

The Nature of Discourse in Transformative Learning: The Experience of Coming Out

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## **Abstract of Dissertation**

### **The Nature of Discourse in Transformative Learning: The Experience of Coming Out**

Mezirow's theory of transformative learning (1978, 1991, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2000, 2009) posits "perspective transformation" as a central learning process. Key to this transformation is the critical examination of the individual's deeply held assumptions and beliefs through discourse to examine new perspectives and test new ideas. The availability and benefit of the discourse described in transformative learning theory, however, depend on the presence of ideal conditions for discourse. The theory does not fully account for marginalized individuals in society who may not easily encounter the ideal conditions or resources conducive to discourse with trusted others. A marginalized individual, such as a "closeted" gay man who decides to disclose his sexuality and "comes out of the closet," may not engage in discourse under the ideal conditions Mezirow describes, yet he may describe his coming out process as a transformative experience (De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Cass, 1979; Herek, 1990, 1996).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process of gay men. Drawing from in-depth interviews with nine gay men about their coming out experience, this phenomenological study focused on the impact of cultural scripts and access to resources necessary for discourse to occur as part of their coming out process and their transformative learning experience. It adds to the breadth of understanding of ideal conditions in which the effects of discourse can be received. Five conclusions are offered: (1) critical reflection is an antecedent to discourse and can be done with self-talk; (2) self-talk may also provide benefits of discourse; (3) more accurate and complete

information is a critical condition—an antecedent to discourse, a condition for discourse, and an outcome of discourse; (4) observational learning can be an important resource for obtaining more accurate and complete information necessary for coming out and discourse—as a precursor for discourse and/or a way to receive the effects of discourse; and (5) the great need for safety and trust strongly informs the sources for engaging in discourse.

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# **CHAPTER 1:**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

Mezirow's (1978) theory of transformative learning posits "perspective transformation" as a central learning process. Transformative learning, he wrote, is "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change" (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). Mezirow described transformative learning as a process involving a profound change in one's sense of self. Key to this perspective shift is the critical examination and questioning of the learner's deeply held assumptions and beliefs. The theory calls for examination of beliefs through critical discourse with trusted others, to examine new perspectives and validate new ideas. The availability and benefit of the discourse described in transformative learning theory is, however, based on ideal conditions. It does not take into full account the challenges met by those individuals who are marginalized in society and may not have full access to the resources that facilitate open, candid discourse with others. A marginalized individual, such as a "closeted" gay man who decides to disclose his sexuality and "comes out of the closet," may not engage in discourse under the ideal conditions Mezirow described, yet he may describe his coming out process as a transformative experience (De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Cass, 1979; Herek, 1990, 1996) that meets Mezirow's description of transformative learning.

This qualitative research study sought to increase understanding of the nature of discourse during the transformative learning experience, with focus on how the effects and benefits of discourse are received when the ideal conditions articulated by Mezirow

may not be readily available. The study explored the role of cultural scripts in this discourse and the related conditions as articulated by Mezirow. The study adds to a growing understanding of the ideal conditions in which discourse occurs, beyond those Mezirow articulated. The context for this qualitative study is the coming out process for closeted gay men.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The discourse that is prescribed in Mezirow's (2009) transformative learning model is based on ideal conditions, presuming a free exchange of ideas, without coercion or other obstructions to transformation. However, the ideal conditions and resources proposed for transformative learning to occur may not be as accessible for individuals who are marginalized. The conditions for discourse as well as the resources drawn upon in this learning process are influenced by the prescriptions we are given by culture. The model does not account for social position, i.e., a sense of position in the dominant social arguments in how we are either marginalized or privileged. Thus, transformative learning can be better understood by accounting for the cultural embeddedness and positionality of the learner. Researchers, including Dirkx (1991) and Taylor (2000, 2007), concluded that Mezirow's model did not fully take into account the context, importance of relationships, and the possible barriers to transformative learning faced by marginalized populations.

The ideal conditions for the discourse that Mezirow's model prescribes may not be reliably available to marginalized individuals, yet transformative learning may include alternative ways of receiving meaning-making benefits of discourse and conditions that facilitate this discourse. Other researchers have identified alternative discourse conditions and methods (Sherlock, 2000; Henderson, 2001; Carter, 2002; Hamp, 2006; Bradshaw,

2008) such as self-discourse, or self-dialogue, as a way to receive the effects of discourse when the ideal conditions such as a trusted discourse partner were not as accessible. This suggests further exploration into the nature of critical discourse and conditions to facilitate this discourse that may be available to individuals who are of a marginalized group.

A useful context in which to explore further the accessibility to discourse and ideal conditions for marginalized individuals is that of nonheterosexuals. Heterosexist scripts can make gay men and lesbians feel like outsiders, not fully fitting into “normal” environment (Clark, 1977/2005). Unlike race, sexual orientation is an invisible trait, a hidden social identity (Shelp, 2002; Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005) that may also be stigmatized. Many gay men and lesbians continuously choose how much of their stigmatized hidden social identity to disclose in each moment and encounter. Those who remain closeted may spend a great deal of energy hiding their identities—“passing” as heterosexual—by constantly looking over their shoulders and monitoring the environment for the next potential threat, and experiencing continuous distraction and depleted cognitive and intrapsychic resources (Snyder, 1987; Herek, 1990; Ely & Thomas, 2001; Ragins, 2004; Clair et al., 2005; DeJordy, 2008). Many gay men and lesbians describe the experience of relief when they decide to be earnest and authentic through disclosure to self and then to others by “coming out of the closet” and living more openly. This embracement of greater authenticity is described as feeling transformative (De Monteflores & Schultz, 1978; Cass, 1979; Herek, 1990, 1996).

Extant literature agrees that coming out is not a discrete event per se but a set of common phases as part of a recursive, nonlinear process of internal reflection,

questioning, discourse, and action by the individual who believes he is gay or she is a lesbian (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1989; Alderson, 2003). The act of disclosing one's sexual orientation is but one component of the coming out process (Anderson & Mavis, 1997). It is a deeply personal, frequently emotional process that often feels very risky, given the stigma assigned to being gay or lesbian in most societies (Goffman, 1963; Herek, 1990, 1996; Clair et al., 2005). Coming out requires individuals to make a decision to disclose their sexual orientation to themselves and to others through a process that has the characteristics and meets the criteria of transformative learning as described by Mezirow's adult learning theory.

Mezirow's model includes three stages and 10 phases that may occur as part of a transformative learning experience. The stages in Mezirow's model especially align with the coming out experience include reflecting on deeply held assumptions, engaging in critical discourse, and taking action based on the new perspective. There are differing opinions about the ideal conditions that facilitate discourse, and this study adds to that conversation by exploring what ideal conditions marginalized individuals encounter that make the benefits of discourse available to them.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process of gay men, adding to the understanding of ideal conditions in which the effects of discourse can be received. Drawing from in-depth interviews with nine gay men about their coming out experience, this study focused on the discourse component of Mezirow's model with emphasis on the role of cultural scripts and access to resources. Through individual

recollections of the experience of coming out, this phenomenological study analyzed the role of discourse as part of the events, feelings, and conditions that inform the decision to come out and the acts of coming out.

The study addressed one specific research question and two subquestions:

- What is the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of coming out?
  1. What cultural scripts are described as being part of this discourse?
  2. What resources enter into the discourse process for transformative learning to occur?

### **Statement of Potential Significance**

This study adds to theory in two general ways. First, it explored transformative learning in a context in which there is a dearth of research—that of gay men coming out of the closet. In doing so, it accounted for marginalized individuals' lack of access to resources useful for transformation and further explicated Mezirow's conceptualization of discourse and its role in transformative learning. This study addressed the role of cultural scripts and resources and their interaction that produce or inhibit discourse in transformative learning. This is important because it expands the understanding of the ideal conditions that enable discourse to occur. In addition, this study expanded understanding of the resources that are needed as part of the transformative learning experience for this context.

Second, for the field of adult learning, this study considered the system of stratification in society. Examining transformative learning in the context of one particular system of stratification (gay men) may inform transformative learning in other

situations, allowing adult learning to play a greater role in social transformation and justice and helping adult educators, human resource development practitioners, employers, clergy, and loved ones to support, and even facilitate, transformative learning experiences for those who are marginalized.

### *The Costs of the Closet Are Real*

The closet exacts a high cost at all levels for the gay men and lesbians as well as their families, their coworkers, their employers, and society as a whole. Staying closeted means that one may not be fully, authentically present. In the workplace, for example, closeted employees may feel compelled to leave an important piece of themselves at the door when they come to work and evade personal interactions that may disclose sexual orientation, which creates physical and psychological stress. They may fear physical harm, a damaged career, or harassment if others suspected or knew. These factors may impact productivity and workgroup cohesion. Herek (1996) wrote that the cost of being closeted is high, causing feelings of inauthenticity and impairing social relationships due to a lack of honesty. The individual feels an increased strain on intimate relationships, and the incongruity leads to psychological and physical distress. He argued that the remedy is coming out. DeJordy (2008) argued that the unintentional consequences for gay men and lesbians passing for heterosexual in organizational contexts included disengagement, depleted cognitive and intrapsychic resources, and cognitive dissonance.

While remaining fearful and closeted may come at a high personal cost to the gay man or lesbian, there are other real “costs of the closet” for employers and society as well. Higher stress levels can translate to increased medical care costs for employers. An unwelcoming or unsafe workplace does little to recruit and retain talented gay men or

lesbian workers or those who support equality in the workplace. The recruiting advantage in having an open environment is not limited to attracting gay or lesbian talent, as many young non-gay candidates view gay-friendly benefits and policies as signs of a fair, progressive employer for all people. More than half of the Fortune 500 companies now offer domestic partner health benefits, a steady increase from the 96 large employers that offered them in 1999 (Human Rights Campaign, 2009).

Another example of the cost of the closet is the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass" policy. Originally framed as a "live and let live" compromise to permit gay men and lesbians to serve in the military provided they did not disclose their sexual orientation, it has instead greatly increased the number of cases of witch-hunts, harassment, physical violence, and even murders of service members who are, or are perceived to be, gay or lesbian. In a 2005 report, the Government Accounting Office estimated that between 1991 and 2003, the cost to taxpayers for discharging and replacing nearly 10,000 gay or lesbian service members was at least \$195 million. The number of discharges continues to rise. The costs of the closet are real.

### **Conceptual Framework**

A transformative learning experience, as described by Mezirow (1978), is a deep shift in perspective, involving a profound change in an individual's sense of self. Transformative learning theory calls for examination of deeply held assumptions and beliefs through critical discourse with trusted others, to explore new perspectives and validate new ideas. The ability to freely and fully participate in discourse as described in transformative learning theory is based on seven general ideal conditions articulated by Mezirow:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- The awareness of the context and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one's own
- Equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse
- A willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and a tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment. (Mezirow, 2009, p. 20)

Mezirow acknowledged that ideal conditions are never realized in practice, but transformative learning theory does not fully account for the challenges met by individuals who are marginalized in society for whom ideal conditions may not be readily available for a substantial part of their coming out process and who may not have equal access to the resources for open, candid discourse with others. The theory does not fully consider the influence of culture and context, which cannot be ignored in those who experience marginalization (Taylor, 2000, 2007). A marginalized individual's transformative learning experience of coming out may not engage in discourse within the ideal conditions Mezirow described, and the individual may find alternative ways to receive the benefits of discourse, outside of what was articulated in transformative learning theory.

Brookfield (2000) pointed to the influence of asymmetrical relationships and power struggles in transformative learning. Individuals must work to determine whether deeply held assumptions are destroying their sense of well-being and serving the interests of others, i.e., hegemonic assumptions. This study posited that a prime example of a hegemonic assumption is heteronormativity, or the belief that heterosexuality is the only accepted norm. Brookfield said that there is a political dimension in all critically

reflective learning that Mezirow's theory describes. "There is always a political dimension in that they are all structured by and entail power relationships, dominant and contending discourses, and unequal access to resources" (2000, p. 127). This political dimension is counter to the ideal conditions articulated for fully and freely participating in discourse.

In a meta-review of empirical research on Mezirow's model, Taylor (2000, 2007) found that the most common limitation of transformative learning theory concerned relationships. The importance of relationships, trust, friendship, and support was underrepresented in earlier descriptions of rational discourse. These subjective elements seemed to provide essential conditions for effective discourse. Trusting relationships provide openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level necessary for managing the threatening and emotionally charged transformative learning experience. Taylor noted that context and culture in the transformative learning process also seemed to have a greater influence than originally thought, with context better understood than culture. The research included in Taylor's meta-review revealed that personal contextual factors, such as readiness for change, predisposed people to a transformative learning experience.

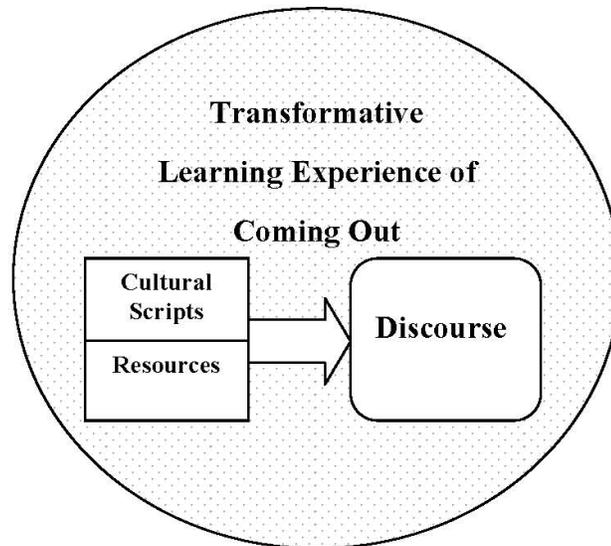
Taylor noted that some studies concluded that the definition of perspective transformation was too narrow and rational, citing as an example Clark (1991), who identified three dimensions of change in transformative learning, including psychological, where the structure of self-understanding changes; convictional, where systems of belief are revised; and behavioral, where lifestyle is altered. The implication, Taylor said, was that perspective transformation was a result of the individual becoming

more in touch with his or her logical-rational side, discounting other ways of knowing, such as affective learning, and the role of emotions and feelings in the transformative learning process. He concluded that there was a profound lack of research on transformative learning in relation to “difference” and that diverse perspectives along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation were missing from transformative learning research.

The context for this qualitative study was the coming out process as experienced by gay men. For the purposes of this study, the process of coming out as described by the participants in this study met the criteria for a transformative learning experience. Coming out is a form of self-disclosure, acknowledging to one’s self a same-sex attraction and “the communication by one individual to another of information about himself or herself that otherwise is not directly observable” (Herek, 1996, p. 2). Coming out is a lifelong process, but for the purpose of this study, it was considered to begin with the first consideration by the participant that he might be gay, ranging to the point where he was out in all life contexts and considered himself to be fully out.

So, this study sought to increase understanding of the nature and conditions of discourse and how it occurs in the transformative learning experience of coming out for gay men (see Figure 1-1). It focused on how the effects and benefits of discourse are achieved and explored the extent to which the ideal conditions Mezirow described as necessary for dialogue to occur are involved in this process as well as other conditions that may arise. It explored what resources enter into the discourse process. For the purpose of this study, resources included such things as presence of the ideal conditions for discourse—more complete and accurate information—and access to exemplars,

alternative points of view, the gay community, and others with whom to engage in discourse. This study also examined the cultural scripts that are described as part of this discourse. Mezirow talked about overturning scripts and schema as part of transformative learning, and this study sought to broaden that understanding of this process.



*Figure 1-1.* Conceptual framework.

### **Summary of Methodology**

In exploring coming out and the nature of discourse in transformative learning theory, this study lent itself to qualitative research. As Creswell (1998) explained, “Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinctive methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 15). Of the qualitative

methods, phenomenology was well suited to this study because it is a method of exploring the lived experience of coming out as transformative learning.

To understand the essence of experiences, data collection consisted of in-depth interviews gathering the statements of the meanings, meaning themes, and general description of the experience, resulting in a narrative description of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 1998). The sample population for this study was nine gay men, each of whom met the criteria to participate: they were born as biological males; lived in the United States; were openly out in all areas of their life—home, social, family, spiritual, and the workplace; have come out since 2000; were at least 21 years of age at the time of the interview; and described their coming out process as a transformative experience. The methodology is described more fully in chapter 3.

### **Limitations**

This study is delimited in scope to explore coming out as a transformative learning experience of gay males. Lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people were not included in the study population, though individuals in each of these groups also may experience a coming out process. Because participants resided in the United States, this population reflected those values and experiences and thus was not representative of those in other cultures. This study was qualitative and included nine participants; thus, it is not generalizable for all gay men, nor was it intended to be.

### **Definition of Key Terms**

*(The) Closet:* A euphemism for passing, hiding an invisible part of one's identity. An

individual who is “in the closet” chooses to remain hidden, concealing an attribute

or element to avoid potentially negative reactions from others, as in revealing a stigmatized hidden social identity.

*Coming out:* Shortened from “coming out of the closet.” A form of self-disclosure and “the communication by one individual to another of information about himself or herself that otherwise is not directly observable” (Herek, 1996, p. 2). Coming out refers to discrete events as well as a process (Anderson & Mavis, 1997).

*Culture:* With respect to transformative learning theory, “Culture itself can be understood as a set of meaning perspectives which, together with idiosyncratic perspectives of our parents or primary care givers, constitute the universe of meaning perspectives to which we are exposed and from which we learn our perspectives through assimilation” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 44).

*Cultural script:* For the purpose of this study, the concept of a cultural script is described as what Mezirow (2009) called meaning perspectives and meaning schemes. Meaning perspectives are made up of broad, generalized orienting predispositions and worldviews. Meaning schemes are a cluster of specific, more immediate beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments that go with and shape interpretation. Together, “they form a frame of reference, sets of orienting assumptions and expectations with cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions that shape, delimit, and sometimes distort our understandings” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 30). They are learned “as generalized subtexts which we have assimilated from our narrative interactions with our culture and our parents” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 44). Cultural scripts also may be called schemas.

*Discourse:* In the context of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, the process in which one has active dialogue with another to better understand the meaning of an experience. Discourse involves a critical assessment of assumptions and beliefs. Discourse can include interaction within a group or between two people, including a reader and author, or an artist and viewer (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Reaching consensus is a theoretical goal but not the only function of discourse (Mezirow, 1996). It is sometimes also referred to as rational discourse, critical discourse, or reflective discourse, or often simply discourse.

*GLBT:* Acronym for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. Though different in many ways, these four groups are often combined because they are sexual minorities who share similar experiences of marginalization and stigma in culture.

*Heteronormativity:* The assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal sexual orientation.

*Heterosexism:* The pervasive attitude of superiority over homosexuality (Herek, 1990). It is the assumption that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual.

*Homophobia:* The unfounded fear of gays and lesbians. Homophobia may manifest externally, toward another, or internally, as self-loathing (Herek, 1990).

Commonly used interchangeably with *heterosexism* and *homo-negativity*.

*Outed:* The forced, involuntary, premature disclosure of an individual's sexual orientation (Herek & Garnets, 2007).

*Resources:* As defined by Callero (1994), "objects that serve as a source of power; they include nonhuman elements such as factories, weapons, and land, as well as human qualities such as fear, respect, and reverence. . . . Resources have an

‘actual’ existence and therefore are observable features of interaction” (pp. 233-234). Schemas (scripts) cannot be observed and so have a virtual existence.

“Together, schemas and resources are said to be constitutive of each other; schemas are the effects of resources and resources are the effects of schemas” (pp. 233-234). Because resources and schemas are so highly related, for the purpose of this study, scripts may also be considered a resource.

*Stereotype*: “A fixed belief that all or most members of a particular group share a characteristic that is unrelated to their membership” (Herek, 1996, p. 8). This phenomenon adds to the difficulty in overcoming society’s assumptions—usually negative ones—about a group.

*Transformation*: In the context of transformative learning theory, “a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 19).

*Transformative learning*: “Learning that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, p. 22).

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

To inform this study, a review of the literature in transformative learning theory and hidden social identity disclosure was conducted. Literature was gathered from a variety of sources, both online and print. Journal articles, articles from popular and national gay media, and dissertation abstracts were reviewed and downloaded from ProQuest and Academic Premier through the Aladdin online university library consortium system. Also visited were Web sites of several national gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights organizations, plus topically relevant Web sites hosted by researchers and national universities. A few articles were requested and received via email directly from researchers themselves.

This chapter begins with an overview of transformative learning, with a discussion of its elements and critiques of the model. This review is followed by the challenges of researching groups that have stigmatized invisible identities. As context for this study of discourse in transformative learning process, the coming out process is briefly explored through the literature. Next, the chapter explores the cultural context of coming out in terms of heterosexism, homophobia, and homonegativity as cultural scripts that are present and potentially surface in the transformative learning process.

### **Transformative Learning**

Mezirow first articulated his theory of transformative learning in 1978 as being a fundamental, dramatic change in the way one sees oneself and the world in which one lives (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). “Transformative learning may be defined as learning

that transforms problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). “Transformative learning may be understood as the epistemology of how adults learn to reason for themselves—advance and assess reasons for making a judgment—rather than act on the assimilated beliefs, values, feelings, and judgments of others” (p. 23).

This kind of learning is more than just additive or building on what one already knows. According to Merriam and Caffarella (1999), transformative learning theory is about how adults make meaning of their lives and centers on fundamental changes in the way in which we see ourselves and the world. Transformative learning focuses on the cognitive process of learning, with common approaches including the mental construction of experience, inner meaning, reflection, and discourse. “The process of transformative learning is firmly anchored in life experience. All human beings have a need to understand their experiences, to make sense of what is happening in their lives” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 320).

Mezirow aligned most closely with the “constructivist” views of adult learning theory. Knowledge is not to be discovered but rather is instead created from interpretations and reinterpretations in light of new experiences (Mezirow, 1996). His central insight was that “we are all active constructors of knowledge who can become responsible for the procedures and assumptions that shape the way we make meaning of our experiences” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 72).

### *Meaning Perspectives and Meaning Schemes*

Perspective transformation is central to transformative learning. Mezirow (1996) wrote that key to perspective transformation is a “frame of reference”—a filter through

which sense perceptions selectively shape and delimit perception, cognition, and feelings by predisposing our intention, expectations, and purposes.

We make meaning through acquired frames of reference—sets of orienting assumptions and expectations with cognitive, affective, and conative dimensions—that shape, delimit, and sometimes distort our understandings. We transform our frames of reference by becoming more critically reflective of our assumptions to make them more dependable when the beliefs and understandings they generate become problematic. (Mezirow, 2009, p. 30)

Mezirow explained that a frame of reference may include “rules, criteria, codes, language, schemata, cultural canon, ideology, standards, or paradigms. Frames include personality traits and dispositions, genealogy, power allocation, worldviews, religious doctrine, aesthetic values, social movements, psychological scheme or scripts, learning styles, or preferences” (2009, p. 22). He explained that a frame of reference consists of two dimensions: a “meaning perspective” (or habits of mind), made up of broad, generalized, orienting predispositions and worldviews; and a “meaning scheme,” which is a cluster of specific, more immediate beliefs, feelings, attitudes, and value judgments that go with and shape interpretation.

Mezirow argued that a fully developed frame of reference is more inclusive, differentiating, permeable, critically reflective, and integrative of experiences.

Learning occurs by elaborating existing meaning schemes, learning new meaning schemes, transforming meaning schemes, or transforming meaning perspectives. . . . Transforming one’s own dysfunctional frame of reference and recognizing the reasons why one acquired it in the first place is “subjective reframing.” The most personally significant transformations involve a critique of premises regarding one’s self. (Mezirow, 1996, p. 163)

Further, Mezirow explained that a meaning perspective

involves a set of psychocultural assumptions, for the most part culturally assimilated but including intentionally learned theories that serve as one of three sets of codes significantly shaping sensation and delimiting perception and

cognition: sociolinguistic (e.g., social norms, cultural and language codes, ideologies, theories), psychological (e.g., repressed parental prohibitions which continue to block ways of feeling and acting, personality traits) and epistemic (e.g., learning, cognitive and intelligence styles, sensory learning preferences, focus on whole or parts). (1996, p. 42)

Mezirow argued that meaning perspectives significantly influence and delimit the horizons of our expectations. Meaning perspectives and meaning schemes are the structures or meaning that together “selectively shape and delimit expectation, perception and cognition by predisposing our intentions and purposes, that is, setting our line of action” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 44).

Meaning perspectives and schemes, Mezirow said, are learned as generalized subtexts assimilated from narrative interactions with culture and with parents.

They are symbol systems which are projected on our sense perceptions as habits of expectation rather than being ‘stored’ information to be retrieved through memory. Culture itself can be understood as a set of meaning perspectives which, together with idiosyncratic perspectives of our parents or primary care givers, constitute the universe of meaning perspectives to which we are exposed and from which we learn our perspectives through assimilation. (1995, p. 44)

A change in perspective is personally emancipating, Merriam and Caffarella (1999) argued, because one is freed from previously held beliefs, attitudes, values, and feelings that have constricted and distorted the adult learner’s life. According to Mezirow (1991), “Transformation involves (a) an empowered sense of self, (b) more critical understanding of how one’s social relationships and culture have shaped one’s beliefs and feelings, and (c) more functional strategies and resources for taking action” (p. 161). He argued that a transformative learning experience requires making the informed and reflective decision to act or not to act. “This decision may result in immediate action or

delayed action, caused by situational constraints, or lack of information on how to act, or a reasoned affirmation of an existing pattern of action” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22).

Baumgartner (2001) wrote that transformative learning theory has expanded the understanding of adult learning through explicating the meaning-making process, placing less emphasis on what we know and more on how we know. She argued that research using Mezirow’s theory has ultimately provided new insights into the importance of relationships, feelings, and contexts. And there is more to be studied.

According to Mezirow (1995), “Creating meaning refers to the process of construal by which we attribute coherence and significance to our experience in light of what we know” (p. 40). There are three kinds of construal, different and complementary interactive ways of meaning making: presentational, propositional, and intentional. “Propositional construal refers to tacitly experiencing things learned, using language categories and words to make meaning. Presentational construal refers to apprehension, making meaning without using language” (p. 40). He further explained:

Presentational construal may be understood to involve our sense of directionality, movement, entity, even punctuation . . . our feelings, physiological reactions, physical balance, kinesthetic awareness, recognition, empathy, and identification with others—all these extremely important dimensions of knowing are involved in making meaning without the direct and immediate use of language categories or words. (1995, p. 41)

Mezirow wrote that propositional and presentational construal are both tacit, outside our intentional focus. The third type of construal—intentional—is “when we are deliberately attempting to pose or solve a problem, describe or explain” (p. 41). Intentional construal involves logic, analysis, reflection, inference, and “the giving and assessing of reasons through rational discourse” (p. 41). Mezirow added, “We engage in intentional construal when propositional or presentational construal becomes

problematic. Intentional construal involves either internal and/or external dialogues” (p. 41).

### *Stages and Phases of Transformative Learning*

Not all learning in adulthood is transformative learning; some simply adds to current meaning schemes or provides new meaning schemes (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Mezirow believed that significant transformative learning involves three stages: critical reflection of assumptions, discourse to validate the new critically derived insight, and action. Using these three general stages as a framework, Mezirow suggested that transformative learning often occurs in some variation of 10 phases:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective emerges. (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19)

### *Critical Reflection*

Reflection, Mezirow (1995) wrote, is “the apperceptive process by which we change our minds, literally and figuratively” (p. 46). He argued that there are two different types of transformation that may be effected by reflection. There is the everyday transformation of a meaning scheme, done by reflection on content or process. There is also the less-common and more profound transformation of meaning perspective, through critical reflection on premise. All reflection is potentially transformative of meaning

structures, he argued, and when critical reflection of premise involves self-reflection, major personal transformations can occur.

Mezirow distinguished between two kinds of critiques used as part of reflection: operational and structural. Operational critique is reflecting upon how to solve a problem within a given structure. Structural critique is critically reflecting on the structure itself. Self-reflection may be included in either operational or structural critique. Reflection in the context of transformative learning theory is a process of attempting to justify a belief through either rationally examining assumptions or through discourse with others of differing viewpoints and arriving at a best informed judgment. The result, Mezirow wrote, is a transformation of meaning structures.

We reflect by critically reassessing the assumptions we have taken-for-granted which prop up the way we think and feel. We sometimes identify these assumptions and look critically at how we acquired them and their consequences in our action or in our feelings. (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46)

Assumptions include intent or things taken for granted, such as a religious worldview. Transformative learning is an experience in which there is a perspective transformation, a process of becoming aware of how assumptions constrain the way people see themselves (i.e., a gay man or lesbian who feels inferior or defective) and their relationships, and then acting upon new understanding. It involves sequences of learning activities that enable movement toward clarity of meaning (i.e., coming out and claiming one's more authentic identity).

Key to this transformation is what Mezirow called critical reflection of assumptions (CRA), which is to “question assumptions, values, and perspectives we encounter in the world” (Cranton, 2009). Mezirow said that CRA is “central to understanding how adults learn to think for themselves rather than act on the concepts,

values and feelings of others” (1998, p. 185). CRA means one is critically reflective of one’s own and others’ assumptions. Mezirow clearly distinguished between CRA and assimilative learning, which means mindlessly or “tacitly” adapting to changes. CRA is “objective” reframing, involving critical reflection on others’ assumptions encountered in a narrative or in task-oriented problem solving (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). A more inward-focused variant of CRA is critical self-reflection of assumptions (CSRA), which is “subjective” reframing. Mezirow said that CSRA involves “critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem (e.g., ‘a women’s place is in the home; so I must deny myself a career that I would love’)” (1998, p. 185). CSRA can be applied to many contexts—critical self-reflections on one’s own assumptions about a narrative, a system, an organization, feelings, interpersonal relations, or the way one learns. Mezirow said that “significant personal and social transformations may result from this kind of reflection” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185). He argued that CRA and its variant, CSRA, are “emancipatory dimensions of adult learning, the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of references, paradigms or cultural canon that limit or distort communication and understanding” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 192). This description seems to parallel the coming out process.

### *Discourse*

An important component of critical reflection in transformative learning theory is that of discourse. “A learning theory should be grounded in the nature of human communications. Seeking agreement on our interpretations and beliefs is central to human communication and the learning process” (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162). Mezirow described discourse as “the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to

better understand the meaning of an experience. It may include interaction within a group or between two persons, including a reader and an author or a viewer and an artist” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 14).

Discourse can occur as part of constructing a new meaning perspective or as a way of testing it with others once it is formed, he said. “Transformative learning involves participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying assumptions and making an action based on the resulting insight” (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 8). Discourse is used to justify a problematic belief or understanding by weighing arguments and alternative perspectives. It is the way to assess and understand how another interprets an experience. Mezirow argued that discourse requires participants only to be willing and ready to seek understanding and reach reasonable agreement. “Feelings of trust, solidarity, security, and empathy are requirements for full participation in discourse” ( p. 12). Discourse involves “welcoming difference, ‘trying on’ other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing” (p. 12). He added that one engages in discursive assessment in dialogue in which “we participate with others, whom we believe to be informed, objective, and rational, to assess reasons that justify problematic beliefs” (2009, p. 20).

Mezirow articulated seven ideal conditions for engaging in discourse:

To freely and fully participate in discourse, participants ideally require, in addition to a reasonable minimum of personal security, health, education, the following:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively

- Awareness of the context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions including one's own
- Equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse
- A willingness to seek understanding, agreement and a tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment. (Mezirow, 2009, p. 20)

Mezirow acknowledged that these ideal conditions are never fully realized in practice, but did not account for contexts such as the marginalized individual when these ideal conditions may not appear to be present for substantial periods of time. For example, those who are gay or lesbian may not know someone whom they trust and feel safe with engaging in discourse. The first issue is one of access to resources. Gay men and lesbians may not consistently have access to all the resources needed for discourse throughout their transformative learning experience, such as “more accurate and complete information,” especially early on in the process. Another possibly confounding issue is that individuals may feel the need to come out to themselves first, or at least consider they may not be heterosexual, to even have an interest in discourse with another. One must risk disclosure of one's sexual orientation in some measure to another for discourse, as Mezirow described it, to occur. There may be an arresting fear that even showing curiosity could “out” them, something sociologist Goffman (1963) described as a “courtesy stigma.” This may feel especially risky to closeted individuals, especially early in their coming out process, as they are acting without certainty of the response they will get. Later in their process, as they disclose more freely and find allies with whom to discourse and avail themselves of resources, the ideal conditions for discourse that Mezirow articulated may become more available.

The ideal conditions for discourse are confounded by cultural scripts or, in Mezirow's language, "meaning perspectives" that discount, condemn, or ignore entirely nonheterosexual individuals. The cultural scripts that they know may go unchallenged without the presence of the ideal condition of "more accurate and complete information." They may not notice positive scripts that provide alternatives to the negative heterosexist scripts that seem so pervasive. They may not feel capable of exploring or validating their emerging identity in discourse with another, due to fear of rejection based on negative scripts, their observations, and past experience. So instead of discourse—particularly early in their coming out process—closeted individuals may find other ways to make meaning that feel safer, such as observation and critical reflection. Then, they may have gathered enough internal confidence to consider engaging in discourse to what they think and feel. Mezirow seemed to allow for critical reflection to compensate for cultural scripts that confound discourse and access to resources needed for discourse and transformative learning. "Through critical reflection, we become emancipated from communication that is distorted by cultural constraints on full free participation in discourse" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 165). Critical reflection frees the individual by challenging hegemonic messages (e.g., cultural scripts) and changing perspective enough to allow the individual to engage in discourse as Mezirow described it (i.e., with another person).

### *Action*

Transformative learning will not occur until the individual acts on the new perspective. Mezirow insisted that a mindful transformative experience requires learners to make an informed, reflective decision to act on gained insight. This, he said, may mean immediate action, delayed action, or reaffirmation of existing actions. "Taking action on

reflective insights often involves overcoming situational, emotional and informational constraints that may require new learning experiences in order to move forward” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 24).

### *Theory of Communicative Action*

Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory drew from Habermas’ (1984) theory of communicative action. Mezirow focused on Habermas’ three dynamics involved in communicative action: lifeworld, learning, and social interaction (Mezirow, 1991). The first dynamic, lifeworld, or the unquestioned world of everyday social activity, is a “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns” and is made up of “a vast inventory of unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions, including codes, norms, roles, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others, and individual skills” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 69). Lifeworld is reproduced through the functions of communicative action and manifest in what Habermas called propositional, illocutionary, and expressive speech acts. Lifeworld is made up of cultural scripts.

Learning is the second dynamic of communicative action, involving the transformative nature of the learning process, and Mezirow focused on Habermas’ belief that being critically reflective reduces the prejudicial power of the lifeworld. The validity testing process challenges, through discourse, raising questions of truth, justice, and self-deception. There are three kinds of discourse. Theoretical discourse is challenging knowledge held about the world; such knowledge can be empirically tested. Practical discourse is utterance involving social norms, ideals, values, and moral decisions. Habermas believed that when these views are challenged, at issue is not their truth but

their rightness, or the rightness of the norms that are the standards. Therapeutic discourse is the third kind of discourse, which involves feelings and pertains to an individual's subjectivity. It tries to determine if feelings are indeed true or involve falsehoods or self-deception. Mezirow wrote that Habermas believed that the individual's potential for self-reflection was central to developing a sense of self-identity. The third dynamic of communicative action theory is social interaction, a self-regulating system of society and social action that serves as a boundary-maintenance system of the lifeworld.

Mezirow (Mezirow, 2009) wrote that Habermas distinguished between two domains of learning: instrumental learning and communicative learning. Instrumental learning involves controlling or managing the environment or others, including improving performance. Beliefs are validated by empirical testing. Instrumental learning is predicated on hypotheses to test for "truth" using deductive logic. Communicative learning involves understanding what others mean when they communicate with us. In communicative learning, validation or justification of contested beliefs is through discourse. "Discursive assessment is that type of dialogue in which we participate with others, whom we believe to be informed, objective, and rational, to assess reasons that justify problematic beliefs" (p. 20). Problematic beliefs, he added, include such abstract concepts as democracy, justice, and love. "Discourse involves dialectical and critically reflective thinking leading to a best tentative judgment" (p. 20). Mezirow added that consensus making is "a continuous process" and that "each consensus is a provisional judgment that is open to new evidence and arguments and new paradigms of understandings" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 97). Habermas believed that emancipatory or

reflective learning affects both instrumental and communicative domains and that much adult learning involves both.

The emancipation in emancipatory learning is freedom from libidinal, linguistic, epistemic, institutional, and environmental forces that limit our options and our control over our lives. We achieve this emancipation by examining our own assumptions. Emancipatory reflective learning can be involved in both instrumental and communicative learning, but has broader implications for the latter. (Habermas, 1984, p. 98)

### *Critique and Evolution of Mezirow's Transformative Learning Model*

Since Mezirow first articulated his model of transformative learning in 1978, much has been written about it and a number of studies have been completed to test the theory in various contexts and to explore the model's constructs. For example, Belenky and Stanton (as cited in Mezirow & Associates, 2000) wrote that Mezirow's theory presumes relations of equality in reflective discourse, when in fact most relationships are asymmetrical; one individual is perceived to be more powerful. They also asserted that Mezirow's theory is limited because it only depicts the end point, causing adult education practitioners to overlook the reality of their students' lives.

In a meta-analysis of empirical studies done on Mezirow's model, Taylor (2000, 2007) highlighted ways in which the model has been developed and expanded. For example, Mezirow's model was originally conceptualized as a linear process, but Taylor's research review showed that transformative learning is "more individualistic, fluid and recursive than originally thought" (Taylor, 2000, p. 292). He found that certain phases, such as working through feelings, appear to be more significant to change than other components, and each phase is not necessarily equal in weight to all others.

Taylor found that the most common finding among the studies he reviewed was that Mezirow's model is limited in its understanding of the importance of relationships. "It is within the arena of rational discourse that experience and critical reflection are played out. Research, however, is revealing a picture of discourse that is not only rationally driven but equally dependent on relational ways of knowing" (Taylor, 2000, p. 306). The importance of relationships, trust, friendship, and support was underrepresented in earlier descriptions of rational discourse, and Taylor concluded that these subjective elements seem to provide essential conditions for effective rational discourse. He added that it is "through establishing trustful relationships that individuals can have questioning discussions wherein information can be shared openly and mutual and consensual understanding be achieved" (Taylor, 2000, p. 307). These trusting relationships provide openness and confidence to deal with learning on an affective level necessary for managing the transformative learning experience. "Without the medium of healthy relationships, critical reflection would seem to be impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth reflection" (Taylor, 2000, p. 308). Similarly, in the context of education, Taylor (2009) argued that authentic relationships are a core element for transformative learning because they create space for questioning discussions and open sharing of information and reach mutual and consensual understanding. "It is through building trusting relationships that learners develop the confidence to deal with learning on an affective level, where transformation at times can be perceived as threatening and an emotionally charged experience" (p. 13).

Taylor (2007) also noted that most transformative learning research was positive, even celebrative in nature, and he suggested a need for more research to explore the

negative consequences, both personally and socially, of a perspective transformation. Taylor cited a study (McDonald, Cervero, & Courtenay, 1999) of the transformative learning experience of individuals who became ethical vegans, finding that “power proves central to shaping the transformative experience.” McDonald et al. (1999) found that transformative learning does not adequately account for the “enormous interpersonal and socio-cultural challenges associated with confronting the effects of power” (Taylor, 2007, p. 184). The study found that the vegans “never became free of the dominant ideology raising the concern that transformative learning from Mezirow’s (2000) perspective gives too much attention to the individual and not the individual within his or her socio-cultural context” (p. 185).

Many of the many studies, Taylor (2000, 2007) concluded, found that the definition of perspective transformation was too narrow and rationally based. According to Taylor, this narrow definition implied that perspective transformation was a result of the individual becoming more in touch with his or her logical-rational side; other ways of knowing, such as affective learning, were discounted. Taylor (2000) added: “Transformative learning is more than rationally based; it relies on the affective dimension of knowing, such as developing an empathetic viewing of other perspectives and trusting intuition” (p. 303). Further, he found that because of the constructivist nature of transformative learning theory, it was difficult to delineate objective reframing (CRA) from subjective reframing (CRSA). In a study about meaning making by HIV-positive adults, Courtenay, Merriam, and Reeves (1998) argued, “Assumptions are not simply cognitive constructs that are alterable without regard to feelings, attitudes, or shifts in

behavioral reactions. Emotional attachments form a part of the context for assumptions; therefore, when assumptions are challenged, emotions are aroused also” (1998, p. 13).

Taylor’s (2000, 2007) meta-analysis of empirical work on Mezirow’s model found that context and culture in the transformative learning process also seem to have a greater influence than originally thought. The research revealed that personal contextual factors, such as readiness for change, make people predisposed to a transformative learning experience. Taylor argued that the role of context in transformative learning is better understood than the role of culture, adding, “Much could be learned about the role of context, by exploring the role of cultural and transformative learning, an area of research greatly overlooked” (2007, p. 185). He also noted a lack of understanding on how historical events in society may shape transformative learning.

In addition to context, the medium of transformative learning has had limited exploration. Taylor (2007) noted a study that used romantic fiction with adult women learners and found it to be a powerful tool in helping learners question traditional ideas of romantic relationships and redefine power in relationships. Journaling was found to be an important medium for voicing perspectives for some study participants. “The written format potentially strengthens the analytical capability of transformative learning” (2007, p. 182). Taylor also noted that little is known about the potential and means of online settings as a medium for fostering transformative learning.

Taylor (2000) concluded that there is a lack of research on transformative learning in relation to “difference” and stated that diverse perspectives—along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—are missing from transformative learning research. Taylor’s (2007) more recent review of empirical research on transformative

learning theory noted a study by Baumgartner (2002), who examined the nature of learning during the incorporation of HIV/AIDS into identity over time. Those living with this chronic illness face stigma, and her study added to the limited field of research on transformative learning in relation to “difference” that Taylor noted was lacking.

Baumgartner’ study found that social interaction was vital to transformative learning:

Social interaction was a key component in the transformational learning process. Social interaction prompted critical reflection and the realization that the person was not alone in his or her experience. The group experience also gave people a chance to try out their new perspectives and roles in a reasonably safe environment and gain confidence in new roles. It gave participants a sense of belonging and decreased their feelings of marginality. (Baumgartner, 2002, p. 57)

#### *Evolution of Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory*

Mezirow’s theory has evolved and further developed since it was first articulated in 1978. For example, in his earlier writings, “rational discourse” was the term used extensively. In later writings, “rational” was mentioned much less frequently in discussing discourse. Instead, “critical discourse,” “constructive discourse,” or simply “discourse” now appear to be used interchangeably and without explicit distinction. This evolution may be a nod to the criticism that transformative learning theory placed too much emphasis on rationality.

A distinctive feature of Mezirow’s first model was a triggering event, a “disorienting dilemma” that creates anxiety and energy that can motivate change. Since he originally articulated transformative learning theory in 1978, Mezirow has broadened his view of the triggering event for transformative learning’s beginning as either epochal (i.e., disorienting dilemma), or incremental, or even several events converging to initiate a process. This broader view aligns with the varied experiences in the context of the

coming out process. On their journey to coming out, some gay men and lesbians face the disorienting dilemma of forced disclosure or being “outed” by another. Others have a gradual process that leads them to the decision to come out in a particular way, at a particular time, and with whom they choose. Coming out can also be a “both/and” proposition—a disorienting dilemma can cause the individual to question his own sexuality (i.e., “what if I am gay?”) and the transformative learning can come incrementally as he or she makes sense of it through reflection, initial disclosure, discourse, perspective change, and taking action on the new perspective.

### *Self-Discourse*

Discourse assumes another human is involved, according to Mezirow’s model, either in person or between an author and a reader, or an artist and viewer. However, marginalized individuals who may not have consistent access to ideal conditions may be compelled to find alternative ways to receive the effect of discourse. Recent studies on transformative learning have suggested that a plausible alternative to verbal discourse with another person is the phenomenon of “self-discourse” or “self-dialogue” (Sherlock, 2000; Henderson, 2001; Carter, 2002; Hamp, 2006). In these studies, self-discourse emerged in a variety of different contexts, such as by top corporate executives, midcareer professional women, and women who had successfully emerged from dependence on welfare. Some study participants reported they did not have a trusted other person with whom they could engage in discourse, and so they had a dialogue with themselves, or their higher power, describing it as self-discourse. Closeted gay men may find themselves in a similar situation of not having access to ideal conditions for discourse and thus may seek alternatives to the verbal discourse that Mezirow described.

Carter's (2002) research explored the nature of the relationships that proved to be essential factors in transformative experience. Her study of mid-career women's learning in work-related developmental relationships identified categories of relationships as significant to women's learning at work. Pertinent to self-discourse, Carter found that "imaginative relationships" were described as "this internal voice as a relationship with self that they listened to and heeded through meditation as a spiritual practice, or in writing to make meaning of their experiences" (Carter, 2002, p. 80).

Shaw (2001) described self-dialogue as a way of making sense out of consciousness, an organized theme or force of mental processes. It is a conversation among different identity elements or perspectives within the individual.

Self-dialogue is a fundamental process of expression; it mediates between self-image and social experience; it is regulated by ontological limits, cultural norms and social rules; and it serves as an adaptive mechanism for self-presentation, identity acquisition, stress management, health maintenance, and personal integration. (p. 272)

According to Shaw, self-dialogue can occur as discourse with one's self. Or in religious practice, it can be through meditation or prayer as a conversation with God or a higher power—a phenomenon described in studies by Sherlock (2000), Carter (2002), and Hamp (2006). Self-dialogue, Shaw argued, provides ways to mitigate conflicts among different social roles as well as between the self and its various role-playing pursuits.

Shaw's assertions are relevant, I believe, in the context of the coming out process. Self-dialogue or self-discourse can be a technique to free oneself from learned social rules for any "deviant actions" as perceived by social rules. Shaw said that the penalties for breaking social norms include shame, reprimand, ridicule, or attack. Social rules are

learned through socialization and resocialization and to neutralize them, Shaw wrote that one can use self-dialogue to rationalize socially deviant intent (e.g., nonheterosexual identity) and then to convince oneself about the necessity of the corresponding act (e.g., identifying as a gay man or lesbian; coming out). Then, one comes up with a set of neutralizing vocabularies to ward off possible attack from the social world. “The neutralization process affirms that people learn and internalize social rules and that social rules internalized provide guidance and restraint to the inner thinking and reasoning process, including self-dialogue” (Shaw, 2001, p. 295). He argued that self-dialogue allows the individual to play out scenarios and possible reactions to stepping outside of social rule boundaries, allowing one to try on the new behavior or identity before acting. This aligns with what Mezirow said about the utility of discourse in transformative learning theory. Self-dialogue can provide a safe forum in which individuals devise ways of sharing their stigmatized hidden identity and can play a role in processing the anticipation of marginality and disclosure. It may be useful as a precursor or in lieu of the ability to freely engage in verbal discourse with others.

As was discussed earlier, Mezirow did touch on self-dialogue for making meaning through intentional construal, writing that “intentional construal involves either internal and/or external dialogues” (p. 41). As the above-mentioned studies indicated, as a result of a fear of disclosure or a lack of trusted others with whom to engage in discourse, those of a marginalized group may be compelled to engage in self-dialogue as an antecedent or even a viable alternative to verbal discourse.

### *Mezirow's Response and Clarifications*

Mezirow responded to critiques by stating that the focus of transformative learning theory was adult learning and its primary audience was adult educators. He said that transformative learning theory was an attempt to identify common elements and operations of adult learning.

He added, "Transformation theory does not undertake a definitive cultural critique, but it provides the model—constructs, language, categories, and dynamics—to enable others to understand how adults learn in various cultural settings" (p. 167).

Mezirow allowed for the possibility of alternative ways for adults to learn based on the culture in which they are embedded. Specifically, he mentioned a general notion of "alternative forms of reflection" as a way adults learn, compelled by the cultural scripts and resource access issues they faced as a result of being embedded in a culture.

Thus transformation theory should be rigorously assessed through a continuing and critically reflective discourse to establish the validity of its constructs, not its focus or lack of focus on obstructions imposed on the learning process by one or another local culture. (p. 168)

Mezirow acknowledged the impact of social, cultural, and hegemonic influences on adult learning. To clarify how context fits into transformative learning theory, Mezirow (1996) wrote that sociocultural factors may enhance or impede critical reflection and rational discourse. "We are painfully familiar with the inequities associated with class, race, and gender. The hegemony of instrumental rationality is another principle distortion" (p. 169). He added:

To the extent that contemporary sociocultural forces lead to transformative learning, they permit or encourage critical reflection and rational discourse. These prevailing forces are of major significance to adult learning; they dictate whose voice shall have priority and who is permitted to be heard. In doing so, they can

distort the ideal of full free participation in discourse. The learner brings to the situated learning experience his or her meaning perspectives. The immediate social situation impacts upon the way she or he construes these predispositions in specific interpretations, which are instantiated in a meaning scheme, involving not only concepts, but feelings, attitudes, values, and beliefs. We have a dialectic between a meaning scheme, highly interactive and influenced by the situated learning experience, and a meaning perspective, an established set of predispositions only indirectly influenced by these immediate social forces. (Mezirow, 1996, p. 168)

Mezirow added that, within the purview of meaning perspectives, meaning schemes can take “a limited number of forms”:

Those socially sanctioned schemes that fit comfortably into long held meaning perspectives will tend to be reinforced by society’s powerful influences. Those that do not may create enough dissonance or disequilibrium to raise accumulative questions about the validity of the meaning perspective. However, culture determines how conflicts in belief should be resolved. Transformative learning theory does not suggest a disengaged image of the individual learning but of a learning process characterized by dialogical voices. The social dimension is central, but so are historical and cultural dimensions of the process. Together they provide us with both our meaning perspective and meaning schemes; and society determines whose privileged voices may participate fully and freely in discourse and what the limits are of critical reflection. (p. 169)

Mezirow (1995) also acknowledged that those who are of marginalized groups may be silenced by a range of influences in society, including fear of retribution, being demoralized and unable to believe what they have to say will be valued, having previously been silenced, being made insecure by contesting ideas, or holding a belief that discourse cannot make a difference in problem solving.

One upsmanship, personal competitiveness, bias and prejudice, and past experiences with oppression and domination can suffocate communication. Dialogue can be aborted by deep differences in language, culture, and meaning perspective. . . . The success of dialogue across differences depends upon external, institutional factors and the meaning perspectives and schemes participants bring with them. (p. 55)

Mezirow (2009) addressed the criticism that transformative learning theory placed too much focus on rationality, arguing that the influences for how adults learn to reason for themselves may include power, ideology, race, class, gender differences, and cosmology, among others.

However, even these influences may be rationally assessed because rationality is not defined by these factors. The process by which we tacitly construe our beliefs may involve taken-for-granted values, stereotyping, highly selective attention, limited comprehension, projection, rationalization, minimizing, or denial. That is why we need to be able to critically assess and validate the tacit assumptions supporting our own beliefs and expectations, as well as those of others. (p. 23)

But while Mezirow acknowledged how hegemony in culture confounds discourse and transformative learning, there remains a need to more fully account for the ways in which it occurs in these less-than-ideal conditions. The current study, like many others cited by Taylor (2007), explored transformative learning theory beyond its early original context (adult education) and audience (adult educators), and also applied transformative learning theory more broadly. This study focused on all dimensions of adult life, not just adult education, and was much more specific in context, focusing on a marginalized, stigmatized group, to add to understanding of the discourse component of transformative learning theory.

### **Coming Out and Transformative Learning Theory**

Dirkx wrote of adult learning and transformation in general that “what adults learn is fundamentally grounded in the way they think about themselves and their worlds, opening possibilities for transformation and creating dramatic shifts in one’s consciousness” (as cited in Baumgartner, 2001, p. 15). Coming out for gay men or lesbians is commonly described as being transformational (De Montflore & Schultz,

1978; Cass, 1979; Herek, 1996). It causes profound shifts in their sense of self and worldview. Coming out can immediately lift the inner turmoil and stress of hiding, even if coming out has a less than favorable immediate reaction.

This study proposed that the process and results of coming out meet the criteria for transformative learning and suggested that Mezirow's model can be reasonably applied.

Transformative learning, which may involve a reassessment of one's self-concept, as is often the case in perspective transformation, is threatening, emotionally charged, and extremely difficult. It is not enough that such transformations effect a cognitive insight; they require a cognitive and emotional commitment to act upon a new perspective as well. Transformative learning involves movement from alienation to agency, and 'centering,' movement from a lack of authenticity, being true to one's self, to authenticity. (Mezirow, 1995, p. 48)

Boyd (1991) identified two basic steps toward a personal transformation: "making public, primarily for ourselves, the historical dimensions of our dilemma" and then "confronting it as a difficulty to be worked through" (p. 198). Mezirow (2000) suggested that transformative learning often involves subjective reframing that "is often an intensely threatening emotional experience in which we have to become aware of both the assumptions undergirding our ideas and those supporting our emotional responses to the need to change" (p. 6).

Mezirow warned that learners can get stalled, temporarily or permanently, in any phase, typically characterized by compromise, backsliding, and self-deception. Arrested development is more likely early on, "at the beginning of the learning, with its threat to long-established sense of order, and later when awareness and insight call for a commitment to action that may seriously threaten important relationships" (2000, p. xii). The theory posits that transformative learning is adult learning where the learner's sense

of self-identity is involved with the process of learning. Gay men or lesbians growing up in a heterosexist environment may never little if anything positive about their orientation and can thus adopt an inner contempt, even a self-loathing, commonly called “internalized homophobia” or, more accurately, “internalized homonegativity.” To avoid ridicule or attack, they may remain hidden, wary, and silent, choosing to pass as heterosexual. Drawing meaning from cultural scripts they attend to, potentially without empathetic others who understand, or noticing positive exemplars, or more accurate information such as positive scripts, they may feel isolated due to their sexual orientation.

Shelp (2002) wrote that gay men and lesbians, like any human, have a need for association with others to survive and flourish. A clue to this need, he asserted, is the slang the gay community often uses to refer to one another. It is common for one gay or lesbian to ask another, “Is so-and-so ‘family’?” to confirm if the third is indeed gay or lesbian. The term “family” reveals a value gay men and lesbians place on fellow members of their “tribe,” Shelp opined, and because they are invisible, they actively seek out others like themselves to abate the isolation.

All through life, gay men or lesbians may take on the heteronormative expectations of their environment, cultural scripts from family, friends, religion, the media, society, or authority figures. But incongruence and tension between embeddedness in the outer world and their deep inner feelings can, through the coming out process, eventually set up cognitive dissonance that lends itself to a transformative learning opportunity as unquestioned cultural scripts and expectations of others no longer fit. “Interpretations and opinions that may have worked for us as children often do not as adults” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 4).

## **Cultural Contexts for Coming Out: Heterosexism, Homophobia, and Homonegativity**

Sexuality is considered a basis for identity in northwestern European and North American cultures, and most individuals feel a need to develop a particular sexual identity (Rust, 2003). For gay men or lesbians, coming out is necessary because they are embedded in a heterosexist culture: the individuals must replace their “default” heterosexual identity with being a gay man or lesbian. Heterosexism is institutionalized stigma (Herek & Garnets, 2007). Like racism and sexism, heterosexism is manifested in institutions, as cultural heterosexism, and also in individuals, as psychological heterosexism. Cultural heterosexism, Herek (1990) wrote, is ubiquitous “like the air we breathe” (p. 317). It is an assumption that everyone is heterosexual, or should be. Like heterosexism, the term heteronormativity is also the assumption that heterosexuality is the only normal orientation. Heterosexism, homophobia, and homonegativity are often used interchangeably, but there are distinctions—heterosexism is a pervasive attitude of superiority over homosexuality, not a fear of gay people per se. Homophobia, like other phobias, is an unfounded fear of gays and lesbians. Homonegativity is negative perceptions of homosexuality.

The cultural unfolding of attitudes toward sexual minorities was heavily influenced by laws, religion, the medical profession, and the media. Herek (1996) argued that because homosexuality has long been defined as deviant and abnormal, gay and lesbian identities and roles have been of an oppositional nature, representing the viewpoint of an outsider. The existence and visibility of nonheterosexuals may disturbingly call into question for some the cultural assumptions about the roles and functions of sex, beyond procreation.

Bronski (1998) speculated that gay culture presents a critique of the ideology of heterosexuality:

It challenges accepted ideas about sexual activity, gender roles, relationships, marriage, family, work, and child rearing. Most importantly, it offers an unstinting vision that liberates sex from the burden of reproduction and places pleasure at the center of sexual activity. (p. 13)

### **Definitions of Coming Out**

Herek (1996) defined coming out as a form of self-disclosure and “the communication by one individual to another of information about himself or herself that otherwise is not directly observable” (p. 2). A distinction should be made here between the act of “coming out” and coming out as a process. The act of coming out is the disclosure of one’s sexual orientation, whether verbally or behaviorally, to another person. Anderson and Mavis (1997) said that the act of coming out is a discrete event in the complex and ongoing coming out process. Individuals may consider themselves to be fully out, but they continue to manage their identity and make choices on whether or not to disclose, and in what measure, in each new encounter. Chirrey (2003) wrote that the phenomenon of coming out is recognized by most gay men and lesbians in Western culture as the moment of recognizing and asserting their gayness. They challenge the world’s view, “demanding that attention be paid to their gayness, insisting on their existence as a lesbian or gay man, and refusing to accept negative evaluation of themselves and their lifestyle” (p. 24). Liang (as cited in Livia & Hall, 1997) argued that coming out is a speech act, describing the state of affairs, altering reality for both the self and the other through disclosing sexual orientation. Garnets and Kimmel (2003) argued that the primary task of developing a positive sense of identity involves a transformation

from a negative and stigmatized identity into a positive one. This describes the coming out process, not just the act of disclosure for the first time or any time. They described gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity development as “a complex sequence of events through which individuals acknowledge, recognize and label their sexual orientation, conceptualize it in positive terms, and disclose it to others throughout their lives” (p. 219). Fassinger (1991) wrote that a positive gay or lesbian identity development “involves a complex process of homoerotic identification, reference group affiliation, and, for some, politicized behavior regarding that identity, all of which occurs within a context of societal prejudice, discrimination and lack of support” (p. 168). Ideally, coming out eradicates boundaries so that one is known as a gay man or lesbian in all aspects of life.

## **Barriers and Factors in Coming Out**

### *Cultural Scripts*

Cultural scripts and resources vis-à-vis the transformative learning experience of gay men coming out are central to this study’s research question. Cultural scripts are described in various ways, depending on the theory stream. A conception of cultural scripts comes from Mezirow’s (1991) description of Habermas’ notion of “lifeworld,” described as the unquestioned world of everyday social activity, a “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns” made up of “a vast inventory of unquestioned assumptions and shared cultural convictions, including codes, norms, roles, social practices, psychological patterns of dealing with others, and individual skills” (p. 69).

In the context of transformative learning theory, cultural scripts inform an individual's frame of reference, shaping meaning perspectives and meaning schemes that Mezirow (1995) described as learned, generalized subtexts assimilated from narrative interactions with both culture and with parents.

They are symbol systems which are projected on our sense perceptions as habits of expectation rather than being 'stored' information to be retrieved through memory. Culture itself can be understood as a set of meaning perspectives which, together with idiosyncratic perspectives of our parents or primary care givers, constitute the universe of meaning perspectives to which we are exposed and from which we learn our perspectives through assimilation. (p. 44)

Mezirow (1991) acknowledged the limits that are placed on transformative learning by social, historical, and cultural interests. He said that because humans are relational creatures their identities are formed in the "webs of affiliation" within the shared lifeworld that Habermas wrote of, or the symbolically prestructured world of everyday life. "It is within the context of these relationships, governed by existing and changing cultural paradigms, that we become the persons we are. Transformative learning involves liberating ourselves from reified forms of thought that are no longer dependable" (p. 27). Mezirow argued that cultural scripts regulate patterns of thought and behavior.

Cultural codes are tacit regulatory principles that establish power relationships and the nature of appropriate discourse both within a given body of knowledge or area of specialization and among such bodies. They are also the principles behind the assumptions implicit in our social norms. (1991, p. 57)

Individuals cannot be understood in the abstract, ignoring their embeddedness in culture. Friedland and Alford (1991) argued that "individual action can only be explained in a societal context, but that context can only be understood through individual

consciousness and behavior. . . . Organizations and institutions specify progressively their levels of constraint and opportunity for individual action” (p. 242).

Connecting cultural scripts with the context of coming out, Herek and Garnets (2007) wrote that the coming out process and forming a positive gay identity mean that the gay man or lesbian must identify, counter, and replace the heterosexist cultural scripts in which they are immersed. “This process of forming a positive sexual orientation identity involves refuting the negative stereotypes associated with the cognitive categories of ‘gay,’ lesbian,’ or ‘bisexual’ and replacing them with positive content” (pp. 365-366). De Monteflores and Schultz (1978) argued that coming out is “inherently concerned with the tension between the individual and society, between conformity to the established norms and values that stabilize society, and the variation that challenges the norms and produces social change” (p. 71). Further, they described socialization and coming out as two complementary sides of a dynamic relationship between the individual and society. “Socialization is the process by which society molds individual identity to perpetuate itself; coming out is the process through which individual identity asserts itself to create social change. Socialization emphasizes the role of social validation; coming out the role of self-validation” (p. 66).

### *Resources*

Sociologist Callero (1994) defined resources as “objects that serve as a source of power; they include nonhuman elements such as factories, weapons, and land, as well as human qualities such as fear, respect, and reverence. . . . Resources have an ‘actual’ existence and therefore are observable features of interaction” (pp. 233-234). He described schemata and their relationship with resources as follows: “Schemas refer to

the cultural assumptions, taken-for-granted rules, and generalizable procedures that underlie social life. Rules of etiquette, aesthetic norms, and general principles of action would be considered schemas” (pp. 233-234). He argued the essential distinction as that schemas have a “virtual” existence, not existing concretely in space and time like resources. Schemas are nonetheless real and interactive with resources. “Although we cannot observe a rule or a norm, they exist [as schemas] and are real and powerful in their effect. . . . Together, schemas and resources are said to be constitutive of each other; schemas are the effects of resources, and resources are the effects of schema” (pp. 233-234).

So whatever term is used, be it schemas, cultural scripts, or meaning perspectives and meaning schemes, they can be available as a resource when they are attended to. For the purpose of this study, specific examples of resources include positive scripts, access to more accurate and complete information, exemplars, media portrayals, the gay community, and others with whom to engage in discourse.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **METHODS**

#### **Overview of Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process of gay men. Drawing from in-depth interviews with nine gay men about their coming out experience, this study centered on the discourse component of Mezirow's model. It focused on the cultural scripts and resources associated with discourse, and the ideal conditions for discourse.

This study had one central research question with two subquestions:

- What is the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of coming out?
  1. What kind of cultural scripts are described as being part of this discourse?
  2. What resources enter into the discourse process for transformative learning to occur?

The topic of this study lent itself to qualitative research. As Creswell (1998) explained:

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinctive methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. (p. 15)

Of the qualitative methods, phenomenological research was well suited to this study because it explores lived experience. Creswell said that phenomenology is a return to "the traditional task of philosophy" (1998, pp. 52-53). It searches for the essential,

invariant structure, or the essence, of the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasizes the intentionality of consciousness. Consciousness is always directed toward an object, and reality of an object is related to one's consciousness of it.

According to Patton (2002), the central question of phenomenology is "What is the meaning, structure and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 132). Moustakas (1994) argued that phenomenology is a "significant" methodology that investigates human experience and derives knowledge from pure consciousness. "One learns to see naively and freshly again, to value conscious experience, to respect the evidence of one's senses, and to move toward an intersubjective knowing of things, people and everyday experiences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 101).

Data from phenomenological study were analyzed through a methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes and search for possible meaning. The researcher *is* the research instrument, rejecting a subject-object dichotomy. Patton (2002) explained, "The reality of an object is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (p. 53). The level of analysis guides the approach, whether sociological, focusing on social acts of groups, or psychological, focusing on the individual. The psychological approach was selected for this study.

There are various psychological phenomenology approaches and they share similarities. This study used a method developed by Moustakas (1994), his variation of Van Kaam's interpretation of the empirical phenomenological psychological research method. This method was derived from the Duquesne (University) Studies in Phenomenology. Moustakas said the central tenet of this methodology is "to determine

what an experience means for the persons who have the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived . . . the essences of structures of the experience” (p. 13). To understand the essence of experiences, phenomenology data collection can consist of long interviews gathering the statements of the meanings, meaning themes, and general description of the experience, resulting in a narrative description of the essence of the experience (Creswell, 1998, p. 65).

## **Research Procedures**

### *Participant Criteria*

To qualify for this study, participants were required to meet six criteria:

- Born biological male
- Live in the United States
- Be openly out in all contexts of life (home, workplace, social, spiritual, family)
- Have come out since 2000
- Be at least 21 years of age at the time of the interview
- Describe their coming out process as personally transformative, as articulated by Mezirow’s transformative learning theory.

After confirming with my dissertation committee, it was decided to delimit to males for homogeneity; the added dynamic of sexism that females experience could add layers of complexity to this study. Likewise, bisexual men or transgender individuals were not included to avoid the added complexity those elements could add to the research. Similar research of these populations would be interesting and useful, but they

are beyond the scope of this particular study. Requiring that participants live in the United States was intended to reduce the complexity of spanning multiple countries, while acknowledging that gay men who live in the U.S. may well have differences in their coming out and disclosure experiences.

The requirement that participants be out in all contexts of life made available the broadest possible range of coming out experiences and the most developed sense of self as a gay man in American culture. For this study, being openly out in all areas meant that participants had to describe themselves as having intentionally disclosed their sexual orientation and not hidden it from their supervisors and most coworkers, friends, family members, and those with whom they share religious or spiritual practices. In other words, they are generally known by others as a gay man.

A timeframe of coming out since 2000 supported homogeneity, given that all would have disclosed their sexual orientation within a shared time period. Attitudes and awareness of gay and lesbian issues and the experience of being gay in America have changed substantially. The coming out experience since 2000 was undoubtedly very different from coming out, for example, in 1970, 1980, or 1990. Another reason for the 2000 or later criterion was to account for the impact of the Internet and computer-mediated communication in their experience. In 2000, two major gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) Web sites—AOL/Planet Out and Gay.com—combined into one large Web-based community, providing at that time the biggest global reach of connected GLBT people. This is important because computer-mediated communication is a resource for information, support, and connection with others worldwide who are gay while maintaining perception of identity control. Participants were required to be at least

21 years old in order so that they were legally adults at the time of the interview. In addition, requiring them to be of legal adult age was intended to increase the opportunities for being out in more contexts of life. The sixth criterion was that each participant felt that his coming out experience was personally transformative, as described by Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

It is also worth noting that race was not a consideration. Race was not anticipated to be a confounding factor in the research. This study did not test for differences in coming out experiences by race, nor are findings of qualitative studies intended to be generalizable. After careful consideration, conferring with the dissertation committee members and the Institutional Review Board (IRB), it was decided that purposefully including or excluding certain races or requiring a certain minority mix for the participant group would not improve the study.

#### *Sample Size and Sampling Method*

Creswell (1998) suggested that up to 10 participants is a generally accepted number for a phenomenological study, but Creswell (1998) and Patton (2002) agreed that no absolute number of participants is required to make qualitative research meaningful or valid. This study used purposeful sampling, which is concerned with the richness and depth of information rather than sample size. Patton said that the power of purposeful sampling lies in selection of information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study. The resources and capabilities of the researcher also help determine sample size. For this study, candidates were screened and 10 were selected as participants and interviewed, though the data for just nine of them were ultimately used for reasons explained in the next section.

### *Participant Recruitment*

Participants were identified using a combination of purposeful sampling techniques: “criterion sampling” and the “snowball” or “chain sampling” method. Criterion sampling means the cases chosen for the study were based upon the study’s criteria. According to Patton (2002), criterion sampling enhances the quality assurance of the research. Chain sampling, also called snowball sampling, “is an approach for locating information-rich key informants or critical cases” (p. 237). It involves reaching out to “well-situated people” to find contacts who are familiar with the phenomenon in question. The search is cast increasingly wider as more individuals emerge through the chain of referrals beyond the original circle of well-situated people. The likelihood of identifying individuals who are ideal for the research at hand increases, analogous to how a snowball grows in size as it rolls down a hill. The snowball technique is useful for studies involving stigmatized invisible social identities, according to Rumens and Kerfoot (2009), who wrote that the snowball method is often used in the study of GLBT people because participants are hard to find due to their invisibility.

To select participants, the combined chain and criteria sampling began by reaching out to 42 individuals I knew personally whom I believed either might have met the criteria themselves or perhaps knew others who did (see Appendix C, Recruitment and Invitation Letters). These individuals identified either as GLBT themselves or as non-gay allies and were friends, coworkers, and former coworkers and business consultants whom I believed might be willing to assist with identifying potential candidates. In snowball fashion, they, in turn, forwarded emails on to their contacts who they either believed met the criteria or who might know others who did. Within a few

days, I received emails from some of my direct contacts, indicating they knew someone who might meet the criteria, and all volunteered to inquire if they would be interested if I wished. I sent each the email recruitment letter which they forwarded on. If the candidate was interested and felt he was qualified, I requested that they send me his name and contact information or have him contact me directly so I could confirm eligibility. In addition, I also received direct emails from men who received the email from secondary sources and indicated that they were interested in knowing more about being a participant in the study.

Email exchanges occurred with 15 men who indicated interest and believed they met qualifications; the communication involved outlining the study and participant criteria and providing Mezirow's (1991) definition of transformative learning. My email asked them if they believe they qualified and were interested in exploring the possibility of participating and, if so, a follow-up telephone screening conversation was requested. From the emails, I discovered that four of the men actually had come out prior to 2000, and thus were disqualified. I thanked them for their consideration and no further contact occurred. So, an initial group of 11 individuals was identified for follow-up conversations by telephone.

I disclosed my own sexual orientation early on in initial telephone conversations to build trust and increase potential participants' comfort level with discussing such a personal experience as their coming out process and their sexual orientation. In a study of gay men in the workplace, Rumens and Kerfoot (2009) argued that disclosing that the researcher was also gay helped put interviewees at ease. This strategy was apparently

useful; each man was very forthcoming on the screening calls, freely volunteering a brief overview of their coming out process and how they felt it was transformative.

On the screening telephone call, each man was asked if he understood the definition of transformative learning as explained in the invitation letter and if he would describe his coming out experience as being transformative. During the call, I verified if the criteria were met. One candidate was disqualified due to his misunderstanding of the requirement of having come out since 2000. Interestingly, the most restrictive of the criteria requirements was that of having come out since 2000. I believe this is partly because the well-situated circle of friends and acquaintances I contacted were approximately my age (50) and/or had come out well before 2000, as had many others in their extended circle of friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

From this process, 10 men were selected who were willing to participate in the study. Once I reached the goal of 10 qualified participants, I stopped the recruiting process and screening interviews and turned to data collection. The final group of individuals included one man who is an acquaintance of mine and the remaining nine men who were referred by friends or business colleagues, or their friends and colleagues, in snowball fashion. Each time I determined on a screening call that the man met the criteria and was willing to participate in the study, I asked to schedule the first interview. Each man received an email with a Research Consent Form (see Appendix D).

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected in two long semistructured, in-depth, private interviews with each individual participant. Interviews were approximately 90 minutes in duration. The interviews were conversations about each participant's experience of coming out. To

ensure consistent, rich coverage of the experience from each participant, I prepared a list of open-ended questions based on the research question and subquestions, approved by the IRB and my dissertation committee (see Appendix A, Interview Questions). I was using Mezirow's model as a lens, so questions explored the coming out process as transformative learning, especially touching on various ways discourse was done or inhibited, the resources desired, needed and used, and cultural scripts that informed discourse during the coming out process. The interviews were set up according to participant's availability, geography, and ability to devote up to 90 minutes.

Each interview was audiotaped and professionally transcribed into a document for analysis. Nine of the 10 initial interviews were conducted in person, to build rapport. The one participant whom I already knew lived in a distant city and due to a medical emergency and busy work travel schedule was not available in person, so his interviews were both by phone. The sites of initial interviews varied, depending on the preference of the participants. Three initial interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants, three were done on university campuses, one was in a church, two were done in a private conference room at their workplaces, and, as mentioned earlier, one was by phone.

After the first interview with each participant was transcribed, I read the transcript carefully and also forwarded copies to each participant to review before a second interview, to check for accuracy and completeness. These "member checks" were recommended as a way to establish credibility of the findings and interpretations (Creswell, 1998). There were a few small edits by participants, correcting only minor facts and, in one case, removing unimportant details to protect anonymity. A second follow-up interview was scheduled to answer any questions that arose from the first

interview and to explore the topic more deeply after the participants had time to reflect on the conversation and review the transcript. This follow-up interview was conducted by phone with eight of the men due to constraints of intercity travel or participant schedule. One local participant was available in person to do the second interview and so it was done face-to-face.

One of the 10 participants could not be reached after repeated telephone and email requests, so there was no second interview with him and he also did not provide any feedback on the transcript. The reason for his ignoring repeated requests is a mystery; the screening call interview and the lengthy first interview were pleasant and robust conversations. At the conclusion of the interview, I informed him of next steps—uploading of the transcript for his review and scheduling a second interview—and he agreed to continue. But his subsequent nonresponsiveness, the lack of his member check on the data, and no second interview led to the decision to eliminate his data from the study, leaving nine participants. Even with his regrettable absence, the data from the remaining nine men were rich and responsive to the research question. By the end of all the interviews, there was sameness to their responses, with individual variations on the overall coming out experience. Creswell (1998) called this event in data collection “saturation,” a point at which collecting interview data to “find information that continues to add until no more can be found” (p. 56).

Like the first in-depth interview, the telephone interviews were also recorded and professionally transcribed. As before, the second interview transcripts were shared with each participant to ensure completeness and accuracy. This member check resulted in

only minor edits (e.g., remove the name of an employer) on the second interview transcripts, and the process moved to data analysis.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis began with a process called phenomenological reduction. Moustakas (1994) said to start with epoché to delimit the study by placing the focus of the research in brackets, setting aside biases, preconceived notions, and prejudgment, allowing for focus on the phenomenon of interest. Patton (2002) recommended that one tactic for engaging in epoché is through creating a subjectivity statement, disclosing the researcher's past experience of the phenomenon, demonstrating to readers that the researcher recognizes the potential for personal bias. With this in mind, my own subjectivity statement is provided in Appendix B.

I read the entire transcript to determine how parts were constituted, as Giorgi (1997) suggested. Each participant's transcripts were loaded into Atlas.ti software, which was used to assist with data management and analysis. I reread each transcript set twice as part of "horizontalizing" where every statement was initially treated as having equal value. Statements that proved irrelevant or redundant were deleted, identifying "horizons" that are the "textural meanings and invariant constituents" of the phenomenon (Moustakas, p. 97). A list of nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements emerged. The data were divided into "meaning units," or emergent themes of the lived experience of the phenomenon. The meaning units were then named with one word or short phrase that represented that topic. The codes were bounded by four elements of the study purpose and research question: the events and feelings that informed the decision to come out and the acts of coming out; the nature of the discourse in the transformative learning

experience of coming out; the cultural scripts described as part of this discourse; and the resources that entered into the discourse process for transformative learning to occur.

There were initially 43 of these code words/phrases, pared down to 37 to eliminate redundancy or low relevancy. For example, “not as bad as thought” and “others already knew” were combined into “coming out to others.” Another example of reducing redundancy was combining “relief” and “contentment” into “benefit of coming out/being gay,” and “epiphany” was combined with “decision to disclose/trigger.” Some codes were split; for example “discourse” proved to be insufficient, so I added a new code of “self-discourse” to account for what appeared to be an emerging theme. “Gay family member” was dropped entirely as it was not relevant to the research questions. All 18 interviews (two per participant) were individually coded in this way, and the coding helped with preliminary organization of the data.

The next step of phenomenological reduction is organizing the horizons and meaning units into a coherent “textural” description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This is the “what” of the experience, as told by the participant, largely with direct and indirect quotes. Next, from the textural description comes the “structural” description of an experience, the causes that account for what is being experienced, “the ‘how’ that speaks to the conditions that illuminate the ‘what’ of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). The structural description is created by the researcher through “imaginative variation” on the textural description, varying possible meanings from different vantage points, considering freely the possible dynamics that evoke the textural qualities. These are clustered into themes to create a structural description. The individual textural and structural descriptions for each participant are presented in chapter 4. To verify the

credibility of interpretations, each man was invited to do a member check of his own textural and structural descriptions. As noted, each had been given the opportunity to review his interview transcripts, for accuracy and completeness. This time, the member check was to solicit views on interpretations. There were very few comments from participants, and no substantial revisions were called for.

The final step was the synthesis of meanings and essences, cross-comparing individual textural and structural descriptions to create a composite textural-structural description. This step was the “intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into unified statement of essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The essence of any experience is never totally exhausted, but rather the textural-structural synthesis represents the essences at a moment in time, according to Moustakas. As part of the process, Moustakas called for the development of individual textural-structural descriptions for each participant. However, this was not done because the individual textural-structural descriptions were extremely repetitive and did not contribute toward responding to the research question. The composite textural/structural description is presented in chapter 5 as analysis using the framework of the seven ideal conditions for discourse that Mezirow prescribed. This approach is intended to highlight both alignments and variances of the participants’ coming out with respect to ideal conditions for discourse to respond to the research question. In chapter 6, conclusions and contributions based on findings and analysis are presented.

### *Verification and Trustworthiness*

Consistent with the nature of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) recommended using language aligned with naturalistic inquiry. Instead of “validity” he recommended “verification,” and in place of “reliability” he recommended “trustworthiness” to affirm the antipositivist stance of qualitative study. Further, Creswell provided eight verification procedures and recommended that researchers employ at least two. For this study, I employed three of the eight: clarifying researcher bias; member checks; and rich, thick description.

The first tactic, clarifying researcher bias, recognizes that in qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument. To address this, as was mentioned earlier, I created a “subjectivity statement” (see Appendix B). This is intended to provide readers with the researcher’s position, past experience, biases, prejudices, and orientations that have shaped the interpretations and approach of the study.

The second verification procedure I used was member checks, described briefly earlier in this chapter, by which the researcher solicits participants’ views of the credibility of the findings and interpretations. There were member checks by each man on the transcriptions of each interview for accuracy and completeness, and another member check on the individual textural and structural descriptions for interpretation. For the textural and structural description member check request, I received feedback from six of the participants. One requested that aliases be added for names mentioned in his textural description, and five others either made no edits or made very minor ones, such as correcting an insignificant fact; none of the edits affected meaning and none voiced

concerns about interpretation. Three of the men initially promised to respond with comments, but repeated follow-up requests were unsuccessful in eliciting feedback.

The third verification tactic I employed was rich, thick description. This described in detail each participant's experience, which allows the readers to make their own decision regarding transferability.

### **Human Participants and Ethics Precautions**

Prior to beginning the participant recruitment process, the IRB fully approved the protocol via an expedited review process. Small edits to documents were made at the request of IRB officials to ensure compliance with federal regulations. Before the first interview, each participant read an informed consent document (see Appendix D), agreeing to participate in the study. This written agreement provides an overview of the research project, explains the potential risks and discomforts and potential benefits, and provides contacts for additional information. They consented to an audiotaped interview and agreed to have their data used in a dissertation and possibly in published articles. They were informed that they could drop out at any time during the process. I assured them that I would do my best to ensure confidentiality. Each man was assigned an alias. Identifying names in interviews were changed as well. Confidentiality is essential for the candid and free sharing of experiences, without fear of undesired or unintended identification. In the interest of privacy, I agreed to destroy interview recordings once the dissertation was completed. The transcription service discarded recordings once the transcript was accepted by me.

**CHAPTER 4:  
FINDINGS**

Chapter 4 presents findings, the individual descriptions of each of the nine participants. A brief biographical statement introduces each participant, followed by a “textural” description and a “structural” description that are part of the phenomenological reduction process. The basic characteristics of the nine participants are summarized in Table 4-1.

Table 4-1  
*Characteristics of the Participants at the Time of the Interview*

<b>Name (alias)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Location</b>
Alan	35	Senior manager	Dallas, TX
Calvin	50	Retired entrepreneur	Dallas, TX
Derek	21	College student	Denton, TX
Ed	58	Senior manager	Fairfax, VA
Frank	29	Federal worker	Washington, DC
Greg	28	PR account executive	Portland, OR
Harrison	27	PR account executive	Portland, OR
Iain	40	Bank manager	Denver, CO
Jackson	50	Corporate executive	Akron, OH

A textural description is “an abstraction of the experience that provides content and illustration, but not yet essence” (Patton, 2002, p. 486). Textural descriptions depict the “what” of the experience, according to Moustakas (1994). Each textural description that follows is told by the participant, with direct and indirect quotes and researcher comments added for context and continuity. The structural description is the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of the experience. Patton wrote that the structural description contains the “bones” of the experience described in the textural

description, using imaginative variation to look beneath for deeper meaning, to reach the essence. A composite textural/structural description of the participants is presented as analysis in chapter 5, organized by the eight ideal conditions for discourse as articulated by Mezirow (2009).

### **Participant 1: “Alan”**

Alan is a 35-year-old white gay man living in Dallas, Texas. He is a successful senior manager at a medium-sized company. Alan grew up in Arkansas with several siblings, including a lesbian sister. Alan attended public schools and earned a bachelor’s degree. His family attended the Methodist church when he was a child, then as a teenager he joined a fundamentalist Christian church, which he left prior to coming out. Alan is single.

#### *Textural Description*

Being gay was a big part of Alan’s identity. “For me, that’s just not something I can ignore. Being gay fits me. . . . It’s a huge part of who I am. It is who I am. I mean, I *am* gay.”

Alan realized that he felt different from other boys at a very young age, but had no concept of what gay was so young. “I just knew that I was not like the other little boys. I had no idea what that was; I just knew I was not like them.” As a youngster, he described observing and emulating the physical mannerisms of men in his life, trying to fit into the culture as a male. Alan recalled bewilderment when his father once told him to “act like a boy.” “That still irritates me to this day. Like, what in the world does that

mean? I am a boy. I'm acting like I am." Alan asked him repeatedly, "What do you mean?"

Alan said that gay boys must cope with confounding cultural scripts alone and "figure out how to assimilate into the culture that's vastly different than what you are as a person. And it's training you don't get, that your parents can't give you because . . . it's not who they are." He felt like he was on his own. "It would have been nice to have had somebody there with me, really, that I could say, 'This is what I think and . . .'"

Information on homosexuality was not easy to find for Alan, growing up in Arkansas in the late 1980s, so he was creative and discreet in his approach "because I was dying for information." Alan would go to a large local bookstore, sneak and find a book, and go to another area of the store to skim it for a moment before putting it down to avoid being seen. Another resource was a best friend who he sensed was also gay. Alan said that neither of them dared to speak of it explicitly. "We talked in 'code' the whole damn time. But, we knew where the other was on some level."

Alan described the evolution of how he viewed gay people, informed by what he observed by what he observed and heard. "Well, my perception of gay people changed over my lifetime." He grew up attending a Protestant church, and he does not recall homosexuality as being a focus or issue of the church. "We (church) were too worried about, you know, starving people and stuff that actually mattered." As a child, he became curious about his older sister and her constant female companion. His mother gently explained what gay meant and that it did not matter if his sister was gay and affirmed that she and her special friend were loved and embraced.

While growing up, Alan said that adults he perceived to be gay were handsome, successful, wealthy men living in his hometown. He said he seldom heard any gay slurs used growing up, and never at home. He recalled observing other boys who were perceived as being gay being harassed. As a teenager, Alan became an evangelical fundamentalist Christian. In junior high and high school, his own feelings about gays hardened. “Admitting to my own homosexuality was, at that point in my life, sort of synonymous with going straight to hell.” Later, he grew disenchanted and left that church.

Before disclosing to others, Alan said he first came out to himself. He described having internal conversations, wondering about what life as a gay man might be like and eventually coming out to himself.

I remember thinking, “What would life be like if I actually had a husband?” And I would do these sort of imaginary kind of projections. . . . From the point that I kind of began admitting to myself, “You know what, you are gay,” once that happened . . . the light was on in a way. . . . I just resigned to what is.

He said that he reached a turning point in self-acceptance. “I really began to start loving the person that I was instead of always feeling bad about the person I was. . . . That’s where I began figuring out that it was ‘Yeah. Oh, wait. You know, you’re not so bad.’” After coming out to himself and then others, he described feeling transformed. “I experienced a level of contentment as an out person that I could never have experienced beforehand.”

Family is important to Alan and he described the heteronormative expectations he held for himself and how he felt that he was “letting everyone down.”

As long as I can remember, I knew the path for life was that I was going to graduate from high school, that I was going to college, that I was going to get

married, and that I was going to have a family. . . . You know, that's cultural. That was my family. That was everything.

He described the fear of coming out to his family. "I was terrified really on the one hand to tell my parents, which was bizarre. I have a lesbian sister who . . . had a partner of many years. And at that point they actually had two children together." Alan also had a gay uncle.

Alan said that though he is out in all areas of life, coming out never really ends. "It lasted a lot longer and it was a far more in-depth process. It started when I was born, and I don't know that I think it's a process that we ever really end. . ."

### *Structural Description*

For Alan, the coming out process was a solo act; he felt as if he was on his own throughout. He spoke of yearning for information and connection that were missing. The strength of heterosexist cultural scripts kept him fearful, confused, and hidden. Before coming out, he did not have anyone he trusted with whom to talk about his feelings and did not describe engaging in discourse with others to examine deeply held assumptions. Alan believed he would have come out much sooner had he been able to talk to someone.

Alan felt different and wanted to understand why. A tension built from a contrast between the negative heteronormative scripts and what he observed and experienced, such as the handsome successful gay men in his hometown who belied stereotypes and his gay family members. He became more curious and creative in finding information and connection. As a young man Alan used what resources he could find, but the fear of being found out prevented him from efficiently gathering information about what it was

to be gay, including verbal discourse. He described talking in a kind of “code”—a vague kind of discourse, exploring being gay without directly disclosing.

Alan described observation as a big part of his quest to understand who he really was and how he was to be in the world as a male. He observed how adult males in his life behaved and tried to emulate their mannerisms. Alan also observed others who he perceived as gay and how they behaved and were treated.

Though heterosexist cultural scripts were confounding for Alan, they may have been mediated by competing neutral or positive cultural scripts from different sources. He observed his family’s acceptance and love of his lesbian sister and her partner and children. Alan’s uncle was also a gay man. He did not hear negative slurs about gays at home. Adult gay men in his hometown he thought of as handsome and successful. He recalled that the church his family attended was silent on homosexuality, focusing instead on the needy.

Without a mentor or confidant, Alan described internal conversations and reflection as he made sense of his place in the world as a gay man. Alan described engaging in self-discourse, considering what it might be like to have a husband and also affirming his worthiness. He also accepted that his life would not resemble what he and his family expected. Eventually, he began to positively visualize life as a gay man and noted a shift in perception through self-acceptance and affirming self-talk. He gradually began liking who he was and described affirming self-talk.

Once Alan came out to himself, he was able to disclose to others, making available the possibility of verbal discourse. Coming out conversations had a meaning-making benefit of discourse, calling into question deeply held fears and assumptions.

## Participant 2: “Calvin”

Calvin is a 50-year-old white male. He grew up in an affluent family, attending a conservative Protestant church. He earned a graduate degree in business and a law degree. In 2003, he sold his successful equipment financing company and is now comfortably retired. He came out in his late 40s. Religious life is important to Calvin, and he devotes many volunteer hours each week at a large United Church of Christ with predominantly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) members. Calvin lives in a suburb of Dallas, Texas.

### *Textural Description*

Calvin was very young when he noticed that he felt different from other little boys. “I just knew I was different. I knew that I liked boys more.” He knew he was gay at 12, when he learned what homosexuality was from his father. “He was real, real, hateful and disparaging towards gay people. And that really bothered me and that helped keep me in the closet, I’m sure.” Calvin said he believed his dad’s harsh opinions were intended to shame him into conforming to family expectations of marriage and children. He decided it was a secret that he could not tell.

I was just horrified that somebody would find out. Everything I did had to be secretive. I couldn’t let anybody know, and I had to date girls in high school so that nobody would find out. It was really a sad existence. . . .Until I went to college, I didn’t know that it was okay to be that way.

Later, Calvin said his father told him that he was loved by his family, no matter what, yet he could not believe him. “My dad always said, ‘I don’t care if you murder someone, you’re still my son and I love you.’ But I just didn’t feel that about the gay issue until it was too late to really—until I was older.” His view shifted as his coming out

process unfolded. Calvin described feeling less concerned about family rejecting him, because there was familial obligation that transcended conditions. .” . . I feel like they kind of have to love you.”

The conservative church his family attended had a powerful influence on Calvin’s feelings about homosexuality and himself. He remembered the pastor saying it was “deviant sexual behavior.” He witnessed consequences of being gay when a young man was thrown out of the church, and that fear pushed him deeper into the closet. “I just thought, my God, they’ll do it to anybody, because this guy was in the top 10 givers.”

He said he did not identify with gay stereotypes he learned growing up. In his freshman year of 1976, a gay group including faculty members was forming on the Southern Methodist University campus provided Calvin with the first positive examples of gay people. They were educated, professional and nonstereotypical. “A lot of the professors were gay . . . because they were tenured, and there was nothing they could do to them. So I became close to a lot of professors and that helped me a lot.”

A lack of resources, such as balanced information, alternative viewpoints or positive examples to compete with pervasive negative cultural scripts kept Calvin closeted. He recalled that as he grew up, the few times gay people were depicted in movies, they were ridiculed, brutalized, and ostracized. He remembered how the gay community defined by, and blamed for, HIV/AIDS during the 1980s. “It was ‘God’s revenge’ and I had to hear all that. . . . It made me even more stand-offish, because obviously I was afraid [of] the disease.”

As an adult, he owned a very successful company, but even as the company’s owner he remained closeted. “For career reasons, I couldn’t disclose that to anybody. I just

had to keep playing the game. I played it for years.” He lived a “double life” being in the heterosexual world of work, attending a conservative church, and on the weekends and on business trips he would have anonymous sexual encounters with men.

He sold his business in 2003 and retired back in Dallas to be closer to his aging parents and at age 45 Calvin finally decided to come out. He started discreetly attending a large, predominantly gay church in Dallas and found comfort in being with hundreds of GLBT people in a welcoming religious environment. Being there provided a safe space for discourse. “I realized that there’s nothing wrong with this. There are thousands of people that are the same way.”

The church played a pivotal role in his spirituality and his view of homosexuality, showing him that gay people are lovable and whole.

This is the first time I felt a real spiritual connection, was in this church . . . just because of the love. . . . I can just feel God’s presence in here. And I’m thinking He wouldn’t be here if there was something wrong with us. . . . I thought God made me this way and it’s not a mental illness—I never really believed that . . .

Calvin sought resources to help him come out. He enrolled in a multi-week seminar that he described as very helpful in understanding his true self and with coming out to family and friends. The workshop provided Calvin with a safe space in which to engage in verbal discourse, deeply exploring feelings and beliefs, and hear others’ stories of struggle and success in coming out, and pointing him to other resources for information.

. . . One guy came in and he was going to tell somebody this week, and we’d all tell him what we thought about how he should do it, or whatever. And then Jim [coming out workshop leader] would tell him. Yeah, it was wonderful. When you get 10 different opinions like that, it gives you a lot of stuff to really mull over.

Calvin said that type of support and advice was critical for his coming out process. “That’s why the church here is important, because we try to do that here, support each other.” Calvin also observed the diversity and normalcy of gay men in the group and felt less alone. Together, the workshop and his new church life helped him shift perspective on what it was to be gay, reversing a lifetime of negative stereotypes, fear, and shame. “It took me being around those other 10 guys [in the seminar] to make me realize that there wasn’t anything wrong with this. . . .They were just as normal as they could be. “

Calvin described mentors and role models who were exemplars and partners for discourse during his coming out process. He observed many successful, contented GLBT people at church each week. He described Shirley, a church staff member who is lesbian, as an important friend and empathetic confidant whose kindness and unconditional acceptance let Calvin know “whatever I said wouldn’t leave the room, it was a safe place.” He said she recommended he see a gay psychotherapist, who he described as a very helpful and safe verbal discourse partner.

I’m just now getting to the point that I’m comfortable with him. But, now that I am, it’s really easy to tell him anything. And it helps. . . . Every week something new comes into my life that I’ve never experienced before. I just need somebody to talk to about it, somewhere safe that I know that it’s not going to go anywhere.

A church acquaintance proved to be a good friend: “I can talk to him about anything.” Joe helped Calvin challenge his own deeply held assumptions. He went with Joe to a mobile phone store and was shocked at how freely he spoke of his partner’s phone to the clerk, essentially coming out to a stranger. Calvin thought, “Why do you need to bring that in it? I mean, what does that have to do with anything?” At first he thought Joe was being an activist, “throwing it in their face,” but then Calvin saw a double standard for heterosexuals and homosexuals. “I hear people say ‘my wife does this’ as part of

normal conversation.” Calvin concluded that Joe spoke so freely simply because he had been in a relationship for 25 years and did not feel self-conscious about it. Calvin also observed that there was no reaction from others to Joe’s candor, diminishing anxiety about being out in public.

The Internet, used for homework assignments during the coming out seminar, proved to be a useful resource for information for Calvin. Coming out stories were very useful for him. “I’d read for hours . . . different stories and things that had happened to people when they came out.” Though he did not use the Internet to engage in discourse with others, it provided resources that “I’d read for hours . . . different stories and things that had happened to people when they came out.” spurred verbal discourse during the workshop, and the men would share and discuss what they had learned online.

### *Structural Description*

Only when Calvin found others he could trust with his big secret and inner-most feelings did he feel comfortable in sharing deep thoughts and feelings about being a gay man. He described engaging in discourse with trusted others in various contexts—church friends, coming out workshop participants, and his therapist. Calvin’s psychotherapist, also a gay man, was a great resource, talking him through his feelings and experiences as he continued to come out more and more. At a coming out seminar, he bonded with the group of men who shared similar journeys. The group had rules that made it safe and confidential which enabled Calvin to feel he could speak freely and feel less alone.

Observation provided Calvin with important information for his perspective change, showing him with valuable examples of ways to be gay in the world. Likewise, witnessing non-gay people’s reactions to and interactions with gays informed his coming

out. Calvin described observing both negative and positive interactions that informed his decisions to either stay closeted or to be more confidently out. Calvin observed other gay people in ordinary and positive life circumstances, contradicting the negative social scripts stereotypes he held of what a gay person is like. He observed loving, committed same-sex couples and their children at church, conflicting with the heteronormative script that being gay is only about sex and enduring same-sex relationships are not possible. The coming out stories of others were central to Calvin's coming out process, learning how they did it and noticing different ways of being gay in the world, countering negative stereotypes, and feeling less alone.

Calvin described beliefs that changed over time regarding coming out to his family. Before coming out, despite being told that he was loved no matter what, Calvin believed as though his family could not accept him if they knew he was gay. He said that later in his coming out process, he came to believe that family was obligated to love family members unconditionally, so he was not as worried about coming out to family.

When growing up in the 1970s and 1980s, he said that gays were either entirely invisible in media and in culture or were depicted as pathetic caricatures of sad, lonely men who were sexually obsessed, perverted, and flamboyant, perpetuating the negative cultural script. Calvin did not relate to the images that culture showed him. Staying closeted was safer if coming out as gay meant he would be associated with, or become like, all the stereotypes he found unpalatable. Once he became more aware of alternatives to the negative beliefs he learned growing up did Calvin begin to feel less alone. The limits lifted on who he could be as a gay man.

The higher education environment offered Calvin positive impressions of gay people, contradicting the scripts he embraced growing up. During his undergraduate years, openly gay faculty members formed a campus gay alliance. Calvin observed that one could be an educated, respected professional and also be gay. He said that he felt close to those gay faculty members, even though he was not yet out, and “that helped a lot” in his coming out process.

### **Participant 3: “Derek”**

Derek is a 21-year-old African American gay man. He is a student majoring in communication design at a large state university in Texas and he works to put himself through college. Derek grew up in a small town in Texas in a very religious single-parent household. He lives in Denton, Texas.

#### *Textural Description*

Coming out was a huge relief for Derek, telling his truth at last. “Well, for me it was carrying this immense load on your back for years . . . and having to hide it and lie. . . . Now you’re actually becoming yourself, or being happy with yourself, to be yourself.”

Derek realized he felt different from other boys very young. “I don’t know how at 4 years old you can know that you’re different from everybody else. . . . It’s just like this sixth sense I knew ‘you’re not right’ in comparison to everybody else.” Somehow he knew he must stay quiet about it. “I guess you do have survival instincts. . . . I grew up in a Southern Baptist environment, and homosexuality is a disgrace, especially in the black community.” Derek said that as a child he was religious and the negative cultural

messages of African American religion weighed heavily on him. Looking back now, Derek said that religion repressed him by invoking morality and judgment against gays, through arbitrary scripture interpretation. “Generally, culturally . . . African Americans are rooted in the church or in the Bible. And so basically what the Bible says is like that’s the law.”

He said that the Bible was a resource for information and also guidance for him in exploring and refuting what culture was saying about who gay people were. God’s love was a powerful script that conflicted with the predominant cultural view of gay people. It was a powerful message for a religious youngster like Derek and he practiced discernment in interpreting scriptures.

I would go to the Bible sometimes and kind of overlook the gay-hating ones [verses] and believe the ones that said, “God loves you for who you are. Love your neighbors.” Most if not all of the New Testament. And I would dwell on that, and live in that, and kind of gain some comfortability (sic) about it. . . . I kind of made my own inferences on who God is and what he is to me, and kind of separate myself from the fire and brimstone God and that kind of thing.

During his childhood, he said the things he heard or observed about homosexuality were negative and frightening, presenting a narrow, grim outlook for his future. “And I kind of hoped at the time, or throughout my life, that it was curable or that I could get past it.” But it did not go away, and making the best of a bad situation until competing scripts showed him alternative perspectives. His feelings about the nature of God changed. His knowledge and comfort increased and he began to come out.

I felt ashamed a lot, because I didn’t understand homosexuality. Up until a certain point of discovery, I thought it was a complete sin and that I was going to hell for it. God hates me. My family hates me. I’m probably going to be beaten up one day because I have these feelings. But then I discovered that homosexuality is just homosexuality; it’s not a bad thing. It’s just a part of nature, and I began to see God as understanding, not judgmental like the people around me were.

The Internet was Derek's primary resource of information and discourse, starting in his early teens. He received alternative views that questioned the negative cultural scripts and deeply held assumptions he had.

What contributed to me coming out, or me actually being comfortable with being gay, was discovering the Internet. . . . I discovered chat rooms and other gay men and talking to them about this and that. Somehow I came upon this guy who was like 28, and he lived in LA. He was kind of like a mentor to me. And he told me, "It's okay to be gay, you're not a bad person, you're not hurting anyone else." . . . And so through talking to him and getting to know other gay people—because before that I didn't know anybody gay. I didn't have any role model or anything, except for what was on TV. . . . My gay influences were very limited. So talking with other people [online]. . . expanded my mind and made me see that, "oh, possibilities."

Online journaling in a blog was an important outlet for Derek. It gave words to his thoughts and feelings, helping him sort through them and receive feedback from others.

Writing helped a lot. . . . It's kind of like talking to somebody about it, kind of like going to a psychologist, just getting it all out. And then having somebody telling you that this is this, or that is that. . .

He said that writing served as his voice, a way to form and express ideas that continues today.

I think I went to journaling because I felt like I couldn't talk to anybody else. I couldn't talk to my mom about it, because she was going through it [his coming out] also. . . . Writing [online] has been my voice basically. I rarely talk [speak] about my issues or whatever, that kind of thing. I really just write about it. It's my catharsis.

Positive images on television were another source of cultural scripts that showed alternative ways in which gay men could live, behave and be in the world.

*Will and Grace* was during the time when I was entering the self-discovery phase. . . . It was the first time I actually got to see like a gay person living in life. It was the first example of being out, being comfortable with yourself. . . ."Okay, that's how it is, or that's how it could be, and that's great."

Derek was 15 when he first met a gay man in person, and he was surprised that the man did not resemble the gay stereotypes he knew. “I just thought gay was just sex. . . . They didn’t have a lifestyle.” This broadened his view of what it meant to be gay. “I always thought that gay people were flamboyant. I thought you couldn’t be a certain way. I thought you couldn’t be a ‘man’ as a gay person.”

Eventually he decided to come out to a cousin and then a friend he felt he could trust. They told him they already knew and did not care. “Here I am trying to hide it and everybody already knows.” He waited to come out in other areas of life until after high school. For Derek, leaving home and going to college was a critical change because it removed him from the repression he felt in high school, placing him in a more mature and open-minded environment. He said that college gave him a place to feel safer and more confident, presenting him with choices he never knew before. It made available new ideas and opportunities for discourse. “The whole world just opened up to me. There were so many possibilities.” This was a different script than he had heard for most of his life.

Coming out to his mother held the most meaning. Derek said he was motivated to tell her when he was dating his first boyfriend, who was a trusted discourse partner. “I guess being on that high, you kind of have confidence and you’re like ‘I can do anything.’ . . . He helped me a lot to be more comfortable with who I am, and just live life and be cool, and chill out, stop worrying.”

Derek said that gay black men often feel like “double minorities,” not fitting in anywhere, with cultural scripts from different communities adding complexity.

And whenever somebody has a problem with us, it’s like, okay, which is it, the “black thing” or the “gay thing,” or is it both? . . . There’s a lot of prejudice in the

black community basically against homosexuals. . . . There are a lot of black people who are gay that are afraid to come out because they're afraid to be judged and having everybody abandon them.

### *Structural Description*

In Derek's experience, heterosexist cultural scripts oppress young children who are gay, even before they understand what being gay means. Derek knew he was different and but not speaking of it until many years later. These early decisions endured, impeding discourse for his coming out process.

When Derek met other gay men the first time, he saw multidimensional, diverse, and rather ordinary individuals who were contrary to what he believed gay men were like. This presented him with scripts that conflicted with those he had accepted from his family and culture. It opened him to possibilities about who he could be as an out gay man.

Media provided alternative images and information, scripts that countered the pervasive heteronormative negative scripts. The global reach, huge content, and perceived safety of the Internet makes it an ideal medium to find information, connection, and opportunities for discourse. Derek found mentors online who encouraged and championed him, helping him to understand the wide range of options gay men have that belied the dictates of cultural scripts. In chat rooms, other gay men his age and older generously shared their stories and gave Derek feedback, advice, and encouragement. They answered his questions. Derek used discernment with online information, accepting what made sense to him, and dismissing what did not.

A self-described loner, Derek preferred to write instead of speak and did most of his writing online on Web sites especially designed for blogging and journaling. He

described blogging as a way to think, assemble and express his thoughts, and invite others to provide feedback and alternatives.

A confluence of negative scripts Derek faced regarding race, religion, and sexuality added complexity to his life as an African American gay man. He felt the sting of discrimination from within his own culture. Derek said that gay black men often feel like a double minority—sexual and racial—and said the sexual minority status is not accepted by other African Americans. He said that African American culture is generally not very accepting of homosexuality because the church is so central to the black community.

Feeling loved, accepted, and supported for the first time as a gay man provided Derek with conflicting cultural scripts to those he learned as a boy. They showed him that he was loveable as a gay man. After years of feeling not loveable, being in love made him feel bold and confident, with a sense of entitlement to be who he really was, because someone loved him for all of whom really he was.

Derek contrasted high school with the larger, more diverse arena of college encourages critical thinking and exposes students to a broad range of ideas and people, in a setting away from home and church. It can be an atmosphere more conducive to discourse by making available competing scripts that helped him examine deeply held assumptions.

#### **Participant 4: “Ed”**

Ed is a 58-year-old white gay man. He grew up in a devout Catholic family and attended parochial schools. Ed earned a master’s degree in business and has served as the chief information officer in a federal agency and an executive at a multinational

technology corporation. He is now a civilian executive in a local fire service. Ed came out at age 53, ending a 25-year marriage. He has three grown children. Ed and his partner live in a suburb of Washington, DC. They are active members of a small Catholic parish that is welcoming of GLBT people.

### *Textural Description*

At an early age, Ed said that he knew he felt different from other boys, but did not know what it was or why. His family was devoutly Catholic, and he attended strict parochial schools, where he said that guilt about anything sexual was especially pervasive. In the late 1950s and early 1960s in upstate New York, he said that homosexuality was virtually unknown. Ed explained that men not following cultural dictates for what males should be like in that era were branded a “sissy.” Ed was well respected in high school, very outgoing and a class officer. Yet, among a crowd of friends, he said he often felt alone. Ed described behaving as he believed boys were expected. He had no idea why he felt different, but he did not believe he was a “sissy.”

Gay never crossed my mind. I probably didn’t even know what it was. I did go out with girls. I did everything I was supposed to do, like make out, whatever. But it was more like it’s something I should do. It’s something I should be interested in, and never understanding quite why I wasn’t as preoccupied with girls as were my friends.

Ed said after graduate school he moved to Washington, DC, where he learned what gay meant.

That’s when I first actually met gay men. And one in particular was hitting on me. And even I knew that. I just said no, I wasn’t interested. But at the same time, that’s when I would go to an adult bookstore and start picking up magazines. And that was the first time I got really aroused by it. But I never had an encounter until my mid-50s, never. It never crossed my mind that I was gay, because I fell in love

and got married. And it was falling in love. . . . It's amazing how you can compartmentalize. And clearly I did.

Ed endured a lifetime of loneliness before coming out, unable to confide completely in another person during his childhood, adolescence, or as a married adult. Discourse did not seem possible.

Before, even though married and being a father and having friends, I was totally by myself, totally. . . . I never had one person I could pour my soul out to. Even being married all those years, I always had to hold back that one gnawing question.

Ed described feeling trapped as a gay man in a straight man's life and was increasingly unhappy. Ed knew he was nearing a decision point; his situation was unsustainable. With nobody to talk to, Ed said that he wrote out the various options he saw.

I'm a writer. I'm not good always expressing myself verbally. And I remember . . . thinking that if I put it on paper maybe I'll see things differently. . . . Every pro and con I could think of. . . . I had come to the conclusion I had four choices. I could be celibate, and I was tired of that; I could sneak around, as many married men do. . . . I couldn't do that. I could come out. Or, I could kill myself. And that was it. . . . I remember once waiting for the subway here, and thinking all I've got to do is step off and that will be it. Golly, it was hard. But, I decided to take the hard route and be honest.

Ed went to a counselor, and it was there Ed disclosed for the first time.

And I remember sitting there in front of this young woman who could have been my daughter and saying, "I'm gay." And it was the first time it ever came out of my mouth. . . . And to tell another human being those three words, "I am gay," you have no idea how liberating that was. It came out of my mouth. And it felt so damn good. . .

The first counselor referred him to another who was gay and also had been married and was a father. The new counselor was ideal for Ed.

He really helped a lot. And it was especially good because he had been married also, and he had children. . . . And he was older than me. It was good to hear that when his daughter got married, he and his partner were introduced. . . . It made me feel like there was hope, because somebody else had weathered it. I wasn't alone. . . . Thank God I had a truly nice man as a counselor who pretty much kept me alive, kept me from just falling apart. Because I was that close.

He described experimenting in the gay world and then debriefing to understand his experiences with his counselor.

Ed described having conversations with himself, silently and in writing, to make sense of it all.

Sometimes I felt I was bouncing from pillar to post trying to figure out how does all this fit together? And as I said, initially the gay part drove it all. But, I think that was more in the exploring, such a new world. That was all in my head. I would write things down just to say, "Okay, just exactly who are you today?" Because I never could be quite sure from day to day. And after a while there were certain stable things that came out. And those were the things I had always had. It's just that they were colored differently now. I could see things differently. I saw relationships very differently.

### *Structural Description*

Discourse and coming out for Ed was shaped by the times in which he grew up. As a child and adolescent during the 1950s and 1960s, Ed described having few resources to help him come out. What he learned from his Catholic upbringing infused sexuality of any kind with guilt. Homosexuality was so taboo, he recalled, that it was seldom mentioned and before the late 1970s and the idea of a loving, long-term gay relationship was unheard of. He described his as a generation of gay men who were closeted, many married with children, who sought to find their place based on what they knew and was expected of them as men. The obvious choices before him—remaining closeted and living a double life, or coming out and disrupting family life— had huge implications.

Motivated by discomfort and discontent of holding on to negative cultural scripts along with competing positive ones, he knew that relief must be possible. Ed spoke of creating or finding the resources he needed to support his coming out. Ed felt he had nobody he could talk to early on, not even his wife who he said he could tell anything except his secret. He felt trapped in a life that was not authentic and great sorrow for the impact that his anxiety was having on his loved ones. He knew there were gay people who had meaningful lives and relationships. Ed turned to writing to assemble his thoughts and assess his choices. He decided to come out.

With a decision made, and depression deepening, he sought a resource for help, someone safe with whom he could confide. For Ed, a counselor who understood gay issues was an ideal confidant for discourse. He described discourse with his psychotherapist during this time as being very helpful. Ed would have an experience, then engage in discourse with his counselor about it, debriefing to make meaning and integrate it into his growing understanding of what being gay was about for him.

### **Participant 5: “Frank”**

Frank is a 29-year-old white gay man. He grew up in a large Catholic family in Virginia. Frank came out when he was 24. He earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy and social science. Today, he works in the federal government as a U.S. Senate committee staff member. Frank is single and lives in Washington, DC.

#### *Textural Description*

For Frank, coming out was more than proclaiming his sexuality. It was presenting an integrated, authentic self.

It's the coming out, not so much as homosexual, but coming out as yourself. Being to the world who you really are. . . . It wasn't so much about who I sleep with or my sexual preferences, as much as it was this was part of me that I wanted to experience and to be fully Frank.

Frank knew at an early age that he felt different. "I knew I liked boys, and I liked hanging out with them in a different way than I liked hanging out with girls from a very early age, as most gay men sort of figure out." The church informed his views about homosexuality. "I was raised Catholic and I knew what it was to be gay. . . . I mean it was pretty clear from day-one that homosexuality, homosexual acts were a sin. You 'love the sinner; you hate the sin'." There was a dissonance for him between his innate feelings and what the outside world told him about being gay. "The thought of liking a boy was really nice and warm and comforting and desirable. The thought of being gay was terrifying and fearful. . ."

The first gay person he met was his best friend's uncle. Frank remembered hearing the explanation, "' . . . he's gay. He likes other men.' I remember sort of recognizing who he was and that he lived a different lifestyle, a lifestyle that was not a normal lifestyle."

In high school, the fear of stigma and stereotype kept Frank in the closet longer. He did not identify with effeminate classmates and also observed them being mistreated.

The kids who were out in high school, the kids who were presumably out, you know, who were more flamboyant or openly effeminate were part of the reason that I didn't want to come out. Because I didn't want to become someone who I wasn't. . . . And so it scared me that that was what I had to be like.

Frank said that his family was liberal and open minded, and even supportive of gay rights, providing a competing script to negative, heteronormative scripts.

Interestingly enough, my mom got involved in gay rights in the Catholic church, like a few years before I came out. My family was always very supportive, friends always very supportive of gays and lesbians. It just took me a while to be supportive of myself.

He described his sister showing him support, before he was ready to come out.

When I was 18, one of my sisters and I were on the phone. I was kind of a mess, and we were talking to each other. . . . she was just like, “You know, Frank, it’s okay if you’re gay.” And I was like, “But, I’m not gay.” And she’s like, “I’m just saying, it’s okay if you’re gay. . . . you can be gay and it’s totally cool. . .

It took another 6 or 7 years before he could accept his own sexuality. “Everyone else in the world was okay with me being gay; I just wasn’t.”

Growing up, Frank said that he saw few positive gay images in the media, informing his view of what it was to be a gay man.

Any time homosexuality was referenced in television shows, it was referenced as either as a joke or as a negative, or something silly, or an affectation, or it was very fringe. It was not part of the plot or the dialogue. . . . [sending a message of] ‘Well, if you’re going to be gay, this is how you would be.’ There are only certain ways that you can be. . .

His urge to come out grew. “I think the isolation was just really profound before coming out. I mean, just really feeling like there was this huge thing that you wanted to talk about, you wanted to talk to people about, and you just couldn’t.” Frank said that his decision to come out in his mid-20s was not forced externally, but from the growing discomfort he felt, the conflict between what he felt inside and fear of coming out.

It was more like I was denying something that was so fundamental to who I am that my body and my mind kind of forced me to stop hiding. I was having a lot of panic attacks, having a lot of anxiety. [I] started to see a therapist . . . really the first person I came out to. And she had zero reaction, which is how it should be.

Frank said that he used the Internet as a resource to observe the gay world before coming out and to make meaning by probing for insight from other men.

Most of the stuff I was doing online was frankly just connecting with other men. Having a conversation with them and trying to build a deeper connection with them. . . .”What’s your experience like as a gay man living in the world?” Get a sense of their experience through what they said, how they said it. You know, reading between the lines more than directly coming out and saying, “What’s your experience like as a gay man?” . . . .

Frank said he used the Internet almost exclusively as a source of information for coming out.

I had looked at about every Web site you could find on coming out and coming out stories. I had read hundreds of peoples coming out stories. . . I would say that most of the ones I read were actually pretty positive. I did a lot of reading, a lot of research, a lot figuring out what the best approach is, when to do it, how to do it.

Though he grew up in an accepting family, he girded for rejection; it still felt risky to come out but their reaction was affirming and accepting. “As much as I prepared myself with my family, that everyone would disown me, I think I kind of knew that . . . these people actually do love me and care about me.” Frank described similarly positive experiences coming out to friends.

Other gay men were resources for Frank during his coming out process. His first boyfriend introduced him to the gay bar scene. Frank had a coworker and friend who was also like a mentor. Doyle was an out older gay man in a long-term relationship. Frank said that Doyle saw him through the drama of a turbulent relationship.

He was really, really an inspiring person who loved life and continued to love life. He sort of saw me through the daily trials and tribulations of me dating this guy who really was not that great of a person. He was just there for me as much as I wanted him to be there for me and kind of helped give me some perspective.

Even after being fully out for 5 years, the coming out process continued. “I still struggle with the fact that culturally I was raised in a heterosexual society. . . . I still struggle with assumptions of heterosexuality and heterosexism. “

### *Structural Description*

Negative cultural scripts taken in at a young age confounded coming out for Frank. He spoke of confusion from the world saying that his natural feelings and urges are very wrong and cannot be acted upon, nor even spoken of. He was “terrified” of being gay and tried to reconcile the fear from outside with what he knew felt natural and good.

The media’s depiction of gays when Frank was growing up was nil and when gay people were shown, it was usually negative. This informed him of how gay people were seen and expected to act, keeping him closeted longer.

The structure and confidentiality of the psychotherapist/client relationship provided Frank with his first opportunity to come out to another person. He said there was no reaction, which he found both affirming and appropriate.

Frank used online research almost exclusively to learn everything he could about coming out. Frank also used the Internet to connect with gay men who were out, posing questions about their experience, providing him with the benefits of verbal discourse, with relative anonymity.

The stories of others can provide the benefit of verbal discourse. Frank spoke of reading many coming out stories online that helped him plan his own coming out, observing the range of possible reactions from others through the real-life examples.

### **Participant 6: “Greg”**

Greg is a 28-year-old gay white man. Greg grew up in Oregon, attended public schools, and studied ballet throughout his youth. He taught ballet and was a professional dancer briefly after high school. His family attended a Christian church; he now considers himself agnostic. He came out in college, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in

business. Today he is an account executive with a large public relations firm. He is single and lives in Portland, Oregon.

### *Textural Description*

Greg remembers feeling different at a young age, but not understanding it until later. “You get a little bit older and start thinking it’s something to hide. . . . Like, ‘oh, my gosh, what if they find out?’” Greg described enduring continuous verbal abuse by classmates through high school.

I didn’t have a lot of friends. It was like every day it was, you know, “faggot this, faggot that.” . . . There was never any gay bashing, but it was like I just kind of kept to myself, because I was doing the whole dance thing; I was moving on in my career. So it was like, “just get me through school, let me get done with this, I’m ready to go.”

Although he described feeling ambivalent about his sexuality, years of being called gay, or worse, made him begin to question if he really was gay. He recalled feeling conflicted about sex education classes. He hoped homosexuality would not come up because he dreaded the inevitable negative classmate comments, yet the heterosexist bias in the classes stood out; never was there mention of same-sex relationships. “I was always in the back of my mind thinking, ‘Well, what about the gay couples?’”

College was a major turning point in all areas of Greg’s life, including accepting his own sexuality. “College is, for me, what really sparked the, ‘You know what, this is me.’” Everything got better for him. He made many new friends of all ages quickly. He recalled how he excelled in classes and was very outgoing. He marveled at his comfort level in the college environment. “Wow, no one’s calling me a faggot, or no one’s judging me for what I wear.” He realized that others liked him for who he was, even if he

was not out to them yet. Greg found college to be conducive to coming out, providing conflicting scripts to those negative scripts of heterosexism and shame that he knew. It made available more opportunities and willingness to engage in discourse. “I think it was my environment. I felt more comfortable. And so it naturally led to more revealing discussions.”

Greg said he always had been a keen observer of his environment, and he used this to learn how to come out, even before he admitted to himself he might be gay. He listened carefully and watched how others behaved and for signals from others. Greg learned by observing other male ballet dancers, both students and adult instructors, many of whom were gay. “I think a huge part of my experience was being surrounded by a lot of other gay men. . . . We’d go out in public and they don’t change who they are, they act the same. Some of them are a little over the top.”

Greg described making meaning of his sexuality as being a lone pursuit. He spoke often of his reliance on “gut checks” for making sense and decisions.

There was no person I sought specific guidance from. I don’t know if it was because I’m too independent. Or I think part of it was I was afraid to do that. . . . I was at the time more introverted, so my gut checks were more the internal. And I think probably like anybody, you end up with internal self-speak. You’re ready to burst, and so you need to spit it out.

He described engaging in self-talk for encouragement and affirmations.

I think probably things like “What’s the worst that can happen?” came up. There was a lot of, “People are going to like you no matter what” type thing. Makes me sound like I’m that Daily Affirmation Guy from *Saturday Night Live*. I know I did a lot of it, because that’s how I am.

Greg said he learned from a variety of sources. “I just took little snippets of what I saw in the media, the movies, what I heard from people. . . . I thought to myself, well,

how would I do it? I guess it was like talking to the media.” He grew up in the late 1980s and 1990s, when gay men and lesbians were increasingly visible on television, more often portrayed in positive ways. The visibility showed him possibilities on ways to be gay and out in the world, refuting negative cultural scripts.

I think for a lot of us [the first example] is gays on TV. You see them, like, “Wow, they’re really out!” I think I was just envious. . . . they’re so open about it. . . . *Will and Grace* was a perfect example. . . . I remember watching *The Real World* when I was 14, 15, and you’d see the gay people on there.

Greg said that the positive gay portrayals in the media during his college years were reassuring, providing alternative perspectives to the negative cultural messages he heard growing up.

I probably saw more people in the media doing it [coming out] and their lives went on, and often they were maybe celebrated for it. That absolutely had to have helped me, probably more subconsciously than consciously.

### *Structural Description*

Coming out was an inner, mostly solo journey for Greg. It was a journey that depended largely on observation and comparison especially early in his coming out process. Without a trusted confidant, in lieu of verbal discourse he found other effective resources to question his deeply held assumptions that were informed by negative cultural scripts. He observed the world, drawing on resources of other people’s examples and images in the media to learn about coming out and being out. Observation provided him with conflicting scripts, countering the negative scripts that informed his deeply held assumptions. He engaged in self-discourse to bolster confidence and overcome fears and cultural scripts, especially when there was no one else with whom he felt he could confide for verbal discourse.

Greg did not engage in verbal discourse until after his initial coming out to himself and others, taking the risk of disclosure without his own full understanding or absolute trust of the others. He said that he turned to close friends for discourse before coming out to his family.

Greg said he did not recall any specific person with whom to engage in discourse, such as a mentor, nor did he believe he would have availed himself of such a resource before he began disclosing to others. He attributed this to independence, of not easily accepting assistance, but also to fear and really trusting someone else at the time. A confidant with whom to engage in discourse did not seem necessary to him at that time as he reevaluated his own deeply held assumptions and made meaning.

Harassment in high school kept him feeling isolated and taught Greg to be self-sufficient. In contrast, Greg said his college experience was transformative. He marveled at the lack of harassment and hateful language. The college environment facilitated Greg's blossoming in many ways, facilitating discourse opportunities.

Greg relied heavily on television and film for making meaning. He described learning from the diverse range of gay characters and portrayals that provided competing scripts to the heterosexist ones that informed his earlier perspectives. The increasingly positive portrayals of gay men and lesbians in the media during his college years were reassuring and educational. Positive, accurate gay visibility showed him examples of how to be out in the world.

### **Participant 7: "Harrison"**

Harrison is a white gay man, age 27. He grew up in Arizona and was an only child. Growing up, his family attended a local United Church of Christ, a liberal Christian

denomination. Harrison has a gay uncle in a long-term relationship. His father also came out as gay after Harrison did. Harrison earned a master's degree in public relations and is an account executive for a large public relations agency. Harrison has a partner and lives in Portland, Oregon.

### *Textural Description*

Harrison said that he first noticed in his early teens that he had different feelings from others, and he also knew it was something to hide.

I think I was 13, and I was watching the Olympics. And I said, "Wow, I like the male swimmers better than the female swimmers." . . . I had to push it back a little bit at that point, because I'm not supposed to be that way.

For Harrison, the thought of being gay was "a little scary." He said that his parents were liberal, so the main fear was of feeling different from everyone else. Harrison said it took a couple of years for him to mull over his Olympics realization, and he did so alone. "It took me a good year or two after that to actually finally come to terms with it. And, you know, pretty much I just had myself at that point."

Later, he told his best friend from early childhood, who attended another school, about his feelings. Harrison said he sensed his friend was also gay and described engaging in discourse with him to sort through feelings and beliefs. "It probably helped a lot that I was able to talk to him about it and we kind of shared experiences. But, he was out to everybody in his high school, and I was out pretty much to nobody."

Even though he had an uncle who was gay and had a life partner, Harrison said he did feel as if he had anyone else to talk to about it. "I was too afraid to talk to my uncles about it because I was afraid to tell my parents." He said that the fear of his parents'

reaction, liberal and open minded as he knew them to be, kept him turning to them.

“Looking back, I can’t imagine them doing that. So it was kind of an irrational fear. But in retrospect, I would have done it sooner.”

Harrison described some internal self-talk during his coming out, to make sense of what he was feeling and feel better about himself.

It was a period of denial. You know, it was like “No, no, no, . . . not interested in this.” And then this period of “Well, maybe I am, and I guess it’s all right.” Then finally coming to terms with it. . . . I didn’t think I really had a (verbal) conversation.

In his family homosexuality was something that was not discussed openly. “My family was kind of like, well, ‘We’re not talking about this, but we don’t hate it’.”

Harrison believed that his parents’ silence created a barrier for verbal discourse.

I think it may have helped if my parents were more open about my uncles. . . . Everybody knew that they were gay, but it was just not talked about. So I think it would have been easier if my parents were more forthcoming in terms of that because then maybe I would have felt like I could talk to them.

Growing up, his family attended a United Church of Christ, a liberal denomination, and the conspiracy of silence about homosexuality was part of his recollection.

Our minister at my church in Phoenix was gay. But it was never addressed. His partner would just come to church. And I think all the adults knew he was. . .but the teenagers and kids didn’t really know he was because nobody ever addressed the issue. . . .From that I took the message that “well, it’s okay as long as you keep it quiet, if nobody knows. But if you do it, and nobody knows, it’s fine.”

Harrison said that growing up he got along well with other boys his age and shared many of the same interests. But knowing he felt different and keeping it a secret in a masculine sports environment was stressful.

During high school it was kind of a tricky time, especially because I was in sports. And I had to do a lot of stuff with all boys. So it was kind of a little bit awkward. And I did hear a few homophobic remarks like from my cross-country assistant coach. . . . I knew like nothing bad would happen to me, but at the same time I didn't want to tell them because that's kind of how they felt, with the joking.

Harrison waited until after high school to tell his friends of his bisexuality; his high school girlfriend surprised him by saying she already knew. The college environment provided a turning point for Harrison on his journey to coming out; he was weary of hiding, but was still conflicted by scripts of heteronormative expectations and how he really felt. So he described an incremental coming out to others, as he accepted it himself.

When I went to college, I decided from the get-go that I was going to be pretty open with all my friends. . . . I was pretty up front with them right away about bisexuality and the transition to "You know what, I think I'm gay." . . . I personally think justifying it to myself was probably the most difficult thing.

Harrison availed himself of whatever information he could find to help him through his coming out process. He said he secretly read his parents' human sexuality textbook, which made him feel a little better informed and removed some fear. He did not have Internet access while living at home so had to wait until college to go online.

So before coming out, it [Internet] didn't really help; I didn't have access to it. But, once I did start to come out and went away to college, I had access to all the resources and the gay groups online. I said to myself, "This is a lot more normal and accessible than I think it is," given that, it felt mainstream. So yeah, it did help through the coming out process, but not before since I didn't have access.

He added that if he had Internet access in high school, and the resources that it could provide, he would have come out earlier.

Harrison said that the media depictions of the GLBT community confounded his self-acceptance. He described news coverage of the annual gay pride parade that typically

showed the most extreme costumes and behavior: “The gigantic drag queens and the leather daddies . . . kind of cuts out a lot of the gay population.” He did not identify with those images, and the message he received was “maybe this isn’t the right culture for me.” A broader representation of the gay community was missing for him.

I think it would have helped, too, to have more gay role models, even celebrities. The only two I can remember from growing up were RuPaul and Melissa Etheridge. And to some degree, yes, I can identify with both of them, but I really had no interest in being a drag queen or a lesbian. So it was good that they were out and it was helpful but at the same time it didn’t really meet my needs.

Harrison said that he felt that he was forced out of the closet at age 18 when his mother asked if he was gay and later again when his father confronted him about it.

When my mom confronted me I kind of freaked out. . . .She said that she’d love me no matter what. And she just wanted to make sure that I was safe and happy. . . . And then I asked her not to say anything to my dad, because I was worried about his reaction. . . .I went away to college, and for about 2 years we didn’t really talk about it. And then I came back one summer, and he took me out to breakfast and said, “So your mom tells me that you might be bisexual.” So I didn’t really have a choice in that matter, either.

During his college years, his mother inadvertently told Harrison about his father’s sexuality.

And then she’s like, “Oh, well, we didn’t want to talk about it to you because we’re trying to figure things out.” And I was like, “Wait, so, that was true?” And she was like, “Well, he’s kind of trying to figure out if he’s bisexual or gay right now. . . . But he doesn’t want me to say anything to you, so don’t say anything to him.”

Nothing more was said for months, when his father surprised him with a disclosure, “So your mom tells me that you know I’m out.”

### *Structural Description*

Harrison's beliefs about what it meant to be gay were informed by conflicting scripts, shrouded in secrecy and intrigue. Harrison described confusion about a conspiracy of silence about homosexuality he observed and experienced. His mother inadvertently divulged to him that his uncle and later, his father, were gay. Each time she told him that he was not supposed to know, it was being kept from him for his own good. His mother asked Harrison about his sexuality, and told him she still loved him. The minister at church was widely known as being a gay man and his partner attended services regularly, but it was not discussed in his family or by other church members. From all the secrets kept and broken, there appeared to be a tacit cultural agreement that someone being gay really was not acceptable, it was unspeakable, but since it was a reality, it was tolerated and ignored. He was loved and accepted, but the feeling that being gay was tolerated but not to be spoken of, without a reason given, created dissonance and barrier to discourse with his parents.

Harrison described internal self-talk that helped him make meaning and accept his sexuality, when he did not feel he had others with whom to engage in discourse. He described internal dialogue about his sexuality that evolved from denial to the possibility of being gay to acknowledging to himself that he indeed was gay.

Harrison described awkward feelings when he was in high school athletics and heard comments about gays. He remembered hearing a coach make loud, disparaging comments about gays, evoking mockery and laughter from teammates. His personal safety was not a concern to him, but he feared being different and shunned. The

heterosexist cultural script in the sports context informed his belief that being gay was shameful and not manly.

For Harrison, moving from high school to college, from living at home to living at school, created a space of more resources. It was an environment that allowed competing scripts to counter the heteronormative scripts that informed his beliefs about what it meant to be gay. He had access to and awareness of alternative perspectives and others with whom he felt he could open up to talk about and explore. Harrison noted that he consciously decided to be open about his sexuality after high school. College provided him with an expanded scope of ideas and fields of study, where questioning of cultural norms was more acceptable.

Heterosexist cultural scripts created a barrier to coming out by marginalizing and objectifying. He lacked access to balanced information. Images he noticed in the media were extremes. Harrison said he was discouraged from coming out sooner. Discourse felt unnecessary then since he had no interest in the extreme elements of gay culture and he did not see images of people like himself in the media that he could identify with; he concluded that “maybe this isn’t the right culture for me.” Feeling like he belonged was important, whether in sports, in his family, or in the community. Looking back, he said that he wished there had been more out gay people visible with whom he could relate to and learn from. Their presence could have provided conflicting scripts to cause examination of beliefs and inform new perspectives

#### **Participant 8: “Iain”**

Iain is a 40-year-old white gay man. He grew up in a large, tightly knit Mormon family in a small, predominantly Mormon community in Nevada. He is divorced and has

a young daughter with whom he remains very close. Iain left the Mormon Church. He came out at about age 30. Iain earned a bachelor's degree in business and today works as a bank manager. He is single and lives in Denver, Colorado.

### *Textural Description*

Iain knew from a young age that he was different from other boys. He tried very hard to be who he thought he was expected of him to be.

Growing up I was the golden boy. I was silent when I was supposed to be silent. I was thoughtful when I was [supposed to be] thoughtful. . . . I mean, I was that perfect child. But it was all to mask who I really was—or, at least, that's how I perceived it.

He was always attracted to men, but it was something he felt a need to hide, like an innate knowing.

My first sexual awareness I knew that I preferred men. I grew up in a really small Mormon community. . . . So I just knew that wasn't something I was comfortable with acting on or even talking about. Just from the very first, I knew that that wasn't acceptable. . . . It was kind of knowledge that is just a piece of you.

He described a strict religious upbringing that kept him closeted. The messages from the church around anything sexual were strict and repressive, infused with expectations of marriage and heteronormativity. Iain complied.

Growing up Mormon, sex is taught or viewed or looked at as part of what you do when you're married. . . . Sex was this giant taboo area. There is sex that you're supposed to have, and sex that is forbidden, and sex that's appropriate, and sex that is not appropriate. . . . The one or two times at 14 I talked to my bishop, who was the religious leader in the area, about masturbation, the guilt around just masturbation was enormous. . . . Just that alone helped reinforce, "Yeah, you're very different, don't breathe a word of this, don't explore this, don't go anywhere with this."

Growing up, Iain recalled being fascinated any time he saw men who he thought might be gay, yet was careful not to appear interested or even tolerant when friends were watching. He felt conflicted between what he saw and felt, and cultural judgments and expectations.

I worked at a gas station at 16, and I would see a couple come by and they were obviously a couple. I'd stop by the table, which was not my area at all, but I would still kind of try to interact a little bit. On a personal level I was fascinated, right? I wanted to see what this would look like. Then, on a kind of social level, whenever there were jokes or statements about "fags" or "queers" or whatever, I would kind of just flow along with that. With the self-loathing, knowing that I am that, but I'm not going to admit that.

After high school Iain went on the obligatory two-year church mission trip to another country. He called the mission trip to Sweden his "University of Life," describing it as an important turning point in expanding his worldview and understanding himself better. In Sweden, he observed a very different cultural view of sexuality and how the human body was regarded. The trip also underscored to him how different he felt he was from the other young men on his mission trip. "But even in that stage of life, with knowing that I was gay or knowing that I preferred men, of course I felt isolated. Because you can't share that with anybody."

Iain said that young Mormon men were expected to return home from their mission trip, meet a girl, get married, and have a family. He did as he was expected, even as the attraction to men continued. He met his future wife at university. "I'm fairly direct, so before we were ever even married I told her that I preferred men, but both of us were needy, were eyeball-deep in the Mormon thing and 'If you're faithful, God's going to cure you' kind of mentality." Later, he and his wife became disillusioned with Mormonism overall and they both left the church.

Iain worked at American Express, which had gay-inclusive employment policies. There, he saw out gay men in the workplace for the first time and was introduced to the idea that being gay was more than just about having sex. The competing scripts caused him to feel off balance, questioning his deeply held assumptions. “One of the first [corporate] mentors I had there . . . [a] blatantly obvious homosexual. I kind of closeted my own stuff and compartmentalized and didn’t ever address that [then], but being around him was kind of in your face. It brought up some stuff up for me.” Iain felt conflicted when the coworker came out to him, between being trusted with a confidence and judgment about mixing work and one’s sexuality. “I had this strange sense of honor and morality. . . . Just in my mind it was totally improper for me to discuss his sexuality at work. It’s not pertinent, right?”

Observing many a variety of gay coworkers was eye-opening for him, broadening and transforming his perspective on what being gay meant. It provided competing scripts, debunking what he had learned from family, church and culture. “Until I was around gays that I was comfortable being around in American Express, it never even crossed my mind that being gay was something you did with a partner.” At work, Iain observed a diverse mix of gay men who were out at work without apparent repercussions. He identified with some of the gays who belied stereotypes that he held of what being gay was, informed by what was portrayed in the media and what he learned growing up. It allowed him to discern who he was as a gay man.

It put me around people that were gay and masculine and furry and built. . . . I thought, “My God, that’s me,” only with a picture of my partner on my desk and a rainbow flag, versus me in the closet, married and miserable. . . . It was very helpful for me to see. I like men. That’s a piece of who I am. But it doesn’t mean that I’m everything else that we see, culturally, with that. I’m not Jack on *Will and*

*Grace* or any of that, that blatant stuff that we see that was pretty much all I had seen up to that point.

Iain found this encouraging, yet conflicted with what he saw. He was confronted by consequences of choices he had made, based on cultural expectations.

It was very moving in the manner of, okay, they can live their life and be who they are and it's just an aspect of them. It gave me hope, actually. . . . At the same time, it was a little uncomfortable to sit there and, all of a sudden, have this face-to-face. . . . There's a sense of, what would my life be like had I made different choices?

Iain said things started to change for him at around 30; he was weary of an existence based on expectations of others.

I had gone through the Mormon thing. I'd done the mission. I'd been the good golden son. I'd been everything everybody else expected up to that point. I'd gotten married and had a child. I turned 30 and I knew I couldn't continue to do this, living this life that wasn't really mine.

The dissonance he felt reached intolerable levels. He recalled feeling miserable both at home and at work, and thought, "I can't do this for another 5 years or 10 years." Iain's described his experience of reflection and self-talk as evolving from mostly negative at first, then incrementally moving to acceptance of who he was and that something must change. It was no longer sustainable for him.

I just realized, okay, so beating yourself up for how you feel, where is that bringing you? . . . But I was so depressed and so disgusted with my life and felt so trapped that I got to a point, kind of like bottom point, where I had to be honest. And if it involves the guilt and the shame of admitting that I prefer men and what that looks like, and building a life where there's part of it, then I have to do it at this point. Because I'm going to lose my mind otherwise.

Iain did not have a trusted other with whom to talk about his feelings early in his coming out process. Even if he had a confidant, he was not ready for verbal discourse in person.

Because that would mean . . . I'd have to admit to somebody face-to-face that I liked men. My father probably would have beaten me, had I actually ever gone and been open or up front with him. At least that was my perception growing up. The concept of admitting that to a man—no.

With face-to-face discourse not an option, Iain instead turned to the Internet for information and connection, to help him understand his sexuality. He joined a “bear” community chat group where described exploring the gay life and engaging in discourse. He described hearing and seeing alternative ways, competing scripts, of how one could be gay in the world. It reassured him and also abated isolation.

That was a big piece of coming to terms with who I was, and the fact that there's more to being gay than just the fact that you prefer men. . . . At that time I was still very much married and trying to make sense of things. I'm not ready to leave the relationship. . . . It helped me realize, “Okay, now I'm not the only one.” I'm not the only one that's gone through this or is dealing with this. To actually make some online friends that you could chat with about the deeper stuff, not just gay sex. . . .

The safety and breadth of the online world were ideal for his needs.

Yeah, I would say that . . . [Web site] practically helped facilitate me making sense of all that. . . . It was absolutely safe to have a chat with this guy who, you don't know, he could be next door or he could be across the world. It really wasn't about that. It was about the shared experiences.

Iain said he felt comfort in connecting with other gay men who were also fathers, to know he was not alone.

I had the experience of chatting [online] with many other men who are fathers and gay. . . . That was the big surprise—that I'm not the only one. That there are other dads out there who were married for maybe 20 years, maybe 25 years. They made it work because they thought that's what they had to do. . . . It felt like [whispering] “a big dark secret.” I wasn't the only one in the world who had ever gotten married when they knew they were gay.

He also felt judgment from some in the gay community who did not relate to a gay dad.

It's interesting because people who haven't gone down that path at all, for whatever reason, they kind of judge you. "Well, were you bi, then?" . . . There's no point of reference for them, and I understand that, but it's definitely a separate situation for them. . . .

Repeated attempts to discuss his sexuality with his wife were rebuffed by her, creating a sense of being trapped, with nowhere to turn. His frustration and pain reached a breaking point.

Finally, I actually started acting on it. I found a [male] lover and led this double life and wasn't very honest with her. I was looking for a way out and there was so much guilt and shame built around the fact that, in that religion, a murder is the only sin more intense than being homosexual.

Iain said that media depictions of gay men reinforced his negative assumptions about gay men.

What I saw and part of what was confusing and frustrating for me was that everything was about the more effeminate gays versus masculine men who just happened to prefer men. And that was kind of conflicting, too. And I think between kind of all those experiences, I stayed in the closet for longer than I might have otherwise. . . . If I could have seen or been able to identify with a character who was strong and tough and yet loving and caring and concerned and gay, to see that that's, you know, a possibility or to see that portrayed out there definitely would have made a big difference.

Iain's found workplace diversity policies dichotomous. On the one hand, his employer was known for its gay-inclusive policies. "They have this huge canned speech about diversity this and diversity that. And I was able to see more homosexual people than I had ever before and work directly with them." He took his employer at its word and became open about his sexuality at work. "I didn't really blatantly advertise it but I didn't want to keep it quiet any more, especially in this environment of 'diversity, diversity, diversity'." He recalled encountering "the real culture, the real tribal law that isn't written anywhere but you understand in the meeting that you speak about this only,

or when you're asked this question, this is the answer." His boss confronted him with rumors about him divorcing and of him being gay, which Iain confirmed. "That was probably the last one-on-one Bob and I ever had. . . . I definitely changed the dynamics of that. He was having an issue."

### *Structural Description*

Iain's life was greatly influenced by cultural scripts about homosexuality that caused him to feel shame and guilt. Iain grew up under a stiflingly religious moral code, immersed in a small Mormon community. He had little space for privacy, free thinking, or self-exploration. He knew he felt different early on and also knew he could not speak of it nor act on it. He did not know any out gay people he could talk to nor did he have access to information beyond what he was told or saw in media until after high school.

He recalled seeing men who he thought were gay and being fascinated, wanting to know alternatives to heterosexist cultural scripts that weighed heavily on him. The subject of sexuality was informed by a strict church teaching which discouraged questioning. Disclosure or even showing curiosity was unthinkable. So Iain kept to himself and focused energy on being the "golden boy"—the perfect son who was silent, thoughtful, and helpful. He was doing what his family and culture prescribed that Mormon boys did. Compliance was Iain's survival strategy.

For Iain, a lack of balanced visible representation in life and in media discouraged him. Growing up, Iain knew that he was attracted to men but found the only gay representations were stereotypes that were unappealing and not personally relevant to him. He had little interest in becoming like them if that was what being gay meant and it kept him from coming out sooner.

Iain used observation of how others behaved—gay and non-gay—to fill a void when resources such as accurate information or a trusted other person with whom to confide were unavailable. For much of his life, Iain had nobody to talk to about his feelings. Mass media was not helpful and the online access was unavailable to him until he went to college. Absent these resources with which to understand his feelings while growing up, Iain carefully observed how his world treated those he perceived to be gay and learned to stay quiet about his feelings. Iain recalled being fascinated when he saw men who he thought might be gay. They provided a competing script.

He had an epiphany around age 30 when he observed a diverse mix of gay men who were out in an inclusive work environment. By observation, new possibilities opened to him about what could be like to live as an out gay man. He saw that they could have meaningful, loving and enduring relationships with a partner of the same sex and be open about it at work and other contexts, refuting his deeply held assumptions. Observing out gay men provided scripts that countered the negative beliefs he was taught.

Iain felt increasingly trapped and he decided something had to change. His internal conversation “self-talk” transitioned over time from a critical, harping, and lecturing voice consistent with negative cultural scripts into an internal conversation that assessed things as they really were and weighed the risks and benefits, informed with competing scripts. He decided that the pain of remaining closeted, trapped in an unhappy marriage, and feeling alone was greater than the perceived risk of coming out and being known as gay. This emboldened him to seek resources, engage in discourse with others, and come out fully.

Computer-mediated communication was ideal for discourse for Iain. Around age 30, Iain was not ready to end his marriage but craved connection and understanding of what he felt and who he was. He went online and joined a chat room on a “bear” Web site, where he was excited to find other men like himself, some of whom were also married and fathers. He described engaging in discourse with other men on the site, discovering new things about himself and the gay community that were inaccessible to him before he went online. With more information and connections, he dispelled assumptions informed by heterosexist cultural scripts. He felt less alone.

The cultural scripts of the gay community can also confound coming out discourse. For Iain, the gay community he encountered was very different from the world he knew from growing up Mormon, as a married man and father. He saw the gay community as not focused on family and with fewer ties. This contrasted with Iain’s situation, where he could not just walk away from his marriage and obligations. Being a gay father, Iain said he felt misunderstood by some gay men. There was stigma attached to being a gay father, and he had to come out as a gay father to other gay men. Mitigating the sting of judgment was the comfort he found in connecting with other gay fathers online who had similar experiences.

Iain described double-speak of his employer; while the company officially supported diversity and inclusion, his own experience was different. The competing script of an officially welcoming and inclusive company policy was diminished by Iain’s experience with his boss. The words were different from the music. He likened it to “the real tribal culture” of a tacit understanding among workers of what to say and when, and proving the expected responses.

### **Participant 9: “Jackson”**

Jackson is a 50-year-old white gay man. He grew up in a devoutly Catholic family and attended parochial schools. He tentatively explored gay life for the first time while in college but got married after graduation. Jackson’s marriage ended after 21 years, and he came out in all areas of life. Jackson has an adult son. He earned a law degree. Today, Jackson is a vice president for a multinational technology company; he lives with his partner and participates in a gay-welcoming Catholic congregation.

#### *Textural Description*

Jackson said he was 6 or 7 when he realized he felt different from other boys. “I just didn’t seem to be feeling the same way as other guys my age about certain things. . . . So I figured something was different.”

Feeling different was a lonely existence—not knowing what was different, but also somehow knowing that he could not talk about it. “It made me feel, like, emotionally isolated in the fact that you kind of know you’re different but you can’t let anybody know that. And you really didn’t understand it yet yourself.”

Jackson’s feelings about himself as being gay evolved as he matured, very much informed by his religious upbringing.

Growing up in a very Catholic household, as I grew older and kind of realized what it was, then you have this whole guilt issue that, well, you know, you’re not allowed to be this way and they keep telling you this is evil and this was wrong. . . . So it kind of went very early on from, I think, feelings of isolation to later on feelings of guilt, being ashamed, you know, embarrassed that you’re different.

As a youngster, the isolation of keeping a secret was real, even when he was surrounded by others. He did not feel able to bring his real, full self to relationships, and did not understand it himself when he was young.

You can be around people and you can be around your friends. But there's a big part of you that you can't define yourself. And you know you can't share it, right? Because when you're that young, you know, nobody wants anything different. You want to be exactly the same. This is certainly something you couldn't bring to your parents. At least I could not. It was certainly something you knew not to talk to any, like, priest or nun about, you know, nothing. So, I mean, the feeling of isolation in my case was, I think, more than a feeling. It was actually kind of real.

Growing up, a lack of visibility of other gay men and the negative messages from culture added to Jackson's compulsion to remain closeted. There were few positive scripts to counter the negative ones he felt surrounded by.

It wasn't as open of a topic in the media, in the press. I mean, there was nobody out there that you can kind of identify with—person, organization—nothing. And, you know, you hear your peers make comments, negative ones. You hear your parents make negative comments, your family, your religion. And you think, "Well, okay, I'm certainly not gonna' go there. Obviously they don't like these people." So you kind of are conditioned for, that you can't tell anyone.

Though he did not recall feeling harassed growing up, Jackson felt suppressed by observing how others treated or reacted to those who were thought to be gay.

Oh, absolutely. I think that was a huge influence on, you know, not wanting to come out. I think seeing the way my family reacted, seeing the way peers reacted, I think that has a lot to do with it. And not only did it, you know, it caused me not to want to come out, but it reinforced the feelings that you're not right, that there's something wrong with you.

As he grew to understand what gay was, Jackson recalled having negative judgments about effeminate men who fit gay stereotypes. Without competing scripts and knowing examples of gay men who he did relate with, his sense of isolation continued.

He described feeling that he did not have anyone with whom to confide. Jackson said he used self-talk to build confidence and counter the cultural scripts that told him he was wrong. “In a way, when I look back at it, I kind of had to be an activist my whole life. . . . But I was an activist *to* myself growing up, knowing you were different, and . . . ‘You’re okay. You’re fine. People can be different’.”

Jackson said that someone with whom to talk would have been a very useful resource: “a support structure in terms of somebody to talk to, in terms of a mentor, you know? I think that would have made it much, much easier. . . . People should not have to go through this alone.”

Jackson said he believes he actually came out twice. First, there was tentative exploration during his college years that confirmed he preferred men and that there were other gay men with whom he related. “So, I kind of was out to a group of people. But, again, it was a small. . . . It was kind of like a dual life. But, you know, at least there was some connection to being gay and the gay community at that point.” He fully and permanently came out after his marriage ended many years later.

Jackson’s early adult life was shaped by cultural expectations of men, without competing scripts that provided viable choices.

I was expected to get married. I did. . . . For a whole number of reasons, this marriage just didn’t work. When we decided, okay, enough is enough, I took that as an opportunity to . . . not want to proliferate the lie and deny really what I was. I just decided that this is it, and I’m going to be authentic. . . . I figured I have lived my life long enough, kind of pretending who I was.

As his 21-year marriage was ending, Jackson connected with gay men in a local organization.

It was, like, a leather club and I think they helped me the most. And, you know, when you see men that I thought were very well adjusted about who they are, not afraid to be who they are, you know, just kind of go about it with a degree of confidence, I think that helped.

Jackson said that the club provided him with examples of ways that gay men could be in the world. He learned and made sense of it through observation and interactions, but did not describe engaging in discourse about being gay.

It was just kind of like a general gay education process kind of thing because there's a lot I didn't know. . . . [but] there was never really a conversation on, "Here's how you go about coming out."

Coming out at middle age, Jackson said he had considerably more resources and capabilities to draw upon for information than as a youngster. There were more competing scripts from which to draw.

Keep in mind I was 42. Life is different then. . . . There's a lot of difference when I came out with society and just openness. There are actually shows on TV. There are magazines. . . . There are resources at [his employer] . . . our GLBT [employee] group, information there on the process of coming out and what it means. There was the HRC [Human Rights Campaign].

Jackson said he went online for information on gay topics, but not for engaging in discourse. "It was never, ever chat rooms. . . . It wasn't like sex sites or anything like that, just more resources."

As he neared his coming out time as an adult, Jackson said that he virtually ceased all self-talk or reflection, to keep his resolve at the end of a long unfolding.

I think the whole time I was married, it was kind of a very long, slow process. . . . When we did get divorced, it was kind of like, "Okay, you're gonna' do this and you're gonna' do this now." And I did not purposely think a lot about what the consequences would be, because if I did—I think it's very easy to talk yourself out of it. So at that point, I just jumped. . . . I was convinced that whatever would happen would not be as bad as what life was.

Jackson said that for him, coming out to himself was more transformative than coming out to others because he had to come out to himself first, with few resources and mostly alone.

Until I actually understood what I was and comfortable and accepting to what I am, there's no way that I could have expressed that to others. . . . I had to work through a lot of emotion. I had to work through a lot of feelings. I had to work through a lot of understanding internally to come to that realization and acceptance before I was able to take outward. I mean, coming out to others was more of an action and reaction kind of thing. . .

Though out in all areas of his life, Jackson accepts the reality that he still must decide to disclose and in what measure.

If people ask . . . “What did you do over the weekend,” it's, like, “Oh, my partner and I.” I was talking to one of our executives and they said, “Well, . . . what does your spouse think about you traveling?” It's like, “Well, I'm not married, but I have a wonderful partner. . . .” So that doesn't bother me.

### *Structural Description*

Heterosexist cultural scripts in the form of stereotypes suppressed coming out and discourse opportunities for Jackson. Jackson felt like he was “the only one” growing up. The isolation he felt from feeling different when he was young was reified by the heterosexist cultural scripts from his family, the church, the media, and culture at large. Though he did not recall feeling harassed as a youngster himself, observing how others treated boys they believed to be gay, and the heterosexist messages from all around him, reinforced a belief that he was different and wrong. When he started learning what being gay meant, he did not relate to the stereotypes he observed. He did not see any others who he thought were gay and to whom he related or felt a likeness. There was little incentive to seek discourse opportunities because of the narrow view he held of who gay

men were, informed by a lack of awareness of diverse ways in which gay men can be in the world.

For Jackson, the college environment was conducive to his coming out. Being away from family, church, and the friends he grew up with, in another city and in an institution that opened him to new people, ideas, and experiences created an environment where Jackson could explore and confirm his sexuality. Positive scripts were available. He came out tentatively, to a small group, to confirm his sexuality and interests. He finally got a small experience of the gay community, though he was still pulled very strongly by cultural expectations and went back into the closet to marry his wife and have the kind of life expected of him.

Even as an adult and as he came out and met more gay people, Jackson did not describe engaging in discourse with others. Absent a confidant or mentor, he tapped other resources to make sense of his feelings. He observed his environment, looking for others who were gay, and listened to how gay people were treated and talked about in his sphere and in the media. He sought out information online but did not use the Internet for discourse. He joined a club that he described as very helpful for observing a variety of gay men but again did not describe specifically engaging in discourse as part of his learning and relationship with them.

Self-discourse can serve in the absence of trusted others with whom to engage in critical discourse. Jackson described talking to himself as a child, championing himself with affirming self-talk to counter cultural scripts that he felt were oppressive.

A lack of resources, including accurate information, role models, or trusted others with whom to confide, confounded his coming out process. Jackson said he believes that

his coming out would have been easier with more information and with someone to talk to. Instead, Jackson spoke of having to work through it internally and alone.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 presented the individual textural and structural descriptions of each participant. While each of the nine participant's personal account was unique to him, similarities emerged. Chart 4.2 provides an overview of the findings in this chapter related to resources, scripts and discourse. Next, chapter 5 presents a "composite textural-structural description" that portrays a synthesis interpretation of the essence of the experience. The purpose of this composite textural-structural description is to describe the common structure of the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process for these men.

## **CHAPTER 5:**

### **ANALYSIS**

Chapter 4 presented individual textural and structural descriptions. Chapter 5 presents a synthesis interpretation of the essence of the experience, to describe the common structure of the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process for these men and the role of cultural scripts and resources in that process.

#### **Discourse as Described by Mezirow**

To help provide context for this analysis, it is useful to briefly revisit how Mezirow defined and described discourse:

the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience. It may include interaction within a group or between two persons, including a reader and an author or a viewer and an artist. (2000, p. 14)

Mezirow argued that discourse is used to understand a problematic belief or understanding by weighing arguments and alternative perspectives. It is the way to assess and understand how another interprets an experience. Mezirow argued that discourse requires participants only to be willing and ready to seek understanding and reach reasonable agreement. “Feelings of trust, solidarity, security, and empathy are requirements for full participation in discourse” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 12). Discourse involves “welcoming difference, ‘trying on’ other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing” (p. 12). Further, he argued, “Transformative learning involves

participation in constructive discourse to use the experience of others to assess reasons justifying assumptions and making an action based on the resulting insight” (p. 8).

### **Ideal Conditions for Discourse**

The analysis of the nature of discourse as described in the nine participants’ depictions is framed by seven ideal conditions for discourse articulated by Mezirow:

To freely and fully participate in discourse, participants ideally require, in addition to a reasonable minimum of personal security, health, education, the following:

- More accurate and complete information
- Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception
- Openness to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel
- The ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively
- Awareness of the context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions including one’s own
- Equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse
- A willingness to seek understanding, agreement and a tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence, or arguments are encountered and validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment. (Mezirow, 2009, p. 20)

What follows is analysis of the findings of this study for each of the seven ideal conditions Mezirow articulated. Up to five dimensions are examined within each of these ideal conditions: self-talk, discourse, cultural scripts, trusting relationships, computer-mediated communication, and environment. (See Appendix E for a summary of this analysis.)

#### *1. More Accurate and Complete Information*

For the context of this study and its nine participants, awareness of more accurate and complete information was essential to the coming out process and served as an antecedent to the meaning-making benefits of discourse.

Until I actually understood what I was, and comfortable and accepting to what I am, there's no way that I could have expressed that to others. (Jackson)

More accurate and complete information served as both an ideal condition and a resource for participants. Without access to and awareness of alternative points of view and possibilities, these participants held on to the predominance of negative beliefs that family, church, and culture taught them about who gay men were, what it meant to be gay, and the proper roles for males.

I just thought a gay was just sex. . . . They didn't have a lifestyle . . . . I always thought that gay people were flamboyant. I thought you couldn't be a certain way. I thought you couldn't be a 'man' as a gay person. (Derek)

Once alternative information from different sources and in different forms began to become available, the dissonance between deeply held assumptions and the competing scripts caused these participants to become curious enough to seek and consider different ideas. If they were unsure about their own sexuality, more accurate and complete information facilitated considering the possibility that they might be gay, coming out to themselves, and then disclosing to others. With more accurate and complete information, their coming out process became more focused and the benefits of discourse became possible and more likely.

### *Observation*

Participants described observing others who they perceived as gay—how they interacted, behaved, and were treated—noticing that there were more ways in which to be gay than the negative stereotypes held out to them by culture.

I realized [attending a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT)-accepting church] that there's nothing wrong with this. There are thousands of people that are the same way. (Calvin)

It [workplace] put me around people that were gay and masculine and furry and built. . . . I thought, “My God, that’s me,” only with a picture of my partner on my desk and a rainbow flag, versus me in the closet, married and miserable. . . . It was very helpful for me to see. I like men. That’s a piece of who I am. But it doesn’t mean that I’m everything else that we see, culturally, with that. (Iain)

It [gay club] was just kind of like a general gay education process kind of thing because there’s a lot I didn’t know . . . [but] there was never really a conversation on, “Here’s how you go about coming out.” (Jackson)

Participants described engaging in observation in person and also by computer-mediated communication. Computer-mediated communication provided them with the opportunity to inconspicuously gather information, and observe or participate in conversations, allowing them to regulate their degree of disclosure and maintain a feeling of safety.

What contributed to me coming out, or me actually being comfortable with being gay, was discovering the Internet. (Derek)

Observation could include reading information. Some participants described hearing and reading others’ coming out stories as interesting and useful, informing them of options and potential outcomes.

I’d read for hours . . . different stories and things that had happened to people when they came out. (Calvin)

Participants described learning from observing media portrayals of GLBT people and topics, especially since the late 1990s when media portrayals became more common and balanced.

*Will and Grace* was during the time when I was entering the self-discovery phase. . . . It was the first time I actually got to see like a gay person living in life. It was the first example of being out, being comfortable with yourself. . . . “Okay, that’s how it is, or that’s how it could be, and that’s great.” (Derek)

I think for a lot of us [the first example] is gays on TV. (Greg)

### *Environment*

College was described as an important context in which these participants observed great diversity of people and gathered alternative viewpoints. Their college campus experience expanded their awareness and confidence.

The whole world just opened up to me. There were so many possibilities. (Derek)

A GLBT-welcoming church was described as a context in which observing and interacting with a diverse group of people, gay and non-gay, provided an alternative view of sexuality, acceptance, and spirituality.

The first time I felt a real spiritual connection was in this church . . . just because of the love. . . . I can just feel God's presence in here. And I'm thinking he wouldn't be here if there was something wrong with us. . . . I thought God made me this way and it's not a mental illness—I never really believed that. (Calvin)

### *Trusting Relationships*

A key element for these participants was the need for trusting relationships. Trust and safety were common characteristics that were necessary in order to engage in discourse, especially early in coming out. The structure of a relationship with a therapist or mentor provided a trusting space in which to explore.

He [therapist] really helped a lot. And it was especially good because he had been married also, and he had children. . . . And he was older than me. It was good to hear that when his daughter got married, he and his partner were introduced. . . . It made me feel like there was hope, because somebody else had weathered it. I wasn't alone. (Ed)

Safe, trusting relationships were described in the form of supportive friends, a first same-sex love interest, and family members.

It probably helped a lot that I was able to talk to him about it and we kind of shared experiences. But, he was out to everybody in his high school, and I was out pretty much to nobody. (Harrison)

I guess being on that high [first love], you kind of have confidence and you're like "I can do anything." . . . He helped me a lot to be more comfortable with who I am and just live life and be cool and chill out, stop worrying. (Derek)

She [mother] said that she'd love me no matter what. And she just wanted to make sure that I was safe and happy. (Harrison)

Identity controls that are part of computer-mediated communication made it useful for safely gathering information through discourse online. Computer-mediated communication provided a global reach, making it more likely to connect with others regardless of borders or time zones. It also provided the degree of anonymity each needed in order to engage in discourse.

That [Web site] was a big piece of coming to terms with who I was, and the fact that there's more to being gay than just the fact that you prefer men. . . . At that time I was still very much married and trying to make sense of things. I'm not ready to leave the relationship. . . . It helped me realize, "Okay, now I'm not the only one." I'm not the only one that's gone through this or is dealing with this. To actually make some online friends that you could chat with about the deeper stuff, not just gay sex. (Iain)

I didn't have any role model or anything, except for what was on TV. . . . My gay influences were very limited. So talking with other people [online] . . . expanded my mind and made me see that, "oh, possibilities." (Derek)

### *Scripts*

Positive scripts served as a resource, providing more accurate and complete information that facilitated the coming out process, ultimately leading to participants' receiving the benefits of discourse in some form. Until attending to positive scripts that conflicted with the pervasive heterosexist and heteronormative scripts they had encountered when they were young, and becoming aware of viable alternative

perspectives, the perceived safety of the closet remained more attractive than coming out. Three participants married women. Two of them, Iain and Jackson, married in their 20s knowing they were attracted to men, out of felt obligation to church and family. Ed was in his 20s when he married his wife in the early 1970s, knowing he was attracted to men, but he did not believe he was gay at that time because he fell in love and married, just as he expected and was expected to do. All three were compelled to marry by heteronormative expectations from family, church, society, and themselves. They described coming out and ending marriages when the dissonance became unbearable between feelings of obligation to wives and cultural expectations of males on the one hand and a feeling of inauthenticity on the other hand, knowing who they were and that it was possible to have a fulfilling life as an open gay man.

It was very moving in the manner of, okay, they [out coworkers] can live their life and be who they are and it's just an aspect of them. It gave me hope, actually. . . . At the same time, it was a little uncomfortable to sit there and, all of a sudden, have this face-to-face. . . . There's a sense of, what would my life be like had I made different choices? (Iain)

I think the whole time I was married, it was kind of a very long, slow process. . . . When we did get divorced, it was kind of like, "Okay, you're gonna do this and you're gonna do this now." And I did not purposely think a lot about what the consequences would be, because if I did—I think it's very easy to talk yourself out of it. So at that point, I just jumped. . . . I was convinced that whatever would happen would not be as bad as what life was. (Jackson)

Before, even though married and being a father and having friends, I was totally by myself, totally. . . . I never had one person I could pour my soul out to. Even being married all those years, I always had to hold back that one gnawing question. (Ed)

Several positive scripts emerged that provided alternative viewpoints:

- You are not alone.
- Gay relationships are possible.

- Gay is more than just sex.
- Help is available.
- Gay men can be real men/masculine.
- It is possible to be out and safe.
- You can trust some others with this secret.
- You are loveable.
- Gay is normal.

## *2. Freedom from Coercion and Distorting Self-Deception*

Coercion, oppression, or influence due to unequal power or status, along with distorting self-deception, “the uncritical acceptance of another’s values” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 14) together conspire to prevent discourse. Coercion and distorting self-deception in the context of this study kept these men in the closet and confounded discourse, particularly in the early years of their life, i.e., through adolescence for many of them and through most of their adult life for two. Disapproving or mixed messages from caregivers, institutions such as religion and schools, and culture at large compelled them to pass rather than risk stigmatization or perhaps even physical harm. For participants, distorting self-deception were the unexamined assumptions that limited their beliefs about what was possible for being gay in the world. Participants described the ways in which freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception was increasingly present for them as their coming out process unfolded. What they described highlighted the importance of confidentiality and trust for abating actual or feared coercion so they could receive the benefits of discourse.

### *Trusting Relationships*

Mezirow wrote that discursive assessment is done “with others, whom we believe to be informed, objective, and rational” (2009, p. 20). In the context of this study, participants described trust as also a critical attribute for a discourse partner. Trusting relationships served as both an oasis from feelings of coercion as well as for the honesty and openness to challenge and examine limiting self-distortions. Participants described a variety of ways to receive the benefits of verbal discourse while feeling safe and maintaining control of their identity. A trusted other person who was known to be supportive and safe was important. Some described the benefits of the discourse within the structure of a psychotherapist/client relationship, which is bounded by professional ethical standards of confidentiality.

I just need somebody to talk to about it, somewhere safe that I know that it’s not going to go anywhere. (Calvin)

And I remember sitting there in front of this young woman [therapist] who could have been my daughter and saying, “I’m gay.” And it was the first time it ever came out of my mouth. . . . And to tell another human being those three words, “I am gay,” you have no idea how liberating that was. It came out of my mouth. And it felt so damn good. (Ed)

I was having a lot of panic attacks, having a lot of anxiety. [I] started to see a therapist . . . really the first person I came out to. And she had zero reaction, which is how it should be. (Frank)

A church staff counselor was also described as being trustworthy enough for discourse.

Whatever I said wouldn’t leave the room; it [church] was a safe place. (Calvin).

A support group also served as a formal structure in which all involved agreed explicitly to confidentiality and verbal discourse could happen in confidence with others.

Yeah, it was wonderful. When you get 10 different opinions like that, it gives you a lot of stuff to really mull over. (Calvin)

Mentors, individuals who were admired, trusted, and more experienced, were described as helpful discourse partners.

He was really, really an inspiring person who loved life and continued to love life. He sort of saw me through the daily trials and tribulations of me dating this guy who really was not that great of a person. He was just there for me as much as I wanted him to be there for me and kind of helped give me some perspective. (Frank)

Supportive family members provided an alternative to beliefs some men had that they would be rejected if they came out. Some came out and found family members already knew and did not care.

Here I am trying to hide it and everybody already knows. (Derek)

I was terrified really on the one hand to tell my parents, which was bizarre. I have a lesbian sister who . . . had a partner of many years. And at that point they actually had two children together. (Alan)

### *Computer-Mediated Communications*

Men described having candid conversations with others anywhere in the world, in ways that did not feel possible face-to-face, mitigating coercion concerns. The perceived anonymity, safety, and control of identity disclosure made computer-mediated communication a favored source for receiving benefits of verbal discourse, but done in writing and often asynchronously.

Because [talking in person] that would mean . . . I'd have to admit to somebody face-to-face that I liked men. . . . The concept of admitting that to a man [in person]—no.” (Iain)

I discovered chat rooms and other gay men and talking to them about this and that. Somehow I came upon this guy who was like 28, and he lived in LA. He was

kind of like a mentor to me. And he told me, “It’s okay to be gay, you’re not a bad person, you’re not hurting anyone else.” (Derek)

Yeah, I would say that . . . [Web site] practically helped facilitate me making sense of all that. . . . It was absolutely safe to have a chat with this guy who . . . could be next door or he could be across the world. It really wasn’t about that. It was about the shared experiences. (Iain)

### *Observation*

Observation of gay people in person and in the media was a way in which some men described making meaning when verbal discourse did not seem available because of low trust and potential for coercion. Passively observing, intentionally or inadvertently, was a low-risk way to make meaning by watching gay men interacting in the various contexts of life. Iain described seeing gay men out at work with no visible repercussion, providing an alternative view on what is possible as an out gay man in the workplace.

Until I was around gays that I was comfortable being around . . . it never even crossed my mind that being gay was something you did with a partner. (Iain)

I probably saw more people in the media doing it [coming out] and their lives went on, and often they were maybe celebrated for it. That absolutely had to have helped me, probably more subconsciously than consciously. (Greg)

### *Self-Talk*

Some participants described engaging in self-talk, either aloud, silently, or in writing, and receiving benefits of discourse without disclosing to another, thus lowering the chance of coercion. For some participants, self-talk was an antecedent to disclosure and verbal discourse and for others it appeared to serve as a substitute.

I just realized, “Okay, so beating yourself up for how you feel, where is that bringing you?” (Iain)

There was no person I sought specific guidance from. I don't know if it was because I'm too independent. Or I think part of it was I was afraid to do that. . . . I was at the time more introverted, so my gut checks were more the internal. And I think probably like anybody, you end up with internal self-speak. You're ready to burst, and so you need to spit it out. (Greg)

Self-talk was described as a way to counter self-distortion, sometimes by self-championing to counter negative self-beliefs. Self-talk was useful for some in coming out to themselves.

It was a period of denial. You know, it was like "No, no, no, . . . not interested in this." And then this period of "Well, maybe I am, and I guess it's all right." Then finally coming to terms with it. . . . I didn't think I really had a [verbal] conversation. (Harrison)

I think probably things like "What's the worst that can happen?" came up. There was a lot of, "People are going to like you no matter what" type thing. Makes me sound like I'm that Daily Affirmation Guy from *Saturday Night Live*. I know I did a lot of it, because that's how I am. (Greg)

In a way, when I look back at it, I kind of had to be an activist my whole life. . . . But I was an activist *to* myself growing up, knowing you were different, and . . . "You're okay. You're fine. People can be different." (Jackson)

I really began to start loving the person that I was instead of always feeling bad about the person I was. . . . That's where I began figuring out that it was "Yeah. Oh, wait. You know, you're not so bad." (Alan)

### *Environment*

Some contexts were described as being more welcoming of differences, providing alternative viewpoints and making available discourse, in an environment perceived as free of coercion. Calvin described a GLBT-affirming church where he felt at home and at ease and engaged in discourse with a staff member. Iain described learning from being in a GLBT-inclusive workplace. The college environment was also described as a context in

which participants felt safer with less concern for coercion that enabled them to find trusted others with whom to engage in discourse and come out.

College is, for me, what really sparked the, “You know what, this is me.” . . . I think it was my environment. I felt more comfortable. And so it naturally led to more revealing discussions. (Greg)

So, I kind of was out to a group of people [college classmates]. But, again, it was a small. . . . But, you know, at least there was some connection to being gay and the gay community at that point. (Jackson)

When I went to college, I decided from the get-go that I was going to be pretty open with all my friends. (Harrison)

### *Scripts*

Positive scripts countered distorting self-beliefs and coercion concerns, making discourse more likely and desirable. Several scripts supported this ideal condition:

- There are safe places and people with whom to talk.
- You are not the only one.
- It is possible to be out and safe.

### *3. Openness to Alternative Points of View*

#### *and Empathy and Concern About How Others Think and Feel*

Evidence of the presence and availability of this third ideal condition was not as strong or obvious as the first two conditions. Participants described always feeling “different” and having curiosity about it, building cumulative awareness. Some participants did describe engaging in discourse as sharing and listening with trusted others, considering others’ ideas and experiences and comparing them to their own. Empathy and concern for how others thought and felt were not explicitly described.

### *Observation*

As with the first two ideal conditions, observation also reinforced this third condition, providing the participants visually or experientially with examples of various ways of being out gay men in various contexts. An example of observation in support of openness to alternative points of view was described by one participant who read others' coming out stories to learn how it could be done and prepare for telling his family in the best way he could.

I had looked at about every Web site you could find on coming out and coming out stories. I had read hundreds of people's coming out stories. . . . I did a lot of reading, a lot of research, a lot figuring out what the best approach is, when to do it, how to do it. (Frank)

### *Trusting Relationships*

Participants described having openness to alternative points of view and empathy during discourse: face-to-face or online, verbal or written.

One guy [coming out workshop participant] . . . was going to tell somebody this week, and we'd all tell him what we thought about how he should do it, or whatever. And then Jim [group leader] would tell him. Yeah, it was wonderful. When you get 10 different opinions like that, it gives you a lot of stuff to really mull over. (Calvin)

I had the experience of chatting [online] with many other men who are fathers and gay. . . . That was the big surprise—that I'm not the only one. That there are other dads out there who were married for maybe 20 years, maybe 25 years. They made it work because they thought that's what they had to do. (Iain)

#### *4. The Ability to Weigh Evidence and Assess Arguments Objectively*

Participants of this study described weighing evidence and assessing arguments, though it was not clear whether or not they were able to do so "objectively," pointing to a criticism of Mezirow's theory as being too rationalistic (Clark & Wilson, 1991; Taylor,

2007) and not giving enough weight to affect (Taylor, 2000a; Courtenay et al., 1998). A topic so intimate, informed by years of personal investment in deeply held assumptions and pervasive negative cultural scripts, would be difficult to discuss objectively.

Nonetheless, study participants did describe thoughtfully examining options and ideas, evaluating them through self-talk, observation, and discourse in a trusting relationship.

### *Self-Talk*

Self-talk was described as a way in which participants imagined alternative perspectives and explored new ways to think about being gay. It provided competing scripts to those that informed deeply held assumptions. Self-talk was described as happening as a precursor to disclosing to self and others, silently, aloud, or in writing.

I remember thinking, “What would life be like if I actually had a husband?” And I would do these sort of imaginary kind of projections. . . . From the point that I kind of began admitting to myself, “You know what, you are gay,” once that happened . . . the light was on in a way. . . . I just resigned to what is. (Alan)

But once I did start to come out and went away to college, I had access to all the resources and the gay groups online. I said to myself, “This is a lot more normal and accessible than I think it is,” given that, it felt mainstream. (Harrison)

I’m a writer. I’m not good always expressing myself verbally. And I remember . . . thinking that if I put it on paper maybe I’ll see things differently. . . . [I wrote down] every pro and con I could think of. . . . I had come to the conclusion I had four choices. I could be celibate, and I was tired of that; I could sneak around, as many married men do. . . . I couldn’t do that. I could come out. Or, I could kill myself. And that was it. . . . I remember once waiting for the subway here, and thinking all I’ve got to do is step off and that will be it. Golly, it was hard. But, I decided to take the hard route and be honest. (Ed)

### *Observation*

Observation was described as a way in which this fourth ideal condition was available for some participants, noticing in person and online how others lived openly in

the world and comparing and contrasting that with their own situation and beliefs. They had alternatives from which to arrive at a more informed perspective.

I think a huge part of my experience was being surrounded by a lot of other gay men. . . . We'd go out in public and they don't change who they are, they act the same. (Greg)

I just took little snippets of what I saw in the media, the movies, what I heard from people. . . . I thought to myself: "Well, how would I do it?" (Greg)

I think they [club members] helped me the most. And, you know, when you see men that I thought were very well adjusted about who they are, not afraid to be who they are, you know, just kind of go about it with a degree of confidence, I think that helped. (Jackson)

### *Trusting Relationships*

Participants offered few explicit descriptions regarding the experience of trusting relationships as being useful for weighing evidence and assessing judgments.

Yeah, it was wonderful. When you get 10 different opinions like that, it gives you a lot of stuff to really mull over. (Calvin)

### *5. Awareness of the Context of Ideas and*

#### *Taken-for-Granted Assumptions, Including One's Own*

Participants recalled that the context or source of their assumptions and beliefs was informed by heterosexist scripts learned from parents, schools, religion, and society. They described taken-for-granted assumptions based on heteronormative expectations. Recollections, some of them poignant, demonstrated that they recognized the origins of beliefs that shaped their lives.

Any time homosexuality was referenced in television shows, it was referenced as either as a joke or as a negative, or something silly, or an affectation, or it was very fringe. It was not part of the plot or the dialogue . . . [sending a message of]

“Well, if you’re going to be gay, this is how you would be.” There are only certain ways that you can be. (Frank)

As long as I can remember, I knew the path for life was that I was going to graduate from high school, that I was going to college, that I was going to get married, and that I was going to have a family. . . . You know, that’s cultural. That was my family. That was everything. (Alan)

I was expected to marry. I did. . . . For a whole number of reasons, this marriage just didn’t work. When we decided, okay, enough is enough, I took that as an opportunity to . . . not want to proliferate the lie and deny really what I was. I just decided that this is it, and I’m going to be authentic. . . . I figured I have lived my life long enough, kind of pretending who I was. (Jackson)

I had gone through the Mormon thing. I’d done the mission. I’d been the good golden son. I’d been everything everybody else expected up to that point. I’d gotten married and had a child. I turned 30 and I knew I couldn’t continue to do this, living this life that wasn’t really mine. (Iain)

I was raised Catholic and I knew what it was to be gay. . . . You “love the sinner; you hate the sin.” (Frank)

That’s when I first actually met gay men. And one in particular was hitting on me. And even I knew that. I just said no, I wasn’t interested. But at the same time, that’s when I would go to an adult bookstore and start picking up magazines. And that was the first time I got really aroused by it. But I never had an encounter until my mid-50s, never. It never crossed my mind that I was gay, because I fell in love and got married. And it was falling in love. . . . It’s amazing how you can compartmentalize. And clearly I did. (Ed)

Finally, I actually started acting on it. I found a [male] lover and led this double life and wasn’t very honest with her. I was looking for a way out and there was so much guilt and shame built around the fact that, in that religion, a murder is the only sin more intense than being homosexual. (Iain)

Some men described having the taken-for-granted assumption that if family or friends knew they were gay, they would be unlovable, despite messages and actions to the contrary.

My dad always said, “I don’t care if you murder someone, you’re still my son and I love you.” But I just didn’t feel that about the gay issue until it was too late to really—until I was older. (Calvin)

Interestingly enough, my mom got involved in gay rights in the Catholic church, like a few years before I came out. My family was always very supportive, friends always very supportive of gays and lesbians. It just took me a while to be supportive of myself. (Frank)

Derek said that gay African American men often feel like “double minorities,” not fitting in anywhere, adding complexity to his understanding of the context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions.

And whenever somebody has a problem with us, it’s like, okay, which is it, the “black thing” or the “gay thing,” or is it both? . . . There’s a lot of prejudice in the black community basically against homosexuals. . . . There are a lot of black people who are gay that are afraid to come out because they’re afraid to be judged and having everybody abandon them. (Derek)

#### *6. Equal Opportunity to Participate in the Various Roles of Discourse*

Mezirow (2000) described discourse as being most effective when everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute, actively listening and taking turns to talk and consider each other’s perspectives. For participants in this study who described engaging in discourse, the presence of this sixth ideal condition was not explicitly portrayed. While there is little direct evidence from their descriptions to support the availability of this ideal condition, however, they also did not indicate any concerns about limitations in discourse roles.

This ideal condition was not present or applicable for those participants who reported relying primarily on observation for making meaning and who did not describe engaging in verbal discourse. This ideal condition, unlike the previous five conditions, seems to require that one or more other people be involved in discourse.

7. *A Willingness to Seek Understanding, Agreement, and a Tentative Best Judgment as a Test of Validity Until New Perspectives, Evidence, or Arguments are Encountered and Validated Through Discourse as Yielding a Better Judgment*

For this final ideal condition, Mezirow (2009) explained that the best judgment reached by consensus through discourse is considered the best *so far*, and should be considered subject to revision

As situations change, social norms change, and the validity of what is asserted is subject to change as well. The informed consensus we seek is provisional; it is the best we have at the moment. It may be changes with the addition of new evidence or new arguments based on a more inclusive paradigm or meaning perspective. (p. 11)

Those who described engaging in verbal discourse, based on the operational definition of transformative learning, were open to revising perspectives as ideas or arguments were encountered. Similar to the sixth ideal condition, “*Equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse*,” the seventh assumes that discourse with another person occurred. However, some participants did not describe engaging in verbal discourse, instead relying on observation and engaging in self-talk as ways to make meaning and arrive at a best judgment.

The prospective nature of this seventh ideal condition for discourse aligns with participant descriptions that the process of coming out continues indefinitely, even after they consider themselves to be fully out. They continued to make decisions about disclosure in each new circumstance or encounter. Their transformed perspective, of being out gay men, was always subject to revision as they continued to make decisions to disclose, and in what measure, in each encounter. Their acceptance of the ongoing nature of coming out may suggest a willingness to remain open to new perspectives or

arguments. Whether or not they may engage in discourse to arrive at a newer, better judgment, is not clear.

It lasted a lot longer and it was a far more in-depth process. It started when I was born, and I don't know that I think it's a process that we ever really end. (Alan)

I still struggle with the fact that culturally I was raised in a heterosexual society. . . . I still struggle with assumptions of heterosexuality and heterosexism. (Frank)

If people ask . . . "What did you do over the weekend?" it's like, "Oh, my partner and I." I was talking to one of our executives and they said, "Well, . . . what does your spouse think about you traveling?" It's like, "Well, I'm not married, but I have a wonderful partner. . . ." So that doesn't bother me. (Jackson)

### **Summary**

Chapter 5 presented the composite textural-structural descriptions of the experience of coming out, framed by ideal conditions for discourse. In the final chapter, conclusions derived from the analysis are presented and discussed with relation to existing literature to examine alignments, disagreements, and gaps. Chapter 6 also includes contributions of the study and recommendations for future study.

## **CHAPTER 6:**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of the coming out process of gay men, adding to the breadth of understanding of ideal conditions in which the effects of discourse can be received. Drawing from in-depth interviews with nine gay men about their coming out experience, this phenomenological study focused on the discourse component of Mezirow's model. This final chapter presents conclusions based on the findings and analysis in the prior two chapters, contributions of the study, and suggestions for future research.

#### **Conclusions**

This study offers five conclusions on the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of coming out. Specifically, these conclusions add to the understanding of the ideal conditions for discourse, which are also ideal conditions for learning (Mezirow, 1991). Included are discussions of alignments, disagreements, or gaps in the literature.

##### *1. Critical Reflection Is an Antecedent to Discourse and Can Be Done with Self-Talk*

Critical reflection is a central component in transformative learning theory. In the context of this study, some participants described engaging in critical reflection in the form of internalized "self-talk" conversations and also in writing to themselves. Critical reflection of assumptions is a reframing of perspectives. Mezirow said that critical reflection is "central to understanding how adults learn to think for themselves rather than

act on the concepts, values and feelings of others” (1998, p. 185). Reflection in the context of transformative learning theory is a process of attempting to justify a belief through either rationally examining assumptions or through discourse with others of differing viewpoints and arriving at a best informed judgment. The result, Mezirow wrote, is a transformation of meaning structures.

We reflect by critically reassessing the assumptions we have taken-for-granted which prop up the way we think and feel. We sometimes identify these assumptions and look critically at how we acquired them and their consequences in our action or in our feelings. (Mezirow, 1995, p. 46)

Mezirow (2000) wrote that transformative learning can occur through critical reflection that is either objective reframing or subjective reframing. Objective reframing involves critical reflection on the assumptions of others in a narrative or in problem solving that is task oriented. Subjective reframing is critical self-reflection of one’s own assumptions. Subjective reframing involves the “critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem (e.g., ‘a women’s place is in the home; so I must deny myself a career that I would love’)” (1998, p. 185). Subjective reframing can be applied to many contexts—critical self-reflections on one’s own assumptions about a narrative, a system, an organization, feelings, interpersonal relations, or the way one learns.

“Subjective reframing commonly involves an intensive and difficult emotional struggle as old perspectives become challenged and transformed” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 23).

Mezirow believed that “significant personal and social transformations may result from this kind of reflection” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 185). He argued that objective and subjective reframing are “emancipatory dimensions of adult learning, the function of thought and language that frees the learner from frames of references, paradigms or cultural canon that limit or distort communication and understanding” (Mezirow, 1998, p. 192). This

description of objective and subjective reframing appears to parallel the coming out process described by study participants.

Participants in this study described engaging in self-talk, silently and consciously conversing with themselves, or doing so in writing. Much of it occurred before disclosure to another and engaging in verbal discourse, though it continued throughout the coming out process for some men. The content of self-talk was described as weighing the alternatives and the costs of coming out versus passing. Some described using self-talk as a way to champion and advocate for themselves, countering pervasive negative messages about being different and gay with positive, supportive words. Self-talk was described by some as bringing them to the conclusion and acceptance of being gay, in turn freeing them to disclose to others. Self-talk was also described as imagining what might be possible as an out gay man, moving beyond the heteronormative expectations from family and culture. Self-talk was done in writing too, journaling long-hand or online. While self-talk was described as critical reflection prior to disclosure and discourse by some, other participants did not describe engaging in verbal discourse with another, raising the possibility that self-talk also provided some of the benefits of discourse.

Mezirow (1995) seemed to speak to the possibility of self-talk and self-discourse in terms of creating meaning as a process of construal “by which we attribute coherence and significance to our experience in light of what we know” (p. 40). He posited that there are three kinds of construal, different and complementary interactive ways of meaning making: presentational, propositional, and intentional. “Propositional construal refers to tacitly experiencing things learned, using language categories and words to make meaning. Presentational construal refers to apprehension, making meaning without

using language” (p. 40). Mezirow wrote that propositional and presentational construal are both tacit, outside our intentional focus. The third type of construal—intentional—is “when we are deliberately attempting to pose or solve a problem, describe or explain” (p. 41). Intentional construal involves logic, analysis, reflection, inference, and “the giving and assessing of reasons through rational discourse” (p. 41). Mezirow added that “we engage in intentional construal when propositional or presentational construal becomes problematic. *Intentional construal involves either internal and/or external dialogues*” (italics added for emphasis) (p. 41). So, he seemed to allow for self-talk as self-discourse, though he was not explicit on whether he believed self-talk could also be done in written form.

In her study of mid-career professional women, Carter (2002) found that journaling and writing stories provided welcome opportunities to reflect. The women became aware of their own learning in relationship with others through writing and reflection in journals or diaries, sometimes sharing with others. Carter cited Linde (1990), who asserted “that narrative encourages development of a private, internal sense of self, as well as the self that is expressed and conveyed to others” (Carter, 2002, p. 84).

## *2. Self-Talk May Also Provide Benefits of Discourse*

Self-discourse was reported in other research on transformative learning theory. In these studies, self-discourse emerged in a variety of different contexts where individuals were in some way marginalized and thus did not feel they had consistent or full access to a trusted discourse partner, such as by top corporate executives (Sherlock, 2000; Henderson, 2001), midcareer women (Carter, 2002), and women who had successfully emerged from dependence on welfare (Hamp, 2006).

Carter's (2002) research explored the nature of the relationships that proved to be essential factors in transformative experience. Her study of mid-career women's learning in work-related developmental relationships identified categories of relationships as significant to women's learning at work. Among them, she found that "imaginative relationships" were described as "this internal voice as a relationship with self that they listened to and heeded through meditation as a spiritual practice or in writing to make meaning of their experiences" (Carter, 2002, p. 80). The concept of "self-discourse" as dialogue with self or a higher power emerged in other studies as well (Sherlock, 2000; Henderson, 2001; Hamp, 2006). The men in this study did not describe talking to a higher power. Carter (2002) concluded, "It was through the conversational nature of talk and self-dialog, with others or in writing, that we experienced most of the learning that was transformative" (p. 81).

Shaw (2001) described self-dialogue as a way of making sense out of consciousness, an organized theme or force of mental processes. It is a conversation among different identity elements or perspectives within the individual. According to Shaw, self-dialogue can occur as discourse with one's self. Or in religious practice, it can be through meditation or prayer as a conversation with God or a higher power—a phenomenon described in studies by Sherlock (2000), Carter (2002), and Hamp (2006). Self-dialogue, Shaw argued, provides ways to mitigate conflicts among different social roles as well as between the self and its various role-playing pursuits.

Shaw's assertions are relevant, I believe, in the context of the coming out process as described by the participants in this study, thus opening the possibility that these participants used self-talk as discourse. Shaw said that there are many penalties for

breaking social norms, including shame, reprimand, ridicule, or attack, and asserted that one can use self-dialogue to rationalize socially deviant intent (e.g., nonheterosexual identity) and then to convince oneself about the necessity of the corresponding act (e.g., coming out). Then, one comes up with a set of neutralizing vocabularies to ward off possible attack from the social world. Shaw's description is quite similar to the findings of this study, where the participants used dialogue, particularly written via the Internet, to examine different social rules as well as to help stretch and even reframe their thinking about being out and the different roles and opportunities available to gay men who are out and open. It is clear that self dialogue played an important role, allowing these individuals to play out scenarios and possible reactions to stepping outside of social rule boundaries, even allowing them to try on the new behavior or identity before acting. These findings also align with Mezirow's assertion about the utility of discourse, of trying on different perspectives, and the role self-dialogue plays in providing a forum in which individuals devise ways of sharing their stigmatized hidden identity and process the anticipation of marginality and disclosure. This study's findings demonstrate that it is useful as a precursor or in lieu of the ability to freely engage in verbal discourse with others.

*3. More Accurate and Complete Information Is a Critical Condition for Discourse; It is also an Antecedent to Discourse, a Condition for Discourse, as Well as an Outcome of*

*Discourse*

Mezirow (2009) argued that to more freely and fully participate in discourse, certain conditions must exist. Topping his list was "more accurate and complete information" (p. 20). Based on participant descriptions, a conclusion drawn is that

without more accurate and complete information, the related discourse and decision to come out may not occur at all. In addition, discourse itself can be the source of more accurate and complete information, adding resonance and energy to the transformative learning experience of the individual's coming out process.

Taylor (2000, 2007) found that context and culture in the transformative learning process also seem to have a greater influence than originally posited. Personal contextual factors, such as readiness for change, make people predisposed to a transformative learning experience. In this study, as participants became more aware and interested, confidence built and more risks were taken to intentionally gain access to more information. Eventually, they engaged in discourse as part of the coming out experience. More accurate and complete information was critical to helping ready them for change and was antecedent to coming out and discourse.

For the participants in this study, more accurate and complete information was made available by attending to alternative scripts that were overshadowed by the pervasiveness of negative cultural scripts about homosexuality until they began to engage in dialogue and self-discourse and additional information was sought. The scripts that these participants attended to and experienced throughout their early lives set a frame for thinking that was uncomfortable, even painful. There was little incentive for coming out or engaging in discourse. Discourse, transformative learning, and coming out were forestalled unless and until an ideal condition of more accurate and complete information was presented.

Transformative learning theory does not adequately address contexts in which the availability of ideal conditions for discourse may be constrained, and the descriptions of

these participants, particularly of events at the beginning of their coming out process, are insightful. The evolutionary nature of coming out, stimulated by discourse, interest, and curiosity while balancing the reactions, perceived reactions, and other conditions associated with a stigmatized topic, as described by these participants, provides insights into the role and purpose of context in the transformative process. As participants gathered more accurate and complete information, that informed the context, building their self-awareness and confidence and allowing them to attend to more positive scripts that counter deeply held assumptions that previously limited their viewpoint and actions. A more balanced, hopeful perspective emerged, causing dissonance with long-held assumptions, enabling coming out to self first, and then others.

The literature has described discourse and discourse partners as a source of more complete and accurate information. Mezirow (2000) argued that discourse involves “welcoming difference, ‘trying on’ other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing” (p. 12). The men in this study who described engaging in discourse confirmed this perspective, saying it helped to abate feeling as if they were alone. They conversed with others who were living fulfilling lives as out gay men. They described learning from discourse partner viewpoints and experiences, as well as receiving encouragement and validation, countering deeply held assumptions, and providing them with a more balanced perspective. For these participants, both context and discourse were integral to the coming out process.

*4. Observational Learning Can Be an Important Resource for Obtaining More Accurate and Complete Information Necessary for Coming out and Discourse; It Can Be a Precursor for Discourse and Also May Be Used to Receive the Effects of Discourse*

The literature in transformative learning is clear that more accurate and complete information is a critical condition for discourse as well as for the decision and any resulting actions taken. The findings from this study reveal that if actively and visibly seeking information feels risky, then more anonymous, less transparent tactics can serve as an efficient and effective way to obtain more accurate and complete information. For these participants, at least, the coming out process required alternative information resources that provided competing ideas for the deeply held assumptions informed by pervasive heterosexist scripts and heteronormative expectations. The results of this study demonstrate that, in conditions where seeking information may feel risky by drawing attention to one's perceived sense of taboo of the topic, an inconspicuous, lower-risk way to gather information that is a critical antecedent to discourse occurs through observation.

Observation, in the context of this study, is paying attention to specific behaviors and then modeling them or using this information as a base from which to begin to develop a platform from which discourse can occur. In this study, many different types of behaviors were used as the base for modeling—interactions of others, whether face to face, in the media, or online, and observing role models and prototypical examples. It is clear from these findings that observation plays an important role in transformative learning. It may even be necessary as a precursor to true dialogue, as described by Mezirow in his ideal conditions.

The work of Bandura (1989) may prove particularly helpful in considering the role and importance of observational learning. Bandura wrote that observational learning is governed by four components: attention, retention, production, and motivation. Attention is the ability to selectively observe the actions of a model. Retention means observed actions are retained in memory for use at a chosen time. Production is the process of engaging the observed behavior. Motivation refers to the adoption and repetition of the observed behavior if it produces satisfactory results. This description of observational learning components aligns with what participants in this study described as being a critical part of their transformative learning experience.

“Much social learning occurs either deliberately or inadvertently by observing the actual behavior of others and the consequences of them” (Bandura, 1989, p. 21). Participants in this study described having spent most of their lives fending for themselves to gather information, constantly scanning their environment for potential threats, allies, and resources. So it is likely they were observing and learning inadvertently primarily before coming out began, and then observing more deliberately as they consciously moved into their coming out process. They described becoming more attentive and willing to consider that they might be gay and being more curious about what being gay was really like, beyond what they assumed based on cultural scripts they held. Participants reported the usefulness of observing others’ interactions as well as media depictions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) content and online content, including chat rooms and blogs. Reading others’ coming out stories also served as more accurate and complete information for these participants, further suggesting the importance of observational learning.

For some participants, observational learning appeared to provide benefits and effects similar to that of verbal discourse. Some did not describe engaging in verbal discourse with another but spoke of observation as an important contributor to their evolving understanding of what it meant to be gay throughout their lives through the coming out process. This may suggest that observational learning was a way in which they received effects or outcomes similar to that of discourse. According to Mezirow, discourse is sometimes used to justify a problematic belief or understanding by weighing arguments and alternative perspectives. While Mezirow's description of discourse consistently assumed a process in which one has active dialogue to better understand the meaning of an experience, some of these participants reported essentially the same outcomes through careful observation, modeling what they saw and processing the results. Discourse most commonly assumes a meaning-making conversation, either dyadic or within a group. Mezirow did allow for discourse to be nonpersonal, indirect interaction, such as between a reader and author or an artist and viewer (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). The reports of the participants in this study confirm this mode, as both entail observation without conversation.

Mezirow described discourse as involving a "welcoming difference, 'trying on' other points of view, identifying the common in the contradictory, tolerating the anxiety implicit in paradox, searching for synthesis, and reframing" (p. 12). This appears to be how some participants used observational learning, perhaps in lieu of discourse. Further research on this is needed, as outlined later in this chapter.

*5. The Great Need for Safety and Trust Strongly Informs the Sources for Engaging in  
Discourse*

It is clear from the findings of this study that privacy and trust were critical to participants' feeling safe enough to disclose and engage in discourse, especially in early stages of the discourse process. Mezirow's (2009) parameters for full and free participation in discourse addressed this, positing that participants in general must have, among other things, freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception, the ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively, an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of discourse, and openness to alternative points of view. The underpinnings for these ideal conditions in the context of this study are safety and trust.

Taylor (2000, 2007) found that the most common limitation of transformative learning theory was that of trust in relationships, which "allow individuals to have questioning discussions, share information openly and achieve mutual and consensual understanding" (2007, p. 179). Specifically, he found that trust, friendship, and support were underrepresented in earlier descriptions of rational discourse. He wrote that these more subjective elements seem to provide conditions essential for effective discourse. "Research, however, is revealing a picture of discourse that is not only rationally driven but equally dependent on relationship ways of knowing" (2000, p. 306). He argued that Mezirow's (1995) model gave little attention to the role of relationships concerning discourse and the role that relationships played in establishing and maximizing understanding between participants, seen as important in achieving transformative learning.

Taylor's review showed the importance of relationship in transformative learning within a variety of contexts. Arguments can be made that the subjective elements of relational knowing—trust, friendship, support—are important for anyone to engage in meaningful discourse that is part of their transformative learning experience, and for the participants in this study, it was clear that their great need for safety and trust was an especially important condition that enabled discourse to occur. The men in this study described two ways in which they felt confident and trusting enough to engage in discourse with others: structured relationships and computer-mediated communication (CMC).

### *Structured Relationships*

It is clear from the findings of this study that for these men, privacy was central to the trust and confidence necessary for verbal discourse. For many of them, trust was increased by a relationship with a discourse partner that was structured and formalized. Participants spoke of longing for someone safe, wise, and discreet with whom to confide. For those who are firmly closeted yet want to talk to someone, finding a trustworthy person is a critical challenge because of the fear of being outed just by searching. The participants described structured relationships as providing privacy and structure, which, in turn, were seen as ideal conditions for verbal discourse. These structured resources included psychotherapists, mentors, and church staff, all of whom were seen by the participants as having both a personal as well as a professional commitment to confidentiality and privacy.

Two examples of less structured relationships that can be conducive to discourse were a mentor and a clergy member or church counselor. Mentors are generally desirable

for anyone, but this study showed that for a gay man who is questioning his sexuality and who fears betrayal and being outed, a mentor who helps create safe space in which discourse can occur is especially helpful. For these participants, a mentor served as a confidant to help critically question a lifetime of assumptions based on cultural scripts by providing alternative views, counsel, history, and information. Mentors were helpful to alleviate loneliness, for guidance and for discourse. They were friends or coworkers. Participants who described coming out without the benefit of someone like a mentor expressed a sense of missing out on an important resource and noted that the effects lingered for years. In the context of this study, mentors appeared to be somewhat rare, at least early in the coming out process, perhaps due to the informal or less structured nature of mentor relationship when compared to psychotherapy.

Taylor and Jarecke (as cited in Mezirow, Taylor, & Associates, 2009), drew together themes and comparisons among many studies on transformative learning in a variety of contexts. They found that the studies that posited transformative learning as a purposeful process agreed that it is not a prescriptive or stepwise process, but the availability of certain conditions is essential to facilitate transformative learning. The findings from this study provide another context for these conditions to occur and expands their research beyond the classroom context, which was their focus. Both studies call out the importance of a structured relationship for marginalized individuals that is grounded in respect and trust.

### *Computer-Mediated Communication*

CMC includes the use of email, chat rooms, listservs, Web sites, blogs, and social networking sites. Mezirow could not have accounted for CMC when he first articulated

transformative learning theory in 1978, and relatively little research to date has been published about it vis-à-vis discourse or transformative learning theory. The emergence of CMC does not diminish discourse's value for meaning making; to the contrary, the results from this study indicate that CMC can greatly increase the opportunities for discourse to occur. According to these participants, CMC facilitated the ideal conditions for discourse. The scope and the perceived security and privacy control of CMC, for these participants, was seen to align with their need for safety and information in their coming out process.

CMC's breadth of information and scope of reach addresses the need for accurate and complete information. The global nature of the Internet greatly expands the possibilities of connecting with discourse partners. The limitations of time and space are transcended. Gross (2004) wrote, "Computer-mediated communication offers possibilities for the exploration and expression of identity, for affiliation and solidarity among otherwise isolated and even stigmatized individuals" (p. xi). The perceived privacy and security of CMC and the ability to incrementally control disclosure of identity address the need for trust in discourse relationships by building confidence but with protections available. Gudelunas (2006) said that safety and privacy concerns of gay men and lesbians make the Internet especially attractive:

The Web, moreover, with its ability to transgress spatial and temporal boundaries and provide anonymity, safety, and fluidity, has been situated in an inherently hospitable medium for GLBT people. That gays and lesbians have taken to the Web in large numbers to find friendship and romance should not seem surprising. (p. 26)

The participants' descriptions seem to point toward a distinction between salient information and true identity. Participant accounts of engaging in discourse via CMC

provided rich details of very meaningful exchanges while sometimes not disclosing all the identifying information that one might while engaging in verbal discourse. The mediating qualities of CMC allowed them to maintain a comfortable level of anonymity, even while disclosing intimate details and deeply held beliefs with another person who was similarly obscured. For participants in this study, CMC clearly played an important role for their connection and engagement in discourse.

### **Contributions**

This study makes contributions to transformative learning theory in four ways: an understudied context for exploring transformative learning theory; an expanded understanding of ideal conditions for discourse; the importance of more accurate and complete information; and the value of CMC in transformative learning.

#### *An Understudied Context for Exploring Transformative Learning Theory*

This study places transformative learning theory in the context of a marginalized, highly stigmatized group to add to understanding of how the ideal conditions for discourse are made available for the learner, thus addressing Taylor's (2000, 2007) conclusion that there is a lack of accounting for context and culture in the theory and that of the two, context is better understood. His meta-review of studies on transformative learning theory concluded that the definition of perspective transformation was too narrow and rational, and he noted that there is a profound lack of research on transformative learning in relation to "difference" and that diverse perspectives—along the lines of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation—were missing from transformative learning research. He added: "Much could be learned about the role of

context, by exploring the role of culture and transformative learning, an area of research greatly overlooked” (2007, p. 185). This study is an answer to Taylor’s call for more research in the area of difference, specifically sexual orientation, and the role of culture and context on transformative learning.

#### *An Expanded Understanding of Ideal Conditions for Discourse*

This study expands the understanding of transformative learning for individuals for whom availability of the ideal conditions for discourse that Mezirow (2009) identified is constrained. While all seven ideal conditions were present for the participants in this study, they gained access to these conditions in ways that maintained a need for safety and confidentiality, especially early in their coming out process.

#### *The Importance of More Accurate and Complete Information*

For the participants in this study, transformative learning (i.e., coming out) did not occur until they had access to and received more accurate and complete information. Interestingly, Mezirow placed this condition at the top of his seven ideal conditions throughout his writings over the past three decades, but he was not explicit about whether or not these occurred in a specific sequence. This study concluded that more accurate and complete information was antecedent to discourse for these men with stigmatized hidden identities. Once they received alternative information that countered the social scripts of the lifeworld in which they were embedded, the possibility emerged for them to even consider and then enter into their coming out process, engaging in the attendant discourse. This suggests that the sequence of the ideal conditions is highly specific to the context and conditions associated with the experience.

Another study finding related to this top ideal condition is the word “more” that frequently but inconsistently precedes “accurate and complete information” in Mezirow’s writings. Mezirow did not articulate a reason for the variance, often using “more” and sometimes leaving it out. I argue that “more” accurate and complete information is an important distinction. There is no one objective truth about what is accurate and complete information for coming out or being a gay man.

Mezirow, in discussing the outcomes of discourse, spoke to the idea that once a new perspective is achieved, as a result of engaging in discourse, it is not the ultimate perspective or the objective truth, only the latest. “The resulting consensus is our best test of the justification of the problematic assertion only until new perspectives or evidence are introduced which require further discourse” (Mezirow, 1995, p. 53). While they were still closeted, what participants in this study knew to be “complete and accurate information” was based on the cultural scripts they received and attended to from various sources, and it kept them passing. Once they had access to and were willing to receive “*more* accurate and complete information,” things began to shift for them. “*More* accurate and complete information” to the participants in this study meant alternative information that provided balanced and broader viewpoints that questioned their deeply held assumptions. While the descriptive “more accurate and complete information” lends itself to a concise list of ideal conditions, I believe that it needs more detail. Adding descriptors such as “balanced” and “alternative viewpoints” would give greater clarity and weight to this highly important ideal condition for discourse. A more descriptive phrase would also help address criticism of the model being too rationalistic.

### *The Value of Computer-Mediated Communication in Transformative Learning*

This study expands the understanding of CMC as a contributor to the ideal condition of more accurate and complete information essential to discourse and for the decision to and actions of coming out. It identified CMC as a useful channel for verbal discourse and for observational learning. Additionally, CMC provided perceived control and privacy that made it a useful tool for those for whom privacy, invisible social identities, and disclosure were concerns.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings, conclusions, and contributions of this study, I offer six recommendations for future research.

#### *Address the Ongoing Nature of Transformative Learning*

This study posits the coming out process as a transformative learning experience, and participant selection criteria required that each man be out in all contexts of his life. An implication is that once fully out, the coming out process has ended and, by extension, so has transformative learning. However, participants in this study described coming out as ongoing, something that occurs repeatedly for a lifetime. Mezirow similarly described an end point in transformative learning, yet framed a transformed perspective as being the best so far, with one ideal condition for discourse being that the learner remain open to potential for further transformative learning and perspective change. If coming out does not end, can it also continue to be transformative? A study, using coming out as a context, may add to the understanding of the ongoing nature of transformative learning

*Explore Observational Learning and Social Cognitive Theory  
in the Context of Coming Out*

Observational learning theory emerged as an important theme in this study. Further research would be interesting to explore observational learning and transformative learning, using the theoretical framework of Bandura (1989) as the starting point for consideration and expanding it to Bandura's larger social cognitive theory. As part of social cognitive theory, Bandura offered the conception of human functioning as a product of dynamic interplay, or "reciprocal determinism," of personal factors (cognition, affect, biological events), behavior (shaped and directed by beliefs, self-perception, goals, and intentions), and environmental influences, that combine to form "triadic reciprocity." This three-sided model shows bidirectional interaction between each of the three components, making individuals both the products and the producers of their own environment (Pajares, 2002). Further research could explore more specifically the role that observational learning plays in transformative learning and in the experience of discourse.

*Explore the Trust Provided by Structured Relationships  
as Ideal Conditions for Discourse*

This study identified the importance of trust as an ideal condition for discourse to occur. Participants spoke of the benefits of talking to a psychotherapist and mentor. Future studies could focus on characteristics of structured relationships that make them more effective for discourse when privacy is critically important. Are there unique qualifications or training that can increase the trust and efficacy for discourse within a structured relationship? Are there other relationships that may be similarly structured to

encourage discourse by a marginalized individual who finds confidentiality and trust especially important—for example, life coaches, social workers, human resources managers, clergy, consultants, workplace mentors, school counselors, even massage therapists?

The emerging practice of professional coaching shares many of the same privacy and ethical attributes common for psychotherapy (International Coaching Federation, 2008). However, coaching differs in that it is present- and future-focused, not primarily retrospective, and is not predicated on healing or pathology. A coach also differs from a mentor in that coaching is a formal, usually compensated relationship that often includes a contract and professional credentials. Also, coaches do not generally give advice; instead, they help clients find their own answers. So an interesting future study would be to explore the efficacy of coaching for discourse in the coming out process. This could also expand to a comparison of coaching, mentoring, and psychotherapy vis-à-vis discourse and coming out.

#### *Replicate the Study with Other Marginalized Groups*

It is clear from this study that, for this group of gay men, context was a major influence upon their transformative learning experiences. This study was limited to gay men, but other marginalized groups or distinctive populations—especially those who may have invisible stigmatized characteristics—may face similar life challenges and issues with disclosure. For example, lesbians, bisexual men and women, and transgender individuals also have coming out experiences that are transformative and are worthy of research to understand the nature of discourse for the transformative learning experience of coming out for these groups too. Beyond sexual minorities, there are other individuals

who may have stigmatized invisible identity characteristics, like religion, or a physical disability that may put an individual at choice for disclosure, or put them at risk for being “outed.”

Another research focus could be for those who identify as a “double minority,” as did “Derek” (who was African American and gay) or “Frank,” “Iain,” and “Jackson” (gay men who married and were fathers). These men were minorities (racial, marital status, parental status) within a minority (sexual) and faced unique challenges connecting with others who had similar experiences.

*Further Explore the Importance of Computer-Mediated Communication  
in Transformative Learning*

CMC was described as being an important way in which participants engaged in discourse. Mezirow’s description of discourse seemed to assume real-time interactions, in person or perhaps by phone. Future research could focus on the role of CMC and the power of the Internet to allow for discourse. What happens to discourse when it goes online? How is it similar and how is it different? What is the role of adult educators with relation to using CMC and transformative learning?

Taylor (2007) found in his meta-review of transformative learning research that little is known about the potential of an online setting as a way of fostering transformative learning. Future research also could focus specifically on the role and impact of CMC in transformative learning, expanding Mezirow’s description of discourse and ideal conditions. For example, a study could explore what impact asynchronous communication has on discourse and meaning making as part of transformative learning and compare the efficacy of CMC for discourse with real-time, in-person discourse that

Mezirow's theory predominantly assumes. Also, future research could explore the CMC discourse experiences of other individuals with stigmatized hidden identities for whom disclosure is transformative, such as lesbians or bisexuals accepting and disclosing their sexuality.

*Replicate the Research for Family Members and Friends of Those Who Come Out*

Family members and friends of GLBT people may experience their own transformative learning experience as a result of their loved one coming out to them. Like their gay loved one, they must make meaning of this new information, a change of identity for someone they care about and believed they knew well. They may face feelings of betrayal, grief, and fear, like the GLBT person. Like their loved one who is gay, they too may face the choice to "come out" to others, and they face a challenge in obtaining more accurate and complete information; they too learned negative social scripts. They have a choice of disclosing that they have a loved one who is of this stigmatized group, thus themselves being subject to the courtesy stigma that Goffman (1963) described. Gay-friendly individuals may be perceived as being gay or lesbian themselves, simply through association. They have a coming out dilemma of their own. Future research could focus on transformative learning and discourse that friends and family members of individuals who have a stigmatized invisible identity experience.

**Personal Learnings and Closing Thoughts**

Throughout the doctoral program, our cohort often heard that the dissertation topic sometimes finds the researcher, not the other way around. And so it was for me. About halfway through doctoral coursework, during a lecture on Mezirow's theory of

transformative learning, I had an epiphany: “That sounds like the coming out process.” I was intrigued, and the more I learned about Mezirow’s model, the more compelling it became in relation to the coming out process. The transformative learning model aligned with my own coming out process and that of others I knew. But, I also believed something was missing in the understanding of transformative learning theory in the context of the coming out process. From that suspected gap, a dissertation focus was formed.

While I exercised great care to set aside my own bias throughout this research project, it was interesting to notice at its conclusion that my own personal experience of constructing this study mirrored what showed up in the study in at least two ways: the importance of privacy and trust that may be found in a structured relationship and the fact that the coming out process never really ends. My own experience during data gathering underscored to me how the importance of privacy and trust can be addressed by a structured relationship. This study found that gay men coming out placed a high value on privacy and trust as an ideal condition for discourse. These men were out in all contexts of life, per the criteria for being a participant, so there was probably little fear of being outed. Still, the stories they shared were intimate and the relationship I formed with each man was apparently safe enough for them to share highly personal and sometimes painful recollections freely. We formed a relationship that was highly structured, giving confidence that it was legitimate, safe, and worthwhile.

Another structure that I believe was very helpful was my coming out to them as a gay man in our first conversation. Some of these structures included the study and the researcher’s affiliation with a major university. Many participants first learned of the

study and the call for participants from someone they knew and trusted who passed it along to them. The university provided explicit guidelines for human subject research, addressing explicitly confidentiality and placing control in their hands for participation throughout the process. Each man was very generous and forthcoming, answering all the questions and sharing intimate details of his life. I believe it began and was sustained by the “safe” container that we cocreated—a relationship based on trust, privacy, and structure.

A pleasant surprise for me was how much some of the participants felt they benefited from participation. At the outset, I assumed their participation was a one-way favor for me by the participants, yet some explicitly expressed satisfaction and even gratitude to have the opportunity to share their coming out story, explore their coming out story, and integrate their coming out story. I heard from one man that he felt overwhelmed to see it all there in front of him—his story was laid out in full and integrated for the first time. One coresearcher said that he shared his transcripts with his therapist and it broke new ground for him in his development of his new gay identity. The third coresearcher said that reading his story was a powerful experience and provided “epiphanies.” He added, “Your questions allowed me to see what I think and feel from a different perspective, which enabled me to get past some limits I didn't even know I had.” I believe the interviews, in which participants mulled over their coming out experience and the meaning they made of it then and now, had the effect of discourse, leading to a perspective shift. This was made possible by the ideal condition for discourse of privacy and a structured relationship, even after the participant was fully out in all contexts. Was the interview process itself a transformative learning experience for him? That may be for

another dissertation to explore. But it appears to confirm the ongoing nature of coming out and the ongoing importance of the ideal conditions of trust and privacy.

Another personal learning underscored how coming out never really ends. At my previous employer, a huge corporation, I was known widely at work as being a gay man. I was a founder of the corporately recognized GLBT employee resource group. I met many times over the years with top executives on issues of concern to GLBT employees and customers. I was quoted and pictured in articles about GLBT issues in the workplace that appeared in national publications, including *Time* magazine. I was as out as anyone at American Airlines could be. So I was astounded to be overwhelmed with waves of fear sparked by receiving a scholarship from an employee organization. I was unable to receive the award personally, and the organization leader asked me to send someone to the ceremony on my behalf. He said spouses generally substitute for absent recipients. When I considered asking my husband Larry (a 34-year employee) to accept on my behalf, a feeling of panic washed over me when I thought that I would be coming out to a room full of coworkers, many of whom I did not personally know, and also would out my partner who also was out at work! Larry accepted for me and was treated most graciously, as I anticipated. But what irony in being recognized for academic accomplishments, including a dissertation that used coming out as the context, plus being an out employee working on diversity issues at work for many years, and still having fear and shame come up so strongly and unexpectedly. I believe, and this study strongly supports, that coming out never ends. Disclosure is a discrete part of the coming out process and perhaps the most visible piece, but the internal machinations of managing a

stigmatized invisible identity are continuous, endless, and active, even for someone as out  
as me.

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**APPENDIX A:**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The following are examples of open-ended questions posed to participants, divided into first and second interviews.

**Interview #1**

1. How do you define or describe “coming out” and “being out”—and what do these experiences mean to you?
2. How did you feel when you first thought to yourself that you might be different/gay?  
Probe: When was that? What did you do about it?
3. What triggered this realization?
4. How did you decide to come out to others?
5. What was it that triggered this decision?  
Probe: Did you disclose of your own volition or did you feel threatened?
6. What part of coming out do you feel was most difficult? Most transformational?  
Probe: Coming out to yourself? To another—who?
7. How did you feel about gays and lesbians before you accepted that you might be gay yourself?
8. How much isolation did you feel as you came out?
9. How did you “learn” to come out—did you have a role model or guidance?  
Probe: Did you have written resources or guidance?
10. To grapple with feelings of possibly being gay, who did you talk to? What did you read?
11. How did you talk about feelings of being gay at that time?  
Probe: Fearful, hopeful, relieved?
12. Describe the reflection or self-talk you experienced at each stage of coming out.
13. What helped you reflect upon the prospect of being gay and coming out?  
Probe: Did you have others to talk to? Was it in person? Electronically?
14. How do you feel you’ve changed by coming out?  
Probe: Do you feel transformed? What does transformation mean to you?
15. How have your relationships with others changed since you came out?  
Probe: Do others treat you differently? Did any relationships improve or deteriorate?
16. Talk about the experience of coming out in each area of your life—home, work, church, social, family. How did each differ? Who did you talk to in each context?
17. Looking back, how does your view now of being gay differ from before you came out?
18. In what ways are you a different person today than you were before coming out?  
Probe: Are you more/less happy, trusting, content, confident, open, present?
19. If you could come out all over again, would you do anything differently?  
Probe: What? Why?
20. What was your biggest surprise from the coming out process?
21. Is there anything else you would like to share about your coming out?

Interview #2 was done after both researcher and participant had an opportunity to review the transcript for interview #1.

### **Interview #2**

1. Did you review the transcript of our conversation, and do you have any comments?
2. Since our last conversation, did you had any additional insights into your coming out experience?
3. Were there any surprises or revelations that came as a result of our conversation?
4. Is there anything new you want to share relevant to this study?
5. I reviewed the transcript and have just a few follow-up questions, just to be sure I understand fully what you shared. [Follow-up questions unique to the individual participant to be determined, guided by the transcript of the first meeting.]
6. Do you have any questions for me at this time? Please contact me if you have any further insights you think may be relevant to this study.

**APPENDIX B:**  
**SUBJECTIVITY STATEMENT**

Moustakas (1994) argued that phenomenological analysis occurs in the mind of the researcher. An early step in the psychological phenomenology research methodology is epoché, a process Moustakas described as setting aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things. Epoche is intended to support the researcher in gazing upon phenomena so that they can be “known naively and freshly through a ‘purified’ consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). A technique for epoché is a subjectivity statement, to lay out for readers the researcher’s experience to aid readers in weighing truthfulness and the potential for bias. In the interest of epoché and transparency for readers, I offer personal background information. First, I share the epistemological lens I use for this study followed by some personal history that informs my interest and experience with regards to transformative learning in the context of coming out.

In exploring the nature of discourse in the transformative learning experience of coming out, I come from the radical humanist perspective as described by Burrell and Morgan (1979), a paradigm defined by its concern to develop a sociology of radical change from a subjectivist standpoint. Its approach to social science has much in common with that of the interpretive paradigm, in that it views the social world from a perspective tends to be nominalist, antipositivist, voluntaristic, and ideographic. However, its frame of reference is “committed to a view of society which emphasizes the importance of overthrowing or transcending the limitations of existing social arrangements” (p. 32). Critical theory falls within this paradigm, a worldview that I resonate with.

I am a gay man. From an early age, I remember feeling “different” from other little boys but could not articulate those feelings—a common experience for gay and lesbian children. I first came out in 1982 in my personal life but kept my professional life separate. On the job, through a progression of career changes, it was my practice to be out to a very few selected coworkers, but I generally considered myself closeted and saw no need to jeopardize a job by disclosing something I rationalized as having nothing to do with my professional life. Yet, I found this compartmentalizing of my identity to be a growing burden and felt resentment that I did not feel fully welcome and embraced at work. That was my perception of the workplace, anyway. My non-gay coworkers freely shared information about their spouses and children, but I did not feel safe sharing my personal life in the same way. I was in a committed relationship with a man but felt like I had to remain silent or be vague, playing games with pronouns to remain aloof. I often felt isolated, with few others in the workplace with whom to conduct meaningful discourse.

Until recently, I was an upper-level manager at the headquarters of a major global airline. In 1993, outside events transpired with my employer that prompted my decision to come out and be out. A few other gay people outside of work provided encouragement and support through limited discourse, helping me build the confidence and courage to come out, but some of my reflection and discourse was internal. I reached a point where I sensed it was less of a risk than I assumed earlier and my coming out would actually benefit the company and, I found, benefit me. Once out, I felt new freedom, like a burden was beginning to lift. The fears and assumptions about not being accepted and limiting my career proved unfounded. Those with whom I worked continued to show me

respect—in some cases more respect for making what was seen as a brave move of coming out—and our relationships are more authentic because of it. I look back to that pivotal time as a period of transformative learning and growth. My perception of self changed. I was changed.

Since then, I assumed a leadership role with my employer on issues related to gay men and lesbians as employees, as employee spouses, and as consumers of my company's services. I was a founding member of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) employee resource group on the corporate diversity advisory council, I provide extensive communication and strategic support to the marketing efforts toward the gay community, and I was a trusted advisor to the human resources department and corporate officers on issues of workplace and marketplace policies and practices. As a result, my employer leads its industry and has repeatedly been named a top employer and service provider by gay organizations across the country. It has earned a top score in the Human Rights Campaign's annual Corporate Equality Index.

Through my willingness to come out and be out, I also showed patience and leadership as my employer adjusted to new workplace and marketplace realities of inclusion and equality. I identify with what is described (Myerson, 2003; Creed & Scully, 2000) as a "tempered radical"—an employee who wants to succeed in his or her organization yet also insist on living by personal values and identities. "They want to rock the boat, and they want to stay in it" (Myerson, 2003, p. xi). How I actualize this is by being a good team member who also continually is pushing my organization's boundaries and questioning basic assumptions through gentle persuasion and diplomacy. This is true of other issues that I care about, too, in addition to sexual orientation. My

tempered radicalism has measurably helped my employer through increased gay market share and revenue and helped coworkers through corporate adoption of equal employment policies. By staying closeted, no doubt my efficacy would be much less as would my feelings of loyalty and willingness to go the extra steps for my employer.

My husband and I have been together since 1990; we were legally married in Canada in 2004. We both worked at the same company. We are fully out in all areas of our lives and are both leaders in our local Unitarian Universalist church. We helped lead the “Welcoming Congregation” accreditation initiative that resulted in the 2008 designation of our church as a space that is welcoming and inclusive of GLBT people.

My activism makes it clear that I believe there is great power in coming out and being out in life. While coming out can be a transformative learning experience to the individual, having employees who are out also transforms the workplace. My own experience, I believe, mirrors coming out experiences of others in many ways. So for me, coming out is affirming, liberating and political. But in order to capture the essence of their experience and explore the transformative learning aspects, I practiced epoché—being intentional in suspending my own experience and avoiding comparison. It is easy to compare and even judge others’ experiences against my own, but they are on their own journeys and timelines, and I remained cognizant and respectful of that process and experience as being uniquely their own.

**APPENDIX C:**  
**RECRUITMENT AND INVITATION LETTERS**

**Recruitment Letter**

*This letter was emailed to professional colleagues and contacts at gay rights organizations and gay professional and community groups or forums with a primarily gay audience or membership, seeking referrals to identify candidates.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student at The George Washington University, working on my dissertation, and am recruiting participants to be part of this study, “Coming Out and the Nature of Discourse in Transformative Learning Theory.” Specifically, this research centers on the transformative nature of the coming out experience for gay men.

I need your assistance in identifying qualified individuals who may be willing to participate and meet the criteria for this research. Please review the following background information and let me know if you think of someone who may qualify.

*1. What are the criteria?*

I seek up to 10 participants for my study. To participate, the person must

- Be a gay man who was born a biological male
- Be at least 21 years old
- Be a U.S. resident
- Be out in all areas of his life (work, home, social, spiritual, etc.)
- Have come out within the past 8 years (i.e., since 2000)
- Describe coming out as a transformational experience

*2. What do you mean by “transformational”?*

Transformational can mean many things, but this study relies on the definition given by Mezirow. See questions 5 and 6 below for descriptions of Mezirow’s theory and descriptions of transformation.

*3. What is the role of each participant?*

Potential participants will be provided with sufficient information to choose to be involved in the study, and they may change their mind and withdraw at any point without consequence. Participation includes two in-depth interviews, approximately 90 minutes each, to discuss their coming out experiences. Interviews will be taped and transcribed, and participants will review the transcripts to ensure accuracy and completeness after each. In addition, participants will be able to examine findings and contribute to additional conclusions. Confidentiality will be respected. Participants will receive no payment for participation in this nonsponsored study.

#### *4. What are the potential risks or benefits of the study?*

Participating in this study should not involve any physical risks, although it is possible that responding to questions and reflecting on coming out experiences could give rise to emotional discomfort. Participants can withdraw at any time from the study. While confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, every effort will be made to maintain the anonymity of participants; they will not be identifiable in the study. The benefit to participants could include increased self-awareness and a deeper personal understanding of coming out and being out. The study will make contributions to knowledge in the realms of adult learning and coming out theory.

#### *5. What is this study about?*

For gay men and lesbians, “coming out of the closet” is often described as being transformational. It is a defiant step that counters societal stigma to live more authentically and open. I believe that the coming out process closely resembles Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (1978), which describes a process in which the individual reflects on deeply held assumptions, engages in critical discourse with trusted others, and takes action as a result.

In Mezirow’s theory, discourse with trusted others is essential for transformation to occur, but the ideal conditions for such discourse (e.g., unrestricted exchange with a trusted other, freedom from coercion or judgment) are not available to those who are marginalized, such as gays and lesbians. Ideal conditions for discourse may be absent, yet transformation occurs. This study will explore the coming out experience through in-depth interviews with gay men to understand how discourse occurred, despite societal and cultural prohibitions.

#### *6. What is Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning?*

Mezirow describes a transformative learning experience as often involving a deep and profound change in one’s sense of self. It is a process by which an individual examines taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Mezirow believed that significant transformative learning involves three stages—critical reflection of assumptions, discourse to validate the new critically derived insight, and action. Using these three general stages as a framework, Mezirow suggested that transformation often occurs in some variation of 10 phases in which clarity of meaning emerges (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships

10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

I need your help in identifying 10 qualified individuals who meet the criteria outlined above. If you know of individuals who you believe may be qualified and interested in participation, please feel free to contact me at [tkincaid@gwu.edu](mailto:tkincaid@gwu.edu) or by phone at 817-776-3567.

Sincerely,

Tim Kincaid  
Doctoral Student  
The George Washington University

## Invitation Letter

*This letter was shared with potential participants for the study.*

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a doctoral student at The George Washington University, working on my dissertation, and am recruiting participants to be part of this study, “Coming Out and the Nature of Discourse in Transformative Learning Theory.” Specifically, this research centers on the transformative nature of the coming out experience for gay men.

I understand that you may be willing to participate and meet the criteria for this research, and I appreciate your consideration. Please review the following background information to decide if you are interested and believe you may qualify to participate.

### *1. What are the criteria?*

I seek up to 10 participants for my study. To participate, the person must

- Be a gay man who was born a biological male
- Be at least 21 years old
- Be a U.S. resident
- Be out in all areas of his life (work, home, social, spiritual, etc.)
- Have come out within the past 8 years (i.e., since 2000)
- Describe coming out as a transformational experience

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Transformational can mean many things, but this study relies on the definition given by Mezirow. See questions 5 and 6 below for descriptions of Mezirow’s theory and descriptions of transformation.

### *3. What is the role of each participant?*

Potential participants will be provided with sufficient information to choose to be involved in the study, and they may change their mind and withdraw at any point without consequence. Participation includes two in-depth interviews, approximately 90 minutes each, to discuss their coming out experiences. Interviews will be taped and transcribed, and participants will review the transcripts to ensure accuracy and completeness after each. In addition, participants will be able to examine findings and contribute to additional conclusions. Confidentiality will be respected. Participants will receive no payment for participation in this nonsponsored study.

### *4. What are the potential risks or benefits of the study?*

Participating in this study should not involve any physical risks, although it is possible that responding to questions and reflecting on coming out experiences could give rise to emotional discomfort. Participants can withdraw at any time from the study. While confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, every effort will be made to maintain the anonymity of participants; they will not be identifiable in the study. The benefit to participants could include increased self-awareness and a deeper personal understanding of coming out and

being out. The study will make contributions to knowledge in the realms of adult learning and coming out theory.

*5. What is this study about?*

For gay men and lesbians, “coming out of the closet” is often described as being transformational. It is a defiant step that counters societal stigma to live more authentically and open. I believe that the coming out process closely resembles Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (1978), which describes a process in which the individual reflects on deeply held assumptions, engages in critical discourse with trusted others, and takes action as a result.

In Mezirow’s theory, discourse with trusted others is essential for transformation to occur, but the ideal conditions for such discourse are not available to those who are marginalized (e.g., unrestricted exchange with a trusted other, freedom from coercion or judgment), such as gays and lesbians. Ideal conditions for discourse may be absent, yet transformation occurs. This study will explore the coming out experience through in-depth interviews with gay men to understand how discourse was done, despite societal and cultural prohibitions.

*6. What is Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning?*

Mezirow describes a transformative learning experience as often involving a deep and profound change in one’s sense of self. It is a process by which an individual examines taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Mezirow believed that significant transformative learning involves three stages—critical reflection of assumptions, discourse to validate the new critically derived insight, and action. Using these three general stages as a framework, Mezirow suggested that transformation often occurs in some variation of 10 phases in which clarity of meaning emerges (Mezirow & Associates, 2000, p. 22):

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective

*7. If I’m interested and I believe I qualify, what is the next step?*

If you are interested in participating, the next step is a brief telephone interview to answer your questions and establish that you meet the criteria for the study. Please feel

free to contact me with any questions or to schedule a telephone call at [tkincaid@gwu.edu](mailto:tkincaid@gwu.edu) or by phone at 817-776-3567.

8. *Do you know someone else who might be interested in participating?*

Please feel free to pass along this study outline to another who you feel may meet the criteria and could be interested in participating.

Sincerely,

Tim Kincaid  
Doctoral Student  
The George Washington University

**APPENDIX D:**  
**RESEARCH CONSENT FORM**

**Coming Out and the Nature of Discourse in Transformative Learning Theory**

GWU IRB number: 100640

Principal Investigator: Timothy S. Kincaid

Telephone number: 817-482-1216

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**1. Introduction**

You are invited to participate in a research study under the direction of Timothy S. Kincaid of the Department of Human and Organizational Studies, The George Washington University (GWU). Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary.

**2. Why is this study being done?**

You are being asked to take part in this study because you indicated that you are a gay, biologically male individual who has been out since 2000, are out in all areas of your life, are at least 21 years of age, live in the United States, and experienced the coming out process as transformational. The purpose of this study is to explore the coming out experience through the lens of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, with special focus on the nature of the discourse conducted as part of coming out. The research interviews will be conducted at a private location that is mutually convenient. A total of up to 10 participants from throughout the U.S. will be asked to take part in this study.

**3. What is involved in this study?**

If you choose to take part in this study, you will participate in two in-depth interviews exploring your coming out experience—with a focus on the reflection, the questioning of deeply held assumptions, and the dialogue with others that occurred to arrive at a shift in perspective. Each interview will be digitally recorded and then transcribed, and you will be asked to review the transcripts to ensure accuracy and completeness. When the dissertation is completed, the tapes will be erased. Once the interviews are completed, the investigator will analyze the interview transcripts from all participants, performing a phenomenological reduction of the texts to explore the essence of their experiences. The following activities are specifically research related: interviews and review of transcripts. The total amount of time you will spend in connection with this study is approximately 3 hours.

**4. What are the risks of participating in this study?**

There are no physical risks associated with this study. Participating in this study poses no risks that are not ordinarily encountered in daily life. There is, however, the possible risk of loss of confidentiality. Every effort will be made to keep your information

confidential; however, this cannot be guaranteed. Some of the questions you will be asked as part of this study may make you feel uncomfortable. You may refuse to answer any of the questions, and you may take a break at any time during the study. You may stop your participation in this study at any time.

### **5. Are there benefits to taking part in this study?**

You will not benefit directly from your participation in the study, though the interviews and questions about your coming out experience may be useful and interesting to you in terms of greater self-awareness and personal understanding. The benefits to science and humankind that might result from this study are threefold. First, the study will account for the problems encountered by marginalized individuals—particularly related to access to resources and going against cultural scripts and systems of beliefs. Second, for the field of adult learning, this study may make a more serious engagement with the system of stratification in society, which embeds adult learning. Looking at one particular system of stratification (gay men) and examining transformation in the context of that stratification could be generalized to other issues. Perhaps this will make adult learning an even more serious mechanism for social transformation and justice. And it may give adult educators new insight into how to facilitate transformative learning experiences for those who are marginalized. And third, this study will add to the understanding of the coming out process through the lenses of adult learning and transformative learning theory.

### **6. What are my options?**

You do not have to participate in this study if you do not want to. Should you decide to participate, you can later change your mind at any time.

### **7. Will I receive payment for being in this study?**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

### **8. Can I be taken off the study?**

The investigator can decide to withdraw you from the study at any time. You could be taken off the study for reasons related solely to you (for example, not following study-related directions from the investigator) or because the entire study is stopped.

### **9. How will my privacy be protected?**

If results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who participated in this study will not be named or identified. GWU will not release any information about your research involvement without your written permission, unless required by law. Audio recordings of interviews, written transcripts, and other research records will be handled carefully to support confidentiality. Recordings will be erased once the dissertation is completed. Participants will be

assigned an alias; no actual names will be used in the analysis documents and final dissertation or subsequent publications.

## **10. Problems or Questions**

The Office of Human Research of The George Washington University, at telephone number 202-994-2715, can provide further information about your rights as a research participant. If you think you have been harmed in this study, you can report this to the Principal Investigator of this study. Further information regarding this study may be obtained by contacting Andrea Casey, Principal Investigator, at telephone number 202-994-1152. For problems arising during evenings or weekends, you may call Tim Kincaid at 817-776-3567.

\*Please keep a copy of this document in case you want to read it again.

**APPENDIX E:**  
**SUMMARY OF COMPOSITE TEXTURAL-STRUCTURAL**  
**DESCRIPTION ANALYSIS**

Table E-1  
*How Each Ideal Condition Was Present/Available for Participants Ed and Iain*

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Ed</b> Came out early 50s	<b>Iain</b> Came out around 40
1. More accurate and complete information	<p><b>Observe others</b> Gay married men and fathers.</p> <p><b>Therapist</b> For both discourse and information. Shared experiences—gay, married, parent. Older and more experienced than Ed.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You have choices. A good life as an out gay man is possible. You are not alone as a gay man, gay father, gay married man.</p>	<p><b>Observe others</b> Out coworkers; gay men who he related to.</p> <p><b>Online info</b> Other gay fathers, masculine men who are gay.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You are not the only one. Gay relationships are possible. Gay men can be masculine.</p>
2. Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception	<p><b>Therapist</b> Related well, similar backgrounds, trust and easy connection; safe/trusting relationship for discourse.</p> <p><b>Self-talk</b> Written long hand, to make meaning, decisions.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You can trust some people with this.</p>	<p><b>Observe others</b> Out coworkers appeared comfortable, safe, happy.</p> <p><b>Online discourse and observation</b> Perceived privacy, safety, ability to manage ID.</p> <p><b>Self-talk</b> Decided that hiding was more painful than coming out was scary.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You are not alone. Possible to be out and safe.</p>

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Ed</b> Came out early 50s	<b>Iain</b> Came out around 40
3. Open to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel	<b>Therapist</b> Safe/trusting relationship for examining alternative points of view.	<b>Observe others</b> Coworkers who are comfortable being out, pictures of partners on their desk. Understands why many gay men don't understand his marriage and fatherhood. <b>Online discourse</b> Connection with masculine gay men he related to.
4. Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively	<b>Self-talk</b> Written long-hand, for understanding; decided whether or not to come out. <b>Therapist</b> A safe/trusting resource to examine beliefs and alternative ideas.	<b>Observe others</b> Coworkers who were out, with loving relationships. <b>Self-talk</b> Decided that hiding was more painful than coming out was scary. <b>Online discourse and observation</b> Possible to be gay and masculine. Possible to be gay, married, and a father.
5. Aware of context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one's own	<b>Therapist</b> Safe/trusting other for looking back and understanding beliefs informed by past	<b>Observe others</b> Out coworkers reminded him he made different choices in life that made him unhappy. <b>Self-talk</b> He could not see staying closeted and miserable.
6. Equal opportunity to participate in various roles of discourse	<b>Therapist</b> Safe/trusting other with whom to talk and listen	<b>Online discourse</b> Without time or space constraints, connected with similar men all over the world to talk and listen.
7. Willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.

Table E-2

*How Each Ideal Condition Was Present/Available for Participants Calvin and Derek*

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Calvin</b> Came out late 40s	<b>Derek</b> Came out teens/20s
1. More accurate and complete information	<p><b>Observe others</b> Normal, out, happy, interactions, behavior.</p> <p><b>Online</b> Information and coming out stories.</p> <p><b>Coming out seminar</b> Information, coming out stories, discourse about personal history, assumptions and approaches to coming out; connected with similar men, shared experience.</p> <p><b>Therapist</b> Discourse about family expectations, assumptions, how to handle situations, what is really true.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment safe, supportive; older, more diverse group, away from home.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Gay is normal. Happy and out are possible.</p>	<p><b>Observe media</b> Positive images of gays on TV, living normal happy lives.</p> <p><b>Online</b> Chatroom observation of exchanges; engage with others to get feedback, ask questions, receive encouragement.</p> <p><b>First boyfriend</b> Built self-confidence; for the first time felt lovable for true self.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment safe, supportive; older, more diverse group, away from home.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You are lovable. You can be out and accepted. There is nothing wrong with being gay or with you.</p>
2. Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception	<p><b>Observe others</b> Out, safe, confident, accepted.</p> <p><b>Therapist</b> A safe/trusting relationship for discourse; honest and direct feedback.</p> <p><b>Church friend</b> A safe/trusting relationship for discourse; honest and direct feedback.</p> <p><b>Coming out seminar</b> A safe/trusting space in which assumptions were challenged; honest and direct feedback.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Safe to be out. The right to be gay and out.</p>	<p><b>Observe media</b> Positive gay TV images contrasts with negative scripts.</p> <p><b>Online</b> Perceived security and identity control provided safe space in which to gather information and engage in discourse.</p> <p><b>Self-talk</b> Written in blog where access was restricted and readers could provide feedback, alternative perspectives.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment was safe, supportive, and helpful for coming out.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Gay is more than sex. Okay to be gay, you are good.</p>

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Calvin</b> Came out late 40s	<b>Derek</b> Came out teens/20s
3. Open to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel	<b>Therapist</b> A safe/trusting relationship for examining alternative points of view, challenging assumptions about family.	<b>Online</b> Participated in chatrooms, put thoughts on blog, invited and accepted feedback. <b>Context</b> College environment offered broad range of perspectives, diverse backgrounds.
4. Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively	<b>Observe others</b> How others “did” out. <b>Therapist</b> A safe/trusting space for discourse; debrief after coming out experiences for learning, success, failure. <b>Coming out seminar</b> A safe/trusting space for connection with others coming out, discourse about one another’s experiences each week. <b>Church leader</b> A safe/trusting relationship for discourse; felt heard and cared about.	<b>Observe media</b> Positive gay images provided options, examples of how to come out and be out. <b>Online</b> Chatroom discourse was like going to a therapist, with feedback and safe examination of ideas. <b>Self-talk</b> Written, mostly as a blog, to put out ideas and get feedback from selected trusted others.
5. Aware of context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one’s own	<b>Coming out seminar</b> Discussed assumptions and sources, heard and compared stories. <b>Scripts</b> Double standard for gay and heterosexual relationships.	<b>Online</b> Chatroom discourse can bring clarity on assumptions, challenge ideas. <b>Self-talk</b> Written blog invites comments, opportunity for challenge of ideas.
6. Equal opportunity to participate in various roles of discourse	<b>Therapist</b> Safe/trusted space to share. <b>Coming out seminar</b> Safe/trusting space to share.	<b>Online</b> Chatroom-mediated conversations, allowing speaking and listening. <b>Self-talk</b> Written, blog format let others comment too.
7. Willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and tentative best judgment as a test of validity. . .	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.

Table E-3

*How Each Ideal Condition Was Present/Available for Participants Alan and Frank*

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Alan</b> Came out early 20s	<b>Frank</b> Came out 20s
1. More accurate and complete information	<p><b>Observed others</b> Had gay sister and uncle, whom family loved. Saw gay men in town who were successful.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You are not alone. Life as a gay man can be fulfilling, okay to be.</p>	<p><b>Online info</b> Chatrooms, websites for information. Read coming out stories to prepare himself.</p> <p><b>Online discourse</b> Having conversations, connecting deeper about experience as a gay man in the world.</p> <p><b>Discourse</b> Therapist was first person he told, talked about it.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Others out there are like you. Help is available. Possible to be gay and fulfilled.</p>
2. Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Examined assumptions, expectations from family, about marriage and children.</p> <p><b>Self-talk</b> Imagining what it would be like to have a husband and life, letting go of heteronormative expectations. Affirming, self-accepting later.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Okay not to marry, have children. Gay is okay. Your family still loves you.</p>	<p><b>Online</b> Perceived safety and the ability to manage ID made Internet a low-risk resource for information and discourse.</p> <p><b>Therapist</b> Structured relationship made it safe to come out, talk about being gay. Mentor at work helped him talk out problems.</p> <p><b>Family</b> Much fear about disclosing to family and friends. Reception was very positive, supportive. Learned that this one secret was not greater than their love of him.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> There are safe places and people with whom to talk. You are not alone. Your family and friends love you as you are.</p>
3. Open to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel		<p><b>Online discourse</b> Willing to let in stories of others, helping counter his long-held assumptions.</p>

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Alan</b> Came out early 20s	<b>Frank</b> Came out 20s
4. Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively	<b>Self-talk</b> Examined assumptions and expectations from family about marriage and children.	<b>Online info and discourse</b> Perceived safety, ability to manage ID made Internet a low-risk resource for information and discourse. <b>Therapist</b> Structured relationship made it safe to come out, talk about being gay.
5. Aware of context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one's own	<b>Self-talk</b> Knew what he believed was expected of him by family and realized how being gay countered.	<b>Online info and discourse</b> Stories from others and alternative ideas helped show where beliefs originated, questioned validity.
6. Equal opportunity to participate in various roles of discourse	<b>Self-talk</b> Did not describe discourse with another, so played roles internally.	<b>Online discourse</b> Participated in exchanges. Described more of an inquiring, listing role. <b>Therapist</b> Structured relationship made it safe to openly talk about being gay.
7. Willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment	<b>Unclear</b> Did not describe engaging in verbal discourse.	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.

Table E-4

*How Each Ideal Condition Was Present/Available for Participants Greg and Harrison*

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Greg</b> Came out early 20s	<b>Harrison</b> Came out late teens/20s
1. More accurate and complete information	<p><b>Observed others</b> Saw how gay men interacted, were treated.</p> <p><b>Observed media</b> Saw gay images on TV, in movies, for how they lived, behaved, came out.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment safe, more mature, comfortable; huge contrast with high school.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Many ways to be gay. Gay is normal. It's safe to disclose.</p>	<p><b>Discourse</b> Talk to out gay childhood friend, helped make meaning.</p> <p><b>Book</b> Read sexuality text for basic facts before coming out.</p> <p><b>Observed others</b> Liberal parents, church that had gay minister, just don't talk about it; saw gays in media.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> Gay is okay, tolerated, but please don't discuss it.</p>
2. Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Built confidence by championing, building up self.</p> <p><b>Observed others</b> Out gay men appeared confident, safe.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> It's safe to disclose. I'm good, it's okay.</p>	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Incrementally moved from negative/denial to positive/acceptance, out to self.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College was place he decided to fully come out. It was a more mature, larger, inclusive environment away from home.</p>
3. Open to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel	<p><b>Observed others</b> See how others behave and were treated and the reasons.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment offered broad range of perspectives, diverse background.</p>	<p><b>Context</b> College was place to explore, connect, consider. First identified as bisexual, then gay as let go of others' expectations.</p>
4. Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively	<p><b>Observed others</b> Saw how gay men could be in the world.</p> <p><b>Observed media</b> Heavily relied on TV portrayals of gay men to inform ways in which one could be out.</p>	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Questioned assumptions about expectations, fears about disclosure, what it means to be gay.</p>
5. Aware of context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions, including one's own	<p><b>Observed others</b> Interactions by and treatment of gay men.</p> <p><b>Observed media</b> Saw variations on how to come out, be out, compared with assumptions he held.</p>	<p><b>Discourse</b> With gay friend, discussed shared childhood memories, experiences.</p>

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Greg</b> Came out early 20s	<b>Harrison</b> Came out late teens/20s
6. Equal opportunity to participate in various roles of discourse	<b>Discourse not described</b> Observation of others and media images of GLBT to make meaning, in lieu of discourse.	<b>Described very little discourse</b> Meaning making during coming out seemed internal, self-talk, observation.
7. Willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment	<b>Unclear</b> Did not describe engaging in verbal discourse.	<b>Yes</b> This was a transformative learning experience, so by operational definition, he was willing and open; presumably remains so.

Table E-5

*How Each Ideal Condition Was Present/Available for Participant Jackson*

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Jackson</b> Came out first in 20s, then fully in 40s
1. More accurate and complete information	<p><b>Interactions with others</b> Came out briefly in college with small group. Joined leather group in his 40s. Both a source of connection, modeling, experimentation.</p> <p><b>Employer</b> Had progressive policies and a GLBT employee resource group.</p> <p><b>GLBT organizations</b> Human Rights Campaign mentioned as example of resource.</p> <p><b>Observing media</b> Gay images that he could relate to in his 40s.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment facilitated connection, exploration, alternative ideas.</p> <p><b>Scripts</b> You are not alone. There are gay men who are a lot like you. This is who you really are. You're okay; people can be different. You are safe being out at work.</p>
2. Freedom from coercion and distorting self-deception	<p><b>Interactions with others</b> Came out briefly in college with small group of friends. Joined a gay men's group in his 40s. Both a source of connection, modeling, experimentation. Did not describe discourse per se, but made meaning from interactions.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment was a safe space for connection, exploration, alternative ideas.</p> <p><b>Self-talk</b> Championing himself, being "activist" for self to counter negative scripts. Described stopping self-talk near coming out time in 40s, to end internal deliberation and move ahead with disclosure, so self-talk would not become coercive and stop progress.</p>
3. Open to alternative points of view and empathy and concern about how others think and feel	<p><b>Connect with others</b> Curiosity to know more, feel better, find himself. Did not describe discourse per se, but meaning making derived from meeting, interacting with other gay men.</p>
4. Ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Described internal deliberation.</p> <p><b>Connect with others</b> Not described as discourse per se, but modeling by gay men's group members showed him options, countered stereotypes.</p>
5. Aware of context of ideas and taken-for-granted assumptions including own	<p><b>Self-talk</b> Concluded he lived a life not of his own, but of heteronormative expectations. He knew it came from his Catholic upbringing and family expectations.</p>

<b>Ideal conditions for discourse</b>	<b>Jackson</b> Came out first in 20s, then fully in 40s
6. Equal opportunity to participate in various roles of discourse	<p><b>Connect with others</b> Did not describe discourse per se but experimenting with friends in his 20s and participating in club in 40s was experiential.</p> <p><b>Context</b> College environment felt free and safe for connection, exploration, alternative ideas.</p>
7. Willingness to seek understanding, agreement, and tentative best judgment as a test of validity until new perspectives, evidence or arguments are validated through discourse as yielding a better judgment	<p><b>Unclear</b> Did not describe engaging in verbal discourse.</p>