in order to (re)construct the narrative.

The second of LeRoux's (2017) markers of rigorous autoethnographic research is *self-reflexivity*. Rather than being a parallel process, self-reflexivity is embedded within the research design for this study, with much of the 'raw data' being my deeply reflective, introspective pieces of work. This necessarily involved thick descriptions of personal and relational experiences, as well as my associated emotional responses, which was elicited through reading other narratives as well as listening, for example, to songs with meaning associated to certain events, experiences, and relationships.

These experience-near and thick descriptions facilitated *resonance* by allowing the reader to enter into my experience, engage with it and connect to it on a visceral and emotional level, as well as an intellectual level. According to McIlveen (2008), the reader of an autoethnography plays a key role in establishing its value because it is within this sphere that lessons for transformation of praxis are learned, which occurs as a result of the empathic resonance. The degree of resonance and intertwinement, therefore, is an indicator of validity in autoethnographic research (McIlveen, 2008). In addition, detailed descriptions of the research process and transparent reporting was provided in order to facilitate the verisimilitude, plausibility and trustworthiness of the study, contributing also to its *credibility*.

Finally, LeRoux (2017) argues that a rigorous autoethnography makes a meaningful *contribution* in various respects. In addition to making an academic contribution to creating and expanding knowledge, and stimulating further research, autoethnography should make a meaningful contribution to social justice and transformation by liberating, empowering, improving practice, and contributing to social change (LeRoux, 2017; Schroeder, 2017; McIlveen, 2008). Social rejection and, by extension, issues of self-acceptance is an all-too-common phenomenon and experience within the queer community. As a stigmatised and marginalized community, queer individuals are routinely othered and dehumanised in societies dominated by heteronormative and heterosexist discourses. These discursive practices sever the possibility of empathic engagement and, therefore, of understanding. In response, qualitatively exploring the complexities of an unaccepted coming out experience and the impact on belonging and self-acceptance can bring about layered conversations and topics to facilitate understanding, empathic engagement and, ultimately, change.

To remain authentic and trustworthy, the research aims, and objectives are maintained throughout the research paper. In doing so, this ensures the autoethnographic research is aligned to qualitative rigor that engages with the tenants of a valid, reliable, and generalizable research paper. To do this, my research refers to previous research to understand interpersonal and intrapersonal concepts and uses two theoretical models—Whiting Model for Psychocultural Research (1977) and Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model (1979)—in order to continue to relate and link my experience to cultural and social standards of sexuality. In addition, my research incorporates vignettes that represent experiences in my life that highlight core themes of my experience as a gay man in a heterosexually organized society. The process of incorporating the vignettes encapsulates LeRoux's (2017) marker that self-reflexivity contributes to the rigor of the research. This is done through the thick descriptions which are transparent, reflected by research, and adds to the credibility of the autoethnography.

3.9. Ethical considerations

Due to the nature of the autoethnography, very personal and intimate experiences with loved ones were explored and reflected on. However, respect, consideration, and compassion were used to ensure that the story told is authentic and one of transformation (Wall, 2016), and may be used as a tool for personal growth, both for my family members and myself. Conversations have been had with some involved, and although pseudonyms have been used, I still chose to focus the story primarily on myself and not speak of my family members' individual stories. Therefore, the experiences expressed were based on our relationship, and how the relationship was perceived by me and the feelings I experienced, rather than using my story to elicit guilt or blame. Through this process, some individuals were aware of the progress of the research and were able to provide advice and certain boundaries as to what I may include. I have also been in psychotherapy and have continued to do so during the process, which my therapist is aware of, so when memories were elicited and engaged with as part of the research process, I had a support system that was able to contain and reorganize my perceptions.

Throughout the writing process, I struggled with what experiences to write about and to reflect on. My family and I have learnt and grown substantially over the past decade. I spoke to my supervisor and my family about my experiences because I carried around guilt for exposing challenging moments. Both my sister and mother reassured me, and they support my process, and because of our lessons learnt, they hoped that, perhaps, someone would read my research and learn from our experiences. Through the hurt came moments of healing, as individuals and as a family, and that was the end goal. To reflect, with permission, that mistakes happen, but so does healing.

3.10. Theoretical models: Cass's homosexual identity formation model (1979) and the Whiting model for psychocultural research (1977).

3.10.1. *Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model*

Self-discovery and identity formation are often synonymous with certain life events and interactions that contribute to self-acceptance as a gay man in a

heterosexually organized society. One of the first gay identity models was Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model (1979), which views gay identification as a developmental process that occurs through interactions between the individual and their environment. According to this model, moving towards self-discovery reflects a greater degree of self-integration (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). The model suggests that gay identity formation occurs in stages. In the pre-stage 1 period, it is recognized that heterosexual standards of identity are viewed as the norm and as such, gay orientation is a minority status. Stage 1 is identity confusion; Stage 2 is identity comparison; Stage 3 is identity tolerance; Stage 4 is identity acceptance; Stage 5 is identity pride; and Stage 6 is identity synthesis (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). These will be outlined below.

Stage 1: Identity Confusion

In this stage, there is an internal conflict when individuals perceive themselves as heterosexual but have gay thoughts and feelings, creating a psychological incongruence. Evans et al. (2010, p.308) describe the initial awareness of the gay thoughts and feelings as a time of "curiosity, confusion or anxiety".

Stage 2: Identity Comparison

In this stage, the individual moves away from their initial confusion, and begins to accept the possibility of having a gay orientation. At this point, the individual realizes that being gay may create social alienation and rejection from mainstream society. The feelings the individual experiences may oscillate between feeling relief and feeling ostracized (Evans, et. al, 2010).

Stage 3: Identity Tolerance

In this stage, the individual starts to acknowledge to themselves that they are gay. In doing so, the individual starts exploring their social, emotional, and sexual needs which creates experiences that allows them to move further away from identity confusion. In this stage, the individual begins to reach out to other gay individuals or groups, creating a sense of belonging in the gay community. If the connections are positive, then the individual is more likely to move towards accepting their gay orientation.

Stage 4: Identity Acceptance

In this stage, the individual spends more time within the gay community and assimilates to the culture and community. However, according to Cass (1996, p. 244), the individual's "inner sense of self is still tenuous". Furthermore, due to rejection and lack of acceptance from mainstream society, there are continued underlying feelings of isolation and incongruity. The individual may attempt to fit into both the heterosexual and gay community at the risk of not fully living or embracing their authentic self. Yet, for some, the process of fitting in to avoid rejection from the heterosexual community, and to experience acceptance from the gay community may be successful.

Stage 5: Identity Pride

During this stage, the individual may reject heterosexual standards and values surrounding sexual orientation and heterosexism and does not hide their sexual orientation. This is usually the stage where the individual may start advocating against discrimination and victimization from mainstream society. Although the individual has accepted their sexuality, it is usually during this stage that the individual challenges their close friends and family who do not accept them or creates closer bonds with those who do.

Stage 6: Identity Synthesis

During this stage, there is a sense of "otheredness" that is apparent for the gay individual in comparison to the heterosexually organized society. However, the dichotomy between perceived norms and standards regarding sexuality in both communities is not as clear-cut and separated (Cass, 1996). With this perception, the individual views their sexuality as part of who they are and not as their complete identity and public views and opinions become less relevant (Cass, 1996).

However, these stages have been criticized by Horowitz and Newcomb (2002) as being too linear since not all gay individuals may transition through all stages in this order, or at all. In addition, although Cass's model acknowledges that a gay individual's identity formation unfolds in the context of

heterosexist society and that this plays a role in this process (Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014), Kaufman and Johnson (2004) argue that the model does not adequately take broader sociocultural factors, and their interactions, that can impact identity development into account. For this reason, an integrated ecological theory—the Whiting model for psychocultural research, described below—has also been utilised to interrogate the interactions between the self, family dynamics, and wider societal attitudes and values, and how this shape development.

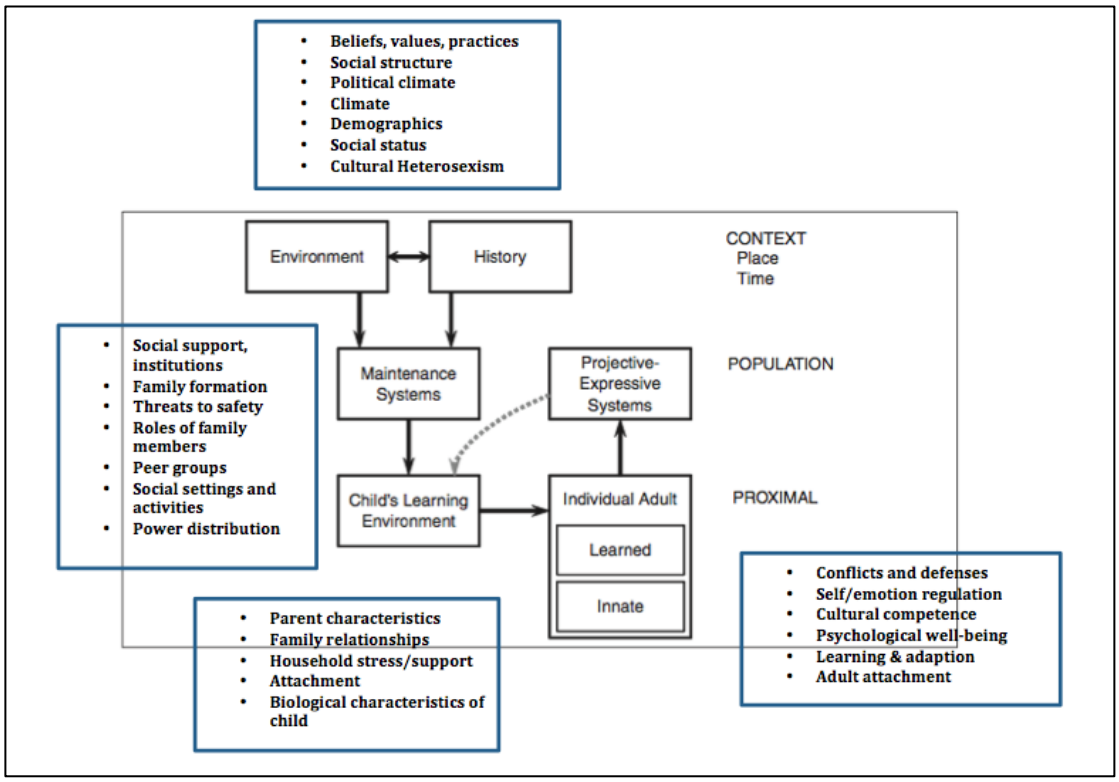
3.10.2. *The Whiting Model for Psychocultural Research*

Ecological systems theory conceptualizes human development as occurring within several interrelated social systems and contexts and is influenced by culture and history (Darling, 2007). The individual is at the center of concentric circles representing these systems known as the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The proponent of this theory, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1974), was influenced by Bandura's social learning theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory that emphasized the influence one's environment has on development. As such, Bronfenbrenner considered a child's development as unfolding through the relationship between the child and the various subsystems—from family and school to cultural customs, laws and cultural norms and standards (Darling, 2007). The interrelationship between one's social relations and their cognitive and biological development is the foundation for understanding the interplay between nature and nurture, and one's early environment which is represented by the Whiting model from a biopsychocultural perspective (Worthman, 2010).

The dynamics between the queer individual, their family and mainstream society can be understood through an integrated ecological theory. It has been proposed that differences in cultures and societies are "a product of culturally driven dynamics operating during development rather than of innate differences" (Worthman, 2010, p. 546). In line with this, in their integrated ecological theory, John and Beatrice Whiting (1966) proposed that early development by proximal conditions, such as infant care strategies and caregiver attachment, are influenced by culture. The integration of the

individual, family, community, and population account for the way culture impacts human development, and the multilevel constructs such as gender and childcare practices within communities (Worthman, 2010). For these reasons, the Whiting model (1977) for psychocultural research (Figure 1) is suited as a theoretical framework for my autoethnography, which considers my family dynamics, heteronormatively organized society's standards of sexual orientation, and myself as interconnected role players in my unaccepted coming out story.

Figure 1: Diagram representing the multilevel approach to psychocultural interactions.



Note: The diagram is a representation of the Whiting model for psychocultural research (Whiting, 1977), redrawn, and with the addition of levels of analysis along the right side of the figure. Arrows with solid lines indicate causal relationships and the arrow with the dotted line indicates possible, but uncommon, direct feedback (Worthman, 2010, p. 548). The interactions between the multiple levels are the foundation for the analysis of my life events that highlight main themes and subthemes in regard to cultural heterosexism and hegemonic masculinity (i.e., History, Environment, and Maintenance Systems).

According to Whiting (1980, p.97), the parents' greatest role is to integrate the child into "settings that have important socializing influences". However, for the interactions between child and society to be effective and healthy, the interpersonal behavior learned from the parents should be transferable in most social settings. However, sometimes this does not occur, and the child may learn and develop maladaptive social behavior (Whiting, 1980). Yet, as one moves from childhood to adulthood, social settings change, and there is a need to adapt or learn new behaviors of interacting with different social settings and contexts. Amidst the changing settings and social groups, Whiting (1980) mentions a few factors that influence the way the adult interacts with social groups, which includes: the norms of behavior, the physical space, and the characteristics of the members of the group; interpersonal patterns of relating that are based on previous ways of relating and experiences with socializing; the perception of response from members of the new social group as influenced by previous interactions. The relevance associated with the Whiting model and the coming out experience influencing one's sense of belonging and self-acceptance is deeply rooted in the way the gay individual was raised to believe and associate with sexual minority groups within mainstream society. The first experience with interacting is learned from the parents, however, Whiting (1980, p.105) emphasizes "…that individual's behavioral expectations of new respondents result from a projection onto them of emotional, cognitive, and social behavior profiles of significant others in their early lives". The statement relates to the process of heterosexism, and internalized heterosexism based on projection from mainstream society and introjection of the gay individual (or gay community). Furthermore, when considering the coming out experience, it is not only one's childhood that impacts the way the individual relates to social groups, but also the response to the coming out experience, that is either accepted or not. In this way, using the Whiting model, it is not only about considering the individual's childhood and parents' ideas of gender and sexuality but also history, the physical environment, norms, and standards maintained by mainstream society, and cultural traditions (Whiting, 1980). These factors then influence the way the individual defines and perceives social groups, as well as themselves within

different social groups and communities, and could define their sense of belonging or not belonging.

3.11 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has outlines the methodological approach of the present study. Specifically, it described the authoethnographic approach that has been adopted as well as the procedures undertaken to collect and analyse the data, as well as to secure rigor. The product of these procedures are discussed in Chapter 4 to follow.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the findings my autoethnographic inquiry through exploring events in my life from my childhood to the present moment that represents my lived experience as a gay man and the impact of my unaccepted coming out experience on my perception—and experience—of belonging and (self-)acceptance. My childhood briefly sets the scene for the way I viewed the world, which influenced the way I navigated social settings at school and tried to make sense of my sexuality. I then explore my university years and the period of time I spent studying in Australia when I was 19 years old as a time frame to illustrate the dynamics of navigating through my sexual identity in a heterosexually organized society and an initially unaccepting family. Thereafter, I demonstrate the impact of my coming out experience on my self-perception and on my relationships with friends, family, and intimate partners. Due to the changes and growth through the years, I conclude by exploring recent years with a dynamic shift within my family in relation to the acceptance of my sexual orientation. The multileveled interactions between my childhood development, my family dynamics, and living in a heteronormative society as a gay man are analyzed using both Cass's Homosexual Identity Model and the Whiting Model for Psychocultural Research. The process of analysis using the multileveled approach is in line with the elements of a moderate autoethnography by which lived experience is used to engage in a critique of sociocultural dynamics that shape and influence individual identity (Reed-Danahay, 2017). The chapter is organized according to the following themes and subthemes that were conceptualized from the data through the thematic analytic process:

Table 1: Table reflecting the titles of themes, subthemes, and vignettes.

Theme 1	**Introduction to Heterosexuality and Relationships**
Vignette 1	Setting the Scene—Childhood
Subtheme 1a	Emotional Safety and Masculinity
Subtheme 1b	Self-esteem and Loneliness

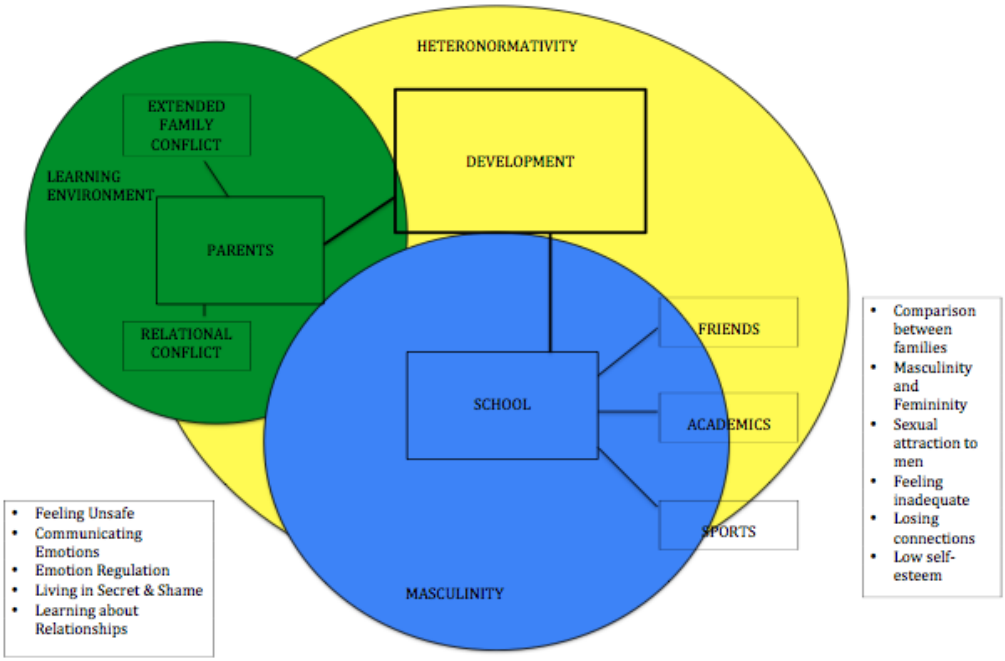
Subtheme 1c	Making Sense of My Queerness
Theme 2	**Coming Out and Rejection**
Vignette 2	Coming Out in my University Years
Theme 3	**Navigating my Coming Out Experience**
Vignette 3	Returning Home
Subtheme 3a	Living in Secret and Shame
Subtheme 3b	Self-sabotage and Achievement
Theme 4	**Relationships after Rejection**
Vignette 4	Dynamics of Relationships
Subtheme 4	Fear of Connection
Theme 5	**Finding my Worth**
Vignette 5	Letter to my mother

4.2. Theme 1: Introduction to heterosexuality and relationships

The first theme depicts the interaction between my learning environments at home and at school, and the way the dynamics between my parents and the heteronormative view of sexuality predisposed my self-perception as being different. Vignette 1 offers an overview of my childhood and my school setting that speaks to the broader concepts of how a heterosexually organized society perpetuates the heteronormative stereotypes of emotional and physical expression of the self. Figure 2 represents the interaction between the various systems which links the experiences of home life and social context to my internalized feelings as a developing gay man in a heterosexually organized society. Theme 1 is further sub-delineated into subthemes: *emotional safety and masculinity*, which addresses my experience of masculinity as represented by my father and supported by attending an all-boys school, which was simultaneously experienced as unsafe due to my home environment; *self-esteem and loneliness*, which addresses the initial negative impact my home environment had on my self-esteem and, later, the compounded impact of the

rejection from my family, which often correlated to feelings of loneliness; and *making sense of my queerness*, which addresses my emotional and behavioral experiences in trying to navigate coming to terms with being gay and relating to others without the support of family or friends.

Figure 2: Diagram depicting the influence of cultural heteronormativity and masculinity on my early development.



Note: Heteronormativity is the social organization of the dominating roles, norms and standards regarding gender and sexuality. Within heteronormativity is the interchange of power dynamics between masculinity and femininity. These social constructs influence cultural practices, and the roles and responsibilities of many households and families from a white, Western perspective. However, heteronormative structures and masculine constructs do not only influence child development in heterosexual marriages, but also the way in which children relate to each other (e.g., gender specific/preferred sports). The domains of heteronormativity and masculinity played a role in the way I relate to myself navigating through queer identity and the impact on my psychological well-being. This in turn influenced the way I perceived myself in peer groups, academics, and sports.

Vignette 1: Setting the scene—Childhood

I was born in 1989, the youngest of two, with my sister being born in 1985. I started Grade One in post-Apartheid South Africa when classes were racially integrated. My father was amongst the young men who had to enlist in the army and had been part of active war. During my childhood, I do not remember much about his work life; except that he was a police reservist for the Flying Squad in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, and my mother was a personal assistant. We were a white family living in a lower-middle class suburb, with not much money. Inside our home there was ongoing conflict, which did not allow for a positive role model relationship for my sister and I to learn from. We knew conflict, aggression, anger, and feeling unsafe. Regardless of the emotion, the product was always anger, and there was no conflict resolution or a way to discuss issues amicably or calmly. There were happy moments, but it was not a happy home.

The dynamics between my parents created a hostile and aggressive environment. We, as children, were not shielded from the tension. However, my mother did her best to be as nurturing and protective as she could be. There were moments where my parents had separated but then reunited, for what reason, I cannot say or understand. Not only was the tension felt in my household, but it overflowed to other social aspects of our lives. The relationships with our extended family—both my mother's and father's siblings—were strained. We went from holidaying and celebrating life events together, to nothing. Even with their friendships, it all somehow stopped. I was too young to understand the underlying dynamics, and the dynamics between my family, but the feeling I got was one of family connection, to isolation. It became a complicated game of blame, where my mother was blatantly not her parents' favorite child, and my father learnt his behavior from his father. Relationships in my childhood were incredibly confusing. After some time, it felt like it became the four of us over night.

By no means am I claiming that there were no happy moments, but the unhappy moments certainly tainted my memory. The way I experienced relationships

was one of difficulties, isolation, and conflict. This extended to the way I viewed my father. A man in the police: physically strong, aggressive, and authoritarian. Walking on eggshells, too afraid to further rattle the already volatile environment, became the way I experienced my home. Home is supposed to be safe; home is supposed to be nurturing, but it was not. My mother adored us, and loved us, but the strain of her relationship distracted her from truly being present with us. There was anger in my mother that was projected to the world, and her potential to live a life of serenity was not afforded to her; she made her choice to stay. My mother had several opportunities to not remain, but ultimately did. Not an easy reality to accept, but the way it ended up being.

Years later, my father was successful in starting a new international business venture, and we went from a lower-middle class family to a middle-upper class family. I understood what hard work and dedication looked like. However, money may change the physical home environment, but in my life story, it does not make a family happy.

I was at a private all-boys school for primary school, and then from early high school—Grades Six to Ten—I attended a co-ed private school. The change of schools from my understanding was because of the academic pressures that the all-boys school enforced. However, this was not the only reason; the other reason was that I spoke to a teacher about my home situation and there was an intervention. Already at this point, when I was 10 years old, I had learnt four life lessons: 1) My mother did not believe I was capable of high academic achievements, 2) Family dynamics and emotions will always interfere with achievement; 3) What other people know or think of you is important; 4) Sharing family "secrets" or reaching out for help will get you into trouble. With these life lessons, I started high school at a new school. Although I was for the most part an average student, there were moments I did not feel average, when competing in a spelling bee, participating in the Mathematics Olympiad, and making my way to the semi-finals of a national History speech competition. I had the potential to prove to myself and to my family that I was capable of academic success. Even though I had many acquaintances at school, I only felt

comfortable and safe with a few close friends, but not with others. But then, it all changed. For some reason I changed schools in Grade 11, the year before I matriculated. This was when I realized and experienced the impact a change in social dynamics had on me and the way in which I navigated through it. It was from this moment on that I felt alone. I walked into a social setting that was already established as their groups were formed and my relation to them was founded on my insecurities and fear of rejection. For the most part, I was liked, and I made friends, but my perception was that I was an outsider. Even then, I felt I did not know how to truly connect to others, because I felt I did not fit in. I was not a sport jock, an academic, or a drama kid. I did not belong. I had the potential to be all three, but I did nothing and isolated myself, keeping myself at a distance that felt safe. It was the most confusing time for me because I wanted to be part of it all, I knew I had the talent, but it was as though I had no confidence and motivation to put myself out there; I didn't believe in myself. The only thing I knew for sure was that the boys I went to school with were incredibly attractive, and confident, and popular. But I 've always known that. I always knew that I wanted to be them, and I wanted to be with them.

My childhood and the early experiences that shaped it—as represented in Vignette 1—were contextualized by a traditionally heterosexual relationship between my parents each of whom played their roles as influenced by what was expected of 'man' and, separately, of 'wife'. These expectations were heavily informed by what, traditionally and structurally, was determined as being masculine or feminine and, therefore, what was allowed and not allowed for either a man or a woman—this impacted on what they could be, or could like, or could do (or not). Hence, the manner in which I experienced my childhood home was determined not only by the behavior of my parents, but also how that behavior was shaped by structural determinants that impacted on how my parents represented relationships (Worthman, 2010).

My introduction to masculinity and relationships in my early childhood occurred in the context of an ambivalent relationship with my parents characterized on the one hand by love, support, and guidance, and on the other

hand by fear and conflict. This misalignment has made it challenging, in reflecting on these early experiences, to define my home environment as nurturing. The Whiting Model suggests that no home environment is isolated from the historical and environmental happenings of the world. As such, I have attempted to understand my family and its relational and interpersonal dynamics as situated within, and influenced by, the broader sociocultural system. For example, my father's experiences in the army and the subsequent, and compounding, trauma of being in the South African police force are likely to have played a perpetuating role in relation to his aggressive manner of relating and served as the backbone for his beliefs regarding what it means to 'be a man'. This is consistent with research that shows that male members of the army/police are more likely to subscribe to more traditional ideas around masculinity such as, for example, the physicality of being a soldier serving as a signifier of their masculinity (Cohn, 2000) as well as the hegemonic ideology that discourages male soldiers from admitting they are emotionally vulnerable (Mankayi, 2008). In addition, it is also likely that my father's experience of masculinity was influenced by his own father's entitlement, aggression, and control. For example, my grandfather has been described as having a volatile, aggressive, and spiteful disposition and as someone who would regularly instigates either physical altercations with my uncles or arguments with my grandmother only to, subsequently, refuse to attend family gatherings. This kind of relational context may have predisposed my father to being drawn to hostile environments, recreating, and reifying a cycle of hegemonic masculinity that eschewed that which may have been regarded as 'feminine' such as nurturance and gentleness.

Due to gender socialization, the son understands masculinity through the father's perception and experience of what men should be (Pleck, 2010), including the expression (or lack thereof) of emotion, which is transmitted via father-son interactions (Remmo, 2009). My father, therefore, may have come to internalize—via his interactions with his own father—that men did—and could—not show vulnerability and enacted this through aggressive ways of relating. My father's internalization of this 'brand' of masculinity extended into what, to him, it meant to be a father and, hence, shaped my experience of him

as the beneficiary of his parenting approach. I knew, and have always known, that my father's life was solely about providing for his family because this was the role a man was meant to play. But, in my experience, the emotional connection was missing. It was as though he did not know how to love gently, or how to be nurturing, which often left me feeling fearful and as if I needed to 'toughen up'. His aggression and need for control created an emotional distance and permeated most of our interactions. Activities such as playing soccer or rugby, or even learning to drive were always tarnished because the prevailing tone of his interaction style was anger in most situations and for reasons that I did not understand. As a result, being with my father was most often unpleasant even during activities that were meant to be fun. Although he was physically present, he was emotionally absent which was, upon reflection, what he learned men should be based on broader macrosystemic values regarding masculinity that were intergenerationally transmitted through his relationship with my grandfather. This speaks to the facilitation of more distal maintenance systems that informed and shaped my own proximal childhood learning environment (Worthman, 2010) and reflects the interactions between levels of the ecosystem that influenced me as the individual.

In a similar way, my mother, and her propensity to remain in a hostile relationship may be an inherent characteristic due to her own parents' dismissive relational style creating an atmosphere for impoverished self-esteem, which impacted her relationship with herself and others. For example, growing up, my mother's parents rarely held conversations with her, not asking about her day at school, or who her friends were or what she was doing. They simply did not show interest in her life. Her father would abuse alcohol almost daily which would precipitate arguments between he and my grandmother, which preoccupied them and left my mother forgotten and unacknowledged—who she was, what she wanted and needed, and her feelings were insignificant in this context. Considering the ideologically conservative society my grandparents lived in—white, middle-class, and heterosexual during Apartheid—the roles of gender seemed to have been entrenched within a patriarchal system and the concept of sexuality—although never discussed openly—was defaulted strictly, and implicitly, as heterosexual with no tolerance

for deviation. The significance of this is that the concept of what a man and women should and could be, and do, was predetermined, and very limited, for families steeped in this traditional conservatism. Hence, the precast mold in which my mother was made to fit took the shape of submissive, wife and mother. The nurturing of her own identity was hinged, therefore, on getting married, raising a family and being a bookkeeper or secretary—so, there was no need to invest in who she was, or what she wanted for herself. These roles and responsibilities are informed, and reified, by archaic and traditional ideas around femininity that positions it as subservient in relation to the starkly contrasting concept of masculinity defined in terms of aggressiveness and power (Mankayi, 2006). This polarization sets clear, albeit artificial, boundaries between the masculine and the feminine, between men and women, making the so-called 'in between'—the spectrum of queer identities—a social impossibility. From my mother's perspective, the lack of emotional investment from my grandparents left her feeling that she had no support in following her aspirations, and no one to encourage her to invest in her future. My grandparents' focus seemed to be on the relationship my mother had with my father—a young, healthy, fit, and wealthy man—and her role as a wife and mother rather than on the emotional development of my mother as an individual. From her teenage years, my mother had learnt that society's view of a woman's success was based on her marital status—a woman was legitimized through her relationship with her husband, regardless of the nature of that relationship. From this perspective, my mother—as a woman—was not allowed to and, therefore, did not learn to be her own person independent of her relationship with my father. Her role, according to society, was determined by her gender. In the same way that my parents—and their conceptualizations of sexuality and gender—have been shaped by the broader sociocultural context in which they were raised and in which they parented, my own identity has been influenced by, and is inextricably bound up with, that of my parents and their interactions with this broader society and culture (Whiting, 1980).

Culture, according to Parritz and Troy (2013, p. 28), "is not only the background for development; rather, it is a major influence on development itself and must be examined in terms of both individual-level culture…and

social-level culture". The proximal environment of parenting is influenced by the way gender roles and sexuality are perceived by parents, which is informed by broader sociocultural norms. Rigid heterosexist ideologies that shape parental beliefs around gender and sexuality impact the child's learning environment and, therefore, early, and subsequent development (Worthman, 2010). My parents' relationship was hostile and unhealthy, due to the model of relationships learned from their parents. But this was accepted and further perpetuated due to patriarchal notions that it was permitted and 'normal' for men to be aggressive and dominant, and for women to be submissive (Javed & Chattu, 2021). In reflecting on this, I have come to see how this environment led to my feelings of lack of safety along two dimensions. First, I felt unsafe because there was a persistent undertone of aggression from my father and a limited experience of being protected from this by my mother who seemed to accept the status quo; and second, it was very clear—implicitly and explicitly—what a man was supposed to be and I had inklings as to my not fitting this mold, making my family space further unsafe.

4.2.1. Subtheme 1a: Emotional safety and masculinity

My idea of emotional safety was influenced, therefore, by the relationship I had with my father and the way in which he represented masculinity. During my childhood, I feared my father and this fear served as a barrier that did not allow for emotional connection between he and I. I recall, vividly, one of my parents' more hostile arguments. In attempting to shield my sister and I from my father's aggression, my mother had booked a spontaneous 'weekend away' and had asked my grandmother to pack bags for us so we could avoid going back to the house during this period. I remember my mother receiving a telephone call from my grandmother in which she described how my father had destroyed my mother's work laptop and had thrown all her clothes out. Inasmuch as my mother tried to remain as composed as possible for the sake of my sister and I, her fear was tangible. Experiences such as these reinforced for my mother that appeasing my father and remaining in his shadow was safest because leaving him was not an option—good wives did not leave their husbands, especially not husbands who provided for them. In this family context, this is how I learned to be in relationship with my father—by being distant, agreeable,

and without upsetting him, which was far removed from openly expressing vulnerability. However, even though he was an aggressive and hurtful man, I still wanted to connect with him—to have a father-son bond—but I was sensitive which was not aligned to the way he 'did' relationships. I wanted to feel safe, but I did not because even at a young age I felt a dissonance between the masculinity that he promoted and embodied and my emerging sense of self, and that terrified me, which forced a distance between us that felt insurmountable.

According to Williams (2006), the father's role in attachment—through augmenting the child's feeling of safety and security—parallels that of the mother in establishing the child's identity and sense of self. Therefore, a positive relationship between father and child enables a more secure and healthy sense of self in which the child is able to manage their emotions in an appropriate and adaptive way, as well as effective ways to act on impulses. Regulating my emotions and effective ways of acting on impulses were two psychological processes that I did not have the privilege of experiencing in a healthy relationship with a role model. Instead of being provided a platform to acknowledge, explore and make sense of my inner emotional world, I understood only anger and aggression because this is how I knew my father to respond to most situations—this, to me at the time, was how men were supposed to respond. Other emotions—particularly more vulnerable emotions such as sadness or disappointment—were simply not allowed for. It was as if these emotions did not exist and to feel them was weakness and was wrong. This way of being was perhaps shaped by the dominant heteromasculine ideologies, reinforced by my father's own father, that influenced his ability to engage with his vulnerability because to do so was perceived as feminine, weaker and, hence, unacceptable for a man (Remmo, 2009; Pleck, 2010). This, most likely, influenced how he engaged (or did not engage) with vulnerability, in general, and—by extension—with *my* vulnerability. It was as though he used anger and aggression—the 'masculine'—to disavow and extinguish vulnerability—the 'feminine'. This angry and aggressive style of relating and managing situations was present throughout my childhood, offering me a distorted model of how to engage with, express, and act upon my emotions

given that vulnerability was not allowed. But this was also the only way to 'connect' with my father; by denying those vulnerable, feminine, parts of myself that I felt, and knew, would not be accepted. I learned from early on, as a result, that in order to be in relationships with others, I had to carefully curate what I felt and who I was—or, who I thought would be most acceptable to the other person. What I experienced was stunted emotional development that made interacting with others difficult because of the uncertainty and insecurity of relationships due to my own sense of feeling insufficient and inadequate. Interestingly, this parallels my mother's experience of having been left unacknowledged in her own parental home, precipitating her poverty of self-esteem, which highlights the intergenerational transmission of relational patterns and the influence of history in how the ecosystem shapes development.

According to Williams (2006) appropriate social behaviors and self-confidence for children are psychological processes learnt from interactions with the caregivers, and more so, from the father. These processes of relating serve as blueprints and facilitate navigation of other social settings that include friends and acquaintances. Reflecting on my childhood, entering into new social situations or being placed in unfamiliar social groups felt intimidating and deeply anxiety-provoking because it triggered fears around my perceived acceptability to others, rooted in my father's implicit rejection of anything that was construed as not meeting the standards of heteromasculinity. So, I held my established friends closely because they accepted me and were, therefore, safe, but any change in social dynamics created anxiety in me that made me feel uneasy. Because my home life felt unstable, I craved stability in any other settings, including friendships. But, at the same time, my friends began to take part in extra-curricular sporting activities, and puberty started to approach, which inevitably meant that conversations evolved towards talking about girls. Although I had not, by this point, engaged with the idea of my own gay orientation, I was aware of my own more 'sensitive' disposition and how it was not to be expressed. So, in my mind, to be involved in sports was to be 'a man' and accepted by—as well as acceptable to—others and was an opportunity to meet new people, and girls (because this is what adolescent boys are supposed

to do). However, I wanted neither. Not only did I think I was not good at sports because I was not as strong and confident in my abilities, I also did not find girls attractive. But I played the part because I knew, as a boy, that to engage in other, 'non-masculine' things—ballet, theatre, fashion—was simply not acceptable.

Because of my father's subscription to a masculinity defined by aggression and control, my perception of safety and security felt distorted. What was conveyed by this experience was the complexity and interplay of dynamics. My father was aggressive and controlling which made me feel unsafe, but I also felt unsafe, isolated, and wrong because I felt I did not embody, and could not identify with, his brand of masculinity. I attempted to put on a façade, but it was it was a role I was playing to maintain proximity/connection to a caregiver—a problematic one, but a caregiver nonetheless; I molded myself in order to be acceptable so that the connection would not be lost, even though this was a 'false self' (Winnicott, 1965). Selby (2000) speaks to the inauthentic behaviors of the false self as a way to adapt to interpersonal interactions. These behaviors emerge in situations where it is important to be socially accommodating and are used to gain acceptance. When considering the early learning environment (Whiting, 1977), the quality of early relationships seems to influence (in)authentic behaviors associated with trying to find one's sense of belonging (Selby, 2000). The nature of one's attachment to their caregiver has been directly connected to the development of one's identity, which is then explored in social groups as authentic or inauthentic (Selby, 2000). These aspects coalesced to influence my sense of self and identity. Home was supposed to be a safe and unconditionally accepting environment, but it was not. My father who was supposed to be the protector became someone my mother tried to protect us from, attempting to shield my sister and I from the anger that permeated our household. This only perpetuated the notion, for me, that relationships were unsafe and, ultimately, that the world was unsafe. What should have been psychologically safe became unsafe, fostering insecurity that I internalized, allowing it to permeate my sense of self and, hence, how I interacted with the world around me. The assumption that the world felt unsafe because the home environment felt unsafe is described by Selby (2000) and

Worthman (2010) in that dysfunction and distress permeate one's sense of self from early development due to the caregivers' psychobehavioral patterns that are imposed on the child. Williams (2006) proposes that emotional safety is the foundation for establishing a healthy sense of self and a prerequisite for identity formation. More so, Ying et al. (2018) indicate that family solidarity is dependent on the relationship between parents, which predisposes a child to understanding and implementing healthy adjustment mechanisms. Marital conflict, however, predisposes a child to psychological maladjustment such as internalizing problems (Ying et al., 2018). As such, the interpersonal conflict I experienced within my home distorted for me what it meant, and felt like, to be emotionally safe and secure. My lack of psychological safety at home predisposed me to developing a low self-esteem. My experience of home life was often associated with a sense of shame because my father's rigidity, aggression, and rejection of femininity contributed to me feeling wrong because of my sensitivity and identifications with femininity. I internalized his rejection of anything that did not conform to heteromasculine norms. The broader sociocultural construction of heteromasculinity represented by my father, and heavily enforced within the relationship I had with my father, influenced my intrapersonal dynamics.

My engagement with my own queerness was influenced by my relationship with my father which, in turn, was influenced by his relationship with his father and his own experiences in careers (i.e., police, army) that understood and perpetuated notions of hypermasculinity or, what McAllister et al. (2019) refer to as 'military masculinity' characterized by toughness, stoicism, invulnerability and the exclusion of femininity. Related to this was how I subsequently related to social situations (e.g., at school) by trying to fit in by doing traditionally 'masculine' sports to confirm the conceptualizations of traditional masculinity transmitted to me by my father and, thus, denying any indications of femininity, eschewing the possibility of my gay orientation. This created an internal dissonance because my implicit, authentic—as yet unarticulated—experience of myself did not truly align with the traditional masculinity that was taught to me as legitimate. I felt different, but I also 'knew' that different was not good, so I forced myself to be what I was taught to be.

This demonstrates the interconnectedness between various layers that comprise the sociocultural system that ultimately shapes the individual experience as represented in the Whiting Model.

My childhood experience of my family dynamics and parents' relationship (Child's Learning Environment [Whiting, 1977]) was greatly influenced by my father's learning of masculinity from his father and law enforcement institutions (police and army) that informed and reified his perception and understanding of his role as husband and father. The way in which I experienced masculinity in my home was, in turn, paralleled and maintained by my schooling experience (Maintenance Systems [Whiting, 1977]). My experience of school was often fixated on the comparison of myself with the other boys associated with sports as a way to express a socially acceptable masculinity and facilitate belonging to a group that subscribed to heteromasculine norms (Environment and History [Whiting, 1977]). Although expressed through a 'false self', these norms aligned with the norms and standards carried through from early childhood around masculinity, informing what and how one is accepted and experiences belonging.

4.2.2. Subtheme 1b: Self-esteem and loneliness

The ambivalence that I felt at home permeated into my experiences at school. First, this was reflected in the ambivalence that I experienced in my perception of friendships—I was liked, and I had friends, but I also had an underlying sense of not being 'cool enough' or wanted by others (e.g., my house was not the house to hang out at, and I never invited others to parties or to hang out for fear of rejection). The feelings of not being cool enough may have its roots in my relationship with my father, in that his transmission of a masculinity that I did not identify with created internal dissonance, and as such, I did not feel that who I was, was acceptable. Second, while I knew I was able to be more than average, academically, I also did not truly believe that I could be a top achiever. This sense of ambivalence felt like it was deeply connected to my sense of self regarding my self-esteem and the comparison I constantly made between myself and others. I felt that others had it better than I did: their families were kinder, wealthier, and more engaging, and they had a sense of confidence that

I envied. There was a self-deprecating nature—rooted in my sense of shame—that was hidden behind the joviality and politeness that I projected outwardly. The underlying shame was generated from my perception of being made to feel wrong for my nonadherence to the traditional masculinity espoused within my family. Through my father's hypermasculinity and rejection of femininity, I implicitly felt my own femininity—and, by extension, my gay orientation—was wrong, and these were fundamental parts of who I was, or was becoming. Often, when something that I perceived to be negative happened (e.g., a disagreement or poor grade), I experienced feelings of guilt, and felt a sense of confirmation that I was not good enough and that I was wrong. I never had the experience of being nurtured and comforted when I experienced negative emotions or felt distressed—in my family, there was no need for this for a boy because boys were meant to perform 'toughness' and, therefore, did not even experience disappointment or sadness (McQueen, 2017); these were reserved for girls. Ivan (1996) has argued that 'feeling rules' direct not just what is outwardly displayed but also teaches what one should and should not feel as a boy or girl. As such, "a boy may come to understand not only that he should not cry when intensely sad, but that he should not even feel intensely sad" (Ivan, 1996, p. 3). So, instead, my response to these kinds of experiences, later on, was that of shame, self-criticism and anger at myself for not meeting the mark. This tended to be a recurring theme when it came to my academic abilities as well as social interactions—feeling not good enough underpinned by feelings of being wrong, which fed into an impoverished sense of self.

My mother had chosen to stay in a hostile relationship for two reasons. Firstly, was her own impoverished sense of self that she internalized which reminded her that she could not provide as a single mother and that she was not emotionally strong enough to do it. Patriarchal ideologies—to which my mother subscribed—prescribes that men are the providers and decision-makers within the family. In this narrative, women are only legitimized through their attachment—by marriage—to their husbands and have little agency or identity of their own. As such, my mother was only legitimate because she was my father's wife, not because she was a person in her own right. This is the ideology that she herself was taught to internalize via her upbringing. This

demonstrates that she was influenced by broader sociocultural/sociopolitical notions of what a woman is or should be that automatically place women in a position that is in inferior to, and in service of, men (Finlay & Clarke, 2003; Loscocco & Walzer, 2013). A second, related, reason my mother stayed in a hostile relationship was the shame of a failed marriage which would elicit feelings of embarrassment that kept her isolated and alone in her own intrapsychic conflict with no one to express her true feelings with. The shame of a failed relationship is also rooted, then, in failure as a woman. Because a woman is defined by her marriage—according to patriarchal, heteronormative ideologies—if the marriage fails, she fails as woman and as a person and has little worth. As such, the shame my mother experienced had its origin in those sociocultural constructions of a woman's role. My own experience of myself as a child mirror, strikingly, that of my mother's. By virtue of having internalized an impoverished sense of self and embarrassment, these were powerful themes in my mother's parenting, embedding these within my own emotional development as a result. Any sense of wrongdoing was accompanied by shame and the expectation of being rejected and isolated. The idea of shame in my home had elicited feelings and an awareness of being different (i.e., being wrong/wrongdoing) which precipitated fears around rejection, because I was already primed for this because of the way my mother parented. By doing so, the atmosphere created in my learning environment (Whiting, 1977) interacted with my feelings of difference that were entangled in my father's approach to masculinity.

During this time, I had been exposed to perceptions of heterosexuality at home and at school. This was defined by hegemonic ideas and performances of heteromasculinity that informed an understanding of queer orientation as subordinate, wrong and stigmatised (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Garlick, 2003). In line with Stage 2 of Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model—Identity Comparison—I came to understand that my feelings for other boys did not fit into dominant heterosexual norms, but at the same time I did not quite know or understand what being gay meant. Ferdoush (2016) describes Stage 2 of Cass's model as the point at which the individual begins to consider that there is a possibility of being gay, which results either in isolation or in finding

groups to identify with. Feeling uncertain as to why I felt different when I was with boys compared to girls made navigating social groups challenging. In accordance with Stage 2 of Cass's model, when I realized I was different from my friends, there was not only identity confusion, but also feelings of isolation and loneliness. In trying to make sense of my difference, I felt I did not have the support to speak to my family about it. As there were challenges with open dialogue and effective communication in my household, I did not feel comfortable in discussing something as complex and uncertain as navigating my sexual identity. Although an important proximal characteristic within my family dynamic, the problem was not simply a matter of lacking open dialogue and effective communication. My sense of loneliness and isolation was further entrenched because of the embeddedness of my family in a particular sociocultural system that subscribed to very particular—traditional—ideas regarding gender roles and relationships that stigmatized anything that defied these roles, including queer orientation. So, in addition to poor communication and rigidity, there was also implicit socialization that gay orientation (and femininity) was wrong, so it was not safe for me to talk to my parents or sister about it, which was compounded by the broader absence of emotional safety and support in the family. Ying et al. (2018) stipulated that positive communication between parent and child predisposes a child to higher self-esteem because they would feel loved, supported, and valued, which were feelings I was not familiar with. Similarly, Meanley et al. (2021) found that family warmth was associated with higher self-esteem in adolescents, but that this relationship was attenuated by family rejection due to sexual orientation. What became evident was that navigating my gay identity would not be a linear process. There was very little guidance or support and few role models that I could rely on. Navigating through my personal feelings about my sexuality was a very lonely and isolating experience, magnified by an uncontaining home environment.

4.2.3. Subtheme 1c: Making sense of my queerness

The Whiting's model suggests that history forms part of the multilevel approach to understanding human development which may include the perceptions and experiences of sexuality. In the context of sexuality, Rowe and Dowsett (2008)

refer to ‘sexual subjectivity’ which is an individual’s attempts to understand their sexuality. However, this understanding is influenced by historical norms and standards that are transmitted through the family. Sexual subjectivity, as such, involves the individual’s experience of self related to the physical body and sexual confidence, the emotional connection to receiving and giving pleasure for the self and another, and personal feelings of sexual behavior, all of which are influenced by the culture in which one was raised (Rowe & Dowsett, 2008). One’s sexual subjectivity is often experienced in a shared association by the way in which society has established the norms for the majority group (e.g., heterosexual), creating a sexual culture. For example, hegemonic masculinity is a dominating norm for many heterosexual men which is legitimised and enforced through social groups and institutions such as, for example, the family, military, or law enforcement (Jewkes et al., 2015). My perception of my father’s physical strength, aggression, and authoritarianism in my household as I was growing up embodied the ideals of hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2019). This created an internal conflict for me in response to what I perceived as an expression of my sexuality as a gay adolescent navigating sexuality in a household that subscribed to traditional ideologies around gender and sexuality as embedded within, and informed by, a society organized according to heterosexual—and heterosexist—standards. Jewkes and Morrell (cited in Jewkes et al., 2015, p. S114) describe hegemonic masculinity as,

> a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.

This premise tended to be very apparent not only in my household, but also in an all-boys school where heterosexual masculinities are routinely used to construct and maintain sex and gender hierarchies (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996). Given the dissonance resulting from my as yet unarticulated engagement with my gay orientation, my perception of masculinity was one of fear and dominance, and my aversion to it was rooted

in my home experience due to my father's representation of hegemonic masculinity. This aversion to hegemonic masculinity emerged because my experience of my own masculinity did not resemble that of my father's. Ultimately, there were two foundations for my aversion, which are interconnected. The first was my father's representation of a masculinity characterized by aggression and authoritarianism. The second was the societal ordainment of this particular 'brand' of masculinity that privileged and legitimized heterosexuality, with clearly defined and differentiated gender roles, separating men from women—and, by extension, masculinity from femininity—and how they can and should relate. This was incompatible with being a gay man and did not allow for sensitivity or the expression of vulnerable emotions. This distorted my perception of the interplay between masculinity and femininity. I, consistent with sexist socialization practices, came to know masculinity to be aggressive and frightening, and femininity to be vulnerable, weak, and fearful (Malonda-Vidal et al., 2021). Masculinity dominated, femininity was dominated and the power differential that resulted made the two fundamentally incompatible. This made engaging with my own, dissenting, masculinity a vexed process. I could be described as a child who enjoyed the more 'feminine' activities associated, stereotypically, with young girls—playing with dolls, wanting to do ballet and spending time with my sister. This created a sense of entertainment for my family, with home-made musicals and theatre productions, fashion shows and dancing. It was also viewed as 'just' me wanting to be with my sister as a further denial that this was a fundamental part of who I was. However, I also enjoyed the more stereotypically masculine activities, such as building model aeroplanes, playing rugby and mechanical construction. These were all aspects of me, but the more feminine activities were laughed off as entertainment. The aspects of my identity that referenced femininity or queerness were reduced to simply that—entertainment; a dabble in something that was pretend and, therefore, not within the realm of possibility. More so, the idea of my activities being seen as entertainment—and not as an expression of my gay orientation—is in line with the influence of society's construction of queer orientation as illegitimate, and society's enforcement of the false dichotomisation of masculinity and femininity in favor of hegemonic masculinity.

Navigating my feelings in relation to my queerness was complex and left me wanting to protect myself from rejection and judgment, especially in the context of a home environment in which performances of masculinity had a potent hegemonic inflection, automatically subjugating and suppressing that which did not conform to the heteromasculine. So, I wanted to deny my (homo)sexuality. The fear of rejection had been a powerful deterrent against coming out, fuelled by the constant barrage of heteronormative standards around which society is organized and that is perpetuated and influenced, socioculturally (Mallon, 2000; Guittar, 2013; Watson et al., 2019). This is consistent with studies which show that the coming out process is shaped by the family's value system (Merighi & Grimes, 2000) and that families with more traditional values may be perceived as less accepting than families holding less traditional values (Broad et al., 2004). The process of coming to terms with my sexuality was, therefore, challenging. Being in a private school and engaging in stereotypically and traditionally masculine activities such as rugby and weight training, were activities that were easier to take part in because in the culture of an all-boys school it was the accepted way to behave and engage. On the other hand, my affinity for dance and theatre was not something that I took as seriously as sport, for fear of ostracism for being 'too feminine' (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Nayak & Kehily, 1996).

Having moved to a new school in my later years of high school, I was already an outsider because I was a new student entering into an already established social system. As much as I tried to assimilate, I felt as though I did not belong because I did not possess the characteristics of the groups I desired to be part of—they appeared confident and well-adjusted, and I felt like I was not good enough and had little to contribute. During this period of trying to make sense of my sexuality there was no safety in exploring both masculine and feminine aspects of myself—a rugby player and a drama student—so I did not allow myself to do this. On the other hand, being perceived as more masculine and—by extension—less queer, allowed me to maintain social proximity to the people I valued at that time (Cook et al., 2013). Although this was a superficial sense of belonging because it was based on a fabricated or

performed masculinity, it was never truly fulfilling as the mere proximity did not allow me to feel truly accepted for who I was. However, it did provide a veneer of being part of something, which created an illusion of safety as it provided a space to hide in plain sight; but, as a result, I also felt like an imposter. The experience of safety—even the illusion of it—was important to me since I did not feel safe at home. There was no sense of belonging at home because of my family's affinity for conceptualizations of difference that aligned with mainstream society's rejection of the other. Although, at this stage, I was not actively rejected by my family, my unarticulated identification with the other meant I was denied a sense of true belonging alongside a persistent anticipation of impending rejection.

A study by Rosario and Schrimshaw (2013) found that one third of sexual minority youth experience family rejection in response to coming out. In the face of family rejection, belonging within the family is, therefore, threatened. This is also perhaps why finding a sense of belonging within the gay community becomes especially important. The lack of belonging in society as a gay man comes about due to the influence of two systems—the maintenance system defined by societal perceptions of sexuality, informing its norms, which permeates the second system, the family, and parents (the child's learning environment) whose ideas of sexual and relational norms are rooted in mainstream societal discourses (Whiting, 1977). Beekman et al. (2016) identify that a sense of belonging is desired more so for some individuals than others. This is often found in those seeking approval and acceptance through affiliating with certain groups. Approval and validation are usually sought by those who have experienced rejection and invalidation, as, in my experience, the rejection of queerness. My parents initially invalidated my queerness through implicit communications that gayness was wrong—reinforced through performances of hegemonic masculinity—which felt like, and was experienced as, rejection. The rejection, for myself, was experienced, therefore, even before I came out and the more explicit rejection upon coming out was an extension of what had been happening for years, leaving me without a sense of belonging and in desperate search for this through approval and validation.

Belonging—as distinct from inclusion—depends on the authenticity of relationships within the social group (Oswald, 2002). Lentin et al. (2012) note that individuals with a high need to belong usually do so to find acceptance. Yet, when one complies to group norms that are not in line with their authentic self, there is usually compensatory behavior such as performed masculinity or denial of effeminate qualities to satisfy inclusion and minimise a risk of exclusion (Lentin et al., 2012). However, doing so further perpetuates the stigmatization that having to conform to heterosexual standards is still better than fully expressing oneself as gay. Interestingly, my school had several queer teachers and a matriculant before me had taken his boyfriend to the matric dance. This dynamic illustrates that although some places and people are accepting, or at least tolerant, of queer orientation, the process of coming out to oneself and coming to self-acceptance is a personalized experience for queer individuals. As much as the school environment was seemingly accepting and tolerant, my individual experience of being vulnerable created anxiety that was rooted in my childhood of feeling isolated in my family due to my feeling different from what was expected or allowed and, hence, feeling as though I did not truly belong because I was somehow wrong. Although the school environment was objectively accepting of queer individuals, there was still a fear—based in shame around being deviant—that I would not be accepted and, as such, that I did, and could, not belong anywhere. I could not allow myself to relate meaningfully to others which perpetuated my idea that I did not belong. It is often smaller groups within a system that create an accepting environment and subsequent feeling of belonging (Hill et al., 2017). But I was not able to allow myself to integrate authentically and, hence, to benefit from the belonging that might have been possible.

The first time I explicitly spoke about my queerness was when I told a friend that I was bisexual, with the intention to provide enough vulnerability to express my attraction to men, but also enough safety to remain in a societally accepted sexuality—bisexual meant that I was not ‘completely’ gay; I was still somewhat heterosexual. I had never been sexually or emotionally attracted to females, but the appeal to fit in propelled me to have ‘crushes’, or at least the illusion of having a crush on a female. Guittar (2013) and Semon et al. (2017)

argue that the experience of coming out as bisexual provides the individual with an identity to express their same sex attraction, but to also hold onto a sense of hope that a part of themselves would be secured within heterosexual standards. It must, however, be acknowledged that even though my appropriation of bisexuality was used as a means to express a degree of my queerness as a transitional state, bisexuality is a legitimate self-identifier, distinct from gay orientation and heterosexuality (Guittar, 2013). Using bisexuality, for me, allowed me to remain within the realm of what was socially acceptable and this sense of 'hiding in plain sight' also meant that there was a sense of safety within my family and broader social network. By identifying, even if artificially and only partially, as heterosexual there was hope for my family that I may still one day settle down with a woman, facilitating their denial of my queerness, and reinforcing the misperception that my queerness was a phase. Bisexuality, in my personal experience, was used as a means to hide my authenticity and vulnerability in order to remain acceptable, even though it felt profoundly unsafe, so as to maintain a connection to my family and the illusion of belonging; this is how I learned to survive. Attachment theory posits that, early in development, children adapt their behaviors to their caregiving environments in order to establish and maintain proximity to their caregivers for physical and emotional survival. This occurs even in problematic caregiving contexts in which a child may develop maladaptive behaviors because this is the only way to establish proximity and, hence, ensure survival (Williams, 2006). In line with this, I attempted to find ways of being acceptable, even if it meant being inauthentic, because this meant that I was able to stave off rejection and maintain the connection with my family. Even though it felt unsafe, it was familiar.

In sum, my engagement with my sexual identity during childhood, in the period before I came out, was influenced by a number of interconnected factors: the distal sociocultural context shaped by heteronormativity; constructions of masculinity that are perpetuated through heteronormativity; and the proximal environment of my household—and its caregiving system—as embedded within, and influenced by, this broader sociocultural system. When I realized that being gay elicited feelings of not being safe within my family—rooted in

earlier experiences of the marginalization of femininity—I used isolation as a defensive strategy. Worthman (2010) understood this kind of defensive strategy as definitive of the projective-expressive system in response to persistent psychic conflicts established early in life actualized through cultural values, meanings, beliefs, and practices that begins in the child's learning environment, fundamentally experienced in the home environment (Whiting, 1977). As such, the internalized emotions that were projected by my parents were informed by the ideology that mainstream society dictates what is normal and accepted according to gendered roles and sexuality, and what is not. These projections of a hegemonic nature maintain heterosexist societal systems that situate queer identities in the position of the sexual minority, eliciting feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem. This parallels when a gay child is rejected by their family, impacting negatively on their self-worth, self-acceptance, and sense of belonging. It is in this way that internalized homonegativity is viewed as "a product of society's negative ideology about sexual minorities", perpetuating negative self-evaluations (Pistella et al., 2016, p. 3695) and fostering challenges in creating healthy relationships with peer groups and intimate partners. Individual family systems and their values are informed and influenced by ideologies around which society is organized due to the embeddedness of families with the broader macro- and exosystemic structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Therefore, the standards enforced by dominant heterosexist ideologies within society regarding sexuality, femininity and masculinity, and the criteria for what, and who, is acceptable informed the values in my family around gender and sexuality that shaped my coming out process—lead up, the actual coming, and the aftermath.

4.3. Theme 2: Coming out and rejection

Having described the context of my childhood and adolescence in Theme 1, this theme transitions into young adulthood, when I was a student, and my experience of coming out and its aftermath. Vignette 2 below describes my undergraduate university years as the background for the period during which I was attempting to establish an identity away from my parents while also navigating the complexity of coming out. Inasmuch as coming out is a personal and individual choice, this is nonetheless influenced by the anticipation of the

possible consequences thereof which, in turn, is informed by what it means to be gay in a society organized around heteronormativity (Pistella et al., 2016). As in my experience, the decision to come out is often thwarted by family dynamics which themselves are rooted within a broader cultural system that others queer orientation. Theme 1 explored these societal influences and maintenance systems and the consequences thereof, which framed the context for my unaccepted coming out experience. The current theme explores events surrounding my coming out experience that focuses on my university years as a point of reference and corresponds with Stage 3 of Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model—Identity Tolerance. Mosher (2001) reports that parental reaction has an impact on one's acceptance of their sexual identity and influences the decision to come out to others—friends and acquaintances—in the future. The process of coming out is not only an internal resolution for sexual identity formation, but when a home environment is experienced as conflictual and embedded with relational trauma, the individual also considers the impact of their coming out for future social situations as to not cause conflict because of their sexuality (Mosher, 2001). For this reason, the decision to disclose my sexuality to family and friends was underpinned by the fear of rejection and aggression.

Vignette 2: Coming out during my university years

I applied for psychology because I knew I wanted to work with people, and I did not have the grades for medicine. I got accepted and went on to do well academically. Socially, it was the same, I had friends, but I never felt like I belonged. There was a misalignment between my external world and my internal feelings. I was liked, I had friends, I went on holidays, I went to festivals, I was invited to events, but I never felt safe because I did not allow myself to accept that others liked me and wanted to be with me. There was always a relational pattern that I did not keep friends for long. There would always be a reason to cut connections, whether it was my choice, or my perception that I was no longer good enough for them. This was my conflict, my external world appreciated and wanted me, but my internal feeling was "I'm not good enough". I wanted to belong, I needed to belong, but I did not know how to, it did not feel

safe. It was at this moment that I had spoken to my father about studying overseas in Australia. He had business partners in Australia, and we made our way to visit two universities while on a holiday. To my delight, I was accepted, and it felt as though I would be free. At this point, a handful of my close friends knew that I was bisexual (I told them I was bisexual because I was not ready to accept that I was gay, nor was I prepared for their reaction). The reactions I got were a mixture of admiration for being brave (because they could never kiss another man), to acceptance because they were not surprised, to rejection. These reactions highlighted an important dilemma for me: not only did I feel alone but coming out presents the realization of a long-standing fear of rejection.

I was sitting in my second-year psychology class and listening to the lecturer speaking about statistics, specifically SPSS. I sat there and had a rush of self-doubt flood my entire thought process. I felt I was not good enough. From that moment I started skipping classes, not doing homework and assignments, and started to spend my nights going out and distracting myself from what I thought was my incompetence. The modules presented were rich in philosophy, ancient healing, and psychology, and I was not capable at that moment to appreciate the beauty of academics. I let myself down, and I let my family down.

But I had another distraction—my first love. I walked into a bar with my flat mates and ordered drinks at the bar. And there he was, serving me my Strongbow Apple Cider, and then another, and then another. And then he slid a piece of paper across the bar top with his number. I was faced with a tsunami of emotions. I was thrilled and scared. It was the first time I was not living with my parents and had the opportunity to express my authentic self, my gay self. It was terrifying. At this point I had lost any chance of motivating myself to pull myself out of the academic grave I had dug for myself. I got caught in a spiral of self-sabotage that I was not able to recognize. Not only did my academic life suffer, but also, I now started to feel incredibly insecure in my relationship and jealousy that I experienced viscerally. As a few months went by, I focused more on my toxic relationship, neglected my family and friends, and marinated in self-pity, self-hatred, and a disregard for anyone else. I took an opportunity to visit

my family in South Africa, and decided that, that would be the time to come out. This was new for me because my family did not have a history of being able to discuss sensitive topics or to be supportive. I had no idea how I would do it, but I felt I had to, because if it did not go well, I would be back in Australia within a week and would not be in contact with my family; that was my contingency plan. I remember phoning my sister at work, knowing that her friend had told her years ago that she was lesbian, and my sister was supportive.

"I have something to tell you, but I don't know how", I said. She replied, "It's okay, you can tell me, we can get through whatever it is".

My sister thought that I was going to tell her that I made a woman pregnant. I had never been sexually active, nor dated a woman. Her initial reaction was surprise, not comforting, just surprised. I then walked downstairs and sat my mom down and told her that I was gay. Anger and disappointment immediately filled the core of her being and the entire room. I was told not to tell my father. The week after was total misery. There was a constant nervous energy in the air, with anger, disappointment, and loss. The way my sister cried was the same way a loving sister cries at the funeral of her brother. I had broken them, and they did not know what to do with their anger, disgust, and disappointment.

At some point my mother and I were driving together, and she looked at me with the same anger and disappointment in her eyes. The disgust she had for her son was tangible, and she had looked for the next flight back to Australia for me, because she could no longer physically be with me. This is what she said to me and how I felt in that exact moment, forever scarred in my being: "I love you… but I will never accept you". These are the only words that I can remember her saying to me after I told her I was gay. Everything else was a blur. It was at this moment that my emotional walls came up and stayed up. It was at this moment that I knew I was alone. It was at this moment I knew that I was a disappointment, embarrassment, a family secret, and another thing to worry about. Those words, those feelings are what resonate at the centre of my being; something I thought was repressed far enough so that my outer

appearance of strength, 'okayness' would mask the anger, the guilt, the shame, the immense hurt of rejection.

It felt like my internal world had emptied. The ripple effect was not as gentle as a stone dropped into a quiet river; it was a tsunami that shattered a sense of self, a confusion of identity, of belonging. I was broken, and I did not have my mom. It was that moment I realized I had lost my family, my academic dreams, and my ability to truly connect to any man I would love.

Back in Australia, I was called into the HOD's office because I was failing. I felt I had no one to turn to for support and I had no personal resources to pull myself out of the negative spiral I had gotten myself into. I packed my bags and flew back home, a Stockholm syndrome situation, in which returning to those who hurt me was second nature. I gave up on my future, and I gave up on myself. I became the disappointment my sister and mother saw the day I came out.

In reflecting on these moments, 'hurt' fails to fully encompass my emotional experience—it was devastating, shattering. My hurt and devastation turned into anger and rage, which turned to self-destruction, because I did not know how to process hurt in a gentle and nurturing way. The process of working through emotions in a healthy and effective way was foreign to me, but anger and rage was familiar to me. It was as though the anger and rage afforded me an element of being in control of my emotions in order to counteract the profound unsafety and invalidation. The transition into self-destructive thoughts and behaviors was about finding a reason to confirm the communication that I was not good enough and eliminating those parts of the psychological self that are unacceptable (Potter, 2005). Because of these intense feelings, I felt like I did not have a moment to truly work through the rejection, and I went back to Australia feeling broken, with a fractured sense of self. At the time I did not feel as though I had a choice. Of course, I could have used my anger as motivation to excel in academics and prove to myself that I was not the disappointment I was made to feel like by focusing on my degree and future. I chose, instead, to

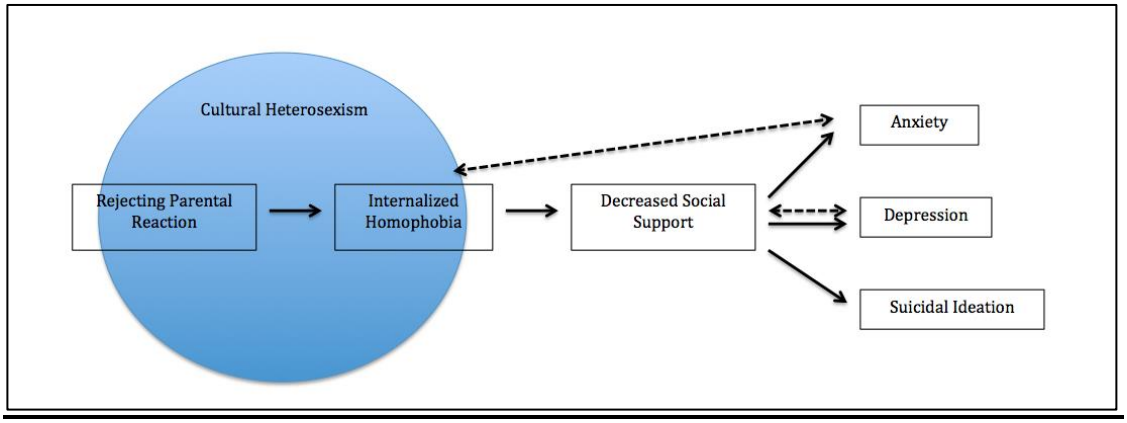
escape and avoid anything that was good for me. The intensity of my emotions precipitated numbness.

I hated being in this position. I hated myself for being gay, for being different, and for hurting my family. I internalized the disgust and I hated who I was. I did not deny my sexuality, I simply hated it. The shame which I had become so familiar with—and that I had integrated as part of my Self—during my childhood became my so-called 'dark passenger' (Dominey-Howes, 2015). I was overwhelmed by the ambivalence of having the freedom to explore my sexuality in another country without the physical proximity of my family, but also having been reduced, emotionally, to a small boy whose sense of self was lost and replaced with shame. I was not rejected because of something I did, but for who I was. My disappointment in myself was that I had an opportunity to live the life I wanted and to begin to live authentically, but I had no will, desire, or ambition to make the most of it. I did not want to live a life in which I was disgusting to my mother and sister. Yet, it was not only my family; there was a change in my friendships as well. Some friends rejected me for religious reasons, and some friends I pushed away because of my anger, resentment, and disregard for others stemming from a place of me feeling as though I was not deserving of a safe and accepting relationship. It was as though my internal self-representation was one of needing to be rejected and being accepted was not familiar. My behavior of rejecting others was the projection of my internalized feelings of shame manifested as the belief that I was not worthy or deserving of acceptance. The result was isolation—I felt alone and that I was to blame for it all.

Exploring reactions to coming out—represented by Figure 2—Puckett et al. (2014) relate the gay individual's experiences of internalized homophobia, decreased social support, and mental ill health to parental rejection in response to coming out. In reflecting on my own experience of coming out, characterized by rejection, it became evident to me that this was not a simple, linear process between caregiver and child. Rather, this was a complex process embedded within a system comprised of multiple interconnected layers. By this I mean that the rejection I experienced created emotional confusion that became so

overwhelming that I either isolated myself or tried to belong to a social group that encouraged and reinforced my self-destructive behaviors—finding connection through my body in fleeting and superficial relationships. This then led to a decreased sense of social support and feelings of anxiety, depression, and shame, which, in a cyclical process, affected my relationship with my family, and perpetuated internalized homophobia, poor coping mechanisms, and unhealthy relationships. My internalized homophobia perpetuated the shame and guilt I had for trying to connect with others in what I perceived to be unhealthy ways. This was rooted in self-judgment instigated by the broader homophobic culture constructing the gay community as overtly promiscuous, dirty, and unable to find true connection. This culture of homophobia served the social architecture in which my family was embedded and informed their conceptualization of what was normal and acceptable and, therefore, also what was not. My family's conceptualization was founded on the judgment of others which ultimately led to their rejection of a lifestyle they had pre-imposed assumptions about and contributed to my internalized homophobia, perpetuating shame.

Figure 3: Diagram representing the relationship between rejecting parental reaction, internalized homophobia, decreased social support, and mental health outcome.



Note: The diagram has been adapted from Puckett et al, (2014, p. 3), to illustrate my lived experience of a negative coming out experience. The solid lines are the original correlations depicted by Puckett et al, (2014), and the dotted lines represent my experience, namely, the correlation between feelings of depression and experiences of anxiety. The blue circle represents cultural heterosexism that defines the historical and maintenance system according

to the Whiting Model. The reason it has been added is to illustrate the influence cultural heterosexism has on parental reactions, but also the internalizing of homophobia that is often prominent in mainstream society where queer orientation is viewed as less desirable and is stigmatized.

According to the Whiting model (Figure 1), attachment during early development plays a role in the relationship between mother and child. More so, one's self-esteem and self-perception is influenced by the responsiveness of the caregiving environment (Doinita, 2015), which informs and shapes attachment. How the child comes to feel about and perceive themselves, others, and society is shaped by the nature of the attachment. So, when a negative reaction as hurtful as rejection occurs, especially from a parent, the individual feels devalued, and unworthy of love (Doinita, 2015). Even in my childhood, when I began to realize that I was different, but had not come out yet, the values in my family felt like they othered queer orientations. This had already created a sense of being devalued. Although this was not an overt rejection, it was implicit rejection of who I was that presented itself in my home and other social spheres, fostering insecurity and self-doubt. While physical proximity is definitive of attachment in early childhood, this makes way for emotional proximity as the child achieves a greater degree of independence (William, 2006). As such, with the rejection came a broken emotional connection between myself and my sister and mother, and my sense of safety I received from them as a child—being protected from my father's aggression and hostility—was no longer there. It was as though I had nowhere, where I belonged. According to Corrales et al. (2016) exposure to childhood adversity such as relational trauma has a negative effect on one's sense of belonging. Sense of belonging, according to Baumeister and Leary (1995) includes long lasting, predominantly positive, stable interpersonal relationships where one is valued and feels cared for. Even during times of conflict, the emotional safety that is inherent to secure relationships and that is associated with having a sense of belonging remains present. However, early childhood adversity threatens a sense of belonging by creating insecurity and mistrust in interpersonal relationships and is associated with challenges in affect regulation and isolation (Corrales, et al., 2016). The compounding factors of

being exposed to relational trauma and being rejected because of my sexual orientation created a rupture between my family and I. This change in dynamics between my family and I was rooted in the fact that who I was violated the cultural and social standards which organized my family's value system (Porter et al., 2019). The internalization of shame and rejection triggered a way of perceiving events following my unaccepted coming out experience that confirmed that I did not belong and that I was unworthy and inadequate.

The feelings of unworthiness and inadequacy stemming from rejection may be associated with shame. Being shamed for one's sexual orientation has been linked to lowered self-esteem, living in secret, denial, and feelings of isolation (Burn, 2018). Cass's model describes that these feelings, when too intense, can inhibit the gay individual from achieving Identity Tolerance, suggesting that shame has a stunting effect, holding the individual back from an integrated identity. Shame is rooted in the stigmatization of queer orientations that is perpetuated by legal, cultural, and social systems that reinforce negative self-evaluations among gay men due to the internalization of homophobic discourses (Hequembourg & Dearny, 2013). This highlights the interaction between experiences of shame and the historical grounding of the social rules that define what is normal and what is othered and stigmatized, embodied in the concept of cultural heterosexism. Allen and Oleson (1999) conceptualized this interaction as the internalization of negative societal attitudes about queer orientation by the gay individual. However, Allen and Oleson (1999) differentiated between internalized heterosexism and shame, with internalized heterosexism being a consequence of the interaction between the individual and society's rules of sexuality, and shame being a result of being made to feel wrong and less than for who one is. Furthermore, Hequembourg and Dearing (2013) state that there is a relationship between shame and internalized hetereosexism as the gay individual feels shame for being gay due to the negative stereotypes and constant rejection by heterosexist ideologies as the individual is exposed to more social exclusion in peer groups as part of the maintenance system described by the Whiting Model.

4.4. Theme 3: Navigating life after my coming out experience

Themes 1 and 2 have explored how cultural heterosexism socially instigated my feeling excluded from belonging and predisposed me to rejection sensitivity related to being othered. This, with a childhood that did not provide emotional safety created an unaccepted coming out experience that explicitly left me feeling rejected and without a sense of belonging. More so, societal heterosexism predisposed me—through my home environment and interactions with social environment—to introject negative feelings about myself which interfered with developing a healthy and self-accepted gay identity (Burn, 2018). Chisman and Brocks (2018) argue that a negative self-evaluation leads to challenges in connecting with others and threatens the individual's sense of belonging and acceptance, which is consistent with my experience. In this way the psycho-social-behavioral patterns learned in childhood and influenced by social interactions manifests in adults as projective-expressive systems (Whiting, 1977) that continues to represent the impact of cultural norms, values, and beliefs on the individual (Worthman, 2010). Worthman (2010) states that the projective-expressive systems usually are formed through dysfunction, distress and social pathologies that emerged from social and child development. This theme addresses my projective-expressive experiences in relationships and how I navigated these following my coming out experience.

Vignette 3: Returning home

When I walked out of the airport terminal building into the faces of loved ones waiting, I saw the same disgust and anger on my mother's face from months before.

At this point, I had no idea how to recover or how to put my broken pieces back together. I was enrolled in university again, failed again. I enrolled in hair dressing to forget about my academic pursuits and gain a skill that would be fun and make me money to leave home as soon as possible. With animosity still rampant at home, I had some saving grace and a thread of relationship with my sister. She would not hear anything about my romantic interests, but she and I hid from my mother and father that I was studying hair dressing, with

schemes to not tell them that I was excluded from university. At this stage I was receiving text messages from my mother almost on a daily basis letting me know exactly what she thought of me: "I can't believe I raised you and you're gay", "I hope you feel ashamed for what you're doing to us". The messages ranged in intensity, but there was always something. I tried to ignore these messages that made me feel ashamed, bullied, and heartbroken, and tried to live my life. But even when I was socializing with friends, the barrage of text messages continued, and each time my cell phone chimed a piece of me knew I was about to be insulted. Not only this, but tensions at home between my mother and father were just as toxic as before. My father was living somewhere else, and I had moved in with a friend's mother because of the constant emotional abuse from my mother and sister. At this point the secret of me doing hair came out. I came home to collect something and walked into my bedroom. On my pillow were two handwritten letters, one from my sister and one from my mother. The only way to describe them is "hate mail". All I remember after reading the letters is that this was not a spontaneous moment of anger of lashing out, but a calculated, goal directed act to make me feel ashamed, embarrassed, and disgusting. The letters spoke about how life is between Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve, how this was just a phase, and how disappointed and hurt they felt. I left that day driving to my friend's mother's place, destroyed. The letters were subsequently burnt by my mother.

After a few months, the aggression at home had settled, and living with my friend's mother was no longer a viable option, again, a Stockholm syndrome situation, and I moved back home—a trauma bond I cannot explain. With the secret of me doing hair out in the open, there was some freedom. I was the national winner for an international hair competition, and the prize was an all-inclusive paid trip to Rome to meet the other winners. It was a magical life event. Passionate and successful people surrounded me; I was social, I had fun, and most importantly—for a moment—I experienced myself as free. It was a life changing experience that showed me that the dark spiral of my family's perception of me was not true. I was capable of success and connection. My sexuality did not have to be the only aspect of my life that defined me.

When I returned from Rome, I realized that my life could have a new direction, and I decided to leave hair dressing and I returned to university to start my BSc degree—a personal challenge that required a lot of hard work and focus. I started to build a life that I felt would guarantee a feeling of success – academics, social life, an attractive body, and attempts at dating.

Although my life had been set on a new direction, my sexuality was not spoken about, and it was a family secret. The shame my mother and sister felt, especially around family, permeated the atmosphere and created an intense anxiety. My feelings of shame, not being good enough or worthy enough had become part of my self-perception.

4.4.1. Subtheme 3a: Living in secret and shame

Although my family knew of my sexual orientation, it was not discussed. The process of consolidating my feelings and accepting my sexuality for myself but having to live in secret because disclosing to extended family or friends brought shame and embarrassment to my mother. This exacerbated my already intense feelings of shame rooted in childhood feelings of not being good enough, being defective and, therefore, needing to be hidden from view. The experience of having to live a secret life further perpetuated my anger towards my family as well as resentment towards them for their rejection. The resentment was constant alongside the ongoing questions from extended family about girlfriends, and the subsequent visible tension, discomfort, and daggered eyes that my mother would give me, reminding me that my sexuality was a family secret—forbidden—and that I, essentially, was invisible.

Shame is associated with the internalization of not feeling worthy and is related to the self-perception that one is defective (Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). Shame is generated relationally in that it germinates in one's perception of what other people think of them, which is often the product of real experiences of social rejection (Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). Nathanson (1994) speaks of shame-proneness, which is the process of internalizing negative self-perceptions inherited from earlier experiences. It is further

mentioned that shame-proneness derives from the child's early development because of conflict, abuse, emotional negligence, and rejection (Pinto-Gouveia & Matos, 2011). My experience was that shame proved to be a debilitating emotion that came with a need to please and a moral perfectionism that did not allow me to live my life authentically. Moral perfectionism is related to virtues, moral values, and judgments with a high concern for making moral mistakes (Stoeber & Yang, 2016). The moral mistakes that essentially make up moral perfectionism, related to my experience, is linked to the domain of sexuality and being a 'bad person' by deviating from heteronormativity and the consequential feeling of shame. Even more, it felt like shame prevented me from belonging in my family because of my parent's disapproval. The proximity to emotional chaos that I often found myself in did not resemble the process of coming out described by Mosher (2011), whereby the gay individual recognizes and accepts who they have always been and resolves their internal struggles. Cass's processes of Identity Tolerance and Identity Acceptance were not straightforward because while I was willing to disclose my sexuality, I had not fully realized the impact that my childhood had in shaping my beliefs and understanding of gender and (homo)sexuality. In relation to the Whiting Model, the tensions, and conflicts in childhood influences psychobehavioral challenges in adulthood that are often associated with the need for social development, competence, and compliance to cultural demands and expectations imposed on children during their development. Continuing to live in secret and being ashamed of my gay orientation and constructing it—and myself—as wrong was perhaps my attempt at aligning with my family—and society—against myself to counteract the pain of the rejection and to manifest a sense of belonging where it had been obliterated. This, however, also prevented true Identity Tolerance and Acceptance.

4.4.2. Subtheme 3b: Self-sabotage and achievement

After returning home from Australia, I felt like a disappointment because of not excelling academically, and for disappointing my family when I disclosed my sexuality. I attempted a career in hairdressing, but my sense of shame and guilt for, firstly, not completing my degree, and secondly, for considering a career in

a stereotypically feminine profession, was overwhelming. At that point, after my unaccepted coming out experience, I craved validation from my family and wanted to prove to them that I was not an embarrassment, but I also realized that I chose hairdressing as a means to express my creativity, and to immerse myself in a culture that was supportive of the gay community. However, although I was good at it, I was not particularly passionate about being a hairdresser, which created a sense of anxiety about my future. Being involved in hairdressing was a pivotal experience for me, as it exposed me to gay culture, as well as the very prominent feelings of wanting and needing acceptance and support from my family. Hairdressing being a 'feminine' profession and, therefore, shame-inducing for its unacceptability to my family, I decided that it was not the right career for me. So, I told my father—although not emotionally supportive, he was very supportive of our academic pursuits—that I wanted to study again.

At this stage I felt I had to prove to myself and my family that I was not a complete disappointment and academic success would be more acceptable and worthy of my family's acceptance. This, I thought, would compensate for being wrong and would recoup what was lost due to their rejection of me. I registered for a BSc in Physiology and Biochemistry, later picking up Psychology again. In retrospect, a BSc may be perceived as part of the 'hard sciences' and is traditionally masculine. Perhaps there was an unconscious need for my career and academic life to be more acceptable and palatable according to societal—and my family's—standards of being a man. Being involved in academics was aligned to feelings of approval, achievement and belonging (Covington, 1984). Covington (1984) proposed that meaningful conceptualization of achievement is related to one's self-perception, and the Sciences gave me a purpose, something that I had to work extra hard at and a status that I felt I needed. While this was undoubtedly fuelled by a need for external validation, it was also an attempt to prove to myself what I was capable of achieving. I felt like I had disappointed my family when I returned from Australia and gave up my studies, but I also disappointed myself. Failing in Australia and ultimately giving up a chance of a lifetime and being rejected by my family because of my sexuality created a deeply impoverished sense of self

and intense shame. I felt the need to be validated and sought approval by excelling academically. If I excelled at academics, I would get the approval of my family, I would have achieved something, no longer feeling like a disappointment, and I would belong to a revered community of intellectuals rather than a 'deviant' community that catalysed my mother's disapproval.

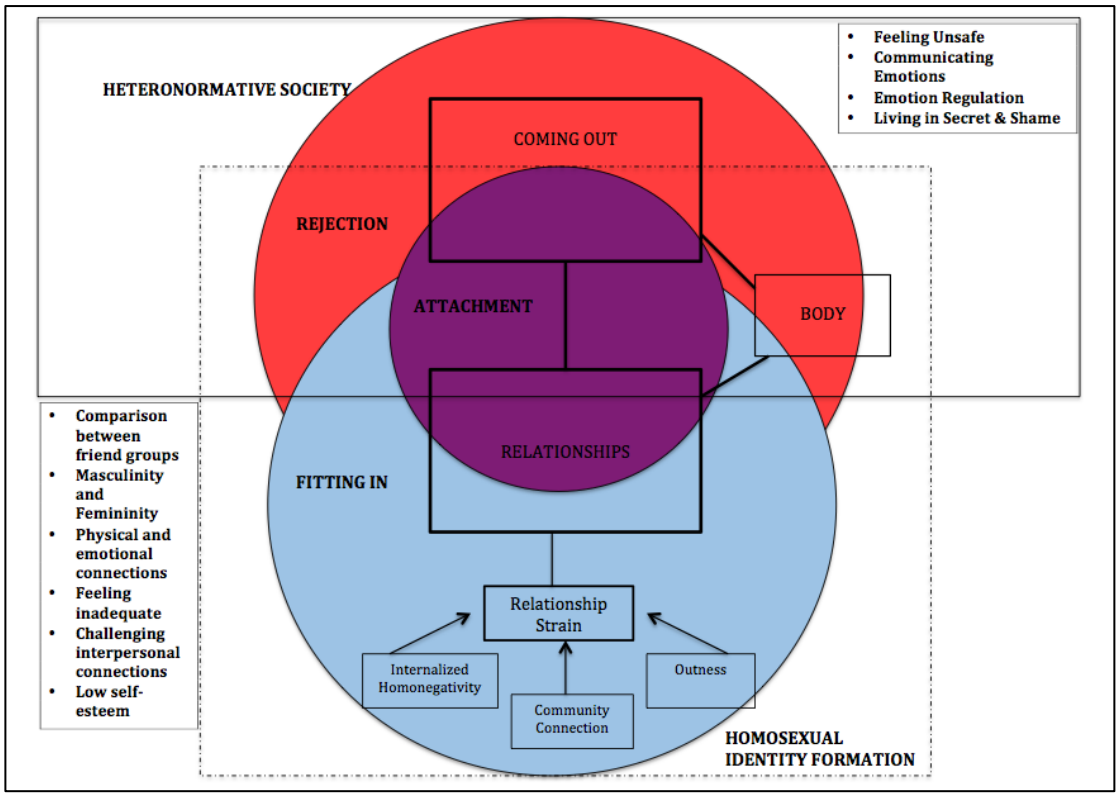
However, I re-entered academics not merely to stave off further rejection from my family. It was also a process the intention of which was to work towards a goal that gave me meaning and purpose and to re-establish, for myself, my sense of belonging and worth. This was a turning point in my life because as much as I was seeking validation and approval from my family, I was also connecting to a sense of internal validation that was not about my sexuality. Although there were moments in which I was top of the class in certain modules and others where I failed, there was a sense of accomplishment for what I did achieve and could continue to achieve when I acknowledged my potential to be successful. My perception of myself greatly affected my desire for success, and again, there were moments during my studies that rather than rising to the challenge I avoided hard work, which related to my confidence—or lack thereof—to consistently excel. Fairbairn spoke of the internal saboteur, which relates to the internalized negative perception of the self, that is used to jeopardize progress towards a healthy perception of the self, which has been attributed to repressed feelings associated with the bad object (Nuttal, 2000). When the feelings that have been internalized cannot be separated from the negative projections of others, feelings of unworthiness and deprivation of the self-emerge in the form of shame (McWilliams, 2011), my 'dark passenger'. My own self-sabotage fuelled by shame is consistent with Worthman's (2010) conceptualization of the projective-expressive system (Whiting, 1977) as a defensive response to psychic conflict generated in childhood.

4.5. Theme 4: Relationships after rejection

This theme will focus on my intimate relationships. The way my intimate relationships were navigated was shaped by the relational experiences I had within my family as a child as described in Theme 1. These experiences with my parents carved out not only a distorted model of relationships, but also

predisposed my internalization of a negative self-perception after coming out. A relationship was a way to connect, to feel loved and accepted, but my romantic relationships always seemed to perpetuate the unconscious notion that I was not good enough. Figure 4 is used to illustrate and introduce the concept of how different systems overlap with each other to create different perceptions and experiences of relationships.

Figure 4: Diagram representing the link between my coming out experience and my relationships.



Note: The multileveled conditions presented by the Whiting Model highlights the influence of heteronormatively organized society on familial and interpersonal interactions. With this in mind, the process of coming out and engaging in romantic same-sex relationships created an overlap in my experience between being part of the gay community and wanting acceptance to protect myself from rejection from mainstream society. The use of my body played out in two ways: the first being to assimilate into heterosexual society by portraying more of a masculine presentation; secondly, to engage with men physically rather than emotionally. This placed strain on myself and my relationships.

My experiences of social withdrawal and isolation were affected by my ineffective understanding of conflict resolution, which took the form of arguing, becoming angry, and communicating aggressively with loved ones and intimate partners. The reaction I exhibited to a perceived threat of rejection from my partner would often elicit a very real concern about an actual breakup (i.e., rejection). After my childlike acting out with aggression, I would find myself in deep remorse and apologize, expecting the relationship to simply return to a place of love and comfort. However, this perception was distorted, as it created no space to reflect on emotional triggers or effective communication following the argument. I did not understand the correlation between my childhood and the emotional strain of my family's rejection, and the role it had in the perception of my worth in relationships. The underlying anxiety I experienced due to the inconsistency and unreliability of emotional safety in my childhood predisposed me to being hypervigilant to threats (perceived or real). This in turn, allowed me to detach from my partners, even if that meant pushing them away through acting out. Brown et al., (2013) propose that difficulties experienced by individuals in gay relationships are often related to the negative environments that they grew up in. Porter et al. (2019) speaks of the rejection experienced in relationships as often being the result of problematic interpersonal behaviors that are elicited by feelings of shame and low self-esteem—feelings that I intimately identified with. It appeared that my behavior to protect myself against rejection, was an unconscious process to keep myself emotionally safe. If I felt I was not good enough, then being in a relationship would create a situation by which a failed relationship would prove it. I felt I did not deserve to be in loving and nurturing relationships, in general, but more intensely so with a man because this was a remnant of the heterosexist lens I was raised in that proffered the notion that a relationship between two men was not only impossible, but wrong. It was as though my sabotaging of relationships with men was a way to identify with my family's distorted perceptions rooted in heterosexism that is one way in which I—psychologically—attempted to retain proximity to my family and counteract the rejection for being gay. This includes parent-child attachment, which unfolds in the proximal learning environment, and describes a caregiving context that shapes what the child comes to learn about themselves, the world, and other people. As such, attachment influences

personal and social interactions and relationships throughout life and early secure attachment is the foundation for a healthy sense of self in relating to others in broader society (Doinita, 2015). The attachment I had with my parents created a complex environment for my coming out experience, which created a 'double rejection' and predisposed me to navigating relationships in an uncertain and confusing way. This is another example of how broader societal notions impacted on my individual psychological processes—through experiences with my family—and my interpersonal relatedness/relationships, reflecting the interconnectedness of systems in influencing the individual's development. My fear of not being accepted by friend groups and romantic partners kept me feeling alone by way of a paranoid anxiety (Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017) that created hostility within me that presented as aggression. These internal feelings perpetuated my experience of shame which emerged, behaviorally, as I became insecure and responded with hostility in the face of perceived rejection, or when I felt unseen and unheard by significant others such as my family and romantic partners. My anger was therefore directed, targeted and a defensive attack geared to keeping me safe through distancing me from connecting.

As time went on, my self-blame and shame for my failed relationships magnified, and in line with Porter et al.'s (2019) explanation that a perceived threat of rejection perpetuates isolation and social withdrawal, left me feeling lonely and depressed. I responded to this loneliness and emptiness by having more casual sex that offered the illusion of affection and closeness but in the safety of the absence of true emotional vulnerability. The intrapersonal conflict of the desire for closeness and intimacy, but the peace and safety of solitude, often presents with emotional and sexual fantasies of connection (Kibel, 2019; Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). Casual sex was a way of enacting this fantasy for connection in a way that was circumscribed, limited, and gratifying. The connection was discarded before it could become meaningful and, therefore, emotionally threatening. Not having my family's support, living in secret, and not publicly displaying my gay relationships meant that I was forced to navigate these emotions by myself.

Vignette 4: Dynamics of Relationships

My intimate relationships have always been arduous experiences. I tended to be attracted to men who I thought were out of my league. They were good looking and successful. There was always an air of confidence and an almost popularity that I envied. These were attributes that I felt I did not possess. I did get attention from men, and I did have long term relationships, however, there were always two underlying aspects that did not contribute to successful relationships: firstly, I did not believe that I was good enough and always questioned why my partners were with me, and secondly, my relationships—despite having come out—were always a secret. The most challenging part of being in my relationships was that I felt I was alone in navigating the difficult times. I did not feel I could count on my friends to speak about the feeling of inadequacy I felt about myself. Feeling lost in myself and in my relationships, the relationships became incredibly toxic. I would demean myself and always put my partner first. What I felt was that I was re-living the relationship that was modeled for me as a child, and the only way I knew how to engage was to create conflict. There was always something not working. Even then, the shame and self-blame became overwhelming, and I felt that if I had done more, or been more accepting of the way they related, it would not have ended. I entered into relationships with partners who were independent, but distant. They were consumed by their own lives, and I had to fit into their way of being rather than us coming together. I often felt not seen and not heard.

Even though I 'knew' my toxic relationships would eventually come to an end, I felt rejected when they did. But I also felt weak for not choosing myself when the red flags were so blatant. My need to feel loved and to not have alone placed me in situations that perpetuated my feelings of inadequacy. Yet, the pattern kept repeating itself. It is as though the chaos of my childhood was familiar to me. And the relationships I found myself in were attempts to fix myself and my past as though it was a repetition compulsion by repeating a pattern in an attempt to secure a different outcome – the fixing. Peace and self-worth seemed like a foreign way of being, and it was as though I chose to find comfort in chaos, because (emotional) chaos is what I knew. It is not so much

that it made me feel safe – because it was not – but in the absence of safety it was at the very least familiar.

There were a few one-nightstands, online chats, and friends-with-benefits that gave me the attention that I desired, while the emotional distance of these engagements kept me safe. However, what was not apparent at the time, or rather I denied it, was that some of those men were good men. They were kind, and warm, but they made me feel vulnerable. I sooner gave them my body than my heart because warmth was threatening. I know that through my resistance to seeing the worth in myself, I had hurt some people. Even with some friends, I gave up the safety of their love and companionship for chaos in relationships that proved how unworthy I felt about myself.

4.5.1. Subtheme 4a: Fear of connection

My distrust for others seemed to have crept into all spheres of my life, but most notably within my romantic relationships, with my family, and with myself. I felt stuck in what felt like a struggle to let go of the profound hurt I felt was inflicted upon me by my family when I came out. At the same time, I wanted a safe and secure relationship, but just could not allow others to get close to me, for fear of further rejection. I was angry with my family for rejecting me, I was angry with myself for having placed myself in that situation, and I was angry for being gay. I got caught in the fantasy of 'what if'. 'What if' I was not gay, 'what if' my family responded differently, 'what if' I was not wrong or defective. Upon reflection, I feel I often perpetuated these feelings by involving myself in relationships and situations that elicited feelings of mistrust. My lack of self-worth seemed to be an affair perpetuated by being shamed by others, but also by being ashamed of my actions in seeking validation as a result of being made to feel worthless. I desperately wanted to feel safe with others, but this was always accompanied by a more powerful and lingering sense of fear of being annihilated through being rejected and invalidated for who I was. It was as though my relationship with my family was mirrored in my intimate relationships with elements of intense neediness but also hostile attacks. This confusion often left me with a need to detach from others; when someone wanted to be emotionally close to

me, I could not understand why. My need for connection was tempered by a defensive avoidance in the form of social withdrawal and isolation as a result of a fear of rejection and vulnerability in relationships. This was precipitated by my parents whose allegiance to a particular belief and sociocultural value system left me feeling profoundly invalid for who I was because I did not fit the heteronormative mould. Isolation and detachment were a means of safety that left me resentful, lonely, and guilty. This aligns with Lingiardi and McWilliams's (2017) explanation of the inability to experience the self and others in healthy relationships as resulting from a fear of abandonment and rejection. As such, my expectations of future rejections as an inevitability instigated a distrust of safety which resulted in the perpetration of hostile behaviors that kept others away from me (Kibel, 2019; Lingiardi & McWilliams, 2017). According to Ren et al. (2018), the hurt that is perpetrated through being ostracized is what triggers aggression in response. Aggression was my protector against the vulnerability; a more powerful counter-position to the powerlessness, emptiness, shame and worthlessness I felt as a result of being invalidated for who I was by those closest to me who were meant to be self-affirming and keep me safe.

During moments of rejection, I had feelings of inadequacy and wanting to isolate myself that left me feeling lonely. For me, the experience of rejection was the opposite of belonging. Social connection was an internally polarising experience for me; I wanted the connection, but I also knew that being alone was safe, albeit lonely. Despite the desire to be with someone and to immerse in the gay community and feel connected to this world, I was scared and doubtful to be with anyone or to make those connections. I wanted to be accepted but I did not know who was going to accept me as I did not think I was good enough or worthy enough to be accepted. This was a challenging time because, in hindsight, I used my internalized homonegativity as a resistance to embrace the gay community. I was afraid to associate with a community that was stereotyped and perceived as being sex- and drug-focused. My self-stereotyping created an intrapsychic conflict between attempting to conform to heteronormative views and values in order not to be rejected, while also wanting to explore my sexuality and attraction to men. I experienced both fear of the gay community but also admired its sense of what I viewed as confidence

and openness. In my experience, the gay community appeared to offer an opportunity to find a sense of belonging. However, I continued to struggle with authentic emotional connection to others motivated by a maladjusted unconscious process to feel validated and wanted. I struggled with finding healing from the rejection I experienced when I came out to my family, in the gay community. Although fleeting and superficial, I used 'hook up culture' as an external means of finding meaning and belonging, which seemed—to me—to be a norm in the gay community. Using my body allowed me to minimise the feeling of rejection, however, it sometimes perpetuated feelings of shame that consequently left me believing that I would not find a healthy relationship as a gay man. I judged myself for exploring my sexuality and sexual relationships, as it related to my internalized homonegativity that was associated with sexual promiscuity and superficial relationships.

Perhaps when seeking belonging, I tried to find a common connection with the gay community. My body was a means to connect, gain attention and to feel worthy; it was a way to fit into what I perceived the gay community to be. When these misperceptions dominate the internal working models of self-worth and value, this may result in deviations towards maladaptive mechanisms to experience happiness (Satgiu, 2014), rather than focusing on self-acceptance and self-worth. In my experience, the feeling of being rejected, the feeling of not fitting in to the popular athletic groups, and not feeling attractive, left me feeling weak, emotionally, and physically. During my coming out process, the gay community had bars and clubs that allowed a space for expression. It seemed like the more attractive you were, the more attention you got. It was a simple equation that meant so much more. If I was not accepted by my family for who I was, then I would be accepted by the gay community for my body. However, comparison to other bodies in terms of masculine and feminine presentation only reinforced the narrative of superiority and inferiority in the gay community (i.e., hegemonic masculinity). It was as though the negative perceptions of heteronormative standards of physical attractiveness had permeated into the gay community. The more 'masculine' you are, the more attractive—and acceptable—you are due to the ability to more seamlessly become assimilated into the standards of worth influenced heavily by

heteromasculine values and, hence, internalized homophobia. This is not to say that a muscular body only belongs to heterosexual men, but the notion remains that embodying femininity increases the risk of discrimination within both the heterosexual and gay community (Ravenhill & de Visser, 2019). It is not about the muscular body itself but rather that it symbolizes a particular masculinity that reifies a dichotomised, and essentialised, view of gender and sexuality (Tilsen et al., 2007) that positions queer femininities as the so-called abject other through misogynistic notions (Hale & Ojeda, 2018). This particular masculinity is informed by traditional (heteronormative) ideas around men being big, strong and dominant. Therefore, anything more feminine signifies weakness and victimization. So, for me, the concept of a muscular physique represented strength and a purpose and was used to counter the feelings of inadequacy and to gain attention and connection because I knew this to be the acceptable and desired way of presenting the physical self within gay culture (Chow, 2021).

The incorporation of traditional masculinity into gay culture can be understood as a counter-reaction to oppression. It is about acquiescence, but it is also about feeling powerful in the context of being othered and stripped of dignity. When considering the interrelatedness of systems that influence the individual, there tends to be a double discrimination based on internalized heterosexism in the gay community and challenges the notion that those who are oppressed cannot enact oppression (Hale & Ojeda, 2018). This is embodied in the retention of ‘fem’ gay men, transgender men, and women, as well as drag queens at the very periphery of the so-called gay ‘imagined community’ (Winer, 2022) because they violate the ideas of traditional masculinity. Drag, for example, although fundamental to gay culture, is a performance—a form of entertainment that is temporary and distanced from the gay mainstream (Berkowitz, et al., 2007). This treatment of the drag community reflects the reality of internalized homonegativity that is integrated into the gay community through which the rejection of femininity in men is used to reinforce and reify hegemonic masculinities. There remains a taboo and a discrimination within the gay community towards effeminate expressions of queerness because it speaks to internalized oppressive processes (Guittar, 2013; Guittar,

2014; Morgan & Davis-Delano, 2016). These processes are rooted in systems of hegemonic masculinity that shape gendered experiences from early childhood through the relationship with the paternal caregiver of the family (Ozturk et al., 2020). In my experience, trying to maintain proximity to my family and trying to find belonging in the gay community both meant distancing myself from, or even rejecting, my stereotypically feminine qualities, and engaging in performances of traditional masculinity to be perceived as acceptable even though this was at the expense of my felt authenticity and, therefore, of true connection and belonging, at the time.

4.6. Theme 5: Finding my worth

This theme focuses on the process of working towards self-acceptance and attempting to find my sense of belonging. Through the process of further self-discovery, I came to realize that my anger and internalization of the shame and rejection that created my negative self-perception played a crucial role in my difficulties with forming healthy relationships with partners and friends. I realized that I had to work through my past traumas, and I reached out to a clinical psychologist and started the process of therapy. The puzzle pieces of my shattered sense of self started to make sense as a result of therapy, and putting the pieces back together was often more painful than the experience itself, but necessary. It was my perspective that when I worked towards self-acceptance and acknowledging my self-worth despite rejection, then perhaps the intensity of my internalized negative self-perception would be minimized.

Self-worth is the individual's evaluation of themselves as a person from a global perspective (McDavid et al., 2015). Behaviors are often driven by desires for individuals to feel worthy and valuable, which may be viewed as ego-driven. When the need for safety, nurturance and acceptance is not met, there is often a result of instability of worth or self-esteem (Crocker & Knight, 2005). However, when external validations such as physical appearance, family support, and others' approval are criteria for feeling worthy and valuable, self-worth becomes conditional (Croker & Knight, 2005; Zhang et al., 2018). The conditions of external validation precipitate rejection by means of negative judgements placed on individuals by others in their social interactions, which in

turn predisposes one to a diminished sense of self-acceptance. As much as self-worth is a global perception, Lim et al. (2012) maintain that self-worth is regarded as the acceptance and satisfaction about one's personal characteristics and achievements. It is when interpersonal attachments—family and social environment—are distorted, that the ability to process these achievements and characteristics become falsified and invalid, resulting in a negative view of the self-due to projected judgments (Lim et al., 2012).

I reached a point in my life where I could not live in secret anymore. By this stage, I had disclosed my sexuality openly and proudly, although there was still some reservation. I realized that the shame and rejection that I experienced was benefitting neither me, my family nor my relationships. I was tired of going to family dinners or events alone, because it was unfair to my partners, and even more, I felt even more alone when I did it. The denial that my family and I had been living in had to come to an end. With this said, my relationship with my sister had improved significantly, with many arguments and discussions, where my sister realized her distorted perceptions that influenced her non-acceptance of my sexual identity. However, I still blamed and resented my family for my negative self-perception. I remained that wounded child, stubborn and throwing tantrums. I struggled to take accountability and to have the courage to not only live my authentic life, but to also stand up against my family and stand up for myself. I suppose that for so long I blamed my mother for not leaving my father, that perhaps if she had left, she would have been a kinder person, and subsequently not have rejected me. I wrote my mother an email, expressing my true feelings.

Vignette 5: Letter to my mother

Dear Mom,

I am writing this letter because I am hurting, and I want to heal. Our history has been filled with many ups and downs, yet I find myself holding onto the downs. I have the power and the intention of moving forward, and that requires forgiveness. You have taught me to stand up for myself, yet I find it so difficult

to stand up to you. When I came out to you, I will never forget the hurt and intense rejection that I felt, the words of you saying "I love you but will never accept you" still haunts me and I have been carrying that with me for over a decade. I came home to handwritten hate mail and went through years of you manipulating and threatening me. You went to so many psychics to disprove who I am, but never took the time to love me, to be there for me, to protect me when I needed it, I did not have my mom when I was going through the most challenging time of my life. I know it is the elephant in the room, but I believe in myself, and the person I am and the person I will love. I want to be close to you, and I want a genuine relationship with you, but I know the embarrassment and disapproval you have towards me is the wedge between us. I have fought for approval, but I now know that the approval belongs to me, and that I love and approve of myself, and I refuse to take on anyone's judgments. I live proud of who I am and everything that I have done and that I am. I am trying to forgive you for your reaction and for what followed, but that is no longer my story, and I wish it is no longer yours. Through this journey all I have ever wanted was to talk to my mom, whenever something happened and I was not sure, all I wanted was for you to tell me that it will be ok and for you to have my back unconditionally. I believe in our family, but I cannot live in fear anymore, because we are far too important and magical for us to not live our best and most authentic lives. I truly wish our relationship will heal. With this in mind, I really do recognize and appreciate everything else you do for me, because it's a lot. There are many things I am grateful for, yet I still acknowledge that my healing process has just begun, and I had to find the courage to express myself, for myself. You say that you love me, but you do not because you still cannot accept who I am.

I am choosing me, and my happiness, and I wish that you will be with me on this journey of life, but if not, that is what I will work through.

After I had sent the email my mother and I had a conversation. The underlying message was that there needed to be some forgiveness and a way forward. We started having more open conversations around my sexuality, and

I opened up to her about my romantic relationships. There is still discomfort for her, but she is trying. Forgiveness is often seen as an interpersonal process between a victim and wrongdoer, in which forgiveness catalyses supportive relationships and improves psychological well-being (Bono et al., 2008; Lawler-Row et al., 2011). More so, forgiveness appears to improve relational well-being, and as such, promotes social acceptance (Bono et al., 2008). Murray (2002) suggests that for forgiveness to be effective, it often involves the wrongdoer taking responsibility for their actions that caused harm, and to ensure it does not happen again. In my experience, although it took many years, the process of forgiveness had begun. And with it, came a sense of belonging in my family. We all went through trauma in our household, and I had to acknowledge that it impacted the way we all related to each other.

The coming out experience—whether to oneself or to others—can be a precarious journey which is paved with family and social interactions (Cass, 1979; Katz-Wise et al., 2016). For me, it was as though I had the pieces of several different puzzles in one box, trying to create an image that encompasses them all—I was trying to shape a self that conformed to my family's values and those of the culture in which we were embedded, even then they did not match who I was. When I reflect on my coming out story and the immediate reaction I received from my family, the pain that I felt was magnified by a toxic environment. I have often wondered had my mother worked through some of her trauma, had my sister not been influenced, had my family been united in some form of acceptance and understanding, then my coming out experience would have been entirely different. But the reality for me and for so many is that that is not the case. The reality is that societally-entrenched ideologies steeped in heteronormativity produce and perpetuate shame and rejection in intimate environments that permeates the safety that is meant to exist within families. If I were rejected by society for who I was, I would have had the safety and protection of my family as a buffer to contain and to hold the rejection (Qu et al., 2015; Manczak et al., 2018). However, I did not have the safety of my family. Additionally, my sense of self was further predicated on fractured interactions with a group of friends whose religious affiliations shunned me (Oswald, 2002), my family's explicit disgust and grief because of

my attraction towards men, and a gay community that was only interested in me because I was masculine and 'straight acting' enough to be regarded as attractive and, therefore, acceptable (Berkowitz, 2007).

Moving towards an empowered sense of self—primarily learning to unlearn my negative self-evaluation—I had to realize that the projections that I introjected were fears that have been introjected by my family themselves from society. The cycle of hurt stops when I acknowledge that I have to give myself the acceptance and compassion I was so desperately seeking (Sanscartier et al., 2019). My idea that I was not enough based on who I loved was a false pretence instigated by a heterosexist society. If these ideas continued, I would associate belonging and love with avoidance and a diminished sense of self.

4.7. Conclusion

In summary, Theme 1 discussed my childhood environment and introduced the reader to my home environment and the relationship with my parents. In this theme, I explored how heterosexuality and gender roles were identified and learned through the relationship between my parents and how their psychobehavioral patterns influenced how I presented in, and experienced, the world—as a fearful and isolating. Furthermore, the lack of emotional safety predisposed me to feeling unsafe in exploring my sexuality freely and honestly as it was in contrast to the hegemonic masculinity I was accustomed to through my parents' interactions and implicit communications around what was acceptable and what was not. Feeling unsafe, fearful, and isolated dominated a large part of my childhood such that making sense of my emerging queerness came with feelings of denial, shame, and active expressions to minimize outwards expressions that did not align with traditional heteronormative conceptualizations and expectations of masculinity, fostering shame. Theme 1, therefore, set the stage for my challenging coming out process that was shaped in critical ways by a family context infused with the influence of sociocultural conceptualizations defined by heteromasculine values and ideals.

Theme 2 reflected on my coming out experience and the subsequent rejection from my mother and sister, which perpetuated the shame and

internalized negative self-appraisal, which was the antithesis of acceptance and belonging. Germinated through cultural heterosexism, this rejection threatened my identity acceptance and robbed me of a sense of belonging in a familial context in which belonging should have been a given and unconditional. This catalyzed a cascade of self-destructiveness that served to confirm my wrongness and, thus, to provide a distorted rationale for why those who were meant to support, encourage, protect, and affirm me, had abandoned me.

Theme 3 moved on to discussing my process of attempting to navigate life after coming out and experiencing the profound rejection from my family. This included the need to fit in and to seek validation from others albeit in unhealthy and superficial ways. This period was hued with anger and resentment at my family and at myself for being gay through which I found myself attempting to seek belonging through using my body to reject femininity in a community that itself had fallen victim to cultural heterosexism through internalized homonegativity.

Following on, theme 4 addressed the challenges of creating a connection with others, especially romantically, but also platonically. With my parents' relationship as a model for relationships, my sense of worth, my aggression and fear of rejection, relationships were difficult to maintain and to feel safe in. This often led to perpetuating feelings of not being accepted and belonging in a safe and nurturing relationship.

Lastly, theme 5 reflected on the process of unlearning my negative perceptions of queer orientation, not feeling accepted and trying to fit in based on inauthentic and superficial ways. This theme identified the ongoing process of rediscovering me and creating self-acceptance for myself.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1. Introduction

This chapter concludes the research by summarizing the findings and highlighting key points surrounding my coming out experience and the implications of rejection, belonging and self-acceptance. The chapter will also provide personal reflections on the process of conducting this autoethnography and will discuss the strengths and limitations of the study. The chapter will conclude with considering recommendations for future research.

5.2. Overview of findings

The aim of this study was to explore my sense of belonging in my family and in the gay community and how this belonging shaped and influenced my self-acceptance after familial rejection following my coming out. The findings of this autoethnographic study were organized according to five main themes as discussed in Chapter 4: Introduction to Heterosexuality and Relationships, Coming Out and Rejection, Navigating My Coming Out Experience, Relationships After Rejection, and Finding My Worth.

My childhood set the stage for an understanding and experience of masculinity and femininity as diametrically opposed and incompatible with one another. Heteromasculine and heterosexist ideologies permeated my parents' relationship and our household that made it clear that heterosexual relationships with clear, distinct and traditional gender roles and responsibilities were the norm. At a young age, although I had not engaged with my gay orientation yet, my more sensitive and 'feminine' attributes were silenced for fear of betraying the norm that was set and that was expected by my father's version of masculinity. This perpetuated a lack of safety that was already present due to my father's aggression that served as an enactment of his masculinity. So, home was not safe and I felt a sense of shame for—at least internally—not conforming to what was expected and, hence, for being defective. I felt like I did not belong and developed a 'false self' to attempt to manufacture a sense of belonging by aligning with what was acceptable

according to heteromasculine standards and values as I attempted to make sense of queer orienation. Although I did not deny my own gay orientation, I struggled to reconcile it with the values I was inculcated in at home and that was reflected in other social institution such as school and with friends.

As such, I felt a sense of relief when I left home to study in Australia because this afforded me an opportunity to escape what felt like the shackles of my family's allegiance to heterosexism and allowed me to fully explore my gay identity, safely. This contributed towards a greater consolidation of my identity and, hence, my decision to come out. However, given my family's rootedness in societally-endorsed and reinforced traditional values, this coming out led to a rejection that set off a cascade of self-destructive behaviors that spoke to my impoverished self-worth and shame that had already been germinated by my childhood in which I learned that being different was not normal and was wrong. I had come to internalize homonegativity as a result.

Forced to return from Australia, being home following the rejection meant continuing to live in secret which perpetuated my shame and I continued to engage in problematic and self-destructive relationships as a way of avoiding connection because my internalized homonegativity facilitated a belief that meaningful relationships were not possible between two men, so casual sex was a way to connect without engaging in true vulnerability. This way, I used my body to stave off rejection by not allowing enough intimacy that would put me at risk of emotional connection and, hence, the pain of rejection. But this focus on body was also steeped within heteronormative ideas of masculinity that had been internalized by the gay community in its attempt to defend against the ostracism and oppression meted out by mainstream society. As a result, defying the ideal of the traditional muscular male physique, or displaying femininity, was not acceptable and I continued to feel alienated and as if I did not belong. In my attempts to feel like I belonged, I felt as though I needed to perform a version of myself that was curated to be acceptable to my family and to the gay community even though this was not authentically who I was.

Ultimately, however, over time and engaging more openly and authentically with my family, I have been able to shape an alternative path towards belonging that has resulted, through communication, in a greater degree of authentic self-expression and self-acceptance.

5.3. Strengths of the study

Autoethnography, in general, and this study, specifically, seeks to provide a voice of advocacy for marginalized identities—in this case, the queer identities. This is done through the vehicle of the researcher's personal narrative by critically engaging with the self in relation to others and society. For this reason, my narrative provides a personal view that allows readers to connect emotionally to, and identify with, the research. By speaking in the first person, my research provides a vulnerability and an opportunity for the reader—through a personal connection to my story—to reflect on their relationship to different aspects of the research such as, for example, how they relate to the queer communities, or even how they experience belonging and acceptance in a heterosexually organized society. The autoethnographic process can be experienced as self-transformative, by providing an opportunity for self-reflection and awareness for both the researcher and the reader. This may then, as in my personal experience, be a catalyst to further invest in personal growth or discovery. More so, my autoethnography, although focused on me as a gay man, provides an understanding of the complexities of social interactions for sexual and gender-diverse minorities in which relating to others is often underpinned by the fear of rejection, discrimination, and internalized inferiority based on previous experiences. Although, sometimes, the complexities associated with rejection, discrimination and internalized negative perceptions may be repressed and unconsciously projected onto others that offer safety, perpetuating a cycle of self-sabotaging behaviors. With this understanding, perhaps by evoking conversations for sexual minorities, autoethnographic researchers allow for greater advocacy for gender policies and freedom for individuals to authentically explore what their sexual orientation and gender experiences and expressions mean for them. These themes are often explored in the use of a moderate autoethnography, such as my research, which is grounded on empirical research, as well as critical discussion to challenge

discriminatory or oppressive views of the gay community and traditional views of heterosexually orientated families with queer family members.

A further strength of my autoethnography is the use of Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation Model and the Whitings' Model for Psychocultural Research. Cass's model was used as its foundation was in recognizing the impact a heterosexually organized society has on a gay man's identification as being gay. The Whiting model further expanded on how society and its institutions influence the family and, subsequently, the individual. The models, together, consider the interrelationships between various subsystems within the broader sociocultural system such as, for example, social rules and expectations, family dynamics and values and, ultimately, the individual. As such, using Cass's model and the Whiting model concurrently contributed to the rigor of the autoethnography by grounding the analysis in established models. Although Cass's model focuses largely on the individual's identity development, the Whiting model allowed for a broader exploration by considering child development from a historical, cultural, and behavioral aspect. This strengthens my autoethnography by not only considering the perspective of the psyche and attachment to the primary caregiver but extended the analysis into to the family unit as a whole, peer groups, communities, broader societal concepts and intergenerational experiences that shape an individual's experience of self-development.

Lastly, effectively engaging, in-depth, with personal experiences allowed my family and I the opportunity to reflect, grow and learn from this experience in a self-transformative way. Furthermore, engaging evocatively and analytically with personal reflections on key life experiences offered the reader an opportunity to follow my journey and perhaps reflect on their own. Related to this, a notable strength of my autoethnography was to give a voice to the queer community so that—if read—for individuals, families, and professionals, it may offer a deeper understanding of the complexity of living as a queer person in a heterosexually organized society and, may thus, encourage and promote greater understanding and empathy.

5.4. Limitations of the study

Although there are many advantages to using an autoethnographic approach for research, there are also limitations. For example, the balance between storytelling and research may appear to be blurred. With this in mind, Mendez (2013) states that the emotional connection that the reader has towards the research is unpredictable. Furthermore, the research may appear to be from a biased and limited memory of experiences. Due to the personal nature of an autoethnography, the research may also read as narcissistic, self-indulgent, individualized and, from my experience, blaming and manipulative. As such, recognizing that the analytical process of the data is from personal experience, the data may be portrayed as being misinterpreted, unorganized, and not founded on empirical methods of data analysis.

As another potential limitation, both Cass's model (Keaneady & Oswalt, 2014) and the Whiting model (Edwards & Bloch, 2010) have both been criticized for being too linear. To expand on the criticism for Cass's model, the model may not advocate for the various paths of identity formation that speaks to multiple sexual identities (e.g., bisexual, asexual, pansexual) and the multiple axes of identity (i.e., gender, culture, religion, ethnicity, race, class). Cass's model has been criticized by Rowen & Malcolm (2003) and Chun & Singh (2010) for being Western and ignorant of racialized dynamics. The concept of intersectionality is important to consider, especially in the South African context due to the diversity of genders, religions, ethnicities, and cultures. My own personal account presented in this autoethnography suffers from a similar drawback given that I am a white, gay, cis-gender man from a middle-class family. The intersection of many of these identity markers, despite the challenges that I have experienced, carry with them social privileges that are not afforded to people of color, who are transgender and/or who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. Therefore, my experience cannot be said to represent those of these other groups and this autoethnography does not seek, or claim, to do so. It does, however, hope to elicit empathy and to encourage others to document their own experiences.

5.5. Reflecting on my autoethnographic study

When I was first told about an autoethnographic research method, I felt an appeal in sharing my story. From my perspective, I felt captivated by others' stories, but most importantly, the way in which others have overcome hardships. I decided to focus on my coming out story, because I felt that although my story was not unique, it still remains a contentious and often hurtful experience for many. Relating to others through their stories allows for an emotional and intimate connection. In doing this, this was a notable focus for me—for other gay individuals to not feel alone in disclosing their sexual orientation or to be ashamed of their challenges with healing from rejection. However, there was also a more personal, underlying, motive. This was for my family to understand the extent to which their rejection had created negative and resentful feelings towards them. As the writing of my autoethnography continued, this motivation became unhealthy, and the guilt created intense resistance towards finishing my research. The airing of my family drama and conflict was unpleasant, and although this was part of my story, I felt that I was sharing their story as well. This led to many conversations with them, and they reassured me that we all recognize our roles during my coming out experience and how we responded and related thereafter. Perhaps the process of my autoethnography was a healing process for us all. The process was a way for us to not only recognize our faults, but to work through them together by creating a more supporting and forgiving space.

Academically, my research was delayed because of my procrastination, and I became resentful and disinterested in writing. The challenges and constant feedback of my writing not being good enough to be deemed as academically appropriate was frustrating and at times triggering. It felt as though I was sabotaging my academic career because I felt I was not good enough—again—and the pattern of procrastination was repeated. Throughout my academic career, I knew I had the capability and talent to excel, however, it felt as though I seldom put in the hard work, and I did not understand why—I still do not. During my master's degree I was in a relationship and that was my primary focus, and my academic results were average, because I did not put in the time and effort to fully commit. There seems to be a correlation between what I want, or what I deem to be successful—the balance between intimate

relationships and academic excellence. Do I sacrifice my own excellence to try to give my partner everything? Does the concept of sabotage provide the chaotic internal working that I am familiar with and neglecting or postponing the completion of research is a prime example? These are questions that are raised when reflecting which has been a messy, emotionally draining experience. I feel that even the research product presented in this mini-dissertation—through its sometimes-clumsy wording, awkward application of the models and repetitions—reflects the messiness of human experience and, hence, the chaotic, disorganized, and oftentimes painful nature of autoethnographic inquiry.

My family and I have become closer and more open about my sexuality, which is no longer a secret to anyone. Although we each have our personal processes of healing, my family unit is trying to heal as a whole, and sometimes we do it well, other time we do not. During the writing of my autoethnography, my mother has opened up to her friends and extended family members about my sexuality, something that she never did before. Although this has been a heartfelt experience, this year the greatest experience was when my father was speaking to my sister about me and mentioned my sexuality. Throughout my coming out experience, the fear of my father was a constant threat, one that my mother initially used against me—stating that he will cut me off financially and reminding me of his aggression—and, as such, the coming out conversation was never had. He always knew, because he had read one of my personal diary entries in which I wrote quite extensively about my struggles with being rejected because of my sexuality.

During my own personal therapy and the writing of my autoethnography, it became clearer that without speaking about my sexuality to my family and how the experience of their rejection impacted me, I felt that I was still living in shame. The process of writing the autoethnography created a talking point to openly and honestly discuss our experiences and our history as a family. I felt that with the support of therapy, my autoethnographic process became a reflective experience that created opportunities to understand my parents and their relationship more, but also for me to heal in a safe space when memories

were triggered and to recognize patterns of the way I perceived myself and behaved in romantic relationships. With this, I needed to have an open and honest conversation with my father. He was outside and I sat down in front of him, mentioning that I knew he had spoken to my sister about me, and with a waiting pause, I opened up about being gay, my experience with my mother and sister, and why I had not explicitly told him. He looked at me and, without hesitation, accepted me unconditionally and reminded me that he is proud of the man that I had become. It was not about me being gay, but rather about my character and personhood that he admired. Coming out explicitly to my father was gentle and comforting, a stark contrast to my experience with my mother and sister. However, the years of resentment and anger will remain a process of healing, not only regarding my coming out experience, but the toxic environment in which I was raised. For now, there is honesty and an understanding that has moments of compassion and forgiveness—a new experience for our family. As difficult as it has been, my experience has been that writing this autoethnography was not only a self-transformative process, but also an opportunity for my family to transform, and learn with each other, if there is willingness, understanding, and a space for compassion.

5.6. Recommendations for future research

While useful, Cass's Homosexual Identity Formation model may not be widely applicable given the spectrum of sexualities and the impact of intersectional identities. As such, future research should seek to explore and explicate how Cass's model may be diversified an expanded in a way that enhances its applicability to a wider range of sexualities and takes into consideration the impact of other axes of identity on the process of sexual identity development. The concept of intersectionality between race, social class, gender, and sexual identities was not explored in this study. Future research could, therefore, explore this using story-telling methodologies such as autoethnography. This could play a role not only in further advancing and foregrounding marginalized voices, but it could also account for the depth and complexity of individual experiences of queerness in the context of mainstream society and its impact on processes of consolidating and integrating their identities.

5.7. Conclusion

In summary, an autoethnography sheds light on the complexities in the interactions between the self and the sociocultural systems and its institutions in which the self is embedded. Individual development and psychological experiences are, therefore, the product of the interaction between these systems. My autoethnography, specifically, sought to explore my unaccepted coming out experience and its implications for my sense of belonging and self-acceptance. What emerged was a powerful interaction between society and its influence on my family's value system through the historical and transgenerational transmission of heteromasculine ideologies. These ideas exerted considerable influence on my family's engagement with difference and, ultimately, with my coming out, resulting in their rejection of me, sparking impoverished self-image, internalized shame, self-sabotage, and a disintegration of my sense of belonging. However, vulnerable, honest, and open engagement and invitations for conversation and listening may serve as important relational tools to facilitate points of meaningful connection and understanding to mediate the chasms created by damaging ideological allegiances. Locating these points of connection and moments of authentic relatedness may serve to neutralise shame and guilt through mutual recognition and acceptance of the other through fostering a sense of belonging. What should also be recognised, however, is that not all coming out experiences are negative, or as traumatic as mine. There are many gay men (whether their coming out was accepted or not) who are resilient, and live joyous lives, with positive relationships. In this way, heterosexism does not inevitably result in unhappiness.

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Appendix: Ethical Clearance Letter

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Faculty of Humanities
Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
Lefapha la Bomotho

Humanities 100. Since 1919

8 September 2020

Dear Mr S Hall

Project Title:	Who am I without you?: An autoethnographic exploration of (not) belonging in the gay community and its implications for self-acceptance.
Researcher:	Mr S Hall
Supervisor(s):	Mr AR Mohamed
Department:	Psychology
Reference number:	13152191 (HUM052/0720)
Degree:	Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 27 August 2020. Data collection may therefore commence.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,

Prof Innocent Pikirayi
Deputy Dean: Postgraduate Studies and Research Ethics
Faculty of Humanities
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
e-mail: PGHumanities@up.ac.za

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe
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Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof I Pikirayi (Deputy Dean); Prof KL Harris; Mr A Bizos; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A dos Santos; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr P Gutura; Dr E Johnson; Prof D Maree; Mr A Mohamed; Dr I Noomè; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof M Soer; Prof E Taljard; Prof V Thebe; Ms B Tsebe; Ms D Mokalapa