

**Navigations and Negotiations of Identities and
Experiences of Same-Gender-Loving Males of Color Over Time**

BY

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DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

Dear same-gender-loving male of color,

If you feel like you are the only same-gender-loving male of color in the world, feeling frightened, misunderstood, battered, torn, and busied because of your sexual identity and your ethnicity, I am here to tell you are not alone. There are many of us out here; some of us are open about who we are and some of us are not, but know that you are not alone. There is support for you out here. You may not find it in another human, but sometimes you might find it in a movie, television show, book, or a simple letter. People might tell you that you are a sinner, weird, wrong, or other things because you do not fit their or society's idea of being a male. Just know you are who you are. You are important in this world, and you are meant to be here just the way you are; otherwise, God would not have given you life. You are an important and beautiful human being in the eyes of God or else you would not be here.

I was once where you are: feeling hidden or not being able to fully express myself as a same-gender-loving male of color because of the backlash of family and friends. There was probably a time when you felt that you were worthless and lost all desire to live anymore. When you feel that way, when you are hanging on your last rope and about to fall, tie a knot in the rope and hang on. I am a living testament that you can make it through. No one said that life would be easy, although it might look like life would have been easier if you were of a different ethnicity and sexual orientation. Those "others" have their problems also, though they might be a lot different than yours. Just know that you are loved, special, and valued despite what others say. You have a voice in this world, and it deserves to be heard because you are an important part of this world. You may not see it now, but believe me, you have something important to contribute to this world even if you have not realized it yet. If you are persistent and refuse to give up, you will find your own place in this world, and the rewards that it will bring.

I excel when it comes to supporting others and giving encouragement, but I am not good at listening to my own advice because I am still a work in progress. I still get frightened and feel insecure about being a same-gender-loving male of color. However, what keeps me going is that

I realize there are things I need to do to help others in their journey as same-gender-loving males of color. That is why I believe God created me. Just like me, you have endless possibilities, so find your voice, release your burdens, and live your truth. Know that there is a special place for you in this world so go and live your life to the fullest.

Love and Peace,

Dr. David C. Hickson, PhD

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“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

This is my favorite verse from the Bible because it is this scripture that got me through the PhD program. I would meditate on this scripture when I felt like I would never complete and successfully defend my dissertation, and many times when I felt like giving up. It was in those times when I would remember and meditate on my favorite scripture and continue to work through it. Therefore, I must first thank the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for their abundant grace and favor. I pray that I was a clear reflection of Him while researching and writing this dissertation and that my experiences will be an inspiration to others. This was a long and difficult journey for me. Something that would take people usually 6 to 8 years on average has taken me—I am too embarrassed to say—let’s just say it was longer than the average. With multiple deaths within my family and the recent death of my boyfriend, Andre, then coming down with various health issues, I thought I might never get a break. However, with God in front of me, I did persevere, which led to this day.

I would not be writing this acknowledgment if it was not for my dissertation chair Dr. Steven Tozer, who took a chance when others had given up on me. Without Dr. Tozer’s guidance and support, I would not have made it through. It was in Dr. Tozer’s Social Foundations of Education class that which he told us to find an article that interested us and be prepared to discuss it in the next class, which set me on the path of researching and writing about same-gender-loving males of color that would be an important topic to add to the field of

educational research. Dr. Tozer would always tell me that I must get my rump in a chair and write, and that is what I did. I will be forever grateful for your mentorship and for challenging me to better articulate my ideas as an academic scholar.

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I heard that you are lucky to have one best friend, I am fortunate to have two. I would like to thank my other best friend Leroy who is a same-gender-loving male of color who I met through Adodi. Leroy, you were always there for me and understanding me when I felt like the world did not. I thank God that I found a same-gender-loving friend. At times we might disagree about things, but I know that you will always have my back.

My dissertation would not be complete without the participants in my research: C.J., George, and Adrian. Your courage to be open about your same-gender-loving identity inspired me be more open about my identity. I thank you for your honesty and openness during the

interview process when we laughed and cried about our life experiences as same-gender-loving males of color. You were willing to be open about your lives, sharing your pain, fears, and joys. You stuck with me through this journey, and it was your bravery in sharing your experiences that will be an inspiration to other same-gender-loving males of color who might be going through the challenges in their lives. All of you had a story to tell and now your voice will be heard.

I would like to thank Dr. Evonne F. Blakey and the members of our prayer, meditation, and reading group, Growing, Loving, Sharing (GLS), who also inspired me to not to give up. GLS taught me that there is only one which is God, and God is all there is. It was Dr. Blakey, my mentor, spiritual advisor, second mother, and a professor as an undergraduate at Chicago State University that told me there are only two people you can depend on, that is God and yourself. Thank you, Dr. Blakey, for your words of wisdom and being an inspiration to me.

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Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank my family because I am the first Dr. in the family. I would like to thank my late parents John Hickson Sr. and Tommie L. Hickson for their unconditional love. Although they did not approve of my same-gender-loving identity and at times showed it, they always had a great love for me. They always wanted my siblings and me to get a good education to strive to be the best at all that we put our minds to. I know they are looking down at me from heaven as proud parents to have a child who is the first one in the

family to be called a doctor. I would like to thank my siblings Gwendolyn, Angela, Tracey, my late brother John Jr., all my nieces and nephews, and grand-nieces and nephews for their love, constant prayers, and support. They love telling people that have an uncle who is a doctor with a PhD.

To all other family and friends, my heartfelt gratitude. As I close this journey of my life, it is simply the closing of a chapter because this is by no means the end. There is so much more work to be done and voices to be heard as same-gender-loving males of color and I am ready for the new and brilliant experiences that lies ahead.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
A. Introduction and Background.....	1
1. An Early Memory.....	1
2. An Adult Memory.....	5
3. Complications: The Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome and the Crushed Paper Cup Metaphor.....	5
B. Statement of the Problem.....	12
C. Purpose of Study and Research Question.....	12
D. Significance of the Study.....	14
E. Significance of the Problem.....	15
II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RELATED LITERATURE	20
A. Theoretical Framework	20
B. Review of Related Literature	25
1. Overview and Positionality	25
2. Identity Development.....	29
3. Family Relations.....	32
4. Community Relations and Media Identity.....	34
a. Community Relations.....	34
b. Media Identity.....	38
5. Identity Evolution and Learning Multiple Identities Over Time	43
6. Religion and Spirituality.....	49
7. Navigating as Community Outcasts.....	54
8. Body Image.....	56
III. METHODOLOGY	60
A. Research Question and Significance of Method.....	60
B. Research Design.....	63
1. Using Personal Autoethnographic Narratives.....	63
2. An Evocative Personal Autobiographical Narrative.....	67
C. Interviews	71
1. Significance of Interviewing SGL Men of Color.....	71
2. Conducting Interviews.....	72
3. Coding the Interview Responses.....	76
IV. FINDINGS.....	78
A. The Participants.....	78
1. C.J.: The Nigerian American Security Guard.....	78
2. George: The Athlete and Life Coach.....	81
3. Adrian: The Technology Marketer.....	83

4.	The Researcher.....	85
B.	The Interview Using the Research Sub-Questions.....	87
C.	Emergent Themes.....	87
V.	DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION.....	155
A.	Introduction and Research Question.....	155
B.	Using Multi-Perspectival Frameworks.....	155
C.	Summary and Findings from Sub-questions.....	163
D.	Themes from Findings.....	172
1.	Isolation.....	172
2.	Loss.....	173
3.	Generational Differences.....	174
4.	Paradoxes.....	181
5.	Learning and Growing Through Navigating and Negotiating Identities.....	185
E.	Discussions.....	188
F.	Limitations.....	191
G.	Implications for Further Research.....	191
H.	Conclusion.....	193
	CITED LITERATURE.....	194
	APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS.....	213
	VITA.....	217

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>		<u>PAGE</u>
5.1	An Incomplete, Subjective, and Illustrative Timeline of Recent Events in SGL History as it Compares to Key Stages of the Study Participants' Trajectories in School.....	178

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SGL Same-Gender-Loving

ABSTRACT

Being part of any marginalized group is difficult to navigate in America. However, being part of two marginalized groups at the same time can be even more difficult: for example, being Black and gay. African American males suffer higher rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and stress-related illnesses than their white counterparts. For males who are same-gender-loving (SGL), without proper support, those challenges increase significantly. Although it is acknowledged that homophobia and racial marginalization influence how SGL African American males of color navigate their identities, there is little research on how they negotiate and navigate their identities over time. In response to the scarcity of information for educators, families, and communities on the relational dynamics of SGL males of color, four same-gender-loving males of color, including myself, related how we negotiated and navigated various identities over time. This qualitative study examined data gathered through personal and evocative autoethnographic stories and interviews with individual males who identified themselves as African American and SGL. Semi-structured interviews were used for the purpose of exploring participants' life experiences within the changing national culture with respect to SGL males of color. The study provided specific emphasis on the participants' racial identities and SGL same-gender-loving identities in cultural contexts over time. The themes that emerged from this study were isolation, loss, generational differences, learning and growing from experiences, and paradoxical experiences. The findings are useful in this study because through the oral history of the participants, their life stories provide a better understanding of how difficult it is to be part of two marginalized groups, yet they remain resilient in their lives.

However, what was needed, and still is needed, is the proper support to ensure that SGL males of color can navigate and negotiate their identities over time as successfully as any other group.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Introduction and Background

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014), the word *identity* has its origins in the Latin word *identidem* for “repeatedly”, a contraction for *idem et idem*, meaning “same and same”. Identity was first used in English in 1570, according to Merriam-Webster (2014). The current definition of identity is *a person who someone is: the name of a person; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that make a particular person or group different from others* (2014).

Growing up, I was forced to navigate and negotiate various experiences in my life based on the identity I had constructed for myself, which in turn was based on what I believed others who were close to me, and society more generally, expected.

Same-gender-loving, also known as SGL, is a term first used by African-American activist Cleo Manago as a description for homosexual and bisexual members of the African-American community (2009). This term emerged in the early 1990s as a way of culturally affirming African American homosexual identity. SGL was adopted as an Afrocentric alternative to Eurocentric homosexual markers such as the terms gay or lesbian, which do not specifically affirm and engage the historical and cultural aspects of people of African descent, according to Manago.

A.1. An Early Memory

I realized I was SGL at an early age in my early adolescent years around 8 or 9 years old, which is when most people question and become aware of their sexual orientation (Russell, Clark, & Clary, 2009). However, being SGL is something that just was not accepted in my

household but also not accepted in the African American community in general (Patton, 2011). According to a Pew Research Cox (2023), 39% of Black LGBT say their areas are not safe for lesbian, gay, or bisexual people. The majority of Black LGBT people from that report say they have experienced verbal insults or abuse (79%) or have been threatened with violence (60%). I can say my first SGL sexual encounter happened when I was about 7 years old with a friend of the same age whom my mother babysat for. One afternoon when students were able to come home for lunch, my friend and I were in my brother's and my room just talking and fooling around when my friend was telling me what his mother and father did naked. Having really no knowledge of sex except the things my brother told me from his health class, I was very curious. My friend pulled down his pants and told me to pull down mine. Not knowing what to expect and being incredibly curious I obliged. My friend came to me and hugged me tight, and I had to admit, it felt good as I hugged him back. Suddenly to my horror, my four-year-old sister opened the door catching me and my friend with our pants down and hugging each other. It was like being a deer caught in front of automobile headlights. We quickly pulled up our pants and begged and pleaded to my little sister not to tell my mother and she promised she would not tell. Feeling relieved I prayed my little sister would forget and occupy her mind on something else, but my relief was short-lived when I came home from school that late afternoon. I had failed to take into account my younger sister's pleasure of always seeing me in trouble.

When I got home from school as soon as I walked in the door, my mother was there towering over me, and before I could take off my coat and put down my book satchel, my mother started hitting me with heavy hits on my legs, backside, and back. She told me my sister told her what me and my friend had done as my heart began to race, streams of tears flowed down my face, as I could barely hold my bladder. With a severe, scowling, angry voice that sent shivers

throughout my body, the woman who everyone would say is the African American version of the picture-perfect 1950's and early 60's housewife and nurturing mother became a furious angry woman. My mother's eyes were flaming red and the look on her face was pure fury. It was a terrifying image of anger, disgust, rage, and repulsion. My mother told me that if she ever caught or heard of me doing that again, she would tell my father to take me out in the garage and skin me alive. I was frantically shaking, wide-eyed, and crying, as I looked at my mother not only feeling sheer terror but most of all ashamed and extremely dirty. To make my mother, who was the African American version of Donna Reed, the woman who attended my kindergarten assembly beaming with pride when I was the lead dancer in the Easter pageant, the woman who let me sleep with her when I was sick, the woman who cooked my favorite dinner, fried chicken with rice, to all of a sudden become as mean and vile as the witch in Hansel and Gretel was too much to comprehend. That night I lay in the bed staring at the ceiling as my brother snored softly in the next bed. I could not understand what I did that was so abhorrent as to make my mother hate me so much that she would have my father skin me alive. All I could do was picture him in our old garage holding me by one leg and beating the hell out of me as my flesh fell from my body, but still, I could not identify what I did that was so wrong, so repulsive. I did not hurt my friend, nor did he hurt me. We were not fighting, we did not use any swear words, and there was no bloodshed, yet according to my mother's reactions, what my friend and I did was an act that was so despicable, so contemptible it was justifiable to be beaten to death. Again, I tried to make sense of the entire situation, but there was no understanding as to why it was so wrong. All I knew, based on my mother's reaction, was that it was wrong and punishable by death.

As I continued to stare at the ceiling, I remembered the figurines of two little angel cherubs sitting and hugging each other. Both buck naked, both I assume boys because they had

curly short hair. That figurine was one of my mother's favorite pieces in her collection of knickknacks. Then there was the vase lamp with images of a bunch of little angels, cherubs again, naked, holding hands, laughing and playing, looking at each other lovingly. I remember when my brother was punished for breaking that lamp by having him glue it back together piece by piece. I pondered as to why it was acceptable for little angels in heaven to do this but not my friend and I who were not as naked as those angels were. Maybe because those angels mostly had blond hair, blue eyes, and pale skin, because there were no Black cherubs. It seemed like it was ok for little white boys to do this, but not little Black boys because little blond blue-eyed white boys at that age might have looked like angels, but not little fat ugly nappy haired Black boys like me. My mother did not reveal to my father or other siblings what had happened. All I knew from that day on any feelings of attraction, desire, and affection to another male had to be suppressed. This also led me to the belief that being gay, or anything related to homosexuality, was not necessarily a sin but just wrong and dirty.

My mother and I had battles over my wanting GI Joe action figures for Christmas in which she, my father, and my older sister referred to the toys as "sissy dolls"; or in my teen and young adult years my mother saying the dreaded "you need a girlfriend". I grew up thinking and feeling that everything relating to homosexuality was wrong and nasty, from the erotic desire of being in the boys' locker-room after swim class during my gym period and showering with a bunch of my naked schoolmates, to having nocturnal emissions, or the arousal of looking at a Playgirl magazine, and even masturbation. The guilt and the feeling of being not only wrong but feeling dirty was at times unbearable, however the most guilt-ridden part of growing as a SGL male was believing that if I did anything relating to homosexuality it caused misfortune to happen not only to me but also misfortune to the ones I love. Therefore, I had to navigate and

negotiate my SGL identity by suppressing it in order to mentally and emotionally survive in a society that not only marginalized my African American identity, but most importantly my SGL identity.

A.2. An Adult Memory

One early morning when I was about 42 years of age, I was watching a rerun of the *Boy Meets World Season 6 Episode 4*, “Friendly Persuasion” (1998), in which a professor asks her class this question: “Is a person able to alter a trait ingrained in his behavior makeup since childhood?” This question had me baffled because at first, I thought, yes, everyone has the strength of free will. Next, I asked myself then why I still thought of myself as being fat and ugly after all these years. Were my early experiences so profoundly embedded in me that they affected my current experiences and self-perception? I went one step further and asked myself why I have difficulty identifying as being SGL, whereas I can easily identify as being fat and ugly. However, most importantly, could my past experiences help alter my thinking and behavior and accept my SGL identity? I had to reflect on times of experiencing the identity of being fat and ugly that may shed light on the difficulty of changing, and most importantly accepting, my SGL identity and the experience of this phenomenon.

A.3. Complications: The Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome and the Crushed Paper Cup Metaphor

On a brisk winter evening, as I packed my things to leave an evening class at UIC after hearing everyone’s discourse about their research project or some aspect of what they will be writing, I left UIC, as in many other evenings, feeling like a complete failure. As I reflect on that recent evening, well into my doctoral studies, when it was my turn to expound on my research,

the feeling of nervousness overwhelmed me as I began to speak. With my voice quivering, my mind was racing, trying to sound intellectually “good looking” just as the classmates who had spoken before me, whom I shall metaphorically refer to as my “siblings”. The feeling of inadequacy invaded my body like a virus rapidly spreading across and hungrily killing the healthy cells and leaving me vulnerable to all sorts of diseases.

The words I had thought out and written in my notebook sounded good in my head as they were written, but when I began to speak, what came out of my mouth made me feel “ugly” because I felt I did not express myself as being intellectually “good looking”. This disease carries the oppressive symptoms of low self-esteem, hurt, shame, embarrassment, fear, the pain of disappointment, distrust, and intimidation, all reoccurring within me. Thinking and believing that I was not “looking good” intellectually, I began to have the same feelings I had when I was growing up, being the disappointed fat ugly brother or what I now refer to as the “disease” called The Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome.

The Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome is something I discovered I had at the impressionable age of beginning adolescence when one begins to take notice of one’s appearance. In my family of six children, two boys and four girls (miscarried one in mid-pregnancy), it was easy to notice certain characteristics among us, especially between my brother and me as the only males. My late brother, being the elder, was the true “father’s son,” named after my father and enjoying the same things as my father such as fishing, baseball, and scary movies (both laughed when viewing the movie, *The Exorcist* (Blatty & Friedkin, 1973) because they thought it was a comedy), and running in the streets at night with their buddies. I on the other hand did not like fishing because I did not see the enjoyment of sitting for hours waiting for a red and blue colored ball to jiggle or go underwater indicating that a fish was on the hook. I was not a big sports fan

even though I did like baseball and attended some games of both the Cubs and the White Sox. Instead, I wanted to learn to play the piano, but I could not because that extra money was used for my brother's karate lesson. As for running in the streets at night with my buddies, to me, it was a sure-fire way of getting into nothing but trouble as both my father and brother had done in their young bachelor years.

Even more apparent were the significant differences in the appearance between my brother and me. My brother was what I would identify as a dark chocolate version of Clark Gable with the thin mustache and that Rhett Butler smile. My brother was not tall like Gable, but he had a slender athletic build within which he could eat anything and the food he ate knew exactly where to go to compose the ultimate male physique women desired. I, on the other hand, could eat the same foods or less, yet when the food enters my body, it loses its sense of direction and heads straight to my hips and abdomen. My brother's face was immune to acne and oils that still plague my face today and his dark mocha skin made his white teeth almost perfect when he flashed that killer smile. His hair was straight and easy to manage as was my father's, and my brother could wear any hairstyle of the times from the Afro hairstyle of the seventies, braids and curls in the eighties, and whatever hairstyle that was current for the nineties.

Unfortunately, I inherited the hair of my mother, short and coarse with small tight curls that were called in my younger life BBs. If one could imagine taking the BBs of a BB gun, painting them Black, and gluing them liberally on a bald head with a slight space between each BB, that would be my hair. I could never grow an Afro, nor have braids because my hair would not grow more than half an inch. Once I used a hairdressing product in my late teens that promised curl-like waves if the directions were followed properly. I made sure I read directions and followed them as a good soldier. I washed and dried my hair thoroughly as directed and

proceeded to apply the hair product massaging it into my hair and scalp. Believing, dreaming, and hoping I could have hair of curly waves just like the man on the box, I double-checked and continued to follow the directions exactly as written, covering my head with a stocking cap tied at one end that was cut from an old pair of my mother's nylon stockings. This was used as a tight covering that would press the hair to the scalp to form the curly waves. Feeling triumphant and excited I could hardly sleep imagining having a head full of curly waves, beautiful, Black, and shiny that would end the era of having a head full of BBs. I woke up the next morning and rushed to the mirror, anxious to see the beautiful shiny Black waves that were promised on the box. As I removed the uncomfortable stocking cap, eager to strut my new hairstyle, to my shock and saddening disappointment the reflection in the mirror was still the fat ugly brother with the same nappy tight BBs covering my head. That feeling of inferiority set in, and as I looked at my brother's shiny and curly hair, I felt that a great injustice had been done. Since then, I have never trusted any product that promised an easy fix to anything. That incident had a profound effect on my life because accepting and identifying myself as being fat and ugly implanted a sense of inferiority that is present today.

When I am reflecting on the feelings of that time, I juxtapose the events and viewpoints of identifying as being the fat ugly brother and trying to be intellectually impressive when expressing my research interests during that evening's class. Those same feelings, the feelings of shoddiness, began to take hold as I felt and saw the imaginary disapproving and unimpressed looks of the professor after speaking before and after some of my classmates. In my mind, the professors are a kind of mirror, the same mirror that reflected, despite what I did or said, that I am still fat and ugly. My classmates, who all spoke intellectually and eloquently, represented a

form of my brother the athletic, handsomely dark, perfect skin, white shiny teeth with the Clark Gable smile, and of course the straight shiny hair.

As strange as it may seem, I do not harbor any feelings of resentment toward my classmates because I never harbored resentful feelings toward my brother. My brother in his entire life never referred to nor called me fat or ugly, as my classmates at UIC never referred to me as being intellectually challenged. The fact of the matter is I was proud to have a brother who people thought was attractive, just as I am proud to be associated with a group of people with a plethora of experiences to help expand my knowledge of educational research. Truth be known, my classmates responded similarly as my brother did, with support and sincerity.

That support and sincerity of my brother were shown with one of my hair battles of the BBs. My brother had combed his hair in a way in which he had curls in front of his forehead. He was around 12 years of age, and I was about 10 years old. I asked if he could make the same hairstyle with curly curls on my forehead. Without saying a word, he got some of my father's *Royal Crown Promenade Hair Dressing* and with a little water applied it to my forehead. He then began to brush my hair, but no curls appeared. Thinking a little, he next applied a little Vaseline and brushed again and from the questioning look on his face, I knew the curls were not there. Then he used a little baby oil and a little water and brushed again this time harder until he saw my face squinting from the pain of the hard brushings, yet I was willing to endure the pain of the pin-like bristles piercing my forehead to get those curly curls. Although all his hard work had failed again in producing the hairstyle, he smiled a little with a look of sincerity so as not to hurt my feelings and told me that my hair looked much better and if I brushed it every day, then one day I would have curly curls like his. Agreeing to what he said, I swaggered downstairs behind my brother with a big grin, cheesing and eager to show off my new hairstyle.

While writing this vignette, I wonder how many others have suffered from some version of the Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome, a syndrome in which I created for males when compared to their brother is the fat and ugly one. In this case, the word “brother” refers to both males and females because I believe that the problems of dealing with this “disease” know no difference in gender. A substantial literature on negative self-esteem on African American girls continues to grow when it comes to their natural hairstyles (D’Ardenne 2022; Townsend, 2023). In addition, as I reflect back 20 years ago when I was an eighth-grade social studies and literature teacher for a school on Chicago’s South Side, the health teacher at that school gave my students an assignment. The students were to write about themselves and their aspirations. The health teacher showed me this one paper written by one of my female students. She wrote, “I wish I was thin like Tasha.” “I wish I had hair like Vanessa.” “I wish I was popular like Diane,” and the list went on with this student comparing herself to others. As I remember reading that paper, I can compare the feelings of my former student to my experience as a graduate student at UIC. I could say something like, “I wish I could write like Gina,” “I wish I could speak eloquently like Lucas,” or “I wish I could read and remember exactly what I read like Dr. Stallings,” or “I wish I had financial support like Ophelia so I could quit my job and finish writing my dissertation.” I was still living with the scars of Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome even after all these years.

I compared the Fat Ugly Brother Syndrome to the Crushed Paper Cup Theory (Smith, 2010) that pertains having to extremely low self-esteem and having a feeling of worthlessness. In the Crushed Paper Theory, Smith (2010) elaborates that one would have to imagine a stack of paper cups at a sports stadium, fresh and clean for customer’s use. Next, imagine if one cup falls from the stack and is now on the floor of the stadium. The cup is now stepped on and kicked by patrons and by the end of the day, that pristine paper cup is now but a dirty torn piece of paper in

the garbage. For me, that cup symbolizes people who believe they are not only fat and ugly, but SGL. There is a kick for being fat, a step for being ugly, a kick for being African American, and another crush for being SGL. A once pristine person motivated to be someone with great aspirations has now been marginalized for not being part of dominant social norms.

At a church retreat for African American males, I attended in my early twenties, as we held hands in a prayer circle, the pastor said that it is difficult being a Black man in a society filled with racism and prejudice, but to exacerbate the situation it is even more difficult being a SGL African American man. It took an extremely long time for me to be semi-receptive of being SGL because it is easier being fat, ugly, and African American heterosexual male than it is being a fat, ugly, and African American SGL male. Today I am conscious of the fact that being SGL is a critical part of my identity more than being fat and ugly because being fat and ugly are to some extent features that can be changed, in contrast to being SGL and/or African-American because they are identities that can never be dissolved.

I grew up with what can be framed as the Fat Ugly SGL Brother Syndrome. As I reminisce on various events of my life, being SGL was an important part of the syndrome, but a part I refused to acknowledge and still have difficulty acknowledging as a part of my identity, and I must still negotiate and negotiate my experiences so that I can live a fulfilling life. Therefore, for years I had to deny a part of my being, a part that makes up my soul that makes me a complete person, pretending to be someone I am not. A voice, my SGL voice, has been silent for my entire life and it is only now in this dissertation that this voice is beginning to be emancipated and heard. Ayers argued that what is often missing in research literature are the experiences of crisis: the insider's view (1990). Part of what is under-represented in research is the inside view of being a Black SGL person navigating and negotiating their identities and the

lack of support in a racially prejudiced environment, particularly in a homophobic environment in the African American community.

B. Statement of Problem

Greene (1994) states that Black men frequently experience never fully being part of either the gay community for being Black or the African American community for being gay. This presents a significant problem, especially for males growing up in an environment where they feel out of place without positive support from either group. Being Black and gay in societies presents complexities, largely avoided by White gays (Bartone, 2017). Understanding and navigating through intersecting identities is a fact of life for Black gay males. Somehow, they navigate and negotiate both identities from childhood to adulthood in various aspects of their lives in dealing with family, education, religious community, and social community. However, with the lack of support and affirmation, the struggles of SGL males of color can present some agonizing life experiences. This was how I experienced my identity of being a SGL male of color and this study seeks to investigate the ways in which others may or may not share this experience, and what their particular experiences have been.

C. Purpose of Study and Research Questions

Taken from the book *Personal-Passionate-Participatory Inquiry into Social Justice in Education* (He and Phillion, Eds. 2008), this missing piece of knowledge, whatever it may be, led me to the strong desire to conduct a personal, passionate, and participatory inquiry into the experiences of SGL males of color over time. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how SGL males of color navigate and negotiate their identity over time

as part of two marginalized groups. While the terms “navigate” and “negotiate” might seem redundant, they connote different meanings. “Navigation” is a kind of finding one’s way, even steering one’s way, which implies agency only on the part of the navigator. “Negotiation” implies more than a single agent, at least two or more agents in interaction with one another. I wanted to investigate how the subjects of this study both navigated and negotiated their own developmental paths with minimal support. Exploring these narratives of SGL males of color navigating and negotiating their developmental paths with minimal support can help educators, counselors, and other professionals better understand the need of more and better support for the wellness of SGL males of color.

The overarching research question is how SGL males of color navigate and negotiate their identity over time. I will also use the following sub-questions to aid in my research to organize the responses of the participants: a.) How do SGL males of color begin to discover their identities in the context of their relationship with their families? For example, being African American, being fat, being Catholic, and being gay. b.) What did research participants know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community, and about any role model from the media when growing up? c.) How does the educational experience, including teacher and peer interaction, affect the identity of SGL males of color including? d.) What role does religion and religious affiliation play in the identity of SGL males of color? e.) As SGL males of color, what were they thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time? f.) How do SGL males of color manage to live as outcasts in a White hetero-centric, a White gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society? This research is based not only based on my personal struggle but also the struggles of other SGL males of color. I will focus on SGL males of color, making sense of the world, the construction of navigating and negotiating of various identities,

the lack of support and affirmation that was desperately needed, and making sense of the world they construct.

D. Significance of the Study

Throughout my dissertation, I use vignettes like the encounter with my mother above to illustrate the realities of growing up in a community where SGL identity is repudiated, or more broadly, the social and cultural contexts of SGL males of color. From childhood to adulthood, SGL males of color must not only struggle with their sexual orientation but also the racialization of their experience (Field & Sanders, 2016). In order to be accepted and most importantly to survive, SGL males of color are forced to hide and/or change their SGL identity based on their upbringing, the community where they live, and in a larger sense society's standard. When compared to whites, African Americans suffer excessively higher rates of poverty, unemployment, incarceration, and stress-related illnesses (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). For SGL Black males, the challenges increase exponentially. African American SGL males are disproportionate targets of violence (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002; Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004). Furthermore, African American males who have sex with males may be more likely than men from other groups to have sex with someone who is HIV positive (Bingham et al., 2003; Millett, Flores, Peterson, & Bakeman, 2007).

Icard (1985-86, 1986) stresses that SGL Black men are subject to unusually harsh triple prejudice, first from the white heterosexual majority, second the white gay males, and finally the Black heterosexual minorities. In this circumstance, the term "intersectionality" plays a key role in understanding the experiences of SGL males of African descent. The theory of intersectionality was first used as a critique in feminist theory by Crenshaw in 1989. Crenshaw

elaborates that being a Black woman cannot be understood in being Black and being a woman independently. The two identities must include interactions that reinforce each other (Crenshaw, 1989), as to show the vast difference of experience women of color have from white women due to race, class, and educational experiences. Using intersectionality as a frame, a gay Black man cannot fully discuss being gay independently from being Black because both are interdependent, marginalized identities. Therefore, it is crucial to draw upon an intersectionality perspective (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989) and critically consider how social inequality and sustaining membership in multiple social categories.

Strong pressures for social sex-role conformity from the African American communities exacerbate the stresses that can lead to fragmentations of identity in the attempt to integrate multiple identities for SGL males of color (Sears, 1989). In my growing up it was easy to identify as African American because according to Sears (1991St), ethnic identity acquisition occurs first. Even easier was accepting the self-image of being fat and ugly, but the concept of being SGL was incomprehensible in growing up because that concept was just not accepted in the African American society. The effect of this is that was there no role model nor someone who was African American and SGL with whom I could identify. I had to struggle with refusing my SGL identity and negotiate living a life of the fear of being outed. This is one of the main reasons I began researching and writing about “SGL” or SGL males of color.

F. **Significance of the Problem**

SGL males of color must also struggle with the resiliency to negotiate their life experiences to survive in a world of racial and gender prejudice that is influenced by media, religion, and society. Unfortunately, the SGL males of color seem not to have as strong a voice

and support as their gay white counterparts or their Black heterosexual counterparts in cases of discrimination. For example, in 2010, 18-year-old Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, a gay white male, was secretly videotaped having intimate relations with another male in his dorm room. Faced with ultimate embarrassment of the video becoming public, Clementi committed suicide on September 22, 2010. This made headlines, and it created support for Clementi and other white males like him. On that same day Jamal Parris, a young African American, filed a lawsuit against the late Bishop Eddie Long of the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta accusing the pastor of using his influence to intimidate Parris into a sexual relationship. Members of Long's congregation and other religious leaders who supported Bishop Long tried to discredit the young accuser and criticized Parris and several other young Black men with harsh attacks. Later that year there was an enormous celebration for Bishop Long at his church along with many other religious leaders who physically hoisted up the bishop and crowned him king of his church. However, there was no support for the young Black men who were assaulted by Bishop Long nor did any *YouTube* video campaigns support them. When an unarmed Travon Martin was killed in February of 2012 in Florida, there were huge outcries to support Martin and rightly so. In Ferguson, Missouri, the shooting and killing of unarmed African American Michael Brown in 2013 caused such an uproar that not only did it erupt protests and riots in Ferguson but, also around the nation thus generating the Black Lives Matter movement. One wonders, if Martin has also been SGL, would there have been the same outpouring of support and protest of wearing hoodies in remembrance of his slaying; or if Brown were SGL, would it produce such unrest that it would spark a nationwide movement? This causes one to ponder, if either Martin or Brown were SGL, who would protest? Would it be considered a racially motivated crime or gay motivated? Would African Americans consider the

events a gay issue and let the gay community protest or would the gay community consider it a racial issue therefore letting the African Americans protest?

In April 2009, Carl Joseph Walter, an eleven-year-old just shy of his twelfth birthday, hanged himself because he endured months of harassment and anti-gay bullying. In that same month, Jaheem Harris of Atlanta committed suicide for anti-gay bullying and harassment at his school. Yet for these two youths, there was no large outcry nor any support mechanism for their families as was for the families of Clementi who was white and gay and Martin and Brown who are Black and heterosexual. These unrelated incidents of Tyler Clementi who is white and gay, Jamal Parish and Carl Walter who are Black and gay, Trevon Martin and Michael Brown who are Black and straight reveal the dramatic differences in the way our society responds to both race and sexuality (Boykin, 2012). A 2016 study from the journal *Aids and Behavior* showed Black gay men disproportionately experience homonegativity as compared to their white counterparts, resulting in greater rates of depression and social isolation (Quinn & Dickerson-Gomez, 2016).

There seem to be fewer saving graces for gay males of color than for gay whites, and none at the time when I was growing up. My only saving grace was my education, which I exceeded academically—and being fat and unattractive, which allowed me not to lie about not having a girlfriend and having sex with girls. The experience of being fat and unattractive, like other paradoxes I was able to document in this study, was a blessing and a curse; it damaged my self-esteem, but it provided a cover for my SGL identity.

Being an educator of middle school students for 38 years, I have had students who were SGL and I have seen the lack of support for them. At one school in which I taught, when there was school dances, the rule was boys and girls dancing together is okay, two girls dancing

together is okay, yet two boys dancing together was forbidden. Although this rule did bother me, I never questioned it. I will never forget a student I had who never smiled and always looked sad the entire year I had him in my sixth-grade computer class. When I had him for my seventh-grade computer the next year, he looked the same, always with a sad expression on his face and he never said a word. He was an average student and there were times he handed in incomplete projects. When this student started eighth grade, the last year in middle school, he still had that same sad expression and never spoke. I told his homeroom teacher that I had this student for three years and he was always looking sad and never spoke a word, and never had I ever seen him smile. His homeroom teacher told me that he is gay, and his mother talked and belittled him so much that the father had DCFS remove the mother from the house. However, he said he also loves his mother very much and he missed her. Then his homeroom teacher sort of smiled and said isn't that wild? I asked what type of help is this student getting. This teacher did not give me a specific answer, she just said that he talked to someone. Unfortunately, I did not press on with this matter with that teacher like I should have in fear of outing myself. I cannot help but feel somewhat ashamed for not being more persistent with the lack of help and support this student was getting.

This dissertation seeks to speak to the efforts of people, especially urban educators, who seek an environment where gay people are not merely tolerated, because to tolerate means to put up with, which is the equivalent of settling. Tolerance and teaching tolerance are terms that might seem harmless and is the same sense positive because many teachers pride themselves on teaching tolerance in their classrooms. However, the foundation of the word tolerance is inconsistent with the message it projects. The word tolerance, in itself, is tainted (Syed, 2017, pp.8). Tolerance does not apply to the majority but is contextually fashioned to encompass the

outsider, for example, those whose sexual orientation is not seen as the “norm”. Therefore, SGL males of color seek an environment where they are supported, understood, respected, affirmed, and appreciated just as any other group in this world. Being an educator, researcher, and SGL male of color, I hope to be able to help make a positive difference in the lives of other SGL males of color with the support that is needed.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. Theoretical Framework

I became interested in researching the experiences of SGL men of color because of my personal experiences. I had to hide my sexual identity my entire life, and I had to keep this a deep secret, or I thought it would be the end of my life, as I knew it. For many years, I felt I was the only SGL person of color in the world because I was told Blacks were never SGL, and it was white men who brought and forced homosexuality on Black civilization to emasculate Black men. I realized I had been suffering from an epistemic injustice by being a SGL male of color. Epistemic relates to knowledge or knowing. The epistemic injustice was coined by Miranda Fricker (2007) in which the concept of injustice was done against marginalized groups who were unjustly treated as knowing subjects. Fricker's research on epistemic injustice falls into two categories. First, there is testimonial injustice which addresses how prejudice causes the hearer to give a reduced level of credibility to a speaker's word. SGL males of color may have their credibility unfairly overlooked or ignored, and their experiences dismissed or may not be taken seriously by others due to prejudices against both their race and sexuality (Muzanenhano & Chowdhury, 2023). Second is hermeneutical injustice, in which hermeneutics focuses on the interpretation of texts, cultural, and artistic practices, and social phenomena, therefore hermeneutical injustice is caused by people being unable to make sense of certain experiences in their lives due to the lack of interpretive resources to make sense of the experience. There may be gaps in collective understanding that make it difficult for SGL males of color to fully articulate their lived experiences or racial issues may not adequately capture the nuances of SGL males of color intersectional identity (Iacono, 2017).

I find myself falling into the hermeneutical injustice category for example, being punished at the young age of seven for not understanding my what my friend and I did was considered a homosexual act and the concept of homosexuality in general, or not having the knowledge that in the SGL community that Black SGL males date and have loving relationships with other Black SGL males which will be discussed later. Fricker argued that the idea of epistemic injustice might first and foremost prompt thoughts about distributive unfairness with respect of epistemic goods such as information or education (2007). In countering epistemic injustice there must be an emphasis on providing a space and time for education that recognizes the importance of knowledge as it comes through both experience and scholarship (Greteman, Morris, & Weststrate, 2021). However, in my latter years, I learned other SGL men of color had experiences that were similar if not identical to mine.

Another reason I became interested in researching SGL males of color is because of my profession as an educator. To understand my students requires not just that I understand them academically, but as social and emotional beings as well. Educators are excited to speak about diversity and multiculturalism but quickly limit the discourse to only race, ethnicity, and gender, mostly a binary between boys and girls (Palmer, Davis, Moore, & Hilton, 2010). The inequities faced by SGL males of color within education and eventually employment is often neglected within research, which translates into little to or intersectional policy recommendations for educational institutions and the workforce (Moss, 2016). As a teacher of junior high school students, I see that nearly all are at that awkward and often uncomfortable stage of puberty. Most of my teaching experiences have been at African American and Latino schools, and when observing the male students who were or might be SGL I would wonder about their experiences and whether they had navigated experiences like mine when growing up. SGL males of color

experiences are often impacted by heteronormative practices (Mays, 2014; Walton, 2014). The interlocking of academia and social issues becomes a two-dimensional hurdle for SGL male students of color (Moss, 2016). I remember that period in my life as being awkward, uncomfortable, and at times frightening. I knew I was attracted to males, yet I forced myself to play along with my friends, liking this girl or saying that girl was hot. I was clandestinely thinking about guys and the ones who were hot, hoping when I saw a hot guy, no one would notice me staring at him, or when looking at a *Playboy* or *Players* (the African American version of *Playboy*) magazines with friends and praying no one would find out I was pretending to be aroused when I desired a *Playgirl* magazine.

Identifying as a SGL male was something that I understood would bring shame and dishonor to one's family. While I was acutely aware that this was true in the African American community, I would later learn that it was true for other communities as well. For example, in the Asian-American community, disclosing one's sexual identity would have detrimental effects on participation in SGL relationships, especially for males (Dube, Savin-Williams, & Diamond, 2001).

It was only in a doctoral-level Social Foundations of Education class that I began to take a more serious interest in SGL or queer research, especially from the point of view of people of color. I learned that this phenomenon is complex. According to Sears (1989), the development of homosexual identity is shaped by the racial and gendered context in which a person is located. The intertwining of identities is engendered or a moment when multiple aspects of identity are present and considered at the same time (Bourke, 2008, p. 12). In *The Handbook of Research of Social Education* (Tozer, Gallegos, & Henry, 2010), a plethora of articles examined school and learning as a socio-cultural phenomenon. In an assignment given on the first day, I was to find

and read two articles of immediate interest from the book, and I immediately gravitated to the articles on queer theory because I felt that being a SGL person, I needed to understand this theoretical framework. Although I was very slowly beginning to accept this part of me, even as a mature adult, I still felt something was missing because in reading about queer theory, there was no mention of people of color.

Ayers (2006) gives six guiding questions when equality and human freedom are part of the goals of inquiries and one of the questions seems to target the goals of my research. In rephrasing the question, I added terms of my specific inquiry and rephrased the question as follows: *What is missing from the “official story” that will make the dilemmas of SGL male of color navigating and negotiating their identities over time more comprehensible?* Through cultural, social, and educational institutions, gay people are continually described as a disenfranchised minority group (Aleman, 2010) and for SGL males of color the feeling of discrimination is doubled. Therefore, I must look at my research through multi-theoretical lenses. First, I always took umbrage to the word “queer” using to describe SGL people. When I thought of something as being “queer” I would think of something being weird or strange—a term that in my youth was used to put someone down. This presents a double problem because people of color have always been marginalized based on race and adding the negative connotation of “queer”, people of color who are SGL are also being marginalized for their sexual orientation. However, through the lens of a queer theorist, I was able to see that being queer can transgress normative genders and sexualities (Kumashiro, 2001). In that case, being queer has power because it challenges the dominant white middle-class society.

However, queer theory may not adequately recognize gender hierarchies and most importantly race differences in a SGL community (Kumashiro 2001; Wiernga and Blackwood,

1999). In this case, queer society is dominated by and is held to the standards of gay white middle-class men. In this paradigm the stories of people of color tend to be overlooked because society assumes that all gay people are guided by the same values and standards as middle-class, heterosexual white men. Since queer theory fails to acknowledge racial differences, it fails to contest other identities that are not privileged in queer society, thus not recognizing people of color. Therefore, my research must also look through the lenses of critical race theory because race and racism affect people of color even in the queer society (Chapman, 2010). Drawing on the lived experience of individuals, critical race theorists view people's experiential background as a strength (Chapman, 2010). Critical race theorists use various methods such as storytelling, oral history, autobiography, and biographies, as narratives told in a way as to counter the white middle-class queer narratives and to exert agency and defy the notions that all queer males share the same values, identities, and negotiated experiences.

Unfortunately, critical race theory does not by itself fully address the issue of sexual orientation. Because queer theory and critical race theory are often unable to accommodate the issues faced by SGL males of color who come from raced communities, Johnson (2005) conceptualized quare theory as a strategy for theorizing racialized sexuality (p. 126). Quare theory is a theory for SGL males of color and lesbians (Johnson, 2001, p.3). Quare theory articulates and offers a way to critique stable notions of identity while at the same time locating racialized and class knowledge. In this case, Johnson advocates theory in the flesh in which the flesh emphasizes the diversity within and among gays, bisexuals, lesbians, and transgendered people of color while simultaneously accounting for how racism and classism affect how the world is experienced and theorized thus giving voice to queer people of color. Rather than portraying all queer people as a monolithic group, quare theory allows for a more nuanced and

distinctive understanding raced bodies and particular experiences (Rodriguez, 2018). Identity is individualized rather than generalized in abstract notions of queerness (Rodriguez, 2018). Pinar (2008) states that in the 1970's, the notion of voice enabled Madeleine Grumet to differentiate her work in feminist research from male work and her text from male text. It is my hope that I will follow in similar footsteps to differentiate my work from the gay white male work and my text from the gay white male text. I attempt to do so with a multi-theoretical perspective that draws upon queer theory, critical race theory, and quare theory, each of which contributes to a specific application of *intersectionality* theory: a feminist framework first developed by Crenshaw to account for how interlocking systems of power, privilege, and subordination can work together in the lived experiences of individuals and groups (Cooper, 2016). By using these theoretical frameworks, it could help to gain a better understanding to help in overcoming of some of the epistemic and hermeneutical injustices that have plagued me over the years.

B. **Review of Related Literature**

1. **Overview and Positionality**

African American gay discourse gradually emerged in the late 1970s for two main reasons (D'Emilio, 1993). First was the consciousness-raising of sexual and gender identities brought on by the gay, lesbian, and feminist movements. This provided a social context that created a discourse attempting to counter dominant and oppressive discourses on gay, lesbian, and feminist identities. Second was the rise of discourse as it relates to race and gender divisions with the various movements. An awareness grew among gays and lesbians of color that the larger movements did not address, such as the multiple oppressions and other identity-specific

experiences that were faced. This sentiment was emphasized in Joseph Beam's introduction to the book *In the Life*, an anthology of SGL males of color (Beam, 1986).

Although research on SGL African Americans continues to progress slowly, three limitations emerge from Icard's early review of the literature (1996) and Longres' review (1996) as well. First, attention seemed to be focused on young adults who mostly fell between the ages of 20 to 40 (et al. Longres, 1996) instead of focusing on their identities as they evolved from teens to seniors. Boykin (2012) later showed that scholar Lance McCready, a SGL male of color, had done extensive research on SGL male youth of color in an urban setting in a California high school (McCready, 2004, & Blackburn & McCready, 2010). However, most of McCready's research was limited only to the experiences of SGL males of color in a GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) Club in urban high schools that did not include experiences outside of the school setting. Although extremely important to the needs of SGL male of color, McCready's studies do not attune to the experiences of growing up as a SGL male youth of color and how their identity changes over time.

James Sears, Stephen Russell, Mollie Blackburn, and Sabina Vaught are among several scholars who have all done important research on SGL males of color; yet they are all white and/or female. Although their research on same gender loving males of color is significant, the true essence of being a SGL male of color is what is missing: that which Ayers (1990) calls the experience of crisis, the insider's view of how SGL males of color make sense of their world and construct multiple identities, documented by a person who had the first-hand experience of being a SGL male of color. In this study, I am not only collecting, but also living in the stories of the people with whom I engage in inquiry because we share similar identities of being SGL males of color. Because my research is also autobiographical, I bring additional perspective to the inquiry,

based on my experience of being a SGL male of color: What does the world look like to me as a SGL male of color? In what ways do I create meaning and purpose being a SGL male of color? Where do family, education, religion, and relationships with the Black heterosexual community and white gay community fit in the general pattern of my life? I am living the story that I write. I can write a story and research the insider's experience of being a straight white woman, but I cannot live in their stories and develop the essence of being a straight white woman because I am not white, a woman, and straight. I can write and do research and present an insider's view of the experience of a woman giving birth, yet I will never know the true essence and feeling of giving birth to a child because again I am not a woman, nor will I ever give birth. Therefore, I do not know the pain a woman goes through when giving birth to a child or even having a miscarriage, but I can be empathic and sympathetic to her pain. Comedian Carol Burnett once said that if anyone really wants to know how giving birth feels, take your lower lip and try stretching it over the back of your head. Many women who have given birth can understand the essence of that particular pain. I on the other hand will never fathom the pain of giving birth although I can be empathic to a woman's pain during labor. Although scholarly research tries and can make important contributions, Ayers (2001) states that scholarly research fails to make a comparable contribution to understanding the situation from within, because although there is a plethora of research on gay males, research by and about SGL males of color largely been ignored until recent years.

With the important exceptions of Lance McCready, Bryant Keith Alexander, Larry Icard, Keith Clark, and Keith Boykin, most research on SGL male youth of color was and still is performed by white heterosexual males, SGL white males, and heterosexual females regardless of color. A study of the experiences of SGL male of color performed by a SGL male of color will

add to the field of education by helping society in general to gain a better understanding of the endured racism, homophobia, mental and emotional abuse, and violence that SGL male of color face over time as they struggle with identity, religion, love, relationships, and the internal prejudice about body image based on Western standards. Researchers who are SGL males of color who conduct research on the experiences of SGL males of color are able to draw on their own personal experiences and identities, which can enhance their understanding and interpretation of the data (Maake, 2021 & Studmire, 2019). Some might disagree with this because they feel that a researcher who is a SGL male of color researching SGL males of color might be biased in their findings. However, having gay Black male researchers conduct this type of research can help ensure the narratives and perspectives of the participants are represented by an “insider” community of researchers, which can add to the breadth and depth of existing research (Maake, 2021).

Therefore, in this study, I hope to articulate my experiences and the experiences of the participants to explain how the world looks through our eyes as SGL males of color over time. A broad range of unique characteristics shapes the identities and experiences of SGL males of color. One significant characteristic in the intersectionality they navigate and negotiate belonging to is the Black community and the LGBTQ community (Modeste-James & Chilaka, 2024). Being a SGL male of color leads to distinct experiences shaped by the challenges and strengths inherent in these intersecting identities. SGL males of color come from different backgrounds and consist of various ethnicities, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, and geographic locations. Although SGL males of color face specific challenges related to discrimination, including disparities in healthcare, SGL males of color often show resilience and strength when faced with these problems (Modeste-James & Chilaka, 2024).

2. Identity development

Adolescence may well be a time when most of one's identity is developed (Adams, Gullotta, & Montemayor, 1992; Erikson, 1980). According to a Pew Report of a Survey of LGBT Americans (2013, p.46), 48% of gay men surveyed began to recognize their gay identity between the ages of 8 and 14 and 38% were younger than the age of 10. Developing one's identity requires creating a self-image of one's meaningful experiences within the community in which that person lives (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009). When belonging to various groups such as ethnic and sexual minorities, young people develop both ethnic and sexual identities as they develop their total adult identity (Chung & Katayama, 1998). In educational settings, educators can understand and realize that much of the adolescent's future is engraved in his experiences and development during that delicate stage of life. Research indicates that youth who fail to develop a healthy identity are at a higher risk of: substance abuse (Jones & Hartman, 1988), academic difficulties, and dropping out of school, and more susceptibility to influence by negative peer pressure (Adams, Ryan, Hoffman, Dobson, Nielson, 1985); and lower self-esteem (Hunter and Schaecher, 1987), with the risk of poor mental health (Moore, Camancho, & Munson, 2020).

These negative consequences are a special problem for SGL youths of color because, in theoretical writings, SGL youths of color are hypothesized to experience a delayed timing of labeling their ethnicity and sexuality (Manalansan, 1996) and exposing their identity to others (Savin-Williams, 1996). The delays could be due to a lack of support, perceptions of rejection, and internalized homophobia (Manalansan, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1996). Many Black SGL youths fear rejection from their families and communities if they come out, leading them to delay

disclosing or labeling their sexual orientation (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009; Toomy, Huynh, Jones, Lee, & Revels-Macalinao, 2016).

Unks states that of all minority groups, homosexuals are arguably the most hated group of people in the United States (1995, p.3). Unks also argues that although other minorities have gained various measurable amounts of protection and acceptance, homosexuals have been outside of the realm of a modicum of protection. Unfortunately, when various states like Florida and Texas are making laws against supporting LGBTQ+ people, the protections that were gained for gay people are starting to wane in certain areas. For example, the “N” word is now mainly reserved for use by African Americans to refer to another African American as a friend although the word has its roots in slavery and racism. The word “retarded” has been replaced in context with the term “special needs” or “diverse learners.” Yet words like “punk”, “fag”, “faggot”, and “fairy”, just to name a few, have been and are still being used by many, especially the young, to describe SGL men. Children and youth begin hearing these terms at an impressionable time of their lives.

It is in those formative adolescent years when various dimensions of identity develop, such as the formation of sexual orientation when romantic and sexual relationships develop. According to Collins (2009), one-third (36%) of adolescents have had a romantic relationship by age 13, and 70% by age 17, and in another study, 85% of the participants reported being interested in romantic relationships before entering high school (Sulieman & Deardorff, 2015; Suleiman & Harden 2016). African American SGL males have responded with conflict between racial or ethnic identity and sexual identity preference (Constantine-Simms, 2000). SGL males of color must put themselves in cultures in which one identity or the other is marginalized, both identities are centered, both identities are marginalized, or a combination of these (Fields,

Morgan, & Sanders, 2016). W.E.B Du Bois (1989) theorized that Black individuals have an ever-present two-ness where the individual is American (the oppressor) in one sight and a Black (the oppressed) person in the other thus creating an identity that conflicts with itself (Moss, 2016). Even though there is a strong presence of SGL males of color in communities across the United States, they are often ignored, misunderstood, and victimized physically, mentally, and emotionally (Blackburn, 2007; McCready, 2004), especially with the present climate of this country. According to the FBI, anti-LGBTQ+ hate crimes rose sharply in 2022 jumping more than 19% from 2021 (Midgon, 2023) regardless of racial background.

There needs to be more research to sufficiently address the experiences of the changing identities of SGL male of color over time, and how they construct and experience their world based on their identities over time. When research explores issues of LGBT identity formation, a majority of the participants are White, thus, the data is often “whitewashed” (Bartone, 2015). Therefore, it is imperative to bring SGL males of color narratives to the forefront so that the narrative can counter, or add to, White-centered LGBTQ+ studies and scholarship can move away from often viewing this population from a deficit perspective and see them as human beings who love themselves despite systemic barriers and challenges (Bartone, 2017). In a society that marginalizes and emasculates SGL males of color, the experience of growing and constructing identities of SGL males of color for survival needs further research. This is slowly changing, as illustrated by the memoir, *All Boys Are Not Blue* (2020) by George Johnson.

Johnson shares how he navigated and negotiated life as a SGL male of color from childhood to the present. But of course, that account is just one person’s experience. If one compares my life as a SGL male of color to Johnson’s one would say that Johnson had it much easier than me. Johnson grew up in a generation when being SGL was more accepting than when

I was growing up. Most importantly, Johnson had the support of his parents, grandmother, older brother, and other relatives at an early age. Neither his mother, father, nor grandmother told him that there had never been a sissy man in our family, and you will not be the first, nor did his parents keep repeating that he needed a girlfriend. Perhaps Johnson had it easier being a SGL male of color than I did based on generational differences. He was able to identify with both his racial and sexual identity without denying one or the other. Do most SGL males of color identify with their racial ethnicity first or sexual orientation? From my personal experience, I can state that I did not identify as being SGL until my late thirties, unlike Johnson who was able to identify with his SGL identity in early elementary school. By that time in my late thirties, I was financially independent from my family and had been living apart from them for over ten years. However, I am still struggling with the SGL identity by not being fully out to everyone to this day. More research will presumably begin to reveal a greater diversity of identity-forming experiences among SGL Black males. This study will contribute to that.

3. Family Relations

For SGL youths forming and understanding one's racial identity consists of relying on family members and peers (Cardabo, 2005; Jamil et al., 2009). Black familial relationships and bonds are a necessity for survival and connectivity for many, especially SGL males of color (Cross, 2018). Many SGL males of color who are not fortunate enough to have the support of families or to discover organizations of support, such as Adodi, are compelled to live marginalized lives, being both SGL and African American. However, the environment can play a crucial role in how individuals come to perceive and identify themselves (Evans, 2001). As previously noted, it was not until I had the Social Foundations class with Dr. Tozer, that I felt it

was safe to accept my SGL identity at UIC. Still, outside of UIC, my SGL identity must be concealed until I am more comfortable and secure with that identity. African American culture emphasizes religious and familial relationships, commitment to the community, and social norms (Akerlund and Cheung, 2000; Maiden, 2021). SGL Black males face rejection and homophobia from friends, family, religious figures, and the community (Meyers, 2010).

In my parents' generation, parents of SGL males of color knew that their children would be facing a double stigma—one related to race and the other to sexual orientation—and understandably this worried them. In her way, my mother was looking out for my well-being by disapproving of my SGL identity. Many parents experience a child's SGL identity as a threat to their expectations of heterosexual and cisgender respectability and normalcy leading to unique intergenerational conflict and possibly estrangement (Reczek & Bosley-Smith, 2021; Montano et al., 2018; McGuire et al., 2016). Parental SGL biases are at the least part in part responsible for higher rates of poverty and homelessness as well as worse mental and physical health outcomes among SGL people relative to their heterosexual counterparts (Klien & Golub, 2016; Russel & Fish, 2016). It seems the various pressures on young Black gay men had affected the Civil Rights generation in lasting ways, as described in the present article (LaSala & Frierson, 2012).

SGL males of color begin to discover their SGL identity at a young age when they are with their families and begin to recognize them. but not necessarily accept their gay identity, partly depending on family support. The most powerful predictor of outness for Black SGL people is perceived family support, more than a support system, it is also the source of strength for many SGL people (Pastrana, 2016). Therefore, it is apparent that familial resistance to queer acceptance can create complexities for Black SGL family members (Ferguson & Johnson, 2024). To remain in a family system that may subject them to additional homophobia was harmful,

however maintaining family connections promoted safety and security in Black SGL people (Ferguson & Johnson, 2024).

For many Black parents, gender-role expectations among African Americans made life particularly tough for Black gay men and the families who love them. It has been asserted that there is great pressure on Black men to be “hypermasculine” (Lemelle & Battle, 2002; Ward, 2005; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Lemelle, 2010; Sewell, 2020), meaning they must hide their emotions, avoid appearing vulnerable, and be ready to have sex with women whenever the opportunity arises (Boyd-Franklin, 2006). Emphasizing toughness, control, poise, emotional stoicism, pride, and hyper-heterosexuality, several writers have described how Black men have adopted this distorted and stereotypical masculinity as a means to cope with an overtly oppressive society (Ward, 2005). However, Black male feminist scholars (Adu-Poku, 2001; Lemons, 2008; White, 2008) have pointed out how this particular form of masculinity has simultaneously positioned patriarchal, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, and heterosexist systems of power within Black communities and has alienated Black men who find themselves outside of this stereotypical masculinity. This can be particularly acute and painful for young Black SGL males who, due to their sexual orientation, are thought to be rejecting social expectations of true Black masculinity (Collins, 2005).

4. Community Relations and Media Identity

a. Community Relations

The experiences of SGL males of color are shaped by various social identities such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation (Fields & Sanders, 2016). During the adolescent period, some SGL males of color experience a conflict between their SGL identity and anti-gay

cultural expectations of masculinity and religious morality (Malebranche, Fields, Bryant, & Harper 2007). Because of this conflict, some SGL males of color may experience or even fear they will experience rejection, ridicule, and isolation from family, peers, and their community (cFields, Morgan, & Sanders, 2016). The heteronormativity of the Black community and the racism of the queer White community leads SGL males of color homeless regarding community and a sense of belonging (Bourke, 2008; Doss, 2016). This leads to SGL males of color concealing their sexual identity (Maiden, 2021). SGL males of color conceal their homosexuality to minimize stigmatization, and by hiding their sexual orientation for self-preservation within their own community they minimize any homophobic reactions they fear from the African American community (Choi et al., 2011). Additionally, SGL males of color often seek affirmation within the queer community, which also may be a space where racism exists given the white Euro-centric influence on queer culture (Moss, 2016).

Since SGL males of color often identify and draw strength and support from their racial community, preserving support from that community may be more important than embracing their SGL identity. Rather than risking that connection, SGL males of color whose dominant identity is their racial identity may separate from their sexual identity (Fields, Morgan, & Sanders, 2016). In this context, nondisclosure of sexuality may be protective and adaptive by allowing the individual to preserve important social supports (Frable, Platt, & Hoey 1998).

For decades, research has shown that physical appearance is imperative to the organizing perceptions of others (Longres et al., 1996, pp.36). Literature suggests that anti-gay prejudice and violence can be based on the degree to which an individual's behavior and physical appearance conform to social norms and cultural values based on gender (Bohn, 1984; Cotton, 1992; Longres et al., 1996, pp.36). In the African American community conformity to traditional

male and female gender roles and appearance and expectations are still emphasized. Therefore, for many men, acceptance by their African American peers require a display of culturally prescribed male characteristics and mannerisms (Longres et al., 1996, pp.36). African American males whose physical characteristics and mannerisms are consonant with African American cultural gender are likely to be affirmed by their peers. African American males who do not conform to cultural expectations are most likely to experience negative and hostile responses for their peers.

Today in urban areas, SGL males can find comfort and support with the existence of gay-oriented organizations, self-help groups, bars, and other places that alleviate the pressures toward heterosexual norms. In large cities like Chicago, SGL male youths of color can find social services aimed directly at gay youths like Horizon House in Chicago and Lambert House in Seattle. Rural areas, however, may lack organizations of self-help groups, and other gay organizations to support SGL male youths of color in their development of a healthy identity and behavior (Scott, 2012). Living in lower-income rural areas with relatively less educated persons may serve to isolate SGL males of color regardless of their age (Rosenkrantz, Black, Abreu, Aleshire, & Fallin-Bennett, 2017). Therefore, finding supportive gay and heterosexual friends is a task that could be more difficult to accomplish (Scher, 2019).

Involvement within Black communities may have possible health benefits for SGL males of color if they are allowed. In one study, Grayman-Simpson (2012) identified personal and collective social benefits, such as psychological, emotional, spiritual, and collective social wellness from Black community involvement. Grayman-Simpson (2012) suggests the “helping tradition” prevalent among African Americans benefits both individuals and the larger community by fulfilling the basic group and individual social, psychological, emotional, and

spiritual needs (p. 38). In a study of Black men, community involvement assessed as church participation, was associated with better mental health, lower smoking, and lower daily drinking among participants (Brown & Gary 1994). Other studies measuring community involvement such as church participation have produced similar findings and documented health benefits (Ellison et al. 2001; Taylor, Chatters & Levin 2014). Again, these findings must be interpreted with caution when it comes to SGL males of color given the frequently complex, and occasionally ambivalent relationships persons may have with religious institutions in particular, given the homophobic messages delivered in some Black churches (Harris, 2010; Miller, 2007; Pitt, 2010). House and ball communities, for example, which are present in urban cities across the US are social networks of mostly Black SGL youth and young adults (Bailey, 2014; Phillips, Peterson, Binson, Hidalgo, & Magnus, 2011). These kinship communities provide resources to participants such as housing, community, and social support, as well as conveying information related to HIV and STI prevention (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Bailey 2013) according to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, 42% of all new HIV cases are from African Americans (2023). In recent years, house and ball communities have become important venues for innovative culturally tailored for SGL males of color for HIV interventions, including dispensing information related to prevention methods like pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) (Brooks, Landovitz, Regan, Lee, & Jr, 2015; Dickson-Gomez Owczarzak, St. Lawrence, Sitzler, Quinn, Pearson, & Amirkhanian, 2022).

b. Media Identity

Today, SGL youths of color are socialized in an era where social attitudes toward homosexuality have become more tolerant and lenient, even affirming. They are seeing more on television, film, and other media about positive gay lifestyles, especially from social media. Unlike earlier generations, SGL males of color are being exposed to such information through television, movies, books, and the Internet. Media representations of SGL males of color are scarce and the few representations that do exist may perpetuate and amplify stigma due to stereotypical representations, for example, shaping the perception of SGL males of color through limited types of imagery (Sallabank et al., 2022). However, scholarly conversation depicts Black males from a deficit perspective (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, 2008a; Strayhorn 2008b). These perspectives sometimes paint Black men as a monolithic group. Yep and Elia (2012) state that it may be safe to assert that African American men have been perhaps the most feared, disrespected, and rejected segment of the US population, and the cultural representations of African American males have been negative. Ferber went on to observe that African Americans are depicted as responsible for most crimes in the US and continue to be defined as aggressive, hypersexual, threatening, and potentially violent (pp. 16-17). The negative images and lack of positive images in the news and television help to shape this narrative.

The news and media have enabled a narrative about Black masculinity, which is defined by normalized cis-gender heterosexual norms that is sometimes negative (Sewell, 2020). Some movies and television shows such as *Noah's Arc* (Polk, 2005-2008), *Tongues Untied* (Riggs, 1989), *Looking for Langston* (Julian, 1989), *The Skinny* (Polk, 2012), and *Leave It on the Floor* (Larry, 2012), and *Pose* (Canals, et al, 2018) all feature gay African American characters in positive images that are not confined to heterosexual norms. Unfortunately, there are no shows or

current movies that presently have SGL males of color in starring roles. In contrast, while *Moonlight* (2016) did have a SGL male character as the lead, the image presented portrayed harassment not only from heterosexual characters in the movie but also from the main character's own mother. Because what is seen in media does not necessarily reflect real life, SGL males of color are demanding more positive role models and evidence of inclusion in the gay as well as the Black gay community organizations. For example, when the Supreme Court made its landmark decision of legitimizing gay marriage across the nation, many gay African Americans felt it was a partial victory because SGL African Americans still faced political racism with the Supreme Court chipping away at the Voting Rights Act that happened the same day gay marriage became legal. The focus on marriage equality was seen by some as prioritizing the concerns of white gay men over the unique challenges faced by gay men of color (Lee, 2018; Morrison, 2013).

In the present day, gay males have some people with whom to identify. With notable celebrities who are SGL such as Ellen DeGeneres, Clay Aiken, Neil Patrick Harris, and Elton John, more people are finding the courage to come out at an earlier age than generations ago. Therefore, we might expect Black males to be more comfortable with their sexual orientation, but the celebrities I named are all white/Caucasian. There are very few visible and accepted celebrities of color who are out. Such notable people of color who are out are Wanda Sykes, Wilson Cruz, Don Lemon, Ricky Martin, Raven Simone, and Billy Porter, but they are not as visible as the SGL white/Caucasian celebrities and they must be careful of comments made because not only are they fighting the dominant white society but also the dominate heterosexual community in their own racial culture. For example, many African Americans took umbrage over comments made by CNN anchor Don Lemon for his suggestion that being SGL is not fully

accepted African American community. Given the social media negativity over his recent marriage, his claim seemed to be validated.

The movie *Moonlight* (2016) made history as the first movie with an all-Black cast and the first LGBT film to win an Academy Award. The movie also had an African American SGL producer, writer, and director, also nominated. Finally, it seemed, a movie made by a SGL man who is African American and who knows of the struggles of not only is trying to fit in to society's standards, but standards set forth by the African-American community. This movie is as significant as Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) was in the 1950's and 60's. The movie interrogated the fear within African Americans that being out of place according to social norms set not only by white supremacy, but by African American homophobes, could lead to destruction, incarceration, or death. Like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Moonlight* was a counter-hegemonic cultural production (hooks, 1994) elaborating on the life of Chiron, a SGL man of color negotiating life over time from his youth to adulthood. Although the movie was highly praised among many movie critics, there were mixed reviews and feelings from African American non-movie critics, both SGL and heterosexual (Finn, 2017).

When I went to view *Moonlight*, my experience became that of fright, anger, and disbelief. I observed that heterosexual moviegoers to *Moonlight* expected to see a "gangsta hood" movie something like *Boyz in the Hood* (1992) or *Menace II Society* (1993). When the two teenage male characters (Chiron and Kevin) kissed, the eruption from the all-African American audience was a foul mixture of people yelling "Oh hell no", booing, a person yelled out "What the fuck" and two people left the theater with one saying, "I don't want to see this shit". Observing the audience, I noticed couples casually watching and eating as anyone would do in a movie theater. However, after the male-to-male kissing scene then I observed females

with their male companions all of a sudden holding on to their male companion's hand and some even lovingly stroking the man's hand, as if to reassure themselves that their male companion were not SGL. As a SGL male, viewing the movie alone, the audience's behavior made me feel extremely uncomfortable, frightened, and praying that there would be no other love making nor kissing scenes between any male characters in the movie. Thankful that there were no other male-to-male love scenes, I hurriedly left the movie theater before the credits were shown fearful that someone would discover that I was a SGL man because I went to the theater alone. As I returned to the safety of my car, my fear turned soon to anger and disgust because same-sex marriage is now legal, and I was having difficulty comprehending how people could harbor such odious homophobic attitudes that are prevalent in the African American community. Such films were not available to SGL Black males when I was growing up. Now that such a film is available, and applauded by critics, it makes visible biases within the Black community.

Being SGL is not only a problem in film and television but there are also issues of being SGL in the sports realm. In 2013, NBA African American basketball player Jason Collins became the first active African American athlete to come out by publicly acknowledging he is SGL. Although I do admire Collins for his coming out, I do not feel that it will have much of an impact on the acceptance of SGL men and male youths of color. First, Collins is a professional athlete who earns a seven-figure salary and because of this people will accept him as opposed to someone from a low or middle-income background, as economics plays an important part in how people are treated. If someone has millions, what others think may be less impactful, and in observing his following on Collin's Twitter account, most of the people he is associated with are Caucasian, including his partner.

Being SGL is much more accepted in the Caucasian community than African American, Latino, or Asian community (Weber-Gilmore & Rubinstein, 2011; Glick & Goldman, 2010). Michael Sam became the first openly SGL football player to be drafted into the NFL in 2014. The kiss he gave his Caucasian boyfriend after his draft announcement on national television generated both negative and positive reactions from people of all races. However, I felt it would have been more effective if Sam's boyfriend had been African American or better yet a tall and husky-built African American because many African Americans still consider homosexuality as a sinister plot perpetuated by white racists to destroy the Black race (Hare & Hare, 1984; Hemphill, 1991). Sam was only with the NFL for one year in 2014 after being cut by both the St. Louis Rams and Dallas Cowboys. Having never played any game during the regular season, Sam left the NFL citing mental health reasons, however many believe it was because of his sexual orientation (Hall, 2022).

Although celebrities of color are slowly coming out, the overall acceptance of being SGL is still a problem in African American, Latino, and Asian communities. When I was growing up it was unheard of for a person of color to admit being SGL, let alone seem them in any type of media. Many of my SGL friends who are over 45 years old were once married and have children. Because they had to hide their SGL identity they had the difficulty of accepting one identity and denying another. In order to cope with the stress of hiding their sexual orientation, many became drug addicts and alcoholics to aid with the pain of hiding their SGL identity. All of them now are divorced and are either openly SGL or married or dating to a SGL male. These men admit they are the happiest they have ever been, and they also admit marrying a female was the worst mistake they had made—though an understandable one.

5. Identity Evolution and Learning Multiple Identities Over Time

The development of gay identity can be defined as the process through which a person progresses from an assumed state of heterosexuality to an affirmed state of homosexuality (Luciano, 2001, p.21). The gay identity process has been conceptualized in a set of linear stage theories (Cass, 1979 & Troiden, 1979). Most stages describe similar progression that includes the following order: (a). general sense of feeling different; (b). an awareness of same-sex feelings; (c). a point of crisis where an individual realizes his feelings can be labeled as homosexual; (d). eventual acceptance and integration of one's gay identity. However, not everyone fits this model especially males of color. The flaw in these models of gay identity development is that they do not differentiate between races and because there is no differentiation between races, one cannot assume that all gay people develop their gay identity at the same way. These staged models are based on research samples of white, middle-class, educated males. The criticisms of the models are that they assume all gay males regardless of color or ethnicity, especially in the last stage of acceptance and integration of the gay identity. Research on the experiences of gay men has ignored the voices and experiences of SGL men of color, and many of the LGBT students were built on models of theories based on White students. (Means & Jaeger 2014, Washington & Wall, 2010). To have a better understanding of the Black SGL male identity development one must recognize that social and personal identities (race, sexual orientation, culture, and social class) are continuously intersecting and influencing each other, therefore not allowing for the individual identities to act in isolation (Doss, 2016). This intersectionality is engendered when multiple aspects of identity are present and considered at the same time (Bourke, 2008). According to Bourke (2008), the following is how SGL Black male identity development plays out: The person becomes aware of same-sex feelings within the context of the Black community;

the person faces both racism of the White community/world and heterosexism/homophobia for the Black community; the person seeks information and contact with other Black SGL males; the person engages in meaningful activities within a concept of a SGL Black community; and the person recognizes that being a Black SGL is simply a part of his whole being. In addition, issues of disclosure are presented as part of the model (p.12).

When I began researching SGL African American males, I felt it was imperative to look at the rise of African American SGL discourse to help me gain a better understanding of various sources of identity conflict. The literature suggests two reasons for the rise of African American gay discourse, which began in the late 1970s (D'Emilio, 1993). First is the politicization of sexual and gender identities brought on by the feminist movement. The feminist movement developed a discourse centering on women's experiences and countering the white male-dominated oppressive discourses on women's identities. Through their political and social actions, they tried to end various practices that were oppressive and forced people to rethink what it means to be a woman/man and gay/straight. The second reason for the rise of this discourse was race and gender division within the movements. An awareness grew among gay people of color that the larger movements such as the gay and racial-equality movements were not addressing oppression and other identity-specific experiences they were facing. Neither the white women's movement nor the white gay movement made an effort to address racism or develop an overall knowledge of racial politics and the cultures of people of color. According to Beam (1986), "gay male" typically connotes white, middle class, youthful, and possibly butch, but there is little room for SGL men of color within what gets assumed. While Beam's work is now old enough that we can see assumptions shifting, his basic point resonates.

SGL adolescents and young adults of color in the United States experience identity-related discrimination and victimization that negatively impacts their psychological well-being and mental health outcomes (Burton, Marshal, Chisolm, Sucato, & Friedman, 2013; Mustanski, Andrews, & Puckett, 2016; Russell & Fish, 2016). Among dual minority individuals, combined racial and sexual orientation discrimination is a predictor of mental health disorders (Bostwick, Boyd, Hughes, West, & McCabe, 2014; Holley, Mendoza, Del-Colle, & Bernard, 2016; Sutter & Perrin, 2016), and those who are Black and Latinx (also referred to as Hispanic and Latino/a) are subjected to structural and interpersonal racism that poses risks for poorer mental health (Sibrava, Bjornsson, Perez Benitez, Moitra, Weisberg, Keller, 2019). Studies of SGL males of color have found an overlap between race-ethnicity and sexual minority stressors (Kuper, Coleman, & Mustanski, 2014) and evidence for poor mental health outcomes (Toomey, Huynh, Jones, Lee, & Revels-Macalinao, 2017). Belonging to multiple marginalized identity groups simultaneously can clearly present a need for mental health services in order to successfully transition into adulthood (Moore, Camacho, Munson, 2020). Yet, among sexual minorities, young adults have the lowest rates of mental health help-seeking behaviors of any age group (Medley, Lipari, Bose, Cribb, Kroutil, McHenry, 2016), and rates of service use among Black and Latinx young adults are significantly lower than among others in their age group (Broman, 2012).

Some SGL males of color may perceive themselves as being lodged between gay and Black communities, enduring stigma, prejudice, and discrimination in both (Bowleg, 2013; Horton, Keene, Schneider, & Voisin, 2018, Hunter, 2010a). People of color have a double-edged prejudice because society must be able to comprehend the negative emotional consequences resulting from opposing norms placed on men of color from both the African American

community and the white gay community (Conerly, 2000 & Johnson, 1982). Therefore, negotiation of both identities is problematic, especially for male youths and adults of color who are SGL, with few resources nor leadership for proper guidance.

In the 1989 documentary “Tongues Untied”, Marlon Riggs argues being African American and SGL are inseparable parts of a single identity. However, Brown (2005, p. 29) argued that same-gender-males of color “divide” their racial and sexual identities because they “cannot accept a gay identity.” Jamil, Harper, and Fernandez (2009, p. 203) concluded that SGL males of color concurrently developed racial and sexual identities, but as Han wrote:

the actual process involved with the development of each identity not only differed but seemed to be independent of each other. Taken together, these studies had the unintended and unfortunate consequence of pathologizing gay men of color who came to be seen as being in a constant state of internal struggle as they attempted to navigate two distinct and irreconcilable identities (Han, 2017, p. 3)

Many SGL males of color including myself see one identity as being more important than the other. I was so out of touch and closeted with my SGL identity that I did not know that SGL males of color dated or could be in a SGL relationship with other SGL males of color. Johnson (1982) studied 60 SGL African American men to see which identity is more central in their lives, being African American or gay. Johnson found those African Americans associated as being “gay-identified” African Americans are men who are more comfortable showing affection for other men in public, also they are mostly in relationships with white men. These gay-identified men also feel the gay community is more tolerant than the African American community by feeling more oppressed by their sexual preference than by their race. Those who chose the norms of the heterosexual African American culture was considered “Black-identified” gays. These

men were less open about their sexual preference, and they were uncomfortable about expressing any form of intimacy in public with other men, also these men preferred African American lovers.

For example, these men tend to sit one seat apart when going to the movies with other men especially if the person they are with is SGL. These “Black-identified” gays feel being African American is imperative because the color of their skin is more visible than sexual orientation, and it has a greater influence on how others interact with them. However, one of the big drawbacks of this research is that it did not measure if any changes took place over time. I can honestly say that I grew up being “Black-identified” because it was only a few years ago in which I was able to identify myself as being SGL. I was not open as a SGL male although deep down I knew I was and am currently not fully open. I have never expressed any intimacy in public towards other males including my exes even at gay events, although there were times in which I had the passion to be expressive but was unable to show my passion. I also preferred to date and be with African Americans.

It would be interesting to know if any of those 60 males had any changes over time because although I still considered myself as “Black-identified” SGL male, some of the characteristics have changed over time. I did show public intimacy with one of a very few exes. I remember dropping him at Union Station when he went to visit his mother. I kissed him good-bye in the car and it was not one of those “quick peck” kisses, it was a long passionate kiss on the lips. Here we were in the middle of downtown Chicago Union Station with many people walking by, and I am passionately kissing a man in my car. For some reason I did not care if people saw us, all I know is that I wanted to kiss my boyfriend good-bye and tell him that I will miss him. When we finished, he said, “Now are people stopping and staring at us?” As I looked

around no one cared even if they did see us. Was I beginning to change from being “Black-identified” to “gay-identified”? I think not, but I was becoming more comfortable as accepting myself a SGL male. Does that mean I will alienate my African American identity as I become more comfortable with my SGL identity? Again, I think not.

Gay white males rarely have to answer if at all “What do you identify first with, race or sexuality (Bartone 2020)?” Since whiteness is normalized and the gay community is seen by society largely as White, race is a non-factor (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999), This question is problematic because it demonstrates the idea one must choose between their racial community or the gay community. This can cause stress to SGL youths of color (Meyer & Ouelette, 2009), because SGL youths of color should not and cannot be divorced from their race and sexuality. These multiple intersecting identities must be front and center when discussing the lives and experiences of SGL youth of color.

Patton (2011) studied the perspectives on identity in six SGL African American males attending a historically Black college. Using the work of Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, and Soto (2002) on influence of dual-identity development of SGL African American males, Patton discussed four identity statuses of this population: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. African American males whose status is best described as *assimilation* have low sexual identification and high racial identification. Men with *integration* status identified strongly with both their racial and sexual identities. Men in the *separation* status have strong association with their SGL status but very little connection with their racial identity. Finally, men with *marginalization* status have little to no identification with either their sexual identity or the African American identity.

Patton's study concluded that the men who were studied obviously included their sexual identity as part of themselves, but it was not as significant as being a "Black man". This study supports the finding that sexuality did not emerge immediately, most likely this was due to the ability to place emphasis elsewhere until it was okay to acknowledge their SGL identity (Christian, 2005). I did not accept my SGL identity until I was at UIC where I felt it was safe and okay to be SGL outside of a SGL organization such as Adodi. Adodi was founded in Philadelphia in 1986 by Clifford Rawlings as an organization that engenders community, self-empowerment, and spiritual and personal growth for SGL men of African descent who love men.

Many SGL African American males who are not fortunate enough to have the support of families or to discover organizations of support such as Adodi are compelled to live marginalized lives being SGL and African American. However, the environment can play a crucial role in how individuals come to perceive and identify themselves (Evans, 2001). As previously noted, it was not until I had the Social Foundations class at UIC that I felt it was safe to be SGL at UIC, but outside of the university, my SGL identity must be concealed until I am fully comfortable and secure with that identity.

6. Religion and Spirituality

The Black church is a central institution in the Black community and has historically provided important spiritual, social, and health benefits for many Black Americans, especially SGL males of color (Quinn, Dickerson-Gomez, & Kelly, 2016). Churches have traditionally occupied a special place in the African American experience. For many SGL males of color, church is a part of their identity (Miller, 2013). Often, generations of families are involved in the church: their great grandparents helped build the church, their grandparents provided leadership,

their parents work and volunteer at the church. For many, going to church was a requirement as children and they would have gone to Sunday school, sung in the choir or participated in other church activities. As adults, SGL males of color are often involved in church leadership positions such as deacons, lead ushers, ministers of music, or choir directors.

Of all the major racial-ethnic groups in the United States, African Americans are most likely (88%) to report a formal religious affiliation with a church group (Pew, 2008; Pitt, 2009; Pitt, 2010). The Black church has always provided food for the soul, but most importantly guidance: a set of rules in which to make people's lives better. However, the church, especially the Black church, is often identified as one of the most oppressive environments that gay men encounter (Pitt, 2010; Oswald, 2001; and Yip, 1999). It is still the Black church was and remains instrumental in gaining civil rights for minorities. Yet for four hundred centuries, Black Americans in churches are still less approving and speak out against homosexuality as a sin against God more than their White counterparts (Lewis, 2003). Black churches differ in their approach to homosexuality. Yet, the responses of the majority of Black churches range from verbal hostility to homosexuals to silence on the issue (Ward, 2005).

Many religious traditions view homosexuality as a sin and have strictly defined visions of masculinity and femininity. SGL males of color experience homophobia and AIDS phobia that is sanctioned by the Black church (Miller, 2013). The Black church often holds more conservative views that condemn homosexuality as sinful, leading to homonegativity and stigma towards Black gay men (Balaji, Oster, Viall, Heffelfinger, Mena, & Toledo, 2012; Miller, 2013). Still, spirituality has been a resource for SGL males of color who have AIDS or are HIV positive (Miller, 2004). Prior studies show a paradox of religiosity and spirituality being associated with both risk of and protection against HIV and STIs among SGL males of color (Dangerfield,

Williams, Bass, Wynter, & Bluthenthal, 2019). Spirituality has been used to cope with life-threatening events, physical illness, and emotional and psychological stresses. Belief in God has been an important strength for many Black Americans regardless of sexual orientation. These oppressions and messages experienced in the church increase internalized homophobia of SGL males of color, which can increase risk-taking and decrease access to support (Peterson & Jones, 2009).

This becomes a contradiction because the Black church, the champion for the underdog, has now become the oppressor. Christian churches, especially the Black church, says SGL people are going to hell and should not have equal rights nor full protection under the law, such as the right to marry. It seems like the Black church quickly forgot the time when they were oppressed and fighting for equal rights under the law. Now the oppressed becomes the oppressor as in Orwell's book *Animal Farm* (1947), where at the end of the novel the pig Napoleon, who was once part of the oppressed and champion for the rights of animals, has now become the oppressor siding with the humans. One could juxtapose the same situation in which both Eurocentric protestant values and the Black church are oppressing LGBTQ people.

For the Black church to speak and preach heavily against homosexuality makes it seem that being SGL is worse than being in a gang or even committing murder. It is this homophobic attitude of the church that heavily influences the values of young minority children. Religious attitudes (Larsen, Cate, & Reed, 1983) and the levels of religiosity (Herek, 2000), including church attendance (Battle & Lemelle, 2004) and the degree to which a person internalizes religion's values (Herek, 1987) are strongly correlated with negative attitudes towards homosexuals. Such attitudes are portrayed vividly in popular culture in such films as *Blind Faith* (Military & Dickerson, Orwell, 1998).

Many religious conservatives especially those in the African American church use the following scriptures from the Bible to preach and spread homophobia among the African American community. In *The Good Book* (1996), Harvard professor Peter Gomes calls homosexuality the last prejudice. Gomes elaborates that the topic of the Bible and homosexuality is so eccentric and so much is at stake, very few are willing to concede to the experts their personal conviction of the topic. More than any other social or theological issue of our day, the discourse of the Bible and homosexuality engages us at our most fundamental level of existence and raises disturbing questions about our own sense of identity, morality, and the nature of settled truth (Gomes, 1996, p.145). The religious basis for the prejudice against homosexuality so often is expressed by people of strong religious convictions. Almost every such person who acknowledges the aversion to homosexuality does so based on what he or she believes the Bible to say. In their minds there is no doubt whatsoever about what the Bible says, and what the Bible means, meaning they literally take the Bible on every word written and there are no metaphoric writings in the Bible. Therefore, comes the age-old argument: Homosexuality is an abomination, and the homosexual is a sinner. People use such events in the Bible such as God punishing the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for the sin of homosexuality. Saint Paul, who was said to have written more than two-thirds of the New Testament, opposed homosexuality with the early Christians, who were equally opposed to homosexuality. According to Gomes (1996), if we are to be faithful to the clear teachings of scripture, we must condemn homosexuality, the last moral absolute and we compromise it at our own peril (pp.145). This is where the true conflict comes into play for SGL males of color because they grow up hearing that homosexuality is a sin and homosexuals will burn in hell. This is extremely scary to adolescents who happen to be SGL because they must hide their feelings and identity or be condemned not only by their church but

also their families. This causes confusion, feelings of insecurity, and fear of being SGL and hearing the old cliché of the Genesis story being about Adam and Eve and not Adam and Steve.

The traditional set of texts for both the Old and New Testaments to which people appeal in seeking the Bible's teaching of homosexuality are the following: (Gomes, 1996)

<i>Genesis 1-2</i>	<i>The Creation Story</i>
<i>Genesis 19:1-9</i>	<i>Sodom and Gomorrah</i>
<i>Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13</i>	<i>The Holiness Code</i>
<i>Romans 1:26-27</i>	<i>St. Paul's Views</i>
<i>I Corinthians 6:9 and I Timothy 1-10</i>	<i>Pauline list of vices</i>

It is these verses from the Bible that frighten SGL males into believing that they are going to hell and aid in promoting homophobia in the Black community and the church, thus leaving many SGL males who grew up in a Christian community feeling confused, denying their gay identity, and over time trying to integrate their religious identity with their gay identity.

It is often communicated to SGL males of color that they cannot be both religious and attracted to the same sex (Griffin, 2006; Pits, 2010). The messages can produce a state of cognitive dissonance that can contribute to psychological distress and negative mental health outcomes such as depression or drug usage (Jerome & Halkitis, 2009, Quinn & Dickson-Gomez, 2016). Cognitive dissonance is a psychological state of tension usually experienced when a person holds two or more cognitions that contrast. For example, if a person views himself as Christian and then is exposed to sermons that use Christian doctrine to condemn his sexual orientation, he may experience dissonance between his beliefs about his Christian self and his sexuality. One method Lassiter suggests is reconciliation as an approach for the reduction of cognitive dissonance (2015). Reconciliation is not the same reconciliation that one would receive

in the Catholic church, nor does a SGL male of color must deny any part of himself or reject a set of beliefs. In this instance of reconciliation, multiple identities are combined and organized into a sum greater to their parts and relate harmoniously with each other (Lassiter, 2015).

7. Navigating as Community Outcasts

As double minorities defined by race and by sexual orientation, SGL males of color may not develop a sense of community nor participate in either the white gay community or the African American community, thus leaving them without the leadership and collective resources for community change (Kraft, Beeker, Stokes, & Peterson, 2000). SGL males of color often face microaggressions, racism, and homophobia (Carter 2013). These experiences can lead to psychological distress and mental problems (Dunbar, Sontag-Padilla, Ramchand, Seelam, & Stein, 2017), further reinforcing a culture of silence among many SGL males of color, forcing them to live their lives by concealing their authentic selves in fear of persecution and discrimination (Modste-James & Franklin, 2024).

What SGL males of color desire is what all people desire, to be able to live their authentic selves, to be accepted and understood without backlash and discrimination. However, Oliver (2022) says that SGL African Americans are seeking Black queer joy. Black queer joy is an experience that celebrates queerness within the Black community. Oliver defines Black queer joy as an experience that recognizes and accepts one's SGL identity while managing the challenges that might come with it. For Oliver, this journey of Black queer joy does not happen overnight but is possible with the practice of self-love and acceptance.

Having Black queer joy as a middle-school teacher could be a difficult journey. As a teacher of middle school students, I have often heard students making derogatory statements

referring to being SGL and about SGL people, and students of color make many of these offensive remarks. Alexander (2006) states that this would be a teachable moment to make students understand that those remarks are unacceptable. In this case, Alexander identifies a teachable moment as an intersection in time and space where another person can inform the ignorance of one person. The difficulty for a SGL teacher to practice Black queer joy is how to teach without the fear of being labeled by students, a form of teaching the unteachable. Teaching as a SGL teacher, especially for a person of color, can be an uphill battle. Not only must teachers teach against the prejudice within the classroom, but also the prejudice students learn from their family, their community, the media, and society in general.

Being a SGL male of color who was an educator of students, some of whom are SGL or bisexual, I often wonder if they have shared the same experiences as I had during my adolescence and teen years. Have they ever felt marginalized, ashamed, or just plain wrong for being the person they are? Do these students hide or deny their sexual orientation by over-emphasizing some other attributes such as being athletic, comedic, or scholarly? Do these youths silence the small inner voice longing to be liberated and forced to conform to heterosexist Eurocentric standards of behavior based on sexual orientation and race? As a SGL educator, when is the appropriate time and space (if any) for “engaged pedagogy” a term bell hooks developed when the “teacherly” and “private self” of education collide (Clark, 2006). Yet most importantly when these students begin to reflect on their identities, do they leave out the identification of sexual orientation as I have done many times and at times still do? What is the appropriate role for the educator of adolescents in all of this? All of these questions have boggled my mind and are too many to answer is one study, however, these are questions I hope to study in the future.

African American and Latino males tend to come from environments where men are expected to be hyper-masculine with hetero-masculine undertones (Patton, 2011), and being SGL is a forbidden taboo. Wall and Washington (1991) explain that in the African American community, men struggle for respect. They (African American men) are expected to be successful in hetero-normal terms, which means marrying within the race, taking care of a wife and children, and being good role models for future African American men (Icard, 1986; Wall and Washington, 1991; McCready, 2004) and there is nothing wrong with that. Because of this heterosexist paradigm, LGBTQ+ students of regardless of color are being mentally, emotionally, and physically abused to the point of committing suicide and being the victims of homicides, especially in their own racial community. In the last decade, thousands of LGBTQ youth have been made visible by “coming out” and organizing student groups to lobby with adults for support of LGBT-friendly legislation (Aleman, 2010). At the same time, the religious right has been raging a campaign against the LGBTQ community at large. Aleman’s article explains further that half of the anti-SGL initiatives filed in 1995 pertained to school issues. As an educator who is a SGL man of African descent, although not entirely out, I am drawn to the need to make known the marginalization of not only being a person of color but also a SGL man who is empathetic to the marginalization of LGBTQ students. McCready (2004) states although straight Black male students experience marginalization, SGL Black males experience a form of marginalization different from their heterosexual counterparts.

8. Body image

Historically body issues have been associated with girls and women, however, research over the past few decades suggests that men also struggle with body dissatisfaction (Marmara,

2018, Olivardia, 2004). Previously research has consistently found that Black SGL males are more likely than heterosexual men to struggle with negative body image (Basabas et al. 2019; Fredrick & Essayli, 2016). Although there are queer male subcommunities that value a larger body type which are called bears and the very slim body frames known as twinkies, in general, the male body ideal for Black SGL is one that is thin and muscular (Chaney, 2021). Within the queer communities, it is difficult to escape that objectify me via social image media platforms, periodicals, porn, and queer dating apps. Studies suggest Black SGL males are vulnerable to negative influences that media sources have on body image. (Chaney, 2021). When compared to heterosexual men's magazines, gay-related magazines tend to be sexualized, nude and have significantly lower body fat images in heterosexual men's and general audience magazines (Lanzieri & Cook, 2013). In addition to magazines, social networking sites also negatively influence perceptions and attitudes of the body (Holland & Tiggerman, 2016). Body image dissatisfaction among Black SGL males or has been associated with symptoms of depression (Blashill, 2010), appearance-related anxiety (Blashill, 2010), eating disorders (Brennan, Crath, Hart, Gadalla, & Gills, 2011), and internalized homonegativity (Brennan, Craig, & Thompson, 2012). Gay men tend to suffer from body dissatisfaction at rates much higher than heterosexual men which causes greater body image anxiety compared to heterosexual men ((Calzo, Corliss, Blood, Field, & Field, 2013; Siconolfi, Kapadis, Moller, Eddy, Kupprat, & Kingdon, 2016). However, the relationship between community connection and body image among SGL males of color is underexplored (Soulliard, Layland, Smith, Kipke, & Bray 2022). SGL males of color may experience body dissatisfaction and pressure to conform to muscular, lean body ideals that are prevalent in gay culture, like other gay men.

African American adolescent norms stress involvement in heterosexual sexual activities, but SGL males of color have difficulty finding support for their sexual desires. I can reflect on my freshmen year in high school in which the guys I would hang out with during lunch talked about the girls they had sex with or the girls they would like to have sexual relations with. None of them would dare admit that they were a virgin, that was just not right to be in high school and not have sex. I was the only one who admitted to still being a virgin at that time. However, the guys never called me gay, because their rationale for my still being a virgin at 14 is that I was too fat and ugly for any girl to have sex with. In my freshmen year, as I looked at my high school ID, I was this fat “rolly polly” boy who looked like he was 10 years old while all the other guys I associated with at that time were what society would see as attractive hyper-masculine teens. In that case, I can see where being fat and ugly was an unforeseen saving grace because I did not have to be ridiculed as being gay for not having had sex yet and try to justify why I did not have sex if I were an “attractive hyper-masculine” freshman. If I were heterosexual and told these guys I had sex, they would not have believed me. They would say something like “What girl in her right mind would want to fuck a fat nigga like you.” Body image has been a concern for heterosexuals, but it is just another difficulty to overcome for gay men, especially SGL males of color.

The internalization of homonegativity may contribute to body image concerns in SGL males of color, as a way to psychologically or physically distance themselves from perceived weakness or effeminacy associated with gay identity. However, exposure to idealized, predominantly white male bodies in gay media and culture may lead gay Black men to adhere to more stringent body ideals (Siconolfi, Kapadis, Moller, Eddy, Kupprat, & Kingdon, 2016). This could aggravate body dissatisfaction among SGL males of color. Therefore, experiences of racial

discrimination, in addition to sexual orientation-based discrimination, may also impact the body image of gay Black men, however, the research on this is limited. In addition to the lack of research related to specific counseling techniques to treat body image issues among SGL males of color (Chaney, 2021), helping professions need to produce research that adds to helping SGL males of color with this issue.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Questions and Significance of Method

Qualitative research employs various methods that imply a humanistic stance in which the phenomena under investigation are examined through the eyes and experiences of the individual participants (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009). This type of research assumes that reality and truth are built and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Freebody, 2003; Mendez 2013). To assist with the interpretation of my experiences as well as those of the three interview subjects, it is useful to rely on the aims and practices of queer theory, queer theory, and autoethnography. When taken together, following Denzin's idea of a "multi-theoretical perspective" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), these critical theoretical and methodological orientations offer insights for using personal experiences to describe abuses of power and tools for crafting evocative and accessible accounts of cultural life (Baylorn and Adams, 2016).

The book *Personal-Passionate-Participatory Inquiry into Social Justice in Education* (He and Phillion, Eds. 2008) led me to the strong desire to conduct a personal, passionate, and participatory inquiry into the experiences of SGL males of color. The purpose of this investigation is to gain a better understanding of how SGL males of color navigate and negotiate their identities over time. While the terms "navigate" and "negotiate" might seem redundant, they connote different meanings. "Navigation" is a kind of finding one's way, even steering one's way, which implies agency only on the part of the navigator. "Negotiation" implies more than a single agent, at least two or more agents in interaction with one another. SGL males of color are often negotiating aspects of their identities as they navigate various social spaces in this country (Doss, 2016). I wanted to learn how the subjects of this study both navigated and

negotiated their own developmental paths. I wanted to do so in relation to my own experiences, hoping that they would enable me to better understand the subjects of my study, and their cultural experiences over time, better understand myself. To accomplish this, I used autoethnography, which allowed me to draw upon my own experiences to understand the phenomenon of navigating and negotiating my life as a SGL male of color. I explored my experiences in my history of navigating and negotiating my identity as a SGL male of color in order to make sense of the topic of my investigation. The cultural context of my experience was also illuminated by how the participants navigated and negotiated their SGL identities and the way emotional experiences shaped them. This allowed me to understand my own experiences as a stage of the research process that was enabled by interpreting my participants' experiences and representing them through writing.

These theoretical frameworks influenced the construction of my research question and sub-questions, as well as my interpretations of participant responses. I used the following sub-questions to aid in my research to organize my thoughts and the responses of the participants: a) How do SGL males of color begin to discover their identities in the context of their relationship with their families? b) What did research participants know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community, and about any role model from the media when growing up? c) How does the educational experience, including teacher and peer interaction, affect the identity of SGL males of color including? d) What role does religion and religious affiliation play in the identity of SGL males of color? e) As SGL males of color, what were they thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time? f) How do SGL males of color manage to live as outcasts in a White hetero-centric, a White gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society?

In drawing selectively on queer theory, critical race theory, quare theory, and intersectionality theory, the method I used consisted of conducting interviews to explore the experience of growing up negotiating and negotiating a SGL identity over time. I use autobiographical narrative as autoethnography, that is, I use cultural context as an analytic lens, informing my reflections on the experiences of growing up as a SGL male of color in the African American community. This autobiographical part is participatory and personal, influenced by William Pinar and Madeline Grumet (1976). As an educator for over 30 years, observing the problems that SGL male youths of color encountered in their education as well as in their homes, I was drawn to how Pinar and Grumet describe present pursuits as derived from past experiences in view of future expectations (Schubert, 2009; Pinar & Grumet, 1976). My research on SGL male males of color (the present), is derived from my past life experiences growing up a SGL male of color, with the hope that my work will affect in a positive way the educational and life experiences of SGL male males of color (the future).

As a youngster I never heard of the word “homosexuality” nor the word “gay”. Such terms did not frame my experience. When I reflect back to when I was in kindergarten, and it was story time, the students would either sit in a circle with the teacher in the chair at the top of the circle or the teacher in front of the class, and all the children in front of her. I always wanted to sit close or close to the teacher because of her high heels. I liked the sound that was made as the teacher walked in high heels and the way her legs looked in them. It was not a sexual attraction by any means, but more of a fascination with how they looked and how they made her legs look. My kindergarten teacher had a pair of shoes to match each of the colors of the outfits she wore. Yet I had no interest in fashion or being a fashion designer as one might guess, based on my fascination with high heels and knowing that many of the most famous designers were

gay. How do I now make sense of that experience, which was largely unmediated by cultural knowledge at that time, but is now informed by years of experience and reading of cultural analysis?

This is one of many examples of my personal experiences and events in growing up that helped me to make sense of the world and culture in which I lived and how constructing various identities affected my childhood, adolescence, teen, and young adult years. My story helps me to compare my experiences with those of the other SGL males of color and how they are negotiating and navigating their SGL identity and making sense of their world. I want to compare experiences because I might discover ways that could have made my experiences more manageable, or possibly a way I could have handled various events that would have help me to understand and accept my gay identify at an earlier age. According to Pavlenko (2002 & 2007), personal narratives provide rich data and give readers access into the individuals' private worlds.

B. **Research Design**

1. **Using Personal Autoethnographic Narratives**

In researching the ways I changed and accepted my SGL identity over time, I discovered a qualitative method of inquiry that would help me: in this case, narrative writing, because it focuses on researching “into experiences” (Mendez, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). An autoethnography approach to research and writing seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience to understand and connect to a wider cultural, political, and social context (Chang, 2016; Ellis, 2004; Holman Jones, 2005; Wall, 2008). The word autoethnography is composed of three parts which, in Latin, are autos, ethnos and graphia, meaning “the self”, “culture”, and “writing” respectively. This research method gives firsthand

knowledge of researching a phenomenon as it is experienced. That experience happens to be one of the tribulations and triumphs of being a SGL male of color from the point of view of someone who lived the experience. Autoethnography gives an insider perspective, quality, or essence of experiences that differ from “outsider” accounts.

An underlying assumption of qualitative research is that reality and truth are constructed and shaped through the interaction between people and the environment in which they live (Silverman, 2000). In my instance, it would be my truth and reality based on my identity as a SGL male of African descent living in an African American community—within a society with values that are predominantly heterosexual and White. Things in qualitative research are studied in their natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000, p. 3). An autoethnography can show people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live and what their struggles mean in a cultural context (Bochener and Ellis, 2006).

I researched and read books and articles on using autobiography narratives as a method of personal and educational research. In the book *Curriculum: Perspective, Paradigm, and Possibility* (Schubert, 1986), I focused on the section Curriculum as an Agenda for Social Reconstruction, because it was in this section where I first heard of the word *currere*. Currere is a Latin word meaning to run as in running a course; it seeks to understand the contribution academic studies make to a person’s understanding of his or her life and how it overlaps with society, politics, and culture (Bruner, 1996 & Pinar 2004). In my case, the self-realization was of my SGL identity.

As a researcher and a SGL male of color, I hope to provide a rich interpretation of my life experience as one whose voice was silenced, and how I was unable to enjoy the freedom of

being a SGL man while forced to deny my sexual identity. One way to make my voice heard is through the telling of my story. According to Bochner and Ellis (2016), stories give meaning to our existence and one of the main goals of autoethnography is to put meanings into motion, and an effective way to do that is to tell stories (p73). Thus, autoethnography allows me as the researcher to draw on my experiences to understand a particular phenomenon or culture.

McIlveen (2008), states that the core feature of an autoethnography entails the researcher performing narrative analysis pertaining to himself in intimate relation to a particular phenomenon (p.13). Therefore, it is not just about writing about myself, it about being analytic about personal experiences in the development of the research being performed in the cultural context of my experience as a SGL male of color. As I reflect on various aspects of my life from childhood to the present, I am discovering more about myself and my relationship with family and friends. Many of these experiences I kept hidden because of being ashamed or feeling hurt. These are experiences I would want to forget and bury in the past. However, those experiences, as hurtful as they may be, helped to shape the person I am today. According to Ellis (2007), doing an autoethnography involves a back-and-forth movement between experiences and examining a vulnerable self and observing and revealing the broader context of that experience (p.14). In this case I want to be able to capture the readers' minds and heart therefore I will be using evocative autoethnography with aims toward the researcher's introspection on a particular topic—in my instance being a SGL male of color who will allow readers to make a connection with my feelings and experiences. Overall autoethnographers do not want readers to sit back as a spectator; they want readers to feel and care and desire (Bochner and Ellis, 1996, p. 24).

As an autoethnographer, I seek to produce an aesthetically and evocatively thick description of my personal and interpersonal experiences in a cultural context, which is unique to

autoethnography. The aesthetics are formed from writing stories that are poetic, impressionistic, and even lyrical, evoking feelings that reflect the tales of human existence (Ellis, 2004; Poulos, 2021). To accomplish this, I retroactively and selectively write about my experience based on reflections, recollections, memories, and a few typed and written vignettes. By using aesthetic and evocative writing I hope to illustrate new perspectives or epiphanies in my personal experiences that would fill gaps in existing and related stories (Couser, 1997; Goodall, 2001). Using the technique of “showing” (Adams, 2006; Lamott, 1994), the researcher brings readers into an experience of various scenes through thoughts, emotions, and actions (Ellis, 2004 p.711; Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

This study uses various autoethnographic approaches. The first will be personal narratives, where I will focus on myself as a phenomenon by writing evocative narratives specifically focused on my personal and public life as a SGL male of color. Using personal narratives, I seek to understand myself being a SGL male of color as I examine growing up in the Black community, where being gay has never been fully accepted, especially within the Black church. I connect my experiences with the participants in this study to encourage readers to enter my world and to further my understanding by reflecting on and appreciating myself as a being African American and SGL.

As I study my life alongside that of the participants, reflective ethnography is another approach that will be used. By using reflective ethnography, I will note and reflect on the way I change as a result of doing this research. Van Manen (1989) refers to these confessional tales where backstage research endeavors become the focus of the investigation (Ellis, 2004). Reflective ethnographies come from the interactive interview approach that will provide an intimate understanding of the participants’ experiences with the emotionally charged and

sensitive topic of being a SGL male of color. Finally, autoethnography as a queer method will also be incorporated in this study. This method involves combining personal and autobiographical narratives and social aspects to explore the intricacies of SGL identities in meaningful conversation (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016). In using both autoethnography and queer theory, the study focuses on the political nature of narratives that are personal and explores how power structures influence and can be used to initiate social change (Modeste-James & Chilaka, 2024). Autoethnography as a queer method is a way of repelling dominant discourse and structures by producing alternate knowledge through the voices, stories, and experiences of marginalized people (Jones & Adams, 2016; Spry, 2011).

2. **An Evocative Personal Autobiographical Narrative**

Ever since I realized that an autobiography can be used in a dissertation, I have been doing a lot of reflecting of my life experience as a SGL male of African descent: all the good and bad experiences, happy and sad experiences, and even the shameful experiences. As I reflect on various events using the evocative autoethnography and the currere method outlined by Pinar and Grumet (1976), I became even more conscious of how my life experiences have had a profound effect on me both personally and professionally.

An example that comes to mind is the story of how I became known, according to a former principal, as a bleeding-heart teacher. This method will allow me to make connections to my feelings and experiences of how I became a “bleeding-heart.” One of the reasons I chose to use autoethnography is that I do not want readers to sit back as spectators. Instead, I want readers to feel and care about what I am trying to convey. According to Mendez (2013), evocative or emotional autoethnography is gaining ground in research practice because of the connection it

allows readers to their own lives. Therefore, to pinpoint where I became this sensitive and nurturing male, I must reflect to the Christmas holiday season with my family. As far as I can remember, I have enjoyed giving to and helping others even if it meant not taking care of my own needs. I reflect on the time of year of giving and sharing, the Christmas season, as my passionate and personal narrative using evocative autoethnography.

As I continued to reflect on this and other experiences, I was able to comprehend how and why I became a so-called bleeding heart, not only to my students but also especially to my nieces and nephews. Since I do not have any children of my own and more likely never will, I could never say “No” to my nieces and nephews when they were children, especially during the holidays or other special occasions, such as birthdays. I always saw to it that they got whatever they wanted for Christmas, even if it meant that I had to stand in line at 4:30 am the day after Thanksgiving to get my nephew a Furby—or drive almost three hours to a Service Merchandise store in central Indiana at 4 am on Christmas Eve morning because my niece had to have what she delightfully called “a Black roller skating baby doll” and no stores in Chicago or the surrounding areas had these dolls nor did the catalog houses; only the white dolls were available. I pondered what in the world would make me do all of this especially since their parents told me they would have never gotten up that early or driven that far just to get some stupid toy. Their children just would not have gotten that gift. But I did not mind doing this because seeing the joy in their faces of getting that most desired special gift they longed for makes all the difference.

I had suspected the experiences of my past Christmas holidays more likely had a profound effect of me being a bleeding heart. I think Pinar and Grumet (1976) explains it the best in the book *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (1976) when addressed in an essay of the Professors of Curriculum Society in New Orleans in 1975 in which Pinar states:

Experience is what one senses, one feels, one thinks, it is in a word, one's living through of one's life. It includes the physical sensations, as how your back feels in that chair in this moment, the temperature of the room on your face, emotional in that you may have a feeling about me, about him/her seated next to you, about this meeting, and mental in that you recall the thoughts about breakfast this morning or you think about whom it is you chose to have lunch with or about those at home. It is private although you make it public, it is individual although you can share aspects of it with others and be influenced by others but on the whole, it is yours. I cannot design it..... it is your own. (Pg. 18)

In one of my curriculum classes with Dr. Schubert, he gave us a simple class assignment that seemed as if it should take minutes to complete. Dr. Schubert asked us to make two columns. In one of the columns, we were to list five examples of *who we are*, and the second to list 5 examples of *what we are*. It sounded like a simple task, but it really was not. The first problem was to distinguish the meaning of "who" and "what." I pondered and then wrote I am a man, Black, Catholic for *who*; and some of the traits I listed for *what* included educator, researcher, and some other characteristics that most people would write. Yet one thing I did think about, but refused to write, was that I am SGL. For such a long time, until now, I continue to deny part of the Self in me.

I gave that same assignment to one of my computer classes. Instead of using columns, they made a character web using a software application of who and what they are. My students had the same difficulty as I did because these 13- and 14-year-old students had to do some deep soul searching of their self-identification. I could tell it was something they never had done

because it forced them to truly look at themselves on the inside. One student asked what if someone put, they were bi-. I said, “Buy what?” Knowing what she meant, I wanted her to say what she meant. She then half-whispered bisexual. Then I said loudly, “It is ok if someone put, they are bisexual.” I went on further, “It is ok if a person put, they are gay. There is nothing wrong with being gay and they should be proud of who and what they are.” After saying that, the entire demeanor or one would say aura of the class changed. I could not pinpoint it, but it was like now they felt comfortable in my class, and it became more than just a regular teacher/student’s relationship. I could juxtapose that change as a heavy gray cloud being lifted and sunshine filled the entire class with a beautiful rainbow. They felt they could express who and what they were without any consequences. Most importantly they felt they had an adult who supported them and had their back even if they were gay or bisexual. This particular class is where the students could be their authentic selves without fear of criticism or backlash. These students wanted to learn more, they did not talk back, and they did every assignment and project I gave without hesitation. These students were helpful to each other because it felt more like a family, and no one in the class scored lower than a B average. That was my favorite class during my 13-year tenure at that school. Although a few of those students did reveal their gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity, I still felt I could never reveal my SGL identity, even though I felt it would not have changed their opinion of me.

As I reflect and write about these experiences, I understand where my sensitive and nurturing side of being a bleeding heart originated and where it stands with me today. The traits of a bleeding heart in my experiences are not what society would expect of a masculine heterosexual male, but I can say it has made me a better uncle, teacher, and SGL male.

Interviews

1. Significance of Interviewing SGL Men of Color

For autoethnography to be truly ethnographic, it must have interpretation through a cultural context and through a cultural lens (Chang, 2016). While some of this cultural context will be obtainable through the literature and through my experience of the culture, the stories of others will add to this. Part of what they will add is variation of experience within a cultural context, thus avoiding over-simplification and a cultural determinism perspective. Also, because I anticipate the experiences of others to be shared with my own experiences as well as different, this will help me reflect on my own experiences as shared or not. I can go deeper, more specifically, and more personally into the nature of experience that gay men of color have. As Dewey writes in *Experience and Education* (1938), to have a theory of education requires a theory of experience. I am trying to understand how my experiences educated, or shaped, me, and the experience of others will be valuable for grounding those insights and reflections.

To investigate more deeply the participants' experiences navigating and negotiating being a SGL male of color over time, this study draws methodologically upon the life history narrative of qualitative research. Like other narrative inquiries, life history narratives draw upon Bruner's assertion that people live storied lives, and the process of narrating life stories reveals how we construct, negotiate, and understand our sense of self (Alsup, 2006 & Brockenbrough, 2012). What is included in one's narrative is how narrative elements are ordered and how the perspectives that shape the meaning of the narratives as a whole serve as a window into one's own life (Souto-Manning & Ray, 2007). The participants in this research are provided with multiple opportunities to recount and construct their life stories. Life history narrative research

enables examinations of how social and historical forces act upon SGL males of color, how they exercise agency in the midst of larger social forces to construct identities over time, and how life experiences across temporal and spatial contexts have combined to inform the emergent sense of self (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Therefore, using life history narratives affords a rich in-depth analysis of the participants' understanding of their life experiences as not only males of color but also SGL, living in the United States.

The questions asked led participants to sharing events and their overall experiences of growing up as a SGL youth of color. I began by simply asking participants to talk about their growing up and when they first realized that they were SGL. This led participants to describe and sharing experiences with family members and growing up in the African American community. Their experiences caused me in turn to reflect on my own, placing my reflections in dialogue with theirs.

2. **Conducting the Interview**

I interviewed three men who identify as being SGL men. Their nationalities are American. The age of the participants ranges from the youngest being 24 years old to the oldest being 59 years old at the time of the interviews. The respondents were recruited primarily through personal contacts. The men I told of my research were eager to participate and tell their stories. I had to narrow down my choice of participants because there were close to 20 who were eager to participate.

To narrow down the participants, I wanted to get a variety of ages at least one in each age group 20's, 30's, and 40's. I excluded any men who identified as bisexual or men who consider themselves as straight but like having sex with men because this research is about negotiation of

life experiences as a SGL male and change that would happen over time. However, I would include men who at one time considered themselves as bisexual but now identify strictly as SGL because there is a reason for that particular change over time that needs to be investigated.

Because I am one of the participants who socialize within the same community as the others chosen for this study, I was concerned that the interviews would create an imbalance of power as I would have access to their personal stories. Therefore, being a participant in this research also, I allowed the participants to ask about my experiences growing up and my experience of being a SGL man, and the changes in my life and identity over time. This helped the balance of power during the collection of data and the mutual experience of learning and understanding each other (Pitts, 2010).

In using interactive interviews, I interviewed the participants once or twice if necessary for a minimum of two hours or a maximum of 3 hours. The difference between these interactive interviews and the traditional one-on-one interviews is that the participants are men with whom I have a well-established relationship which assisted in the probing together of issues that transpired in conversation about being a SGL male of color. I asked pre-established questions of the participants, and their answers led to other questions based on the topic. I recorded their responses using the Sony PX370 digital recorder. The recorded interviews were stored on a SanDisk micro disk. I transcribed the recordings and erased the micro disk after the transcription. Pseudonyms for the study participants were used throughout to protect the participants' anonymity.

Data collection for this study began with in-depth, one-on-one life history interviews in which each participant described the formation of his own Black and SGL identities. In this study, the use of life history narratives provided a rich and in-depth analysis for each

participant's understanding and negotiation of his life experience of not only being a Black man in the US but also his experiences as a SGL male over time. These interviews were broken into three parts: a.) background of the participants, b.) the discovery and knowledge of being SGL through adolescence and teenage years, c.) current living and lifestyle changes from the initial discovery of being SGL to the present, including what was learned over time.

First, I generated a brief biographical overview of participants that includes settings from where the participants came from, descriptions for family members, religious affiliations, family traditions, education, and relationships with family and friends while growing up. The participants were asked to describe and expound on their childhood. Samples of the questions that were generated in this section are the following (See Appendix A): How would you describe your relationship with your family? What type of school did you attend? How would you describe your religious upbringing? How did religion affect your childhood? How would you describe your adolescence or teen years? Were there any gay or lesbians who lived in the neighborhood in which you grew up? Other questions were generated based on the answers given to the questions. This initial interview allowed participants to reflect on their backgrounds.

Next was a focus on the life experiences of participants' initial discovery of being SGL and their earliest description of identifying as being SGL. This section focused on the participants' descriptions of negotiating with their SGL identity throughout their adolescent and teenage years and what they learned as they matured. This led the participants to provide rich narratives of initial relations with other SGL males, especially involvement with males of color as friends during their adolescent and teenage years. During this phase of the interview, participants' profiles became clearer in identifying as African American and SGL and making a connection to both identities. The participants were asked a series of semi-structured interview questions such

as: When did you realize you were attracted to the same sex or gender? Do you remember some of the friends you had as a child and as a teen? How would you describe your relationship with those friends? Did you know of or have any gay friends as a child or teen? How would you describe your growing up being both Black and gay? Did you have any support growing as a SGL youth of color? Did being gay affect your racial identity? How do you personally negotiate being Black and gay during your adolescent, teenage years, and young adult years?

The final interview section focused on the participants' current situation and what they have learned as a SGL male of color; as well as whether they were satisfied with the navigation and negotiation of their life experiences. Participants provided descriptions of being a SGL male of color today and any changes from their initial self-discovery to their acceptance, in varying degrees, of their SGL identity. This included current relationships with family and friends and the comfort level of being SGL. Questions asked and discussed are the following with the semi-structured question (See Appendix A): Are you satisfied being a double minority, Black and gay? What has been the most difficult part of being Black and gay? Have you ever experienced homophobia from the African American community or outside the gay community? The final round of interviews provided participants a chance to reflect on themselves and on any phenomenon that may have emerged throughout the study, and to share any ideas for how these reflections should be put to use in the study.

Overall analysis from the three phases of questioning presented an examination of the common challenges and possible triumphs across the participants' narratives and my own self-reflections as well as in-depth portraits of the participants' negotiations of the challenges and tragedies and triumphs, which required being resilient over time.

In interviewing the participants, I also hope to gain a better understanding of how the participants' narratives with my own autoethnographic narratives would connect to a wider cultural context of being SGL. For example, in casual conversations, the participants and I discussed the issues with our bodies because we were always overweight even when we were young. As we grew older, we realized that our bodies were not acceptable to us because overweight bodies were not seen as acceptable or attractive in the gay community. For most men the ideal masculine body is a mesomorphic body type which consists of a broad, muscular upper body that narrows down to a V-shaped, slender waist (Hargreaves & Tiggerman, 2006). This is especially true for the gay community for men who are at increased risk for developing body image issues (Chaney, 2021). The greater discrepancy between between men's perceptions about their body size and its actual size (and shape), the more likely they are to experience body image dissatisfaction (Pearson, Heffner, & Follette, 2010). This affected my perception and the perception of the participants that our bodies did not fit the image of the SGL image of having muscular, masculine, or thin bodies that were constantly shown in the media. Therefore, not only were we marginalized for being SGL and Black, but we were also marginalized for being overweight. That is why I am always trying to try a new diet fad to help me attain the body that society and media expect me to have as a SGL male.

3. Coding the Interview Responses

When the interviews were completed, I printed out the transcribed interviews. I assigned each sub-question a color and coded each sub-question using a highlighter. Then I highlighted responses of the participants based on the color of the sub-question. The following was how each sub-question was colored:

- a) How do SGL males of color begin to discover their identities in the context of their relationship with their families? (Yellow)
- b) What did you know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community, and about any role model from the media when growing up? (Light Blue)
- c) How does the educational experience affect the identity of SGL males of color including teacher and peer interaction? (Light Green)
- d) What role does religion and religious affiliation play on the identity of SGL males of color? (Pink)
- e) As SGL males of color, what were they thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time? (Light Purple)
- f) How do SGL males of color manage to live as outcasts in a White hetero-centric, a White gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society? (Red)

There were some responses that seemed to respond to more than one of the sub-questions. When responses overlapped, I color coded the response with the color I thought answered the sub-question but also noted next to the response the sub question it overlapped. For example, if one of the participants responded to a question largely with comments about religion, but also made reference to their family, I coded that response by highlighting it pink but wrote family next to the response.

IV. FINDINGS

A. Participants

Including the author, four subjects participated in this research: C.J., who is 24 and a security guard; George, who is 37 and a life coach; Adrian, who is 43 and works in technology marketing; and I am 59 and a retired middle school teacher. The participants were born across a period of nearly four decades, a difference that affected their life experiences and that would prove to influence their different perspectives on being SGL males. At least two are members of the Chicago chapter of Adodi International, an organization of “same-gender-loving men of African descent who love men with dignity, honor, and respect” according to their website (<https://adodi.org>).

1. C.J.

C.J. is 24 years of age and is the youngest of the participants. He is also the tallest, standing at 6’4” with a husky football build and a round cherub face. C.J. is fully “out” and more vocal about his sexuality than the other participants, expressing it, for example, in how he dresses. C.J. likes to wear what he says expresses his SGL identity, and he wants people to know and respect that. Besides wearing colored fingernails and toenail polish, C.J. dyes his hair a different color every month. One month his hair might be green, the next, red, then purple. C.J. says that he chooses the color of his hair color of the month based on how he feels. C.J. usually wears clothes that some would call flashy or “out there”. At times C.J. wears leather pants of various colors with fringed shirts or bright neon colors that make him stand out because of his height and size. Overall, C.J.'s dress style is more feminine compared to society's construct of masculine dress.

C.J.'s mannerism is similar to the way he dresses, which is feminine. Although most would not consider him a “flaming queen” he does come close, compared to certain members of the Adodi organization to which we both belong. However, C.J. is not afraid to speak his mind, especially with it comes to his sexuality, of which one would say that C.J. is out and proud. People might think that the manner in which C.J. dresses, and his somewhat feminine mannerisms, would make him appear weak, but that is far from the truth. C.J. is outspoken on any subject and will tell people about themselves without hesitation. The Adodi group had a meeting about C.J. because of his outspokenness, which had seemed to bother other members because if C.J. felt that something is working or unfair, he will not hold his tongue and will call people out. They suggested that C.J. tone down his outspokenness. This illustrates something about Adodi as well as the extent of C.J.’s self-presentation. Adodi is supposed to be a space where SGL males of African descent can freely speak their minds, but C.J. was apparently too much for the status quo to accept without objecting.

C.J. is the third of four children born to parents from Nigeria. Although C.J. was born in Chicago, his family still practices traditional Nigerian values where the males are to get a good education, get a good job, get married and have a family. This was an issue for C.J., realizing that he was SGL at 10. C.J. is the tallest of his siblings, an older brother and sister, and a younger brother. C.J. described himself as a fat nerdy kid when growing up in a middle-class family. When C.J.'s father became an ordained minister, C.J.'s self-recognition was in conflict with his family’s culture and now religion. C.J.’s relationship with his family was estranged when he came out to them during Thanksgiving dinner during his junior year of college. After coming out, C.J. spent very little time with his family during the holidays and breaks during the school

quarter. After the death of C.J.'s father, he describes his relationship with his family as still estranged but getting better.

As a fat nerdy kid who attended a magnet school on the southside from kindergarten to eighth grade, C.J. made excellent grades and attended a good high school in Chicago. He attended one of the top prep public schools in Chicago until he was expelled for breaking into the school's digital network during his sophomore year. Because C.J. was one of the top students at that school, the administration recommended that he attend the high school in his attending area. After graduating high school, C.J. went to college on a sports scholarship although he rarely played that sport in college. C.J. graduated college with a degree in chemical engineering. After college, C.J. worked and still works in various odd jobs—for example, as security at various buildings and a Grubhub and Amazon delivery driver. I asked C.J. why he was not working in the field of his college degree because the starting salary of a chemical engineer is much more than a delivery driver and security guard combined. C.J. explained that he was not ready to work in the field of his college degree and he wanted to find himself by working various odd jobs. C.J. plans on working on a graduate degree, but he is not sure if he wants a master's in engineering because now he says he might want to work in fashion design and merchandising.

C.J. still lives at his family home because he admits that his odd jobs are insufficient for him to live independently. However, C.J. continues to be outgoing and proud of being a SGL male of color. Of the four participants, C.J. is most expressive as a SGL male of color by participating in all the gay functions in Chicago and is very vocal about the gay and African American community. C.J. says:

“You know the world is not always a happy place. So just own it, make sure you have a nice thick backbone, and don't let nobody stop you from you enjoying the life, to where you want to enjoy your life and with who you want to love. Live your best life and that's that. That is because you only live life once, and the only person living your life is you.”

As the interviews show, C.J.'s stance is more self-assertive than that of the other participants. This study will explore whether that may have something to do with his growing up in a later era than the others interviewed.

2. George

George is 37 years old and was born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago. Although George had issues with body image, being overweight as a child like all four participants, George now has an athletic build and is six feet in height. Although George considers himself fully out, his everyday dress and demeanor are not at all as "flashy" as C.J.'s. In contrast, George dresses like an average urban male with designer shoes. George will speak about his sexuality if the subject is brought up, but unlike C.J., he is not vocal about his sexuality. George had issues with body image when growing up and he admitted to having an eating disorder as a teen. When George lost weight while in high school, he noticed that both males and females admired his new body, which led him to want to show off his athletic build even more. George can be somewhat conceited when it comes to being SGL because of the compliments he gets for his athletic build. George tends to show off his body at gay functions like the Pride Parade and Market Day, wearing nothing but a thong or jockstrap. He also draws attention to himself by talking and he loves it when people want to take pictures of him at these events.

When interviewed for this research, George spoke slowly to make sure that he did not make a mistake, and many of his answers were vague or one-word answers. George was not being his usual self, especially when it came to talking about a gay issue, because he is usually very vocal about SGL issues. George was diagnosed with a learning disability in middle school, which followed him throughout high school. Therefore, George did not want to sound inarticulate because this was an academic research interview. I had to interview George a second

time because of his vague answers from the first interview. In the second interview I told him to relax and speak to me as if we were having a casual conversation.

George is the only child of his mother and the oldest of three on his father's side. George was raised by his mother and grandparents in a middle-class suburban home. George says that he was spoiled by his mother and grandparents, being their first grandchild. Because George was an only child when growing up, his mother and grandparents did everything for him, and George admits it did not enable him to do well living on his own. When George came out during his early teens, his grandfather had an issue with him being SGL; however, it quickly passed, and his mother and grandparents were accepting of George's SGL identity. He remains close to his family today. George is even closer to his grandparents because his mother was tragically murdered by her friend over a disagreement when George was in his early twenties. This tragedy led George's grandparents to be very protective of George even to this day.

George's learning disability resulted in his enrollment in special education classes from middle to high school. George attended community college and graduated with an associate degree in general studies. While in college, George was a member of the track team, which helped him to build his athletic physique. He was a long-time employee of a major department store until it closed a few years ago. Recently, George graduated with a certificate to be a life coach helping people, regardless of sexual preference, with any issue facing them. However, George always wanted to be a dancer at one of the gay nightclubs on the northside because he loved to show off his body in public. George is an excellent dancer, and when he auditioned to be a dancer in one of the clubs, he was told to lose some weight, and they might consider him as a dancer.

This was a blow to George's ego, and he feels that the biggest issue plaguing the gay community, regardless of race, is body issues and body shaming. Body-shaming is a big issue in the gay community, but there are issues that some would consider more pressing, such as the HIV/AIDS crisis, homelessness of SGL youths, and, the murder of people who are gay and trans. George will speak up if he feels something has been wrongly done, but he is also a person who can take a minor problem and make it a major problem. If a person does not keep in constant contact with George, for example, he will get upset and delete them from his contacts without trying to get in touch with the person trying to find out if the person is okay. George at times fails to realize that communication is a two-way street, and things he says to people can have a negative effect on his relationship with them. Afterwards, George admitted to me that he still has certain things he needs to work out for himself and the training he had being a life coach has helped him and will help him to help others. George says, "If you feel like you got some issues you need to work out, that's okay too. I kind of think that one of the problems in the community itself, is not working out issues that need to be worked out."

3. Adrian

Forty-three-year-old Adrian is the oldest of the participants to be interviewed but looks younger than his age. Adrian was born and raised in Detroit to a lower-middle-class family. Adrian is the only child of a single mother but was raised by his grandmother. Adrian did not have a male figure when growing up and said that his mother was more like the male figure in the family because she was the breadwinner and constantly working, while his grandmother was more the mother figure because it was his grandmother who did all the things a mother would do when raising Adrian and his cousin, who was more like a brother to him.

Adrian went to religious school until he was a sophomore in high school. Adrian said attending Christian schools affected his SGL identity because the Christian schools taught that homosexuality was a sin and gay people are going to hell unless they repent. This was one of the reasons Adrian kept to himself in school and had no interaction with anything pertaining to homosexuality such as discussing it with other students or showing interest in anything that is related to homosexuality. After his sophomore year, Adrian attended a large public high for his junior and senior years, and he continued to keep to himself and keep his SGL identity hidden. However, his high school had many gay students. Of the three participants I interviewed, Adrian was the most difficult to elicit responses from. This may be because the topic of being gay never was discussed in his house when he was growing up. Adrian said that the teachings from school and his grandmother's refusal to discuss this topic, or anything related to being or feeling gay, never came up. Therefore, Adrian's experience of being same-gender loving was almost nonexistent during his childhood and teen years, except for having a secret crush on a boy in his third-grade class. Adrian said that there was almost no communication about sensitive subjects in his family during his childhood. For example, if a relative passed away in his family, his grandmother would remove any pictures of that relative and not talk about them again. Adrian said if there was an issue, there was no communication, which he describes as an elephant in the room. The issue was there, and everyone knew about it, but they would avoid it. Therefore, when interviewing Adrian, I had to constantly ask him to tell me more because he did not readily provide information during the interview, and Adrian would at times say his life was boring.

Adrian was enthusiastic about discussing being SGL during the interview, however, because he felt he could talk about things he could not as a child and teen. Adrian did not explore his SGL identity until he got into college and met other SGL males. However, Adrian says that

to this day, he cannot fully express his SGL identity because that identity was so suppressed for most of his life that he has difficulty accepting his SGL identity.

Adrian has a bachelor's degree in business from a large university in Michigan and a master's degree in business from a smaller university in Michigan. He currently works in technology marketing for a company in Florida. His style of dress is casual and conservative, in contrast to the much younger C.J. No one would know that Adrian is SGL because he does not exhibit the SGL traits that people would typically (or stereotypically) associate with someone who is gay. Adrian still does not openly talk about his sexuality, and he is still closeted to most people. He feels cheated in life because straight men can express their true identity and are free to live their authentic lives. Adrian expresses that he still must hide his SGL identity and cannot live the authentic life he wants to live. As Adrian puts it: "I learned that I don't know if I'm ever going to be comfortable being a SGL man. And you know I think I have hindered myself from forming better relationships by not being open... For me I am not giving you the true me."

4. The Researcher

I am the oldest of the participants in this research, at 59 years old. Many people say I do not look 59, but I tell people that this runs in my family because all my siblings look younger than their age. I was born and raised on the south side of Chicago to a lower-middle-class family. When I was growing up, all families in the neighborhood had both mother and father in the family, including mine. I am the middle child of five with an older sister and brother and two younger sisters. I was the child who got the best grades, but that was overshadowed by being the fat and ugly brother of the two boys in my family. My older brother was the quintessential father's son, not only having my father's name but also liking everything my

father liked, which were things that society considers masculine. As for myself, I did not like many of the masculine things like sports, although I did like playing baseball. I did not like many of the things most boys would like such as cars, guns, and girls. I was more docile but not feminine because I would spend my Saturday afternoon at the local library instead of playing sports on Saturday afternoons or things boys would usually do. I loved reading and learning new things, especially learning about other nations, their cultures, and history. I also loved playing with action figures like GI Joe and Big Jim as a child, but because of my love of action figures, I had to endure being called names like sissy and fag, as action figures were considered to be “sissy dolls” in my household. Like Adrian, I had to hide my SGL identity because it was not accepted in my house, especially by my parents.

I always had low self-esteem problems because I had always been overweight since birth and had to constantly endure being called fat and ugly when compared to my brother. Even after I lost weight, I always see myself as fat and ugly to this very day. My self-esteem issues were not changed by early academic successes, starting with making better grades than my siblings, always making the honor roll, and being awarded many academic certificates and awards in school. One would think being a college graduate with a bachelor's degree in education and attaining two master's degrees and a Ph.D. would make my self-esteem very high. Although I am proud of my academic accomplishments and having a good job teaching for 38 years, I still have self-esteem problems when it comes to, as George mentioned, body image, because that is important in the gay community. Regardless of all my achievements, I cannot shake the image of being fat and ugly. Therefore, I wear comfortable clothes that are color-coordinated because I believe in being comfortable and somewhat stylish in what I wear, but never anything feminine. I would never have the courage to wear clothes like C.J. because that would bring too much

unwanted attention to me, and I would never wear a thong or jockstrap at a gay pride event because I do not have the body for it.

It took me a long time to accept my SGL identity, and like Adrian, I could not live my authentic self because I hid it for most of my life. I could never talk to anyone about my SGL identity because there were no organizations or people I could talk to about that, unlike today, where there are many resources to help SGL people. That is partly why I made so many mistakes in my life, not knowing how to effectively navigate and negotiate my SGL identity because of society's lack of experience and acceptance of this identity. That is one reason that I feel I do not do well in having a loving relationship with other SGL males, because of my lack of experience of people like me who could have given me the advice and support I needed. I only began to accept my SGL after reading the book *B-Boy's Blue* by James Earl Hardy and attending UIC, where I got to know many gay and lesbian people and observed how comfortable they were with their gay identity. This enabled me to come out at UIC, where I felt comfortable and somewhat proud to be SGL and proud to be researching the SGL identity of males of color.

B. The Interview Using the Research Sub-Questions

The overarching question under investigation is how same-gender-loving males of color navigate and negotiate their identities over time. To answer this question, I had to break it into sub-questions. To get information over time, I had to question the participants' lives in various experiences from childhood to adult. This orientation led to six research sub-questions, presented above in Chapters 1 and 3. They provide the organizational structure for the remainder of this chapter, in the order in which they were earlier presented.

a. **How do SGL males of color begin to discover their identities in the context of their relationship with their families?**

I asked the participants when they realized they were SGL and the impact it might have had on them growing up as a person of color, especially growing up in families that did not approve of homosexuality. This realization happened at an early age for the participants and in a school setting with a special attraction to a person in their class. However, the impact had a negative effect on some of the participants. For C.J., the twenty-five-year-old security guard, the realization happened when he was around ten years old. C.J. said:

I realized I was a SGL male when I was in fifth grade. My teacher was a nice well-built guy. The minute I saw him I started to think things and feeling something inside something like, oh, I really like this guy. He's very attractive to me. I started looking at other bits and pieces of his body and that when I realize that, yes, I'm a homosexual or SGL man or gay or whichever that ought to be politically correct.

Thirty-seven-year-old George, a life coach, was at a similar age when he also realized his SGL identity in school. He did not have a crush on a teacher, but on the teacher's husband. George elaborated:

Well, I had this one teacher. She was one of my favorite teachers, and she had this husband, oh he was really cute. She brought her husband to help around the classroom a lot. I always wanted to help him, like to be his little helper. I'm like, why the hell am I so attracted to him and stuff? Then that was when the teacher, she was like playing around with me and all that. She said because everybody else is in love with him too. She was just cracking up about that stuff, you know, I felt a little ashamed about it, but at the same time, you know I kind of felt like you know that's ok, you like who you like, period.

George said that at first, he thought something was wrong with him, but a teacher's assistant helped him to accept his SGL identity.

At first, I thought something was wrong with me because I was always told, you know, the whole thing about gays going straight to hell and everything else. But one of the teacher assistants had told me, you know, it's ok being SGL, just be yourself.

For Adrian, the forty-one-year-old technology marketer, the realization of his SGL identity happened at a similar time—in his case in the third grade with a crush on one of his classmates.

Looking back on it I think I had a crush on one of my third-grade classmates. This little mixed boy named Brad. Now looking back on it I would have called it a crush because you know I don't think I could have expressed that. But looking back on it I did have a crush on Brad because you know, I think I did fantasize about Brad in my own third-grade way. I guess that's when I realized that you know. I don't think it had an impact because I don't think I didn't have enough understanding; you know I mean at that age and at that time.

While the participants began to realize their SGL identities in school, the participants discovered that being SGL was unacceptable in their families. Each participant felt that they were out of place or felt they were not "normal" for having feelings for someone of the same sex and no desire for the opposite sex. Therefore, all the participants had to face the difficulty of suppressing or hiding their SGL identity, especially at a young age.

C.J. grew up in a very strict Nigerian household with strict traditional Nigerian values. C.J.'s parents were from Nigeria; however, C.J. and his siblings were born in the United States. Although American citizens, C.J., and his siblings had to follow certain Nigerian traditions. C.J. explains:

I grew up in a very traditional Nigerian household. Both of my parents are from Nigeria. There are certain guidelines like you can't give things such as gifts to my parent with my left hand because that's a sign of disrespect. In the Nigerian culture, people of royalty and things like that had to be served with their right hand. Giving something with the left hand means they are really not genuine with what they are giving you versus the right hand. Anything that was like out of the norm or anything like that, they like were totally against and things like that. So that was a big no-no like being SGL.

C.J. went on to explain it was traumatic growing up as a SGL male in such a strict household and they were expected traditional Nigerian norms of marriage.

That was a hurdle and trauma I had to deal with growing up in that household. My parents like to, unfortunately, everyone that you know, you guys would marry a woman and my sister had to marry a man and you guys would have kids and all that other great, great stuff. And you are going to grow up and raise a family. That was impounded in my head really time and time again basically banning homosexuality. You being gay is a sin and being a homosexual is the worst thing you can possibly be more than a killer or rapist and things like that. So that's what I got pounded into my head growing up.

George grew up on a very different family situation from C.J., with a different source of opposition to homosexuality. George was the only child of a single mother who had a disability and raised by his maternal grandparents and his uncles. George described his family as quiet chaos when growing up:

My house was quiet, well not actually quiet, quiet, of course, we had chaos in the house I was like living with my mom, grandparents, and three uncles. My mom, you know, had a mental disability, epilepsy. And then there were my three uncles, but one of them was overseas in the army. Every now and then we had noise and everything because one of my uncles had his little, I guess girlfriends of whoever he was just doing the most and getting into all kinds of shit with them.

George explained that his family was hesitant to accept his sexuality mainly for safety reasons because of being bullied or gay-bashed.

Well at first, you know, they were kind of hesitant and afraid for my safety. I really didn't express my sexuality the way I wanted to out of fear of being gay-bashed and everything else. Except for my grandparents because they kind of sort of knew, but I guess they were like still denying it and everything. At first, they thought I was joking, and then I guess they had set down much later to let it marinate and they realized they did have a gay grandson.

As for Adrian, like George, he was raised by a single mother and his maternal grandmother. Unlike C.J. and George, sexuality was never discussed in Adrian's family although he said his family disapproved of homosexuality based on passive comments made by his grandmother.

As far as sexuality, I mean it wasn't a discussion, but it would be like certain comments. So, it's like my grandmother and my mother, but my grandmother was big on the bullet saying that "bull dagger" for a lesbian, so you know it was like, you know they see somebody who they thought was a lesbian. It was a blue attacker, or you know, for a gay guy. He's one of those things, he just one of those things or you know he got sugar in his tank. It was just passive comments, you know it wasn't about any discussions of sexuality.

Adrian tried to explain more about how the lack of communication with his family affected his SGL identity but it seemed he had difficulty getting his words together. Adrian

explains how this lack of communication in his family made him guarded about his SGL identity.

My family acted like things never existed. You know if somebody like my grandfather, my uncle, or a close family member if they died or something, my grandmother would just remove all the pictures and just act like they never existed, that was her mentality. I guess everybody copes differently, you know. Right? They act like they never existed, and I realized that too, you know as I got older, it was just like nothing was discussed. Everything was swept underneath the rug and that's just the way it was. I think it's made me more guarded, though because it's like, ok, we just don't discuss it. So, I'm just kind of just shut off with that, ok, because, you know, because it's like I grew up just being guarded and shut off, it's like, you know, which isn't good, but I'm just, you know, ok.

Like the others, Adrian adjusted to his understanding of family norms and expectations.

Although being SGL was not acceptable in the participants' families, and they faced difficult situations being overweight at home and in school, and dealing with the challenges of being a SGL male of color, all participants were taught not to be ashamed, but proud, of their ethnic and cultural background. This was especially seen in C.J.'s family with the help of his seventh-grade teacher. C.J. explains:

As for race, my family was very pro-like, you know, of being African and Black. When I was in seventh grade, I had a social studies teacher, and her name was Mrs. Smith-Roberts. She's very Afrocentric and very like proud pro-Black and everything like that. She taught us lessons also along with social students about you know, you can be proud of the skin that you're in, and proud of your culture. Make sure no one tells you Black is ugly and things like that.

Having attended schools that were predominately White, George stated that race was discussed in his family. Not only was he told to be proud of being Black, but most of the discussions about race were about being safe because George attended a predominantly White school.

Now the race, they had basically told me if anybody you know maybe confronts or made fun of me because of my race, you know, let the teacher know or let somebody of higher authority know. They told me to be proud of who I am and to stand up for what I believe in.

In contrast to George, Adrian states that when it came to the topic of race in his family, again it was limited to comments made in passing by his grandmother. The big difference is that according to Adrian, there was not that much communication regarding sexuality and race.

It was like an elephant in the room. You know it's there, but no one says anything. My grandmother really didn't comment about race, but she was big on saying Black people don't stick together and everyone is out for themselves regardless of race.

Author's Experience

As I interviewed these subjects, I reflected on my own childhood experiences. First, similar to the interviewees' experience, the realization that I was SGL happened when I was about eight or nine years old. I first got a sense of it when my older brother, sister, and our friends went to the local park district swimming pool. My brother, our friend, and I entered the men's locker room to change into our swimming trunks. Everyone started taking off their clothes, and I started to do some "bird-watching." Bird-watching is quickly looking at a guy's penis without them noticing. There were all sorts of penises of all lengths, but what had my heart beating was seeing the teenagers and young men with pubic hair, which was something I had never seen before. My brother interrupted my "bird-watching" telling me to stop looking around and get into my trunks so we could go swimming. He had no idea I was beginning to realize my SGL identity.

However, what made me secretly accept my SGL was a crush I had on a boy in my third-grade class; like other participants in the study, it happened in a school setting. Marvin was a light-skinned boy who had a swimmer's build. He was tall and sort of lanky with light brown eyes and a short dark brown Afro hairstyle, but most importantly, we were in the same third-grade class. I had the biggest crush on Marvin; he sat behind me in class, and when the teacher put us in groups of four, Marvin was always in my group.

Marvin lived one block behind the block where I lived and we would walk home together every day and talk about school, some of the goofy kids in our class, and how much we liked our new teacher. Marvin would ask every day if he could carry my bookbag home. I don't know why Marvin did this because he had a big bookbag of his own. I guess maybe he wanted to prove how strong he was by carrying two big book-bags, plus there were girls' book-bags he could have carried. When we got to his block, he would give me my bookbag and say, see you tomorrow, go his way home, and I continued to my home.

Then one day on our walk home, Marvin told me his family was moving in two weeks. Hearing that news left me heartbroken. I did not understand this feeling because I had friends who had moved away, but I had never felt this kind of sadness the way I felt for Marvin. I thought at least I would spend the last two weeks walking home with Marvin as he carried my book-bag. I remember that last Friday Marvin carried my book-bag home, we talked about school, but I was very sad as we walked home. When we got to Marvin's block, he said, "Bye David," and walked home.

I was extremely sad when I got home because all I could think about was Marvin and never seeing him or having him carry my book-bag home. I wanted to see him one more time, but I did not know the exact house where he lived; I only knew it was one block west of my house. I got the white pages telephone book and thought maybe I could call him. When I searched for Marvin's last name, Knox, in the phone book, there were pages and pages of Knox, plus I realized a little kid would not have his name in the white pages. My father, looking puzzled, asked what was I looking for in the phonebook. Feeling defeated, I replied nothing and put the phonebook back, and fell asleep on the couch, half crying. My mother woke me up to put me to bed, but I could not stop crying when she washed my face. As the tears were streaming

down my cheeks, my mother asked me why I was crying so much. I didn't say anything but continued to cry thinking about Marvin. How can a little boy tell his mother that the boy he likes, maybe as a boyfriend, is moving away never to be seen again? I went to bed still sobbing, thinking about my first crush Marvin.

When I told my best friend Leroy that story, Leroy asked why I didn't walk to Marvin's home so we could exchange phone numbers. I told Leroy that when I was growing up, we had better come straight home from school, and there was no stopping at anyone's house, or we would get in trouble. In addition, I liked Marvin more than just a friend, and my family could never know my true feelings for him. That is when I realized that I liked boys over girls. That had a big impact on me because that realization had to be kept a secret only to myself, and I had to pretend that I liked girls. I knew this because I remember when I was in first grade, my mother found out that my friend and I were experimenting with our bodies as he showed me what he saw his parents doing. We had our pants down and were hugging when my little sister caught us and told my mother what my friend and I had done. I remember the furious look on my mother's face and the heavy hits on my legs and bottom, and her yelling at me, saying that there had never been a sissy boy in the family, and I was not going to be the first. That traumatic event, and being a fast learner and good observer at a young age, taught me the social constructs that boys are boyfriends to girls, not boys; plus, I have never seen two boys act as boyfriends. Therefore, realizing that my home will never be a sanctuary for my SGL identity, I had to pretend to like girls if that subject ever arose. Although I did not know until later that I preferred boys romantically, that lesson in first grade stayed with me when I did come to that realization at age 8 or 9.

As with the study participants' upbringing, being gay was absolutely unacceptable when I was growing up. My mother suffered from Alzheimer's during her latter years, and I had to refresh her memory about many family matters. I had to constantly remind her that she had a husband, my father, who passed away, and another son, my older brother who also passed away, and she had to be reminded of the eight grandchildren she helped to raise. With all of that, however, she did not forget that she disapproved of me being gay. I remember the look of disapproval on my mother's face when I told her I would be marching in the Pride Parade with the Teacher's Union float. That look of disapproval on my mother's face in the senior care facility told me that she did not approve of my marching in that "sissy boy parade" which brought back some painful memories. My mother told me that as a 7-year-old there has never been a sissy man in this family, and I was not going to be the first. Like the study participants, I felt I was not normal and that part of me was wrong or a sin. I had to make sure to keep that important authentic part of my identity hidden not to upset the family dynamic, especially my parents, and to keep myself protected. However, the most important thing is that I did not want to be gay-bashed, or rejected, by my family.

I was already the fat and ugly brother who was always made fun of for having nappy hair and for eating a big bowl of cereal every morning. I was also being called a sissy for wanting a GI Joe or some new action figure every Christmas and being told every year you are not getting a sissy doll again. Therefore, I had to protect myself emotionally, mentally, and possibly physically. I felt I had to keep my SGL identity a secret from them for the rest of my life.

Despite being fat, ugly, and secretly SGL, one thing that my parents instilled in me was to be proud of my racial and ethnic identity. Like C.J. and George's parents, my parents encouraged my siblings and me to be proud of who we are and where we came from—their

criticism of my natural Black nappy hair notwithstanding. My father was very big on us being knowing of our African and Native American background because his mother was half Blackfoot Indian and African. He demanded that we stay home from school on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. the year after Dr. King was assassinated. My family was one of the few families that commemorated Dr. King's birthday from the block where we lived. The historical book *Great Negroes Past and Present* (1969) was a mainstay in my house and was constantly used as a reference when we had to write about famous African Americans for school assignments. When Harold Washington was running for mayor, my father made sure not only did my family vote, but he helped to take people to the polls so they could vote, which is something I never saw him do for an election. Whenever there was a television show that had or starred African Americans my parents made sure we supported the show by watching it. Like any other African American family, our house was full of that good rhythm, blues, and soul music on Saturday evenings. Therefore, the discovery of my African American and Native American identities made me feel proud, especially during the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's and 70's, and my parents expected my siblings and me to value and promote our racial and ethnic identity.

Summary

In reviewing participants' interviews and my reflections, the discovery of being SGL happened to us at an early age, all of us between the ages of 8 to 10, and in a school setting. According to Pew Research, *A Study of LGBT Americans* (2013), 48% of the gay males surveyed said they realized they were gay between the ages of 10-14 and 38% of the gay males surveyed said they were under 10 when they realized they were gay. George and C.J. discovered their SGL identity by having crushes on their male teachers or teacher's husband, whereas Adrian and I had

a crush on a classmate in our respective third-grade classes. We all expressed feelings in some sort of way with our crushes, but we knew it was a different feeling than just liking someone as a friend. We also knew that the discovery of our recognizing our SGL identity would come with some backlash and conflict. We were told that this identity or behavior was wrong, but we were too young to understand why this was wrong because no one in our families explained it to us. C.J.'s father, who was a minister, told him being gay was wrong, George's grandparents told him the same, and although it was never fully discussed in Adrian's family, his grandmother communicated that being gay was wrong. For me, it was my mother who told me that there has never been a sissy boy in the family and I was not going to be the first, or so she thought.

The subjects and I grew up in families where homosexuality was unacceptable. We would not have known at the time whether this was particular to Black families or simply a value internalized from the wider national culture, as Black and White cultures interact in ways beyond the understanding of children. C.J.'s experience demonstrates how complicated these cultural origins can be. Compared to the participants and me, C.J. seemed to have it worse coming from a home with traditional Nigerian values. C.J. explained that he was raised in a strict Nigerian household where Nigerian traditions were followed. C.J. described his upbringing as traumatic because he was expected to follow the tradition of marrying a woman and producing a family, but homosexuality was banned in his family because homosexuality is a crime in Nigeria. C.J. said that being a homosexual was worse than being a murderer in his family.

In George's home homosexuality was not accepted primarily because it was considered morally wrong, as he understood it, but because his family feared the risk of his being gay-bashed. In Adrian's home, the topic of homosexuality was just not discussed, although being gay was also unacceptable in his family. In my household, being gay was unacceptable also, but

instead of using the word gay, the word sissy was used instead. To me, a sissy was a boy who was not only gay but also wanted to be a girl. I did not want to be a girl and never wanted to be a girl, although I think it would have been easier if I were. I just happened to be a boy who liked and preferred boys over girls. To not be ridiculed, shamed, and punished physically and mentally in our homes, we had to be clandestine with our SGL identity and pretend to be something we were not. We all had to pretend to like girls or even have a girlfriend at one point in our lives. George even shared a photo of himself at his prom with a fake smile with his so-called girlfriend.

Although the subjects and I had to hide our SGL identity, we were taught to be proud and to show our ethnic identity of being Black and African American. C.J. and George expressed that in their families they were taught to be proud of their ethnic heritage and to stand up for what they believe regarding race and ethnicity. The exception was Adrian who expressed that the lack of communication on various topics such as sexuality and race made him a guarded person when it comes to his SGL identity although he was of course aware of his being African American. In my family, my siblings were told that being Black was something to be proud of, and I realized that by being one of the few families to honor Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on his birthday the year after his assassination and by supporting any Black shows and movies that came on television.

b. What did research participants know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community, and about any role models from the media when growing up?

Shifting from family to the wider community environment, all the participants said there were no SGL groups in the community in which they were raised during their elementary and high school years. Although having had no SGL groups in his community, C.J. was the only one who attended schools where there were LGBT alliance groups at both high schools he attended,

but he refused to be associated with them because he would be outing himself, and he did not understand what he calls “the LGBTQ thing.” C.J. said the following:

There were no LGBTQ groups where I lived. I lived in a suburb with a lot of white people, so we didn’t have any type of organizations like that, you know, LGBTQ related. During high school, I didn’t know about the whole LGBTQ thing. In high school, I was basically doing my own little thing, and I really didn’t understand the whole being gay thing. But, yeah, they had some, um, LGBT, you know, groups that were basically an LGBT alliance at both schools (high schools) I attended. I didn’t go to sign up for an organization just because that’s kind of me outing myself. And you know like yearbooks take pictures of all the clubs and once they see that, I don’t know how people are going to take that. I’m not ready to get picked on as a martyr. I was getting picked on enough already as being the weird, awkward kid in every class. But yeah, so they had a group in both schools, but I wanted no part of any of it. I didn’t really know myself then, because I was too busy trying to figure things out by myself and this little romantic relationship, I had with this mid-forty-year-old man. So that’s all I can say about that.

High-school LGBTQ support groups are a recent enough innovation that C.J. was the only participant to have experienced their presence, though he did not join. George states there were no LGBTQ groups in his community while growing up and none during high school. George thought the gay community was all about sex until he was able to do more research as he got older and discovered that the gay community was so much more than sexual encounters.

There were no LGBTQ groups in the community where I lived nor in high school. During that time all I knew was sex, sex, sex, sex, sex, or that was what I was told. But as I got older, I did more research about this community, and it was more to it than that. I learned about the night clubs, but also community groups and outreach groups so I kind of, you know, I was like more interested because I didn’t know about any of these things when I was younger. That’s when I found out about Boystown aka North Halsted from two friends Damien and Anthony, because it was Anthony who was the one that introduced me to my first gay club there.

“Boystown” is the name of a local community in Chicago where a visible concentration of gay males had lived and worked since the late 1960s, and which was officially recognized by the city as a “gay district” in 1997. Like C.J. and George, Adrian knew of no gay organizations in his community or in the Christian and Catholic schools he attended growing up. Adrian said if

there were, he did not educate himself to find out. He also said there definitely were no gay organizations in the Christian schools he attended; such an organization would have violated the religious values of those schools.

I really didn't know of any gay organizations, and I really didn't take the time to educate myself either. I'm thinking like, why, how would I have educated myself? I wanted to learn, I mean, there was the computer and the Internet at that time too, so I mean, I had to learn. I own a computer now, so I mean I did not have a computer in my household then, but I didn't know of any SGL groups. As for school, definitely not, because that was, you know, being gay was considered a sin. When I went to public school, I don't recall any LGBT clubs, but if there were, I would not have been a part of it because I felt like I would, I would have been outing myself.

The theme of isolation emerges in such comments in an interesting way. On the one hand, the participants did now know of SGL organizations that would be a source of association and support for them. On the other, they said they would not have joined such organizations for fear of being outed in the wider, intolerant community. Isolation is both imposed and self-imposed for self-preservation. When questioned on role models from the media, George and Adrian said did not know of any SGL role models they knew of when growing up. Only C.J. said he had a SGL role model he admired. Being the youngest of the interviewees, C.J. had the experience of viewing more gay people and characters in the media than George, Adrian, and I had in our younger years.

Well, this actor's name was, uh, Titus Burgess. I was really into him. You know him, so I looked up to him being an out proud Black man, I'm sure he faces his own problem, you know because it's tough you know getting into the acting industry and everything. But he's like big, making a name for himself, so I strive to be like him.

Author's Experience

I had no knowledge of the gay community when growing up. The only thing I knew was that being gay was wrong based on my parents' views, and there had never been a sissy boy in the family, according to my mother, and I was not going to be the first. Like C.J., I am a

member of Adodi, and I have been for 21 years. However, when I was growing up, there were no SGL groups in the community where I was raised that I could identify and that would be considered a safe place for SGL males of color. There were no organizations of support for gay students in the high school I attended. During my teens and young adult years, it seemed most of the gay people who were living their gay identity were white. I felt if I were white or at least lived in a white community, it would have been a bit easier because the white community overall is more accepting of the gay community than the Black community even in the hetero-white community.

However, some Black gay bars were considered a place of community where SGL males of color could openly and safely express their SGL identity, and the most famous of them was the Rialto Tap located in Chicago's South Loop. The late 1970s and the 1980s were when the Rialto was in its heyday. Because SGL Black males faced discrimination and were not welcome in the gay white bars on Chicago's north Halsted, the Rialto was the place empathic about the plight of SGL males of color such as myself. Unfortunately, I never had the experience of attending the Rialto or any gay bar when I was in my late teens and early twenties because I was still suppressing my SGL identity. The people who frequent the Rialto said that not only was the Rialto a place where SGL males of color could express their identity and come together as a community, but it was also a place where people drank, danced, got any drugs they wanted, and could meet someone for sexual encounters. My friend Leroy attended the Rialto during the 1980s and agreed with my chair Dr. Tozer that I dodged a bullet because that was also the time the AIDS crisis was at its height. Because I do not drink nor do I do drugs, I would have been there to meet someone for sexual encounters. Therefore, according to Leroy, and I do agree with him, I probably would have caught HIV/AIDS because most people were not using protection at that

time, and I probably would be too afraid to get tested in fear of knowing that I have HIV/AIDS and having my SGL identity revealed.

In addition to not having any community or school groups for SGL males of color, there were no SGL role models I could identify with from the media because the gay males in the media when I was growing up were extremely feminine or considered buffoons and were mainly white. However, there were two characters, although fictional, whom I did admire when growing up and still admire today. The first was Bugs Bunny. I like and admire Bugs for his ability to think fast to get out of trouble. He was strong-willed and never let anyone push him around in addition to being independent. The second person was Pippi Longstocking. I read all three of the Pippi Longstocking books as a child, and what I like about Pippi is that she was independent like Bugs, and she did not let anyone push her around. She was not intelligent like Bugs Bunny, but she did have the ability to get out of trouble with her quick yet unorthodox thinking. Pippi and Bugs both lived alone and were self-sufficient, but most important they did not need anyone's approval for who they were or what they did, nor did they care. These are identities I would like to have when dealing with my SGL identity where I could be my authentic self and not be concerned about the need for anyone's approval.

Summary

Except for C.J., George, Adrian, and I had no experience nor knowledge of any LGBTQ groups in the community or the high schools. As the youngest of the subjects, C.J. said there were no LGBTQ organizations in the suburb where he was raised, but there were LGBTQ organizations in the high schools he attended; yet he did not associate with them because C.J. said he just kept to himself and did not want his SGL identity to be exposed. George said the

only thing he knew about the gay community culture was sex and sexual encounters until he researched more about the gay culture and found out there was more to being SGL than just sexual encounters. Having attended Christian schools most of his young life, Adrian expresses that there definitely would not be any gay organization in the Christian schools he attended or in the community in which he lived.

As for me, there were no gay organizations that I knew of when growing up, especially in the community in which I lived that would have supported SGL people. Although the local high school I attended had some gay and lesbian students who were out, there were no SGL groups at my high school. The first GLSEN support groups for high-school students were not founded until 1990, long after my high school years—and even today, only 30 states have GLSEN chapters (<https://www.glsen.org/about-us#snt--1>). Back then I would have been hesitant to even learn about such organizations because I would be questioned about why I wanted to learn about the gay community, risk being called names, and most importantly outing my SGL identity. Therefore I had no knowledge of the gay community. I did not experience going to any gay Black bars like the Rialto which provided a sense of community for SGL males of color who knew about it and chose to go there.

None of the subjects and I had any SGL role models of any kind from any media, again except for C.J. C.J. mentions that he looked up to the Black SGL actor Titus Burgess. C.J. said he looked up to Burgess because he was an out-and-proud gay Black man who was very talented. I did have role models from the media I looked up to when growing up, but they were not considered gay although they do have somewhat of a gay following which is Bugs Bunny because he dressed in drag in some of his cartoons (Savoy, 1995) and Pippi Longstocking because she had masculine traits that some would call butch. However, that is not why I looked

up to them. I looked up to both Bugs Bunny and Pippi because they were seen as underdogs who came out on top of various situations and both characters were strong-willed, independent, and an exception to the norm. Therefore, with no support from their respective community and little exposure to positive SGL characters in the media when the participants were growing up, the participants continued to live suppressing their SGL identity. Absent a community of support, all four participants expressed feelings of isolation, which in some ways was self-imposed out of fear of the negative repercussions of being “out” in a hostile world.

c. How does the educational experience, including teacher and peer interaction, affect the identity of SGL males of color?

All participants were honor students in school except George who had a slight learning disability. George reported that he had an individual educational plan (IEP) while in school. Also, all participants tended to keep to themselves throughout their school experiences until later in high school and college. They all seemed to be aware of their SGL identity but were careful in how they negotiated that identity when dealing with people, even family members, let alone peers who could be abusive. However, school and college experiences for all participants in the study proved to be complex: a source of fear and isolation on the one hand, but also a source of strength and resilience when a teacher, counselor, or peer provided support.

When participants were asked what experience was the most awkward growing up and being SGL, all three mentioned that their physical identity of being overweight made them the most awkward, which was mainly felt in the school setting. All three interviewees had issues with body image and being overweight when growing up that caused awkward feelings in addition to suppression of SGL identity and feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem in my

instance. Gay men tend to suffer from body dissatisfaction at rates much higher than heterosexual men which causes greater body image anxiety compared to heterosexual men (Calzo, Corliss, Blood, Field, & Field, 2013).

C.J. describes himself as being a fat kid when he had a crush on a girl named Carolyn in the fourth grade.

I was this little, fat, geeky, nerdy kind of person and because Carolyn was one of the popular kids, she was not going for that when I, this fat kid, told her I liked her. I find it very interesting that I was turning up, like, basically being interested in a girl before the fifth grade happened. And I still like, why was I doing that when I know I was really meant to be with guys, not girls. When Carolyn turned me down it was really humiliating, but I mean, you know, it's all I guess it's all part of, you know, those things called a growing state.

Being overweight has affected George to the point of dealing with an eating disorder as a teenager. George elaborated on this issue:

What made me feel awkward and I guess you could say uncomfortable in the sense is when I had gym class. Then of course, you had to go to the locker room and change in front of a whole bunch of guys. And I was kind of chubby at the time and I got made fun of, for my body image and everything. And of course, my grandfather didn't make things any better because he was like teasing me and everything else. Then of course, it just caused me to have an eating disorder which I never told anybody until I got older, it just caused me to eat a whole lot to the point where I got sick and just threw it right back up.

Adrian explains that when growing up during his adolescence and teen periods the most awkward experiences were also being overweight.

I was overweight, so I mean I was always overweight. So yeah, you know, not sure if it has anything to do with the same gender stuff, because you know, straight being overweight. But I mean, I mean, my size you know, it's you know, I feel like I've always been overweight, I've been up and down the damn, damn scales. You know so, it like even now, I mean I'm not the heaviest. I'm actually quite a bit smaller than the last time we saw each other more or less. I am an emotional eater also. I wasn't tying my weight problems to being SGL, but it was just so, I was overweight.

Being overweight was awkward for all the participants when growing up, which affects them to the present. There were other feelings of awkwardness for the participants in the school setting, such as the feeling of isolation where there was little interaction with others who might be SGL.

C.J. felt that being SGL in school was very awkward, especially at the elementary level.

C.J. explains that he had to figure everything out by himself up until the eighth grade because that is when he became friends with another student who was SGL.

In being SGL, I always deal with adding more awkwardness to the thing, so now that you're kind of on your own a little bit more. You got to figure more things out a little bit on your own without having like your teachers to guide you through it. I kind of just figured everything out by myself about being SGL until eventually the eighth grade. My best friend at the time, he came out to me as gay. So oh, we had a nice little conversation about, you know, homosexuality and all that. Ok, I'm not here by myself, you know even though it was, you know, the last part of my elementary education career, you know I'm not here by myself and we were able to kind of help each other figure out what it means to be gay and all, you know, the ups and downs all around and what it takes to be a homosexual. That meant the world to me, oh my God, it's like, you know the saying goes, I had the biggest breakthrough or like the blessing that you've needed all this time came down from Heaven. I finally have someone else; you know like me. I finally had someone who can understand me, what I am going through, and what it's like to, you know, be gay and experiencing what it's like to be gay at such a young age and kind of figure out what it means to be gay in this world. That was the only somewhat support I got in elementary school my best friend who came out to me and masturbation.

However, C.J. explains that in high school it was still awkward being at a new school with a new set of people. C.J. states that he was able to open up a bit more, but being gay still had its trials and tribulations; he kept to himself in high school. C.J. did not want to make his SGL public information.

In my high school, all the gay students were buddy, buddy, so they all went off doing their own little thing, I mean it was great that they all got together. I wasn't with them because I wasn't that bold. I was kind of still in my little shell and being reserved. I really did not want to, you know, let that (being gay) be public information and all the other stuff. I open myself to a can of worms with that from the gay students in my high school. The gay students were mostly friends with the girls, so you know, that's who the gay student mostly hung out with. But they also get, like really badly picked on by the jocks and athletes saying look at these bunch of fags or sissies and things like that. Thankfully, I wasn't like that, but I'm not against anybody expressing themselves. I wasn't acting

feminine or anything like that, I just liked boys. I was just a little quiet and a little shy, I was basically into books. So yeah, it was when they would get picked on, it kind of hurt my feelings cause like why they are getting picked on for expressing themselves. But at the same time, I was kind of relieved that I wasn't ready to open a can of worms because I would probably crumble, especially since I really didn't have any type of self-esteem like that. It took me a while to come into that. Although I did have a gay friend in high school who was out, he knew I was gay, but thankfully he didn't out me because you know, he said that he knew that I'm not where he was at being confident and self-esteem-wise.

C.J. went on to say that he didn't come out until he started college. However, he says it didn't come out well.

Well, I didn't come out until I started college, and it didn't necessarily come out well at first. It's funny cause I really didn't come out to anybody at first, I just wanted to go to college and see all the colors of people and people being out. I eventually somehow must have gained confidence in myself and so I said, hey, I'm a gay man, so wha--I'm here. Here I am also seeing all the types of support groups that the university has for LGBTQ people. I felt these people helped me into coming into my own and my stuff. The first person I told was well, you know, in college you develop a whole new batch of friends. So, I first told all my friends that I formed when I first started and you know, they accepted me and supported me. Well, yeah that's the first people I told I was gay.

In contrast to C.J., George had an adult in middle school whom he could identify with regarding his SGL identity. Yet, in fear of being gay-bashed, he still did not express his SGL identity. He tried to convince himself that he was straight and started dating a girl.

In middle school, one of my teachers who helped me a lot because I believe she was also SGL. But she really didn't tell anybody, I guess, out of fear of her career being ruined. I really couldn't express my sexuality the way I want to out of fear of being gay-bashed and everything else, so you know, I tried doing the whole straight thing or whatever. I tried to convince myself I was straight pretty much like everybody else did at one point. I did have this one girl whom I went out with briefly. I mean at first, everything was like going ok then it just went sour right after that. She just turned into a bitch. I was like working a little part-time job with my uncle at this grocery store. Then she became really cool and just turned to a bitch, and a user, and stuff, just real bossy. She was making demands on when to call her, and when to see her, and to buy her things.

Later, in high school, George wanted to, but could not express his SGL identity for the lack of support and the fear of being bullied. However, George discussed a person whom he grew up with that attended his high school and who helped him to start to embrace his sexuality.

I chose not to express my sexuality in high school due to the fact I kept getting called faggot and all kinds of names because of the way I walked and talked which made me feel uncomfortable to the point where I was afraid of being gay bashed. I really didn't have any support from my teachers. I tried to tell them I was being picked on, but it just seemed like they really weren't interested. What made me feel awkward and I guess you could say uncomfortable in a sense when I had gym class. Then of course you had to go to the locker room and change in front of a whole bunch of guys. I was kind of chubby at the time and I got made fun of my body image and everything. I really stayed to myself, but then there was this one guy named Paul and went to the same high school together and everything. You know, pretty much he made me, I guess you could say, embrace my sexuality and everything because he was going out with my other friend at the time named Andrew who is now deceased. That's how me and Paul got real close because Andrew was like a big brother to me, and was about three years older than me.

Eventually, George had a guidance counselor who gave him support because he understood what George was going through. The guidance counselor gave George advice and assisted him in accepting his SGL identity. George also said his guidance counselor identifies as a SGL man of color.

I was wrestling with the decision on whether or not I should come out based on out of the fear of again being gay bashed and being judged by my family and friends and losing them in the process as well. But I talked to my one, my counselor about it. The one who was also SGL as me but way older than me. He understood and he gave me some advice and assisted me in the process. He was like telling me about the time, you know, he was kind of confused by his sexuality. Then he had told me that he how, you know, how he slowly grew to accept himself and everything. He basically told me he was like if you are gay, you gay, if you are straight, you straight, if you are bi then you are bi, something like that. He told me to always be myself and everything and of course, be aware of my surroundings and not to do anything I feel uncomfortable doing, and if anybody, you know, pressures me to do anything I don't want to do, then that the person or people I shouldn't even be around.

Both C.J. and George found peers in middle and high school who were also same-gender-loving and who became friends in whom they could confide, and George even had an adult from both middle school and high school for support. Adrian, however, attended Christian and Catholic schools until his junior year of high school and Adrian mentions one friend who was SGL, but nothing about that identity was ever discussed. Adrian did not begin to associate with

other SGL males until college. In fact, Adrian did not get much of a chance to interact with others, even if they were not SGL because he was raised in a sheltered household, as he calls it.

I didn't have lots of friends during that time just a few friends. I mean being in a sheltered household, there wasn't no hanging out and things like that. I mean, it was you know, go to school and bring your ass home and you ain't spending the night over nobody's house. Yeah, so it was like I didn't even have any of those encounters. Any school friends, I see you at school or maybe talk to you on the phone, but that's it. But I think Larry, I think Larry was SGL, we speak once in a blue moon now. We never discussed anything about being SGL that was just like an unspoken truth, maybe. I really didn't have any interaction with gay guys or whatever during high school. I was 18 or 19 but it was after I graduated high school when I began talking to gay guys.

Adrian blames his Christian education for his being extremely close to his sexual identity because he states all he heard in school was that homosexuality was a sin against God as he stated earlier. This was another issue that made Adrian suppress his SGL identity.

I mean being in Christian and Catholic schools didn't help. You know, I mean probably it's made me suppress it (SGL-identity) more. I mean honestly, it just made me suppress it. You know being in the public school for the last two years didn't help either. I mean honestly, it made me suppress it, I mean maybe suppress it to you know it's like you know, not religiously acceptable and not socially acceptable. You know it's like getting it on both ends, from religious people and society at that time.

Author's Experience

Throughout my educational experience, I never found support or friends who were SGL in elementary school and middle school, so I mainly kept to myself until my junior and senior years of high school. I did have great support from teachers academically, but I kept my SGL identity to myself. Although I could suppress my SGL identity, I could not hide the physical attribute of being overweight. I always struggled with being an overweight person. To me, being SGL was awkward enough, but being teased for being overweight made me feel worse. Out of all my siblings, I was the heaviest baby my mother gave birth to, weighing close to eleven pounds. (Although I was a big baby, I was the easiest baby for my mother to deliver; she said

that all she had to do was push twice, and I was out. However, everyone loves a fat healthy baby such as me.)

When about 2 years old, my mother took my brother, sister, and me to Mississippi to visit her parents, and my grandfather took one look at me and fell in love with me, I became his favorite grandchild because I was this cute cherub-like baby. I was my grandfather's pride and joy when I was in Mississippi as a baby; he took me everywhere to show off his big-baby grandson. I remember my grandfather telling me that when he took me into a candy store, I went buck wild grabbing lots of candy in the store. My grandfather said the store owner said, "I know that boy ain't from down here." However, cute fat babies grow up to be fat children, and I would soon learn that I was called the fat and ugly brother. I was overweight all my life and I had to deal with the ridicule of being made fun of while at the same time hiding my SGL identity. I was overweight my entire elementary school years right up to my sophomore year of high school. That spring I decided to go on a diet, and I lost lots of weight at the beginning of my sophomore year of high school. I was no longer the fat and ugly brother, just the ugly brother who was secretly SGL. The weight loss did not last, however.

I already felt uncomfortable for being overweight, and being SGL made it especially uncomfortable with puberty setting in and not being attracted to any girls in my middle school class. I just kept to myself being quiet and reading lots of books which helped to hide my same-loving-identity because my classmates thought I was this nice, quiet, and shy bookworm who prefers books over girls. Like the participants in this study, I was a co-author of my own isolation.

However, I did manage to find a friend in my sophomore year of high school and his name was Todd, but unfortunately that friendship did not last very long. Todd was a slender mild

spoken, dark-skinned boy who transferred to the high school I attended, and he was in my algebra and physical education classes. Todd was a nice dresser and hinted to me that he was SGL although he never said he was. We seemed to hit it off the first day of his arrival as we talked about classes. He asked if I was going to watch Diana Ross in *Mahogany* (Gordy, 1975) which was going to be shown on television for the first time. I really had no interest in seeing *Mahogany* that evening, but after I watched it, *Mahogany* became one of my favorite movies, thanks to Todd.

Todd had talent as a fashion designer and showed me his brilliant designs, and he gave me one of his designs to give to my sisters to color. Then one day, Todd suddenly stopped coming to school and I wondered what happened to him. About two weeks later I bumped into Todd as I was going to class, and we stopped and talked in the hall. Todd told me he had been sick because he was born with a heart condition. I told Todd I was glad he was better and back in school.

As Todd and I became closer as friends, I remember the day that would be etched in my memory forever. That is when some students in my gym class were saying that that guy Todd who hung with me suddenly died. I heard it a few more times, but I did not believe it until I was in my algebra class. That is when another student told the teacher Todd had died. I said I heard the same thing, but I still refused to believe it. My algebra teacher left the class then returned with a sad look and confirmed that Todd had indeed died because his heart gave out. He said Todd had just won an award for his designs and as a reward, his mother bought him the stereo set he always wanted. His grandmother told my teacher that his heart could not take all the excitement and he suddenly died. I was sad and heartbroken because Todd was the only person with whom I was becoming close in my sophomore year, and most importantly, I believed from his behavior and his comments that he was SGL. Unfortunately, Todd missed so much school

that we did not get a chance to exchange phone numbers, so I could not attend Todd's services. Sometimes I wonder how my life would have been different if Todd had lived and we had become even closer friends and confidants and had shared with each other our sexual identities. I probably think I would not be as closeted as I had been, and not have made many of the mistakes I made in the future, because I would have a friend who would be supportive, and we could have had many helpful discussions, living as SGL males of color. As I matured over time during my college years, I did not accept and recognize my SGL identity.

Summary

School was awkward for the subjects during elementary and middle school because they had to navigate keeping their SGL identity hidden through elementary and middle school, as there was no support for SGL students. However, George and C.J. were able to find someone, be it an adult or a student, whom they could talk to for support in middle school. In middle school, C.J. became friends with a classmate in 8th grade who was SGL whom he could confide in, and George had the help of his middle school counselor to navigate his SGL identity. Adrian, attending Christian schools, said he had to be more guarded about his SGL identity because the teaching of religion classes emphasized that being gay is a sin. I also felt awkward, especially in middle school, because that is when the boys started to express interest in girls.

In addition to the realization of being a SGL male and having to navigate our SGL identity at an early age within our families and school, there was another stigma we had to live with, which was the physical attribute of being overweight children. Being overweight as a child made us uncomfortable with our bodies because of body shaming from others. We all had to live with being called fat or chubby. C.J. referred to himself as a little, fat, geeky, nerdy kid and I

was the fat ugly brother. We endured being teased and humiliated because of our being overweight and not having bodies based on society's standards of being thin or athletic in both the hetero and gay society.

Like George, I dreaded attending physical education classes because I knew I was not athletic, and I would be teased because of my body. Hiding our SGL identity was easier than hiding the physical trait of being overweight. Not only were we being teased by people at school, but also in our own family. George mentioned that his grandfather always teased him about his weight which eventually led to him having an eating disorder called bulimia, and Adrian and I became emotional eaters which still plague us today. Eventually, the subjects and I did lose the weight we carried around during our youths by our second and third year of high school and for George, it was late high school. By losing weight during our teen years, we were no longer being teased for being overweight. However, we still had to navigate our SGL identity by keeping it hidden.

During high school, the isolation largely continued; the subjects continued to keep to themselves. C.J. said high school was still awkward in part because it was a school different from the middle school he knew, but he felt he could be a little bit more open about his sexuality because there were students there who were open about their sexuality; yet C.J. chose not to associate with them. However, C.J. eventually became friends with a student who was openly gay and was empathic to C.J. because he knew C.J. was not ready to express his SGL identity. In high school, George got support from a teacher and counselor who were SGL who helped George begin to embrace his sexuality which helped him to find another student who is SGL he could confide in also. When Adrian was in high school, he said he had to continue to suppress his SGL identity because he attended a Catholic high school. When I was in high school there

were students who were openly gay and lesbian students, but I did not associate with them because I would be outing myself like C.J., and I would be get teased by other students. However, there was a classmate in my Algebra and PE class who I felt was SGL based on his mannerisms and certain thing he said in conversations, and we became fast friends. Unfortunately, my friend passed away before we could share our experiences of being SGL. To this day I wonder how my life could have been different if he had lived.

Like our family experiences, school experiences gave us reasons to hide our sexual identities. But unlike our families, schools also began providing us with a glimpse of a wider world in which we were not the “only” ones experiencing same-gender love. And my feeling of loss was all the more acute when the one person I had found who seemed like me passed away. I had no guarantee that I would find another.

d. What role does religion and religious affiliation play in the identity of SGL males of color?

All participants were raised in a Christian denomination and identified as Christians. All participants attended church on Sundays as a child with their parents or grandparents, which was expected of African American children. There was a conflict between sexual identity and the Black church among all participants. In the Black church homosexuality was a sin against God which was preached on most Sundays and is now considered the last taboo in the Black church. The participants felt that if they had sexual thoughts with a male, they were sinners.

C.J. states that Christianity was instilled in him by his parents, and they went to church every Sunday.

Well, my parent instilled Christianity. We got to go to church every Sunday and things like that. That was basically my church upbringing until my dad found the Lord and

became a minister and created his own little church. He kind of ran off with that (religion) and kind of instilled Christianity into me.

C.J. explains that this took a toll on his self-esteem as a child and teen because it was impounded on him that gays are the bad guys. He says he was quiet about his SGL identity and it made him frustrated during his church upbringing because that was all he heard about when it came to the topic of homosexuality.

I was getting that pounded in my head that homosexuality is bad and being gay is a sin. Repent to Christ and all other, you know, nonsense. Let's convert you if you're gay and convert you to being straight. That caused a lot of internal conflict with me, especially as a little boy. And it wasn't pretty because it kind of led me kind of, you know, veer off from people because you know like I'm getting all this information saying gay is bad, gays are the bad guys. So, it kind of took a bigger toll on myself and a sense of self-esteem. I was a very quiet person throughout, you know, church and all the other stuff. I mostly kept to myself while everybody else(siblings) was doing their own little thing. I mean, because it was very frustrating, all I'm hearing is that gay is bad, gay is bad, well gay is actually, it's not bad. So, it just caused a lot of internal conflict with me in terms of like dealing with my parents and things like that. At one point, I guess I think maybe all the little padding on the head tumbled again, how being a homosexual is a sin made me switch over to the heterosexual side. Some like and don't get me wrong, I mean even to this day, girls, I mean I'm sure there are pretty girls, and they are beautiful with the curves and things like that but it's not for me. But at that time back then, like I guess maybe I'll try the straight thing and see how it goes. I saw this other girl, Joyce, who was also so pretty and beautiful and popular that I really tried to pursue that. But of course, I got turned down again and it was very humiliating, again.

Like C.J., George grew up in a Baptist household and went to church every Sunday with his mother and grandparents until he was a teenager. George described going to church as chaos because although he liked going to church, he did not like the "Bible thumping" from the pastors and priests, which eventually made him stop going to church on Sundays.

You know, it was chaos, I mean, I did like going to church. What I really didn't like was how, I mean for the most part, I'm not trying to sound like a bitch and everything, but just stop trying to Bible-thumping. Because I'm like this, God made everybody into their own image, simple as that. You know, and I'm just like getting tired of everybody, you know trying to tell, you are what, and you are going to this. God don't like you or blah, blah, blah, and other outside stuff. That's like the main reason why I stopped going to church, you know because I mean, I keep telling everybody I'm like, just because I don't go to church anymore that doesn't mean I love God any less.

Unlike C.J., George, and myself, Adrian did not grow up where it was mandatory that he attend church every Sunday, but Adrian attended religious schools. Adrian states that his grandmother would make him go sometimes, but it was not every Sunday. Adrian grew up going to the Catholic Church, but he does not consider himself Catholic, despite attending Catholic and Christian schools up until his junior year of high school. Adrian says that his experiences of attending a Catholic Church and school had a profound effect on concealing his SGL identity, making him remain extremely guarded about his sexuality even today. Adrian equates his identity to having cards in a deck.

I started going to a private school like in the middle of fifth grade. So, you know, religion class, for example, you know that's when religion started to, you know, play a bigger aspect in my life. That's when I started to hear certain scriptures, you know. So, I don't know, I'm not religious at all, you know, that was the time I started to get into doctrine, that's when they started to get, you know, pushed in my head more. It was an issue that was apparent that there was a conflict between what the Bible says. You know, some of these thoughts, I was starting to feel some of these feelings I was having were wrong. In a negative sense when I started recognizing that conflict [gay/religion], it made me become more of a private person. Ok, so I mean, this shaped me. I was shaped during that period. I probably was shaped more in a negative fashion than something positive, you know. So, I think I started realizing I have to keep hold of my cards, my deck of cards close to my chest. Just because, you know, I didn't want to be discovered for whatever. I didn't want to be criticized. I just didn't want to be caught. It just kind of made me kind of just think, you show people what you want them to see, and keep the rest of the cards to yourself. So, put the cards out you want to show, and you know, hide the rest.

Adrian's metaphor would be easily recognizable to all the participants in the study, and to me, as all of us made decisions for most of our lives about what cards to show and to whom. For the three of us, we are still making those decisions daily.

Author's Experience

Like the participants, I grew up in a family that went to church every Sunday. My father was the only person who did not attend church although he was baptized as a child in South Carolina. My family attended a Catholic church because I had an aunt, uncle, and nine children who attended the church, plus it was around the corner from my childhood home and the closest. We would also attend another church that was close by for Sunday school, and that was an African Methodist church. The third church my family attended was my aunt's Baptist church. My brother and sisters are Baptist, but I am the only Catholic. My mother let us decide which religion and church we wanted to be baptized in when we became teenagers.

Although the Catholic Church did not emphasize that homosexuality is a sin and that all gays are going to hell when the pastor did the homily, I have read books by Catholic authors as a teen that said homosexuality is wrong and gays must repent (Wihelm, 1981). The biggest problem I had with organized religion was guilt for being SGL: guilty of having a sexual attraction to other men and masturbation. During my adolescent and teen years, I thought only gay people masturbate, but later to my relief found out through my gym teacher in my senior year of high school that everyone, both male and female, "jags off" as she calls it. She said if someone has never "jagged off" something is wrong with that person because that person is not normal for "never jaggging off".

I remember visiting a female teacher friend of mine who happened to live in a three-flat apartment building and one of the couples happened to be SGL. She was one of those born-again Christians who thought being gay was a sentence to hell. However, she had an open-door policy with this SGL couple, and they would come to borrow things from each other when needed. She introduced me to them. They seemed like some of the nicest people I ever met, and I told her

that. She said that she liked them a lot, and they always had her back and watched over her. She told me that although she loved these people like family, she told me she told one of them that “You know you are going to hell.” I was totally confused that you love these two guys like family, yet you told them they are going to hell just for being SGL, and they still have your back. I was bothered and frustrated by what she said about these nice people, but I said nothing in fear of outing my SGL identity.

Although I am proud to identify as a Catholic and enjoy going to Mass every Saturday, I do take umbrage to the Catholic Church’s views on homosexuality, especially denying gay members from taking communion and not recognizing SGL marriages. In my Bible study group, we sound like a bunch of anti-Catholics based on our discussions about Scripture, certain Catholic doctrines, and pedophile priests who were charged with molesting young boys. I do have problems with some of the Catholic rules/doctrines that I feel were developed to control the lives of people instead of helping them. For example, I do think Catholic priests should be allowed to get married, and a woman should have total control of her own body. Although organized religion preaches against homosexuality, I continue to go to Mass because of my faith in God and my belief that Jesus Christ, who is God in human form, never spoke against homosexuality. Going to Mass gives me a sense of peace that is difficult to describe, Rev. Kevin Taylor (202Toriden3) states that it is that deep loving faith in God that keeps people, especially SGL males of color, going back to church despite the rejection of homosexuality. I recognize that there is a paradox here: I am getting strength and resiliency from an institution that actively participates in repressing people like me for our sexual orientation.

Summary

In reviewing the responses, all subjects, including myself, were raised in Christian religions. In the Black community going to church was as mandatory as going to school. However, being SGL was in direct conflict with the teachings of churches in the Black community which caused the subjects and me to be even more guarded about our SGL identity. In the church being gay is considered a sin and all gay people are going to hell.

I could understand C.J. saying that Christianity took a toll on his self-esteem, and he was frustrated because it was pounded in his head that being gay is bad and a sin, which conflicted with his SGL identity. Because of the conflict between his SGL identity and the teachings of the church, George stopped going to church except on occasions when his grandmother wanted him to attend with her. Adrian attended Christian schools where he was taught during his religious classes that being SGL is a sin based on certain scriptures in the Bible, which led him to be more guarded and closeted in his SGL identity.

There was a feeling of confusion and guilt on my part about my SGL identity because it was preached that being gay is wrong and that God does not like me because, after all, I am SGL. Currently, I am the only one of the subjects to attend church every Saturday because in the Catholic religion going to church on Saturday fulfills the Sunday obligation. C.J., George, and Adrian are still Christian and believe in God and Jesus, however, they do not attend church regularly. Many of the SGL men I know are active in their church as choir directors, musicians, choir members, ushers, or just regular members. At Adodi meetings, when the topic of religion comes up, many of the members say that the Black church is made up of Black women and

Black gay men. Although the church is against the LGBTQ+ people, the members of Adodi say they go to church to serve God and not man.

e. As SGL males of color, what were they thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time?

The participants and I grew up and matured in our thinking about living the life of a SGL male of color. I asked the participants what they learned about themselves in navigating their life experiences as SGL men of color, and whether their views about those experiences shifted or evolved over time. C.J. was the most vocal when answering this question. C.J. believes everyone should live their truth regardless of the trials and tribulations that might happen.

What I've learned overall from this whole little experience of being a Black SGL man is about living your truth and own your truth. It's going to come with some, you know, trials, tribulations, and funny looks. People might want to treat or start treating you differently. You got a lot of types of Black parents that want to just own you. It's unfortunate when it comes, you know, when all you're doing is loving your truth and there's nothing wrong with being gay. But you know the world is not always a happy place. So just own it, make sure you have a nice thick backbone, and don't let nobody stop you from you enjoying the life, to where you want to enjoy your life and with who you want to love or be with and all that. So overall that's what I learned the most out of my entire journey as a Black gay man. My view has evolved a Black gay man because I thought being gay is you know it's a sin. But it's okay to be gay because in my head, I was kind of saying I'm wrong for being gay, but I know I'm not wrong for being gay. I'm not wrong for loving guys. I mean, I love who I love and that's who I'm going home with and nobody else. So that's all I have to say.

Like C.J., George evolved, too. He realized as he got older that being a SGL Black male is more than sex. George also believes that you should push yourself not to be so antisocial because you are gay. George went on to say:

Well, I guess you could say, you know, as I got older, I just started learning more about myself. Not as a Black or mixed person, but as a person in general regardless of who I love. Also, you learn that you don't even have to jump into bed or be in a relationship to feel loved or whatever the case maybe. Just, you know, just living your life to the fullest and, you know, don't be so antisocial if you don't want to be antisocial. Just push yourself out there instead of looking for whoever you want to look for. If you feel like

you got some issues you need to work out, that's okay too. I kind of think that one of the problems in the community itself, is not working out issues that need to be worked out.

The issues George was referring to are the issues that were previously discussed, living in a white gay and Black hetero-centric society. Adrian, on the other hand, said that he would never be totally comfortable being a SGL male of color because of the conditioning of his upbringing. Adrian explain his uncomfortableness by saying:

What have I learned about myself being a same-gender-man of color, hmmm. That's a good question. I learned that I don't know if I'm ever going to be comfortable being a SGL man. I don't think I'm going to be 100 percent comfortable being this way. I don't think I ever thought some people would be comfortable. You mentioned one of your students and he's comfortable or you know some people grow into being comfortable or more comfortable, but not me. Because again, I think I've been conditioned and some of that has been self-conditioning, but a lot of it has been just family. I think I've just been really closed off and I'm very private. I'm very, very closeted and all of that stuff. I don't necessarily want it for myself, but I do admire people like your student or people who could be like, hey you know I'm this or I'm that. They just tell you flat out and it's like no big deal. I've never seen myself being that type of person, I don't think I'm ever going to be comfortable with it, or totally comfortable with it. These kids these days grow up in a family and household where they could tell their parents anything, but that is something I didn't grow up with. I wish I would have though because back then it was you can't tell mom or can't tell dad or don't say this. You know, and it's kind of at least for me it left an impression on me, a very negative impression on me. Yeah, I think that's what I probably learned personally; I will never be fully comfortable being SGL.

Adrian went on to further explain that his views related to ageism in the gay community have changed.

Maybe, I guess maybe my view on the age thing have shifted. You know because I felt like years ago, I mean in your twenties you're good, then it seemed like, you know, by the time you get to your thirties and forties, you are just over the hill in this community and just hang it up. I feel like that's not as true, today. It may have been that way in the 80's, 90's, and the early 2000's like I said if you are over 40 then you might as well be dead in the community. I don't think that's the case anymore. I don't think you get viewed upon like that anymore if you are over forty.

Like the others, Adrian's views of himself in the context of the SGL community evolved over time. By discussing the participants' past knowledge of the identities and what they

presently know about their identities of being a SGL male of color, I asked the participants if they are satisfied with the way they had navigated and negotiated being a SGL male of color.

C.J. seemed to be the most satisfied with effectively navigating and negotiating being a SGL male of color. C.J. proudly said:

I am a Black gay man. Take me as I am or don't. If you take me that great, if you don't, that's your loss. I'm gonna keep on moving. Well, now my dad has passed on, I mean he is no longer in the picture. My mom is still in denial about the entire gay thing and we bump heads about it quite often over that. That's because she sees all these things I'm doing like painting my toenails and fingernails, and I wear different types of clothes, and you know it's these things. Well, what the hell are you going to do mom, I'm gay, I mean there's nothing you can do about it. I mean, I don't really talk to any of my family members like that outside my little brother and my friends that I have. The few friends that I have I consider my family. So that's my life and there's no other way around it.

When asked if there was anything else he wanted to add, C.J. said the following, it was like he wanted to send a message not only to younger SGL males of color but all SGL males of color.

Don't let anybody tell you what your value is other than yourself. It's going to be a journey, especially people that dress like me. I like grew up in a traditional Nigerian household and being raised in that type of community was a drag. It's unfortunate that we all have to go through that, not just for us, not just homosexuals in general, because I know we all have our journey coming and showing as a person who is part of the LGBT community. So just take the journey as strength that's building you into becoming the Christ Superstar. You will be going through all the trial and tribulations but make sure that you surround yourself by people that actually love and care about you. It may not be family, but someone that truly embraces your love for you, for who you are, and no matter what, and also stand strong in your truth and let nothing worry you. Live your best life and that's that. That is because you only live life once, and the only person living your life is you.

Rather than directing his thoughts to others as C.J. did, George reflected on how he learned to understand himself more by negotiating and navigating being a SGL male of color over time.

Well for the most part, I guess you could when I was younger, I really didn't understand myself or whatever. I guess you could say maybe because back then I really didn't have

many experiences and everything. But now at my age I experienced more understanding and have more understanding about myself and everything. Most important I appreciate myself more and I embrace myself more being an African America SGL man.

George had a final thought before ending his interview.

I'm just glad that, that this research is being done because I kind of feel like not enough, I guess you could say understanding, where I don't think enough focus have been done on the gay Black community itself. So, I'm glad that it's being done.

Adrian is the only one of the three study participants who feels he did not effectively navigate and negotiate his SGL male identity to his satisfaction.

Well, I mean I don't think I done it necessarily effectively, I don't think I'm doing it effectively now, and I am not totally satisfied. I think I've navigated and negotiated on autopilot. You know it like when I say autopilot, I mean, you know just keeping the SGL cards my score card to myself. Kind of doing autopilot and just doing what I need to do, keeping details of my life just off to the side, that is what I mean by autopilot. If I were doing it effectively for me, I would be open about my sexuality. Back then you know you better not say nothing and that's the end of it. You know effectively in my opinion for me would be to be more open. That's not to advertise me being SGL but hey if it come up, you know, I would admit it and leave it at that.

Adrian admits the biggest reason he is not satisfied with navigating and negotiating his SGL identity is fear.

There are lots of reasons I have not done this, but I think fear is the biggest reason. I mean I sound like I just being repetitive, but I think it's the way I grew up because you know it could be a big elephant right in the middle of the room right, I don't acknowledge the elephant. I just keep on doing what I'm going to do. So, I have to admit I am a very private person you know.

Adrian feels that as a "private person," he hinders himself from forming better relationships by not being more open.

And you know I think I have hindered myself from forming better relationships by not being open because most people you can tell when somebody's not being totally open and think they are being deceitful, but it is not true. For me I am not giving you the true me. I am sure some people probably have gotten that from me. It's hard to form a true relationship with somebody when you feel like somebody is not showing their true self, it's hard kind of to develop that relationship with them because you know, they are putting all their cards on the table, but I can tell you are not putting all of your cards on

the table. So you know, it kind of put a block up from those close relationships. And yeah, it may always be like that for me.

Author's Experience

Living my authentic self as a SGL male of color was a struggle, however I did learn how closeted and naive I was about my identities. As for me, I learned that being a SGL man is difficult yet alone a SGL man of color twice as difficult. I learned that when it comes to loving someone that gay Black males love and go on dates just as their gay white males. At first, I only thought white gay men were only allowed to date, fall in love, and have relationships. The reason is that when it came to gay-loving relationships, in gay magazines and books, and even in gay pornography magazines, the guys were white attractive men. I did not see any Black guys at all, and because of this I thought all SGL Black men had to keep that identity a secret; they could not be in a loving relationship with another man but only have sex on the “down-low”. I thought that if I were to be in a relationship, it had to be with a white man because Black guys cannot do that. In the gay section of the bookstore, the only gay novels, and especially gay romantic novels, were of white men written by white men for white men. I looked for a novel written by a Black author with Black characters but could not find one. The closest I came was the novel *The Color of Trees* (1992) written by Canaan Parker in which the main character is an African American teenager who attends a predominately white boarding school. The issue for me in this book is that the main character only liked the white characters. The only other Black character mentioned in the novel was a Black student who attended the school on a basketball scholarship. In the book, that Black character is described as a tall skinny teen with short coarse hair with big lips, and a wide flat nose, unattractive to the main character. The story ended with the Black teen and the popular white teen admitting their love for each other and they end up living happily ever

after together as gay adults. That book almost solidified my belief that to have a happy SGL relationship it had to be with a white man.

Then I found the novel, *The B-Boys Blues* (Hardy, 1994), and read the synopsis and all the characters were Black, to my delight. When I saw how the characters interacted in the novel with true dating and romantic relationships, it was like hearing the Hallelujah Chorus. Finally, a gay romance novel I can identify with. It took me 40 years to realize that Black gay men do go on dates and have loving relationships by reading this book. That is when I decided I wanted to be in a loving relationship like the characters in that story, and it did not have to be with a white man. I believe there is systemic racism in gay literature even today. In most of the gay literature when searching on Amazon the first books that come up are written by white men with gay white characters, and the cover of these books are the quintessential stereotypical attractive gay white man, handsome and muscular. I have to scroll pages before I find a SGL Black novel. Most of those novels are gay Black novels written by SGL Black men but on the cover are men who are thugs, athletes, or men on the down-low. Thanks to the novel *The B-Boy Blues* by James Earl Hardy, I learned that SGL men of color can and do go on dates, and they can have open loving relationships with other SGL men of color just as their Caucasian counterparts.

In reflecting on my past and what I have learned being a SGL male of color, I have to agree with Adrian. I am not satisfied with how I negotiated and navigated my SGL identity over time. I have many mistakes that I do not wish on any other gay man regardless of color. All my life I had to keep my SGL identity hidden because things like that were not accepted only in my household, but in Black society in general. In questioning C.J. and George, I do admire their being able to accept the SGL identity and live openly with it; and if others cannot accept it, then it is their loss. I cannot help but be envious of both C.J. and George, especially C.J. I like the way

C.J. expresses his SGL identity not only in the way he dresses but also in his overall dynamic; he would stand up to anyone who tries to put him down because of his sexual orientation. C.J. is someone who will not back down from a verbal altercation when it comes to his SGL identity. C.J. is like my favorite nephew who is SGL by not backing from anyone.

Not only does my SGL nephew look like me and we are both SGL, but he has the same mannerisms. He is caring, sensitive, smart, and always put the needs of others before himself. My nephew has none of the mannerisms of his mother, who is the quintessential party girl, nor his father who was a former gang member who was constantly in and out of prison. The thing my nephew has that I never had is that he has the support of someone just like him who is SGL; and like C.J., he also does not back down in a verbal altercation because of his identity. I am so proud that he is successfully navigating and negotiating his SGL identity that I cannot help but be somewhat envious of him also. I think how my life might have been different if I had the support of my parents or others when growing up. In addition, being SGL is becoming mainstream in the media which is something that was totally unacceptable almost 30 years ago. Today there are a plethora of gay people, both men, and women who, for example, talk about their same-gender husband or wife, and no one is surprised or blinks an eye.

However, it is never too late to change, because I feel that I am navigating my SGL identity much better than I had over twenty years ago. I do have a boyfriend who is not completely out also, but we do support each other. I do invite him to a family holiday get-together, and no one asks any questions because these get-togethers are usually at my house and if they do not like it, I would personally escort them to the door. I am more out at the university than at any other place. When I told a classmate in one of the graduate classes that I was gay, she, who happens to be a lesbian, said yeah, yeah, I know so what is your question about the

research. I was totally surprised that she knew since I never gave any indication of being SGL. Yet it made me feel good and accept that my SGL identity of who I am and not make a big deal about it.

If I had to do it all over again, I would like to have better support from my family which would have helped me to navigate and negotiate my SGL identity much more than I had in the past. However, I did learn a lot from the mistakes, trials, and tribulations of my past that have made me the better and stronger SGL man of color that I am today.

Summary

All participants expressed SGL-related feelings of isolation that changed as the study's participants matured. When it comes to learning about living the identities of being a SGL male of color and the gay community itself, C.J. later learned that people must live their truth and that although people say he is wrong for being SGL he knows that he is not wrong. He says that you must have a thick backbone if you are a SGL male of color because there will be many trials and tribulations but that should not stop you from enjoying your "best life." George learned that a person does not have to jump in bed or even be in a relationship to feel love. George believes in just living life to the fullest, trying not to be anti-social, and accepting that it is ok to have "issues" resulting from an outlier identity. Similarly, Adrian learned he will never be able to be 100 percent comfortable being a same-gender-male of color because he has been conditioned to be closeted, yet he admires and is somewhat envious of people who are comfortable being their authentic selves, despite believing he will never get to that point of living his own authentic self.

My best friend Leroy could not believe that now, closeted and naïve as it may be, I learned that SGL males of color can be in loving monogamous relationships just as straight

people. I honestly thought that Black people just lived an isolated and secret life of being on the “down-low” and having an occasional sexual excursion with the same sex, then going back to their “normal” life whatever that may be. I was in my mid- to late thirties when I realized, with the help of the book *B-Boy Blues*, that SGL men go on dates and have loving relationships. I lived my early adult life believing that only white men could live authentically and love whom they want to love freely. I can attribute my upbringing in the Black community, and in the Black church, to saying that being gay is wrong, a sin against God, and similar accusations against gay people. I would also have to blame the media because the only gay people that I saw or read about were white men, and if a Black person wanted to be in a loving relationship, it had to be with a white person. *B-Boy Blues* really opened my eyes to SGL men living their authentic life, having loving relationships with other SGL males of color, and being accepted and appreciated as whole people who can love and be loved.

I ended this portion of the interviews by asking the subjects if they have effectively grown into their SGL identity and are satisfied with their navigating and negotiating their SGL identity being a male of color over time. C.J., George, and I feel that we can better embrace and accept our SGL identity which will help us to navigate our lives for the better in the present and future. Although C.J. is still estranged from his family, he accepts himself and is proud of his SGL identity, and he even expressed that his communication with his mother is improving. C.J. said he is a proud Black gay man and that is all there to it—they must take me as I am or don’t—,C.J. is going to live his life regardless. George said he has a much better understanding of himself as a SGL male of color and is now more interested in reading more about the experiences of gay Black males, especially my research. Adrian was the exception among the three because he still struggles with his SGL identity and feels that he has not effectively

navigated and negotiated his SGL identity to his satisfaction because he is still not as open as he would like to be about his sexuality. Adrian said he would like to be more open about his sexuality, but he is still afraid of the stigma of being SGL. Adrian said that it is the fear that is blocking him from having loving relationships with other SGL males.

As I reflect on my life, I know that I have not effectively navigated and negotiated my SGL identity as effectively as I wanted because of the lack of support, understanding, and like Adrian, fear. However, I feel that I am doing better presently in navigating and negotiating my SGL identity better than in the past because I have better support, and I am opening myself up and embracing my SGL identity more and learning from the mistakes I made. And most important is researching and writing this dissertation, sharing and reflecting on my experiences of being a Black SGL male. I learned that out of bad experiences, some good things can happen if we allow them. I do feel that now I am stronger than I was in the past being a SGL male of color. Each of us in this study has to an important degree overcome the isolation we experienced as children and youth, as each of us has found support of one kind or another, as will be further discussed.

f. How do SGL males of color manage to live as outcasts in a white hetero-centric society, a white gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society?

With the difficulty of navigating marginalized identities and being an outcast of various groups, I asked the participants if they are satisfied with their navigation their identities as a SGL male of color. All participants agree that being part of two marginalized groups is difficult to navigate because they feel like outcasts from three communities. They are not accepted by the white hetero-centric community, not accepted by the Black hetero-centric community, and at

times not fully accepted by the white gay community. The participants felt that the gay white community is more active and supportive of their own kind whereas the Black gay community is less active. However, all participants also felt that homosexuality was more accepted by the white hetero-centric society when compared to the Black hetero-centric society because of greater homophobia in the Black community.

C.J. expressed that there is a difference between being a gay Black man versus being a gay white man, but it is something he had to research himself.

It's different being a gay Black man versus a gay white man, I later would come to find out. Once I started calling and learning more about that, I know it's like a whole, I mean you know the difference between being a gay player, but you got a gay Black man and gay white man, and you know, the whole little politics and all that.

C.J. copes with being a SGL male of color by finding support from Black SGL friends. He describes as an adult how he was able to find the support he needed to cope through being involved with the LGBTQ community in college and his association with a SGL group for males of African descent.

I am involved with this SGL group of men of African descent called Adodi. I am also involved in my group from UIC. I'm very, you know very involved in terms of, you know, being there for anything in the LGBTQ community. I have my, you know, circle of people that are friends. Well, most of my Black gay men friends that I'm very close to I consider them basically family, and that's about the end of that.

In contrast to C.J., although George and Adrian have attended Adodi meetings on occasion, neither have fully participated in the initiation process of becoming active Adodi members.

George felt that the gay white community was active in support of gay people and that the Black gay community lacked that type of support.

It just seemed like the gay white community, you know, was really active and you know, volunteering for other causes. But I don't think the Black community like was active, let alone out here as much as the white gay community was.

However, George proudly attends most events in the gay community in Boystown/North Halsted in Chicago such as Pride Day and Market Day to support SGL people like himself. Being around SGL males during special events helps George to at least feel part of part of the SGL community. He does have issues with the gay community, however, regardless of race. George does not belong to nor is associated with any group in the gay community, like Adodi. George states he does not have the desire to belong to a SGL group regardless of race because he feels that instead of supporting each other, the members would be competing and tearing each other down especially when it comes to body-image issues. George has a strong feeling that body-image issues such as body-shaming are one of the main problems facing the gay community, especially the Black gay community.

I think one of the main problems facing the gay community is body image, especially in the Black community. Nobody is really in support of each other, you know, because it just seems like everybody is trying to compete with each other instead of working together as a unit or a team.

At first, George believed it was only the Black community that had problems pertaining to body-shaming, but now he believes this is an issue plaguing the entire gay community regardless of race. Once during a casual conversation, George told me he auditioned to be one of the dancers/strippers at one of the clubs in Boystown/North Halsted. George said they thought he was a great dancer, even better than the dancers they have. They told George they would hire him, but he needed to lose some weight, and if and when he lost weight, they would give him another audition and consider hiring him. This solidified George's belief that the major problem with all gay communities is body- image issues. George said the gay community should work

together to find solutions to help the gay community instead of tearing each other down because of a person's body image.

At first, I thought just the Black community itself, I think like mainly because they (the Black community) don't celebrate pride at the same time as the white community does. I am starting to notice that the entire community got like a little, you know, like a little inside fighting within them within the community itself. So, I just think that, you know, they should be working as a team, you know, finding solutions to problems such as STDs and HIV and everything, you know, instead of calling each other thots and sluts and everything else. You know just try to lift each other up, you know try to find a solution and not be part of the problem. It's not just the Black gay community I'm talking about but the gay community as a whole. I just kind of feel like everybody thinks everybody is better than the next person, you know, just because you don't have a fancy house or make six, eight, or ten figures doesn't necessarily mean you're better than the next person. I just think the whole problem is the gay community is so focused on what the next person is doing, instead of focusing on themselves or trying to help with being a united community.

Adrian said that straight Black males can display their true selves, but a SGL male of color must hide his identity and not be his true authentic self. Again, Adrian uses as a metaphor a deck of playing cards being different identities and you have to decide which identity to keep hidden as a way to cope with living as a SGL male of color in areas where you are treated as an outcast. You must know which cards to show and which cards to keep hidden. Adrian's goal in coping was to blend into a community and not stand out.

Straight Black guy, straight guys of color, they obviously have a pass. I feel they are able to be their true selves, you know, they were able to be to, you know, display their true selves. Whereas you know a SGL guy of color, you can't show all areas of you like, you know. It's like I can show this, and you know, I can't show that. It goes back to the damn deck of cards, it's the damn cards. It would be like I could show you this card and that card, but these other cards I got cards behind my back, and I can't show them, you know. It's like my goal is to just blend into the crowd. I didn't want to stand out. I just want to be, you know just blend in. Yeah, I mean, I really just wanted to blend in. I want to be low-key; you know.

Adrian does not belong to any SGL organization for support because he feels all gay communities are messy because everybody knows someone that knows someone like six degrees

of separation. Adrian also feels this is where it is difficult to deal with other communities without support from your own community.

Well, I mean, I'm just keeping it real, I mean just how messy some of these people are, not knowing how so fucking messy these people are. I learned a few lessons from that. I mean how messy they are and how everybody intermingles with everybody. I mean, you know, it's like they say people are like six or seven people away from knowing everybody. But in society in general it's even closer than that. You know like Chicago, for example, you know it's like you hear people from knowing everybody in gay society. It's just that no matter what city you in, it's just like that. I recognize some differences between the gay Black and gay white communities. You know even like bars and clubs, you know, this is the white people club, and this is the Black gay people club. I mean I always knew that too well. I know being in the typical white community is a tad bit more accepting of gay people. You know the Black community or the gay Latino community or whatever really has a lower level of acceptance versus the white communities. I mean sometimes to me just being a man of color I almost really can deal with racist white people than homophobic Black people because to me, the homophobic Black people, they come to get you quicker than some of these racist white people, you know.

Adrian's comments illustrate the complexities of being one of a few Black, SGL males in a White-dominated society. You have to choose your poison: Blacks who reject gays, or Whites who reject Blacks but who might tolerate Blacks who share their sexual identities. Although Adrian does not associate with any SGL group for support, he started meeting other SGL males during and after college for friendship and support to cope with his SGL identity.

I started meeting people that were also SGL, you know. So yeah, I was able to meet a couple of friends and that's when I started to experience experimenting and all of that stuff. But I met, I would say, two really good friends that I am still close to, and I guess they are my support system. The biggest support that I got from them was somebody to talk to about personal issues and relationship issues where I know I am not going to get judged or you know they're not going to like looking at me like I'm crazy, you know. I mean it was really just having that support of knowing people and being able to open up to people who are in the same boat as you.

The participants' experiences demonstrate that it is important to have the support of others from various communities when going through turbulent times in the lives of SGL males of color, especially if that person is living a clandestine life. If a person has no one to turn to in

times of need, a plethora of mistakes will be made, including thoughts of suicide, because they might feel there is no one to understand the complicated situations they might be facing.

Challenging situations can make or break a SGL male of color depending on the support he may or may not receive.

When asked if there was a moment when the respondents faced a situation or challenge that was related to race or sexuality, and the outcome of the challenge, C.J. was the one who was most ready to answer that question. Being the youngest of the three participants, C.J. told of when he came out to his family during his junior year of college.

I think when I came home from college for Thanksgiving break and there we were all together at the table eating, you know, Thanksgiving dinner. Then that's how I messed up and told everybody, my mom, dad, older brother, older sister, and little brother that I was gay. It was kind of like a shock for the moment because they were not expecting that. They were kind of like in denial of it and kind of laughing in my face about it. I told them again that I am gay, and then they kind of said I don't want to be bothered with you. I said Skippy, and I got to figure out things on my own once I get back to school. That was a nasty little experience.

The outcome of C.J.'s experience left him estranged from his parents. He felt he could not go back to his home and to his parents. During college, he considered himself homeless. His sense of loss, coupled with his isolation, was in his words traumatic.

After I found my own way to get back to the campus, I basically cut ties from my parents' house and just lived in the dormitory then eventually I moved into my own apartment. I was working and trying to go to school at the same time and then I wasn't working. Now, I was basically living on the street homeless. I knew I can't go back to my parents at that time, so I basically was couch surfing and living on the streets and still trying to go to school at the same time. Oh, that was traumatic, oh God, I was so traumatized. Lord, I really didn't want to live anymore, so basically that was the most traumatic experience I have ever experienced being a Black gay male.

George's challenge was a guy he had been dating who was mentally and emotionally abusive, stating George was not gay enough. To this day, George had no idea what the person meant not being gay enough.

I was dating this one guy and he turned out to be such an asshole at the time. We first dated for like maybe about six months and toward the end of the relationship, he just basically flat-out told me how I was I was not gay enough for him. I'm like the fuck, what do you mean I'm not gay enough. Then I wind up finding out from one of my other friends at the time that the only reason why he was going out with me is because he could get sex out of me. At first, I really didn't understand it until I noticed the behavior patterns he showed. So, I think when he said I wasn't gay enough I guess he meant my ass wasn't big enough or my dick wasn't big enough or I didn't sleep around with a whole bunch of guys and everything. That is what I took from it.

The outcome of this challenge for George is that he started to get with lots of guys until he was diagnosed with an STD. Despite that challenging outcome, George is now taking better care of himself by working and continuing his education.

I started to get with anybody and everybody and then of course I started slowing down after I wound up catching an STD with the guy who already had something. I didn't care let alone about the outcome. After we broke up, he dumped me and wanted me to be his friend to which I agreed. He invited me to his house and then accused me of trying to get with his cousin. He called me a slut and a hoe, I never talked with him again. Now I am well pretty much you know doing more self-care. I like my job, and I am going to school to be a certified coach. I am also training for a marathon.

Adrian at first had to think of something challenging because he is still closeted about his SGL identity. However, he did tell of a situation when his car got mistakenly towed and was called a derogatory name when the company had to put his car back in the apartment complex parking lot where he lives.

I really can't think of any situation [regarding] race and/or sexuality . . . , but some guy towed my car out of the apartment complex parking lot because they changed the parking passes, so I was given a new pass from the rental office. The new passes look different than the old parking stickers, and I guess with the tow guy there was some type of miscommunication on their end. I guess the tow guy did not recognize the new sticker and he just towed my car. The apartment office told me to call the towing company. I called them and I was as pissed as hell, they told to have the apartment office to call them. The towing company basically apologized but told me I had to pick up my car and they didn't have to bring it back. I told her you better bring my shit back.

Adrian was able to get his car back but the person who brought the car back called him a derogatory name which surprised Adrian. Adrian said there was no reason to be call out his name because it was their mistake.

Well, it took two and a half hours to get my car back and the towing guy just place my car in the middle of the parking lot of the apartment complex. I told him to put it back in the space where it was originally. He and I started to get into it and that's when he called me a faggot ass motherfucker. I did not know if he thought I was gay, or if he was just being an asshole. I brought that up because you said something about race and sexuality.

Author's Experience

I agree with the participants that being part of two marginalized groups is extremely difficult to navigate, but we somehow manage to make it work and make a life for ourselves without adequate support from various communities. It is like what Adrian constantly refers to in his interview, that we are guarding our identity, and we must know when to keep guarded or hidden and when there is a space that is safe to express our identity. However, for SGL males of color, finding that support where they can express themselves is challenging. There weren't any SGL groups for people of color when I was in my teens up to my young adulthood that I knew of. Therefore, for me to cope in a community that is hostile to my SGL was to remain in the closet and try to blend in just as Adrian did by either denying or not discussing anything related to being gay. There might have been supporting groups out there at that time, but I did not know where to look because like Adrian I was still very much in the closet, and with the onset of the AIDS crisis that started during my early twenties, there was just so much I did not know by not having the information that we now have about HIV and AIDS.

This presented another issue of not only navigating my SGL identity but also navigating my SGL identity through the HIV and AIDS crisis. AIDS was known as the gay men's disease,

and the people who were dying from this horrendous disease were mainly white, or so I thought because the only people the media showed who were dying from AIDS were gay white men. This might have led some SGL males of color to believe that since only gay white men are getting this disease, stay away from gay white men and I should be ok, yet of course, they were wrong. According to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Black Americans are the most affected by HIV. The CDC states that in 2020 African Americans accounted for 42 percent of all new HIV cases (2020). HIV and AIDS outed people in the Black community because if an African American male contracted HIV, they were automatically considered gay in the Black community and an outcast, just like the lepers in biblical times. Ervin Magic Johnson experienced this when he went public with HIV in 1991, a decade into the AIDS crisis. Twenty-three years later, his Foundation has done much to provide education and support for HIV victims, especially within the Black community, where HIV and AIDS continue to be a problem for the Black population.

Besides the need to know more about HIV and AIDS, there was one challenging moment where I strongly need support dealing with a relationship issue where I felt I was all alone with no support dealing with this challenge. I realized I needed support from people like me when the first guy I ever fell in love with broke up with me on my birthday. The thing about this relationship is that it was a long-distance relationship. Jerry lived in St. Louis, and I lived in Chicago. It felt so good to have someone treat me so special and tell me how he loved me although I was still closeted. He was fully out as a SGL man of color and had the support of SGL friends of color in St. Louis.

Jerry broke up with me on my birthday by writing a letter instead of a birthday card, and that devastated me. I did not know how to navigate this experience because I had never been

through this before. I had no one to talk to about this situation who could possibly help me to navigate my first break-up, therefore I desperately wanted to find someone else to fill the void that I lost from that first relationship. Because there was no online dating yet, the next best thing was to put ads in the relationship section of gay magazines. I wrote an ad to be put in one of the magazines to which I secretly had a subscription because that is how I met Jerry when he sent a letter to my post office box. I received many letters from various guys locally and around the country.

A few months after Jerry broke up with me, I experienced loss of another kind: my father passed away, which made this period even more challenging. Not only did I have to navigate and negotiate the loss of the first person I loved, but also the loss of my father four months later. I remember that after the funeral repast and everyone had someone to go home to for comfort and support. I, on the other hand, had no one when I went back to my cold and quiet apartment staring at the wall. That made me more determined to find another guy to replace the love and support I so desperately needed after Jerry.

At this time my self-esteem was at an all-time low. I specifically wanted to be in another relationship with an African American man. I had nothing against dating outside my race, but I felt better being in a relationship with an African American because we would be able to understand each other better because we are of the same race. After reading a local gay magazine I went to visit a few gay places on the near north and the north side because there were only one or maybe two places listed on the south side, and I did not want to take the chance of someone recognizing me visiting one of those places. Yet, most of the Black guys who might seem like someone I would like to get to know seemed to be more into white guys. At first, I felt like George because I was still husky and maybe they wanted someone smaller or younger. However,

when I saw these attractive SGL African Americans with older and very overweight white guys my self-esteem was crushed. I could not understand why these guys would want an overweight white guy when they could have an overweight Black guy, therefore it made me even more desperate to find someone.

On one of my weekly visits to my post office box, I received a letter response to my ad. It was from a prisoner named Bobby who said he was interested in me. Usually, if I were in a different mindset, I would have thrown the letter away after reading it because I would not want any kind of relationship with prisoners. However, the letter had everything I need to hear at the time because it was comforting to know someone cared about me, especially with the way I was feeling. I responded to the letter because the prison was located in Indiana about 45 miles from Chicago. As we continued our correspondence, I mistakenly told Bobby everything that was going on with me, and he responded supportively and lovingly.

As I would learn, Bobby was actually the devil in disguise because everything I told him he would use against me. This so-called relationship was turning into something that would become mentally, emotionally, and financially abusive. I made another big mistake: not only did I tell him intimate details about myself, but I began bringing money to him when I visited him at the prison, which was a huge mistake because that was against the prison's rules, and Bobby used that to get more money from me. I knew and felt deep in my soul that this was wrong, but Bobby said that this would help him to get out of prison, and he and I would be together as a couple. That turned out to be a lie because now Bobby said that the authorities had my fingerprints from the balloon that I hid the money in, and they could come and arrest me at any time. Therefore Bobby said I had to bring him money so he could give to these cops to keep me out of prison.

All I could think about was going to prison and being gang-raped or killed, plus the embarrassment it would cause my family. I felt like a total idiot because I felt I was smart enough to know a fraud and not to let people take advantage of me, but most important I was a social studies teacher who also taught about civics and told students not to break the law. However, I was at the lowest point of my life because that same year, my brother the last remaining father figure in my life, was unexpectedly killed in an automobile accident almost a year after my father's passing. This was another huge loss for me, along with Bobby threatening my life. These situations were challenging because as a SGL male of color, I had no one I could turn to for advice and help with the situation with Bobby. At that time I felt alone because I did not have support of family and I did not have any SGL friends who I could tell this clandestine situation to who would understand what I was going through.

The day my older brother was killed in a car accident left me the patriarch of the family which is something I had never been prepared to do because that was the job of my brother. This situation with Bobby coupled with trying to be the patriarch of my family was almost unbearable. For about two and a half years, I had to put my life on hold to make sure my family was adjusting to life without my father and brother and to be of support to them in any way I could. This was so traumatic and stressful for me because I had to deal with Bobby bleeding me dry of my finances by blackmailing me and making sure my family was coping with life after two back-to-back deaths in the family.

I remember after my brother's funeral, I sat cold and alone for hours, feeling numb and staring at the wall with every single light turned on in my house. Not only did I lose the two most important men in my life, but I was being abused mentally, emotionally, and financially by Bobby because he did not care that I lost my brother so close after losing my father. Bobby only

cared about getting my money twice a month because I made the dumb mistake of telling him I got paid every other Friday. I also made another mistake of giving Bobby my home telephone number and address which is what the prison administrators advised visitors not to do. On the weeks I was to get paid, I was getting collect calls from Bobby saying how much money I was to bring him or someone he knew which he told me was used to give to people to keep me out of jail. This got so severe that I eventually had to file for bankruptcy. Although Bobby was in prison, I was a prisoner to Bobby, the only difference is that I was not inside the prison walls.

I could not tell anyone what was happening to me with Bobby because I felt degraded, humiliated, and most importantly scared of outing myself. I did not know who or where to turn to for the help and support I needed. When I was driving home from work one late evening feeling frightened and defeated and not wanting to go home knowing that there would be another threatening letter from Bobby, I just wanted to end it all, I wanted to lose the pain of losing my father, brother, and my dignity. Sitting in my car at a stop sign, I contemplated driving at maximum speed head-on into an abandoned brick building ahead of me. As I put my car in park, I revved up my car by pushing the gas pedal to the floor while still in park. I said to myself, all I have to do is put the car in drive and go full speed ahead into the brick wall and hopefully that would be the end of my life. Then I thought to myself that it would not be fair to my mother nor the rest of my family because they would be burying the last male in the immediate family so close to the deaths of my father and brother. I know my mother would not be able to plan another funeral. Thinking about all of them and how much they needed me, I decided to take my foot off the gas pedal, put my car in drive and went home.

Then one morning, I stopped to listen to the preacher, and he was telling us how God can and will fix all our problems and never give up on God. With all hope lost I turned to God for

help. I remember one of my undergraduate professors telling me when I was making up excuses as to the reason one of my projects did not go as planned. I was blaming everyone else except me. She said I am going to tell you this one time and one time only, “there are only two people in this world you can depend on that is God and yourself.” Looking at that television preacher and remembering the words of my professor I began praying to God for protection and to get me out of this mess I caused. I began reading more self-help religious books such as *Battle Field of the Mind* (1995) by Joyce Meyers, *Get Over It and On With It!: How to Get Up When Life Knocks You Down* (2002) by Michelle McKinney Hammond, and other such books. I began going to church more and participating in Lenten Bible studies. Going to Mass and Bible study gave me the peace and faith I needed to continue living. Although I still had Bobby threatening me and was sending him money, I knew it had to end one day, but when? I remember going to confession on Holy Thursday during Holy Week of 2002, which was interesting because I had not been to confession in years. I confessed to the pastor a condensed version of what was happening to me, and he said something that really stuck. He said to continue praying and after Easter things will get better. Then he prayed for me.

I noticed the call and letters from Bobby had slowed down, and I was getting my hopes up that Bobby would finally leave me alone. However, I received a letter from Bobby saying that he had not been in touch with me because he was in solitary confinement. Therefore, he said that when I came up, I should ask to see Christopher instead of him because people in solitary cannot have visitors. Somehow it was arranged that I was to visit Christopher instead of Bobby. I remember reading the book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963* (1995) with my students in my literature class, and there was one part of the book in which Mrs. Watson said that everyone

has a personal savior, and who would have known that my personal savior was to be Christopher, a prisoner in that same prison.

Christopher was a gay Caucasian who was in prison for murdering his best friend and raping and murdering his best friend's wife. When I met Christopher, he was mild-mannered, very intelligent, and most of all sincere with long brown hair and soft blue eyes. He did not seem like a person that would commit such heinous crimes as rape and murder, however, when talking to Christopher, he said he had two life sentences for the murders he committed. Christopher had an above-average IQ and was bipolar. He had been sexually and physically abused by his older brother and his brother's friends when he was young. Yet Christopher was exceptionally creative, he had a book of poetry published while in prison, and he created things such as miniature doll houses with all the furnishings, and wishing wells made from throw-away material. I believe Christopher would have been tremendously successful if he had not committed those murders and had the right people in his life for support. I visited Christopher about four times at the prison and our conversations were about family, religion, and of course Bobby. I really like Christopher as a person and our conversations were particularly interesting.

I remember that fateful day in which I received a letter from Christopher saying that everything--the threats, the fingerprints Bobby said the authorities had on me--were all lies, and that Bobby was not even gay. This was the beginning of regaining the power of taking my life back. In the letter, Christopher explained that Bobby was taking advantage of my feelings of unworthiness and low self-esteem, and he was using me to get money only. When I went to visit Christopher, he told me everything and the reason he told me everything is that Bobby was bragging to the other inmates about how he had me tied around his finger and smirking that he took all my money and made me go bankrupt. Christopher told me he became very angry at

Bobby because he did not understand how Bobby could take advantage of such a nice person like me. I read a book about prisoners who send letters to unsuspecting people hoping to trick the right person into sending them money and that was Bobby. After hearing this I was relieved and angry at Bobby, but angrier at myself for allowing Bobby to do these cruel things to me, to become his prisoner and take my power. Christopher also gave me the information to have my phone number blocked so I cannot receive any calls from prisoners anywhere, which ended the collect calls from Bobby. I then realized I had the power to end the threats from Bobby all along, but I allowed him to do this to me. I could have ended it anytime with Bobby if I were in the right frame of mind, but I believe I had to go through all of that to realize the power within me.

My final visit with Christopher was light-hearted with barely a mention of Bobby because when Bobby got out of solitary, Christopher said Bobby got in trouble again and was sent back into solitary confinement. It is so unfortunate that he did not get the help he needed earlier in his life because Christopher said his parents were okay with him being gay. Christopher also admitted he was not taking his medication the way he should and if he had been taking his medication, he probably would not have committed those murders. During that last visit, I told Christopher that it is probably best that I never come here again, and he replied that it was the best thing to do because Bobby had given my name and number to other prisoners. Christopher also said he would never write to me again to make sure that Bobby never writes me. Christopher helped me to also regain the power in myself by revealing to me these things about Bobby.

After that last visit with Christopher, I canceled my post office box and told the clerk that if any letters come to the post office box, just return them to the sender. I was getting lots of mail from Bobby at my home, and one time I got three letters in one day from Bobby. I never opened any of Bobby's letters, instead, I took them to the post office and told the clerk to return these to

the sender because that person does not live there anymore. It just happened that all of this situation with Bobby ended about two weeks after Easter, just as the pastor said: “Things will get better after Easter.” Therefore, God sent me Christopher, a gay white man who was my personal savior.

That challenge happened almost 20 years ago and only now can I write or even talk about it. That experience was too difficult, too embarrassing, and demeaning to discuss and at times think about. Until now only two people know about this difficult challenge, which was my former therapist, whom I used to have my sessions with, and my best friend Leroy. Now more people will know about this embarrassing and degrading experience of my life. I ask myself why tell this story now because I started to write of another experience not so intense as this one. However, this experience was part of my life and there is nothing I can do to erase it or forget it. I remember watching an episode of the television talk show *The View* (2019), which aired November 5, 2019, and the guest was Jane Fonda. Fonda talked of the time she visited North Vietnam during the Vietnam War. She admitted she made a big mistake in that experience because she was being followed by the FBI and CIA and that visit almost ruined her career. On the show Jane Fonda said that was a mistake that she could not make go away. She said she had to take ownership of that mistake and learn from it and move on. Steve Harvey said that for every mistake there is a lesson and a blessing when he made that huge mistake at the Miss Universe pageant in 2015 by announcing the wrong contestant as the winner.

I learned that loss cuts both ways because, with the bad, there is something good that comes from it. Therefore, in order to move on to a better life, I had to take ownership of that challenging experience with Bobby, learn from it, and move on to make my life and the lives of others better by telling this story. I feel that by sharing this challenging situation as a SGL male

of color, other SGL males of color will know and understand that they are not alone and can overcome challenges that seem hopeless. Yet, I find it interesting and somewhat chilling that the support I needed to end this mess with Bobby did not come from a group of SGL males of color or even a close friend, it came from a gay white prisoner who happened to be a murderer.

There are several ways that my experience with Bobby impacted my life. First, I became closer to God personally. I love going to Mass every Saturday because it gives me a sense of peace. Although I do not agree with some of the Catholic rules and might disagree with the Homily the pastor gives that Saturday, I am there only to serve God. Second, I learned to be more discerning when it comes to meeting guys especially online and in person. Third, I learned that I needed to have more SGL friends of color for support before situations get out of hand like that with Bobby. Finally, I learned that my experience with Bobby will help me help other SGL males of any color recognize that sometimes the help or support you need can come from someone you least expect.

My favorite nephew is SGL although I prayed he would not be. When he had this little girlfriend whom he brought a Christmas gift for in the 6th grade, I was so glad that he might not be SGL, but that was not to be the case. When he asked me if it was okay to be bi-curious, I told him yes, it is okay, in fact, I told him it was okay to be gay. That was all he needed to hear, that it was okay for him to be gay because he had the support of the two most important people in his life outside his own mother, which happened to be my mother and me. Now it was like he was saying “fuck the world, I am gay and there is nothing wrong with me.” I remember when my nephew told me he was having his first-ever date with a guy. I told him to have a good time, but if this guy asks you to do something that you know is wrong or you know deep in your soul it is something you are uncomfortable doing, then do not do it.

A few weeks later I asked him if he was still seeing that guy, and my nephew told me no, because the guy wanted him to do something he was uncomfortable with and did not want to do. I silently thanked God and thought my nephew could be okay navigating and negotiating his SGL identity. To this day my nephew, who is out, has navigated and negotiated his SGL identity much better than I ever did. Leroy told me the reason for this is that my nephew has the support of someone he admires and looks up to, but most importantly he has the support of someone whom he loves and who loves him in return no matter what. If going through that traumatic experience with Bobby helped my nephew to be a well-adjusted SGL of color, it was well worth it. I must also acknowledge the differences in society that different generations face. My nephew, far more than I, and even more than C.J., lives in a society that offers more role models in the media, including mixed-race gay couples in HIV-medication commercials. There are far more “out” individuals in entertainment and in the local environment than what older generations experienced, and he is less isolated from family and presumably peers because of the more visible presence of SGL males.

The experience with Bobby did bend me but it did not break me. I feel I came out stronger as a SGL male of color. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1888) originally penned with the famous saying, “What doesn’t kill me, makes me stronger,” and I really take that to the heart of being resilient.

Summary

All the subjects felt that being part of two marginalized groups is difficult to navigate, and that it is difficult to find support to help in coping with both identities. The subjects expressed to me that they felt it would be easier if they were white because they would only be

part of one marginalized group and because the white gay community is more active and supportive of their own; and that the white community, in general, is more supportive of gay people than the Black community. C.J. first found college support and became involved in the LGBTQ community during college to cope with his SGL identity. C.J. currently belongs to a group that supports SGL males of African descent. George became involved and attended many of the events in the gay area of Chicago which is predominately white. However, George does not belong to any LGBTQ groups because he feels that both the gay communities, Black and White, only support guys with a certain body type which is a thin or masculine body type. This goes back to George being teased and bullied for being overweight. Like George, Adrian feels that all gay communities are messy, and it is difficult to find support when people know everyone else's business. Adrian stressed that one must know who can be trusted when sharing his SGL identity. Adrian added that is unfair that straight Black men can live their life free of any restrictions, whereas SGL African Americans cannot be their authentic selves. For me trying to live as a SGL male of color was challenging without the proper support that I needed to cope with my identity. Today I do belong to Adodi like C.J., and I have found positive support there. I just wish I had heard about Adodi long before because I more likely would have done things in my life a lot differently, especially after being dumped by the first guy I ever fell in love with. On the other hand, I found it a little strange that none of the subjects mention anything about HIV and AIDS, especially with the Black community having the highest number of cases. I know this is a scary and uncomfortable topic to discuss and being SGL males, we have a higher chance of acquiring this disease if we are not careful. When George said one of the biggest problems facing the gay community regardless of race is body image and body shaming, I want to correct him by saying, "Really, George???" what about HIV and AIDS, what about increased

crime against the LGBTQ community, what about the rise in homelessness for young people thrown out their homes for being gay. However, I held my tongue and did not say anything because all the subjects are entitled to their own opinions, and I am entitled to my own opinions also. In retrospect, it might have been illuminating to ask about their thoughts on HIV and AIDS, as their generational differences might have been highlighted once again.

One thing all the participants can agree upon is that we all faced challenging situations as SGL males of color in which it was difficult finding the support and affirmation needed from various communities. When it came to challenging situations, George, C.J., and I all went through challenging situations that had a profound effect on our lives. However, I think if we would have had the proper support our lives could have been different. Yet through the bad challenges, I believe that George, C.J., and I learned that life does cut both ways: we all had something happen to us that was traumatic, but we survived and managed to make good out of those experiences.

George's challenging situation was when a guy he was dating for six months ended the relationship because he said that George was not gay enough for him. I did not understand this and neither did George when trying to explain it to me. However, this breakup led George to get with a lot of guys for sex to make himself feel good and worthy to be loved. After being with multiple guys, George finally ended up dating a guy who gave him an STD. The new guy George was dating wanted to date someone else and George agreed to the breakup. However, George said the last conversation they had got heated and he called George a slut. Although these were challenging situations for George, the multiple sex partners, the loss of two boyfriends, and catching an STD, George feels that he is happier now that he doing more self-care and loving himself more and he is studying to be a certified life coach to help people in

challenging situations. George told me he hopes to help and support SGL people of color who need help regardless of race or age.

C.J.'s challenging experience is when he came out as being SGL while having Thanksgiving dinner with his family. C.J. said that at first, they did not believe him, then they realize he was telling them the truth and told him they did not want to be bothered with him anymore, which caused C.J. to lose that sense of the family and feeling safe at home. C.J. said it was traumatic to lose the support of family for being SGL, but one thing C.J. had that I did not was the support of people he knew from the university who knew about his SGL identity. Although his relationship with his family changed, he did have people to turn to who helped him through even when he had to sleep couch surfing, as he calls it, in the homes of various people.

I on the other hand had no one who would understand the loss of the first man, or second if you count my third-grade crush, in addition to the loss of my father. Almost a year later I suddenly lost my older brother who was the last father figure in my life while dealing with Bobby. Sometimes I think I might have been able to handle things differently if these situations of loss happened at a different interval. Because of the loss of my first love, right after that the death of my father, right after the situation with Bobby was happening at the same time my brother was killed, I was not in the right frame of mind at all because all those events happened right behind each other. It is like the old sayings, "When it rains, it pours," or "pouring salt into the wound."

All of those events happened within a two-year period and unfortunately, I had to deal with all that by myself because I felt I had no one who could help and be supportive of me. That year was traumatic for me like C.J. said his situation was, because I did not want to live anymore either; there was no one to turn to for help. The difference with C.J. is that he had people he

could talk to and who helped him through that difficult period of becoming estranged from his parents. I felt totally alone in the world like I was the only SGL Black man in the world who was an outcast. Because my esteem was so low from the loss of my first love in addition to losing the two most important men in my life, I turned to any guy who could help me feel better. The guy I found was a prisoner who turned out to be the most hurtful person in my life. I was already feeling bad about the losses in my life then he took advantage of my weakness and took me for almost everything I had including my life. With no one I could turn to without feeling shame, I felt that the only thing I could turn to was the same institution that said people like me were going to hell, religion. I began to pray even more and read more self-help religious books although I did attend church occasionally, I now began to attend church every Sunday and even joined a Bible study group during Lent of that year. During Holy Thursday, a priest told me during confession to continue to pray and that things would get better after Easter, and they did. I believe God brought another prisoner, Christopher, to save me from Bobby; therefore a prisoner saving me from another prisoner. I also became more active in the same group of SGL males of African descent that C.J. belonged to which help me to be more accepting of my SGL identity. I now have friends who identify as SGL and African American, and I have the support I need. When my last boyfriend broke up with me, although it did hurt me badly, I had the support of people I could confide in to help me through that situation; yet I cannot forget that sometimes the support I need can come from the most unexpected person.

Therefore, by researching and writing this dissertation focusing on the varied experiences of being a Black SGL male of color, I learned that out of bad experiences, some good things can happen if we allow them. That which does not kill me makes me stronger and I do feel that now I am stronger than I was in the past as a SGL male of color.

C. Emergent Themes

It is important to note that the findings were presented in confidence leaving out identifiable information to safeguard the anonymity of the participants, except for the author. This was necessary as the shared stories were vital for achieving the goals of this study. Five themes were generated for the analysis were (1) isolation and variable change over time, (2) loss, (3) generational differences, (4) paradoxes, and (5) growth and learning to navigate identities.

The theme of isolation overtime was one of the first to emerge. All the participants felt isolated as SGL males of color because they felt that they were wrong because of the sexual norms that were communicated by family members and by institutions such as school and the church. The participants could not be their authentic selves and had to suffer that part of their identity in isolation. However, isolation was seen more in the school settings, where the participants mainly kept to themselves until the latter years of high school or college.

Loss is another major theme. Loss came in many varieties from the loss of family as with C.J. who lost his family when he came out, later losing his father in death, and with George whose mother was murdered. Then there is the triple loss for the author who lost his father and brother within almost one year of each other and the loss of his mother in 2016. Loss came in relationships with both George and the author losing boyfriends and the author's recent loss of his boyfriend. Loss does not have to be the loss of a human; loss can be the loss of dignity or self-esteem, which the participants experienced.

A related theme is self-preservation during loss that was SGL-related. There were times in the lives of the participants where an event was so unbearable that the thoughts of suicide

became an option, for example, when C.J. became estranged from his family, or Bobby's constant threats to the author. However, both C.J. and the author held on and survived, in both cases through support of SGL peers.

Generational differences are another theme that emerged. C.J., being the youngest, was the most open and outspoken about his sexuality, perhaps because being gay is more accepted in this present age with the help of a plethora of gay themed shows and gay celebrities in the media. This was something that was unheard of and not accepted when I was growing up, which made both Adrian and me more closeted because of the lack of gay people being role models in the media. With the advancement of medicine, HIV/AIDS is not considered a death sentence now and people are living longer as opposed to when Adrian and the author were younger.

The theme of paradox was emergent in the findings. There is the paradox of relying on hostile institutions as a source of resiliency in the face of isolation because the participants faced isolation when growing up especially during elementary, middle, and high school. Both family and school were repressive, for example but participants were able to persevere in part by turning their attention to specific parts of school, such as their studies or joining sport teams. There is the paradox of relationships with important people in the participants for example family members. The participants still loved and cared about their family members and their relationship with them although they treated them badly because of their sexual orientation.

There is also a paradox when it comes to faith and religion, which were supported by family culture. Organized religion rejects homosexuality as a sin, yet all the participants, even the ones that do not attend church regularly, believe in and have a spiritual connection to God.

The author is the only study participant to attend church regularly today, drawing strength from that community.

There is also the theme of continued growth for the participants of learning to navigate and negotiate their identities over time. Both Adrian and the author are still learning to fully accept their SGL-identities whereas C.J. and George are fully accepting of their SGL identity. All the participants still have an issue with body image and being overweight. C.J. and George seems to be dealing with the body issues better than Adrian and the author because both C.J. and George do not mind having their photos taken half clothed whereas Adrian and I would not consider doing that.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

A. Introduction and Research Question

The overall main research question of this study is: How do SGL males of color navigate and negotiate their identities over time? While the terms “navigate” and “negotiate” might seem redundant, they connote different meanings. “Navigation” is a kind of finding one’s way, even steering one’s way, which implies agency only on the part of the navigator. “Negotiation” implies more than a single agent, at least two or more agents in interaction with one another. The subjects of this study both navigated and negotiated their own developmental paths.

Since the participants’ life experiences span a wide range of years, I used sub-questions to help organize the data from the participants’ early years to the present. Different aspects of their lives, at different times, reveal how these SGL males of color have navigated and negotiated their identities over time. I have used my own experiences as a SGL male of color, as well as relevant research literature, to make sense of and analyze their responses.

B. Using Multi-Perspectival Frameworks

I will present how the theoretical frameworks of queer theory, critical race theory, quare theory, and intersectional to the interpretation of my findings of the multi-perspectival framework (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). First, I will focus on how their theoretical frameworks influenced the choice of questions I used in my study, then how these frameworks helped with the interpreting the findings. In using queer theory, I was looking through the eyes of a SGL person when forming the questions that guided my study, which included the following: “Were

there anyone during your elementary school years that helped you understand your sexual identity of being SGL?” “Were you part of any LGBTQ groups at your high school?” and “What did you know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community, and about any role models from the media when growing up?”

For critical race theory I formed questions related to the race of the participants which were the following: “What was your understanding of being a Black male when growing up?” “Were there any SGL students of color at the school where you attended?” and “What was a challenging situation you faced based on your race and/or sexuality?”

In using quare theory I formed the questions through the lens of a Black SGL male, including the following: “In maturing, what was learned about being SGL males of color?” “As a SGL male of color, what were you thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time?” and “How do SGL males of color manage to live as outcasts in a White hetero-centric society, a White gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society?”

Intersectionality influenced my thinking when I was constructing questions like, “How do SGL males of color navigate and negotiate and make sense of their multiple identities based on their relationship with their families? What role do religion and religious affiliation play on the identity of SGL males of color?” and “Could you describe the moment when you recognize that you were a SGL male of color?”

From the participants’ responses, I showed how the theoretical frames informed my findings and conclusions. Queer theory drew my attention to the participants realization that they were SGL at a young age. Adrian experienced being SGL when he had a crush on one of his third-grade classmates and how he fantasized about that student as he refers to it in his third-grade way. I realized that I was SGL in a way that was very similar to Adrian because my

realization happened when I was in the third grade when I had a crush on a boy in my class who always carried my books on the way home from school. The sadness I felt when he moved away was more than just feeling of a friend moving away; it was much more, and he was someone whom I also fantasized about in my eight-year-old way.

In using quare theory, my findings and analysis are based on quare social life that requires an appreciation, understanding and critique of the Black culture, including homophobia, and an acknowledgment of different lived realities in culture-specific communities that make room for and punish acts and performances perceived to be peculiar, inappropriate or disgusting (Boylorn & Adams, 2016). All the participants, including myself, responded that homosexuality was unacceptable in their families. C.J. stated being SGL was a traumatic hurdle he had to deal with in his family because it was pounded in his head that homosexuality is a sin against God. In C.J.'s household it was constantly reinforced that being gay was a sin worse than being a rapist or murder. In my own growing up, being SGL was difficult to navigate and negotiate because the inappositeness of being SGL was being impressed on me with my mother always saying that there has never been a sissy boy in the family and I was not going to be the first, and constantly telling me that I needed a girlfriend. When it came to discussing the gay Black and gay White communities, George stated that the gay White community was more active in volunteering for various causes as opposed to the gay Black community.

Quare theory incorporates intersectionality and being a good quare often means engaging in quare acts (Boylorn & Adams, 2016). In its advocacy for justice, highlighting the differences between SGL male of color vs. Whites, my attention was drawn to George, who is a life coach with the emphasis of counseling SGL males of color. C.J. and I are both members of Adodi which is an organization that offers affirming experiences and loving gatherings to foster

emotional, physical and spiritual well-being for SGL males of African descent. In my dissertation which tells of the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of the participants navigating and negotiating our identities over time, I advocated and highlighted the differences and understanding of our race and sexuality.

Critical race theory informed my interpretation of the findings by focusing my attention on the central role that race and racism played in the participants' experiences. In the findings, I stated that the year after Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated, my father made us stay home on Dr. King's birthday even before it was declared a state or national holiday. C.J. credits his seventh-grade social studies teacher for the lessons she taught of being proud of the skin that you are in and making sure that no one tells you Black is ugly. The participants and I felt that based on race, gay White males seem to have it easier than SGL Black males because gay White males are shown more as being accept than gay Black males in the mainstream media. For example, *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Schitt's Creek*, and *General Hospital* make it look more acceptable to be White and gay than Black and gay because of the extreme imbalance of representation. Although there are some SGL Black males in mainstream media, it does not equal to the amount of gay White males in mainstream media. In addition, with the lack of media representation of SGL males of color in secure romantic relationships with other SGL males of color, it wasn't until the late 1990s, when I was in my mid-30s, that I learned that Black SGL males have been and can be in romantic relationships with each other and not just with gay White males which lead to the theoretical framing of epistemic injustice.

The scholarship on epistemic injustice has drawn my attention to my experience of not knowing that Black SGL males dated and can be in romantic relationships with other Black SGL males. The imbalance of available knowledge constituted an unfairness, an injustice in the

opportunity to know. When going to the bookstores in the mid to late 1990's I was hoping to find a romantic novel in which the main characters were Black and SGL. There were none at that time except one book I found in which the main character was a Black and SGL, but this character was only attracted to gay White males. This furthered the notion that if I wanted to be in a loving romantic relationship with a man, it had to be with a gay White male. As previously mentioned, when I saw a Black SGL character in a romantic loving relationship it was mostly with a gay White character, which solidified this notion. Representation matters in epistemic injustice.

When applying hermeneutic injustice scholarship to my experience, it took me over forty years to make sense of, express, and accept my SGL identity. One of the participants, Adrian, and I feel that we will never be able to fully express and live our SGL identity, being raised in an environment and generation where being gay was not only accepted but also not understood. My inability to make sense of my world extended back to childhood. I was totally confused and severely frightened when my mother spanked me and threatened to have my father skin me alive if she ever found out I was doing anything related to the act of homosexuality. I did not understand what my friend and I did, which was hugging with our pants down, was wrong nor was it explained to me why it was wrong and why she did not want me to be SGL, all I knew at such a young age was that it would lead to a severe form of punishment. The participants C.J. and George felt that something was wrong with them because they were SGL and it was told to them, especially C.J. through his pastor father, that homosexuality was a sin and worst than rape or murder. Today, both C.J. and George realize that there is nothing wrong nor sinful of being SGL. But our collective inability to make sense of our own experiences—an inability that

extended over many years—was not due to our own limitations as persons, but to a culture that imposed a form of hermeneutic injustice.

In writing this dissertation, it is my hope that when read by educators, they realize they have a responsibility not just to reflect on the negative biases of the wider culture, but the more equity-focus and liberating messages from the wider culture. For example, at a school where I once taught the policy for school dances was that it was okay for boys and girls to dance together, it was okay for two girls to dance together, but it was forbidden for two boys to dance together. Any male student at that school would think that being SGL was wrong because of that policy. Unfortunately, I never questioned this policy in fear of outing myself. Another example: I noticed a student in my sixth-grade computer class who never spoke a word in my class nor asked for help with any projects given in class. Yet, what made this student unique is that this student never smiled or laughed even when I said something funny; he had a melancholy look on his face every day. I had him the next year in seventh grade and then in eighth grade. For the three years I had this student, he never talked nor smiled. When I asked his homeroom teacher about him, she told me that the father had the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) remove the mother from the home when he was in the sixth grade because she was extremely abusive to him, when she found out he was gay. This student loved and missed his mother very much although she was abusive to him. I took umbrage when the homeroom teacher sort of smiled and said that was a wild situation. When I inquired what type of help or support this student was receiving, she said that he talked to someone, but I found out it was not the same help other students who suffered abuse would be receiving. Unfortunately, I did not push this matter any further for the fear of outing myself again, therefore I tried to help this student the best I could without outing myself by offering to help him with projects, and not taking off

points when his project was turned in late. It still bothers me that I did not take a more proactive effort to help this student, like speaking to the school's counselor, social worker, or psychologist about that issue so he could have gotten the proper help he needed.

After that, I never wanted any of my students to feel unsupported because of their sexual orientation and if a student was SLG, I would support them the best I could. This might have happened when I gave one of my computer classes a project in which they had to design a concept web of themselves telling "who" they are and "what" they are. I told the students that no one would see their project except me, so it was okay to be open with their description. One student asked what if someone put they were bi-, as in bisexual, and I said it is ok if someone put they were bisexual and I went on to say it was okay to be gay and there is nothing wrong with that and you should be proud of who you are regardless. After I said that, the entire class dynamics changed with my relationship with those students because they seemed better behaved, they never argued nor complained when I gave a project or assignments, and no one made lower than a B+ in that class. It was like our relationship was more than just the average teacher/student relationship, it was much more because I was an adult they felt they could trust outside of their families by allowing them to be their authentic selves without fear of being rejected or any other backlash. That class was my best and favorite class of all the years I taught at that school. They even chipped in and treated me to lunch for their Christmas party and lunch for my birthday. It was a good and liberating feeling, knowing I was able to be supportive of anyone's identity without fear of being outed.

Not only was it liberating to support students who might be SGL in an educational setting without backlash, it was just as liberating using multi-perspectival frameworks in writing about myself and interviewing the participants in my dissertation. I am being open about an identity

that I had hidden practically my entire life, that I am a SGL male. When I first entered the doctoral studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago, no one could have told me that this would be the place that would allow me to be my full authentic self by accepting my SGL identity. I tried writing two dissertation proposals that totally failed because I realized that I was not passionate about those topics. In one class at UIC, it was my turn to discuss my research topic and one student said that I did not sound passionate about my topic and the professor somewhat agreed. Although I felt hurt and like a failure, I realized that they were right. I was not as passionate about those topics as other students in that class were about their research topics. As mentioned previously it was the Social Foundations of Education class with Dr. Steven Tozer that helped to me find a topic that I would be passionate about which is navigating and negotiating the identities and experiences of SGL males of color over time because now I would have to out myself as being SGL because in using the autoethnography method, I would be one of the participants in this study. I realized I was passionate about this topic because I wanted to know more about various research on SGL males of color, and when researching and finding out more about SGL males of color, I discovered I was not alone in hiding my SGL identity in fear from family and society in general. When I wrote the first vignette in which I out myself as being SGL in Dr. Tozer's class, it was the first time I felt secure about my SGL identity outside of Adodi meetings. It made me want to know more about other SGL males of colors and the issues with their SGL identity which led me researching how SGL males of color navigate and negotiate their identities and experiences over time.

When I interviewed the participants for the study, I discovered that they were comfortable and open with sharing their life histories with me, and much of what they shared was information they had never told anyone except me. C.J. was the most open about his

experiences, being the youngest of the participants and coming from a generation where homosexuality is more accepted than the generation in which the other two participants and I came. C.J. had no issues about sharing the challenges he faced being a SGL male of color as well as the triumphs and being proud of who he is, especially being SGL. I could tell with the participants it was liberating for them, especially C.J., that made me feel liberated also. There are things that I revealed about myself that only two people knew which was my best friend Leroy and my therapist. Some of the experiences I shared, especially the challenges with Bobby, I thought I would take to my grave because they were buried so deep within me, hoping to forget them. However, seeing how brave C.J. and the other participants were in sharing their challenges and the expression of relief they told me after the interview, I felt it was only right that I do the same thing because if they were brave enough to share their most intimated and challenging experiences, I should do the same.

When I wrote about my experience being extorted by Bobby, which was the most challenging experience in my life, Dr. Tozer thought it was sort of long, and I agreed it was very long vignette. However, it was important to me to leave that vignette in my dissertation because sharing how I lived through that horrendous experience with Bobby made me a stronger and better person, because sharing that experience gave me a sense of liberation. Now I was being fully open with my SGL identity with the worst of the challenges and triumphs that would come with it.

C. Summary of Findings from Sub Questions

How do SGL males of color begin to discover their identities in the context of their relationship with their families?

For all the participants, including me, the realization of being SGL occurred at an early age, between the ages of 8 to 10, and in a school setting. This is consistent with what we would expect from the literature. According to a Pew Research Study, “A Study of LGBT Americans” (2013), 48% of the gay males surveyed said they realized they were gay between the ages of 10-14 and 38% of the gay males surveyed said they were under 10 when they realized they were gay (p.48). George and CJ had crushes on their male teachers, whereas Adrian and I had a crush on a classmate in our respective third-grade classes. We all expressed feelings in some way with our crushes, but we knew it was a feeling different from what we felt for other peers or teachers. We also knew from our parents’ reactions that the realization of our recognizing our SGL identity would come with some backlash and conflict being both African American and SGL. We knew that this identity or behavior was wrong, but we, especially Adrian and I, were too young to understand why this was wrong because no one in our families—or anyone else—explained it to us. As described, it was the adults’ negative reactions towards homosexuality or gay people through which we realized that being SGL was wrong. I was able to recognize that being SGL was wrong by my mother’s wanting to have my father take me in the garage and skin me alive. In contrast, my older brother once told me when he was little that my mother caught him and a little girl with their pants down hugging. When asked if he got in trouble, he said that mother sort of laughed and told him not to do that again outside, because you don’t want the neighbors to see you. Also, there was the constant reminder from organized religion on religious television stations that homosexuality was a sin. For Adrian, it was by being told in the Christian schools he attended, and his grandmother using derogatory language, that he learned that his same-gender-identity was wrong.

Although we recognized our SGL identity, it was challenging for the participants and myself to fully embrace and disclose our identity due to the fear of backlash and rejection from our families, which we later understood could lead to the dissolution of the family relationship (Recek & and Bosley-Smith (2021).

The participants experienced awkward and challenging experiences as same-gender-males of color from early ages to the present especially when it came to issues with being overweight. All the participants expressed that the most awkward experience growing up being SGL was being overweight, which is a challenge that the participants still face today. Brewster, Riddhi, DeBlaere, Breslow, & Eklund (2016) state that sexuality-minority males internalize standards of attractiveness from traditional masculine body ideals of being slim and muscular. This pressure may increase body dissatisfaction and behaviors associated with eating disorders. It was especially difficult being SGL and overweight because our weight did not fit the stereotypical gay image; it drove a wedge between us and the gay community that could have been our greatest source of support. From an intersectionality perspective (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1989), the readily visible feature of being overweight was something devalued by the Black, White, and gay communities. This intensified the sense of isolation that each of us already felt as a result of our awareness that our SGL nature was frowned upon by family and peers. Although my parents did not approve my SGL identity, they did provide for me and my siblings the best they could and I can say, we did have more than other families and even owned a second house in Michigan. My family was, paradoxically, a source of repression and a source of strength and support because I know that my parents loved me but disapproved of my sexual identity.

What did research participants know about the gay community, about gay organizations in the community and about any role models from the media when growing up?

Unlike CJ, the youngest of the study participants, George, Adrian, and I had no experience nor knowledge of any LGBTQ groups in the community or the high schools. CJ said there were no LGBTQ organizations in the suburb where he was raised, but there were LGBTQ organizations in the high schools he attended. However, he did not associate with them because CJ said he did not want to be outed and just kept to himself.

The absence of SGL organizations in the Black community and lack of role models in the media was an issue with the participants and me when growing up. When I was growing up, for example, there were no SGL groups in the community where I was raised. In contrast to the much-younger CJ's experience, there definitely were no organizations of support for gay students in the high school I attended. During my teens and young adult years, it seemed most of the gay people who were living their gay identity were White. I felt if I were White or at least lived in a White community, it would have been a bit easier because the White community overall seemed more accepting of the gay community than the Black community. The closest to a SGL community for males of color was the Rialto Bar. The Rialto closed in 1996 but during its peak, the Rialto was the place for adult SGL males of color to go to have a sense of community which was reiterated at a recent lecture about the Rialto titled *Take My Picture* (2023).

Unfortunately, I never heard of the Rialto during its peak in my younger days because I had never been a person who liked attending bars; I do not drink alcohol. However, if I did know about it, I probably would not have gone unless I went with someone, and at the time the Rialto was opened I did not have any SGL friends. The participants never heard of the Rialto because it was closed by the time they became adults, C.J. was not born when the Rialto closed. Again, the

lack of organized supports and role models contributed to the sense of isolation that each of us already felt. At times, I felt like I was the only SGL male of color in the world because there were not role models to look-up too nor were there any organization in the community or schools I attended. Through the grace of God, I manage to be resilient until I was able to find an organization like Adodi which supported SGL males of African descent.

How does the educational experience, including teacher and peer interaction, affect the identity of SGL males of color?

All the participants including myself tended to keep to ourselves during middle and high school. However, out of all the participants, C.J. seemed to have the most experience having SGL classmates he could talk to and confide in. Like Adrian and George, throughout my educational experience, I never found support or friends who were SGL, so I mainly kept to myself until my junior and senior years of high school. I did have great support from teachers academically, but like Adrian and George, I still kept my SGL identity to myself. Although I participated in various clubs and activities and had good grades, I kept my SGL identity hidden. I did have an African America SGL friend during my sophomore year of high school, but he died before we were able to have any discussion of our SGL identity. I still wonder how my life would have been different if we had gotten to the point of talking about our SGL identity.

Even as a teacher of middle school students and having some SGL students, I have suppressed my SGL identity and did not take full advantage of the teachable moments to help students understand that degrading anyone based on their sexual identity was wrong. Alexander (2006) states that teaching students that degrading someone based on their sexual orientation would be a teachable moment to make students understand that those remarks are unacceptable. High school would have been difficult if I did not love learning and books. Even though I had a

few close acquaintances, I did not have any SGL friends, except for Todd who passed away early in our friendship. Thank God I made good grades and loved books and learning, which were my saving graces. I would spend my study periods and lunch periods in the school's library everyday throughout my high school career and I eventually became a library aide working in the library my junior and senior years. The school experience, a source of repression, isolation, and pain, eventually provided a pathway to achievement that brought me to the liberating experience of this dissertation research.

What role does religion and religious affiliation play in the identity of SGL males of color?

In reviewing the responses, all subjects, including myself, were raised in Christian-denomination churches. In the Black community going to church was as mandatory as going to school. However, being SGL was in direct conflict with the teachings of churches in the Black community, which caused the subjects and me to be even more guarded about our SGL identity. The participants and I all believe in God and are Christians, although we feel oppressed by the church because homosexuality is not accepted in the church, especially the Black church. Black Americans in churches are still less approving and constantly speak out against homosexuality as a sin against God more than their White counterparts (Lewis, 2003). Although organized religion rejects homosexuality, the church is still a place where gay people attend to pray, find strength, and worship a God who loves all despite sexual orientation (Griffiths, 2017).

Currently, C.J. has self-esteem issues and George stopped going to church because of their conflict with the church's rejection of homosexuality and their sexual identity. If one went to a Christian school that taught being gay is an abomination to God, the sins of being gay and going to hell for being gay could cause a huge conflict and a bigger suppression of a person's SGL identity, as it did with Adrian. Of all the participants, I am the only one who still attends church

on a regular basis. Although I am Catholic and SGL, and gays have been refused communion at various churches, I still attend Mass and receive communion. One would ask why I would continue to be in and support an institution that has always been against homosexuality. I feel the same way Rev. Kevin Taylor does in his article in *Swerv Magazine* (2023) because at Mass, I feel a deeper closeness to Christ. It is about my faith in God and my faith in Christ that leads me to worship. Like family and peers, the Church can contribute to a SGL male's sense of isolation and low self-worth, but like family and peers, the Church can be a source of comfort and resilience. I believe that those who go to church or believe in God has some sort of personal relationship with God, and my personal relationship with God might not be the same personal relationship as someone else. It is my personal relationship with God that gives me the faith to be strong in times of difficulty.

As SGL males of color, what were they thinking and learning about when navigating multiple identities over time?

As the participants and I grew and matured, we began to learn more about being SGL, about the gay community, and about SGL people in popular media. Although there were difficult times with little or no community or media support, C.J. and George came to feel proud to be a SGL male of color living their authentic selves. However, Adrian and I, the two oldest members of the group, felt that we had not navigated our SGL identity as well as C.J. and George because we still feel that we are not living our authentic selves. Adrian learned he will never be able to be 100 percent comfortable being a same-gender-male of color because he has been conditioned to be closeted because of his relationship with his family, yet he admires and is somewhat envious of people who are comfortable being their authentic self because he knows he will never get to that point of living his authentic self.

I felt that I was the most naïve of all the participants because I actually thought that SGL Blacks did not date or have romantic relationships. I thought they were all on the down low like me. I thought in order to be in a loving relationship with a man, it had to be with a White man because that is all I saw in loving relationships. According to Goings, (2016), this reflected a deficit perspective of Black men as a monolithic group unable to freely love whoever they want. I did not know Black men could and do have loving relationships until I read the book *B-Boyz Blues* (1994) which showed SGL Black males in loving relationships and regular friendships. This led to my seeing certain movies and television shows such as *Noah's Arc* (2005) and *The Skinny* (2012) that showed me that SGL males of color can and do have long-lasting loving friendships and relationships. I have come a very long way from being extremely closeted and naïve. By researching and writing this dissertation about different journeys of being a SGL male of color, I am slowly beginning to accept my authentic self, which is openly living my SGL identity. However, I feel the ultimate acceptance is the experience of Black queer joy which is openly living life as a Black SGL male and successfully managing any animosities that might come with being a SGL male (Oliver, 2022).

How do same-gender-loving males of color manage to live as outcasts in a White hetero-centric society, a White gay society, and a Black hetero-centric society?

The participants and I agree that being part of two marginalized groups is extremely difficult to navigate, but we somehow manage to make it work and make a life for ourselves without adequate support from the White, the gay White, and the Black communities. As Adrian frequently says in his interview, we are guarding our identity, and we must know when to keep guarded or hidden and when there is a space that is safe to express our identity. However, finding a place for SGL males of color to experience support, where they can express themselves, is

challenging. The subjects expressed to me that they felt it would be easier if they were White because they would only be part of one marginalized group and because of their view that the White gay community, in general, is more active and supportive of gay people than the Black community.

The lack of support from the Black community presented another issue of not only navigating my SGL identity but also navigating my SGL identity through the HIV and AIDS crisis. AIDS was known as the gay men's disease, and the people who were dying from this horrendous disease were mainly White, or so I thought because the only people the media showed who were dying from AIDS were gay White men. This might have led some SGL males of color to believe that since only gay White men were getting this disease, they could stay away from gay White men and avoid the disease; yet of course, they were wrong. According to the Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, Black Americans are the most affected by HIV. Forty years after the AIDS outbreak, CDC states that in 2021 African Americans accounted for 42 percent of all new HIV cases (2023).

According to Fields, Morgan, & Sanders (2016), rather than risking that connection of community, SGL males of color whose dominant identity is their racial identity may separate from their sexual identity. That is what I did my entire life which led me to the shameful and degrading extortion interaction with the convicted prisoner Bobby. I did not have any connection with the gay community regardless of color, and I did not feel comfortable enough to share my SGL identity with the Black community, fearing the loss of the community I had already established. That humiliating and demeaning experience with Bobby cost me a lot financially, mentally, and emotionally to the point of wanting to commit suicide. With the help of the least likely person, a gay White double murderer, and my faith in God, I made it through that

tremulous and degrading episode of my life. I believe if I had the support of all my communities regardless of race or sexual orientation and was comfortable enough to tell them what Bobby wanted me to do, that experience would not have happened; or if it did happen, it would not have been as costly as it was. But my isolation from those communities cost me dearly. Sometimes I ponder how I survived from childhood to the present being part of two marginalized groups, three if I count my “weight problem.” One way I know is that I kept my SGL identity hidden which was extremely uncomfortable growing up. I always imagined what life would be like for me being independent and taking care of myself and doing what I wanted to do and being who I wanted to be without having to answer to anyone, like Bugs Bunny and Pippi Longstocking. I believe it was that dream of being independent and living on my own that helped to survive to where I can experience being an independent SGL male of color.

D. Themes from Findings

1. Isolation

The theme of isolation over time appears in multiple instances of the lives of the participants. First, the participants felt isolation within (and from) their families due to family judgments about sexual orientation. The participants had had no one to talk to about this when growing up or to help them to understand their attraction to the same sex. The only thing that was told to the participants is that homosexuality is wrong. They had to keep this part of themselves hidden and could not go to anyone in their family for help which caused the participants to try and figure out their sexual orientation on their own. Not only did the participants suffer isolation within their families, but they also suffered isolation in their school setting. Because there were no brave spaces for the participants to express their SGL, the participants stated that they mainly kept to themselves during their middle and especially high

school years. C.J. was the only participant who attended a high school that had a Gay/Straight Alliance organization; however, this was not a brave space for C.J. because he feared that he would out himself. Some of C.J.'s isolation was therefore self-imposed, as he made a choice. Gay/Straight Alliance organizations were not in the schools when George, Adrian, and the researcher attended middle and high school, but later in their lives, when the three of us older men had opportunities to affiliate with SGL groups, we did not always take advantage—again imposing additional isolation on ourselves rather than be outed to communities that might be hostile.

The sense of isolation caused the participants to make mistakes in their adult lives: for example, George thinking that being gay meant sex with men all the time; Adrian never being able to fully accept his SGL identity; and the author's being extorted by Bobby.

2. *Loss*

Loss is also one of the biggest themes that emerged from the findings. Loss came in a variety of ways for the participants. First, loss came in relationships with family and other people. For example, C.J. was very close to his parents and siblings and that close relationship came to an end when C.J. came out to his family on Thanksgiving and they refused to accept his SGL identity. From that day on C.J. refused to go home unless it was completely necessary. C.J.'s relationship has never been the same as it once was. C.J. reported that the relationship with his family is getting better although still strained.

George, CJ, and I had losses with relationships with boyfriends. George contracted an STD because he became promiscuous random guys after a bad break up a boyfriend who was mentally and emotionally abusive to him. I did what George did after the loss of my of first boyfriend when he broke up with me. Both George and I were looking for a love to fill the void

that we longed for. Instead of being promiscuous I chose anybody regardless of who they were to fill that void and that is why I had that nightmare of an experience with Bobby, who was definitely not my type. That experience with Bobby caused other losses: financial loss because I had to file for bankruptcy, but most importantly I allowed him to take my pride and dignity.

The loss of family in death, which everyone experiences, was also compounded with the dynamic of rejection and isolation from family due to conflicts over gender-loving identity. C.J. felt the pain of losing his father, who did not approve of CJ's sexual identity. George experienced the loss of his murdered mother, although she eventually accepted his SGL identity. I, the author, lost both my father and older brother within a year of each other and then there was the loss of my mother fifteen years after the death of my brother. The one thing that bothers me about the death of my parents is that I was or never will be my authentic self with them like I am with my favorite nephew—clearly a SGL related loss that can never be recovered. Another loss in my life was not a family member, but the loss of a friend who I felt would have been my confidant because he was SGL also. Although my friendship with Todd was short due to his premature death, having someone in my life who was like me made my days at school less lonely and isolated. And since starting this dissertation, I lost my boyfriend to death by illness. This experience was itself gendered: I was not allowed to enter his apartment to confirm my suspicions of his death because as a male lover, my status as “family” was not recognized.

3. *Generational Differences*

The theme of generational differences emerged when reflecting on the experiences of the participants. As the eldest of the participants, Adrian and I are not as open as C.J. and George and we are not satisfied in navigating and negotiating our SGL identity. We both wish we could be more open with our identities, but as Adrian states so well, it is fear that keeps us from

enjoying the experience of Black queer joy that C.J. and George are experiencing (Oliver, 2022). Adrian stated that he is guarded with his SGL identity and compared sharing his identity to playing with a deck of cards in that you must know when, where, and with whom to share your hand. Although I am not fully out, like Adrian I feel I will never fully be comfortable with my SGL identity because of fear.

C.J. told me recently that he joined a SGL group started by men of color called Onyx. Onyx is a social organization formed by men of color to address specific issues and project positive aspects of the gay leather lifestyle. C.J. suggested that I go to the Onyx website to view their various events. At many of these events, there are pictures of C.J. at times partially dressed with the other members of Onyx. These photos of C.J. looked like he was having the time of his life. The various smiles on his face were sheer joy without fear of embarrassment or backlash and being with a group of people who accepted him as he is to live his full authentic self. If one could put a picture to Black queer joy, it would be images of C.J. at those Onyx events.

George is not a member of Onyx, but he loves to show his body in public. George participates in the big pride events in Chicago wearing either just a thong or a jockstrap. George shared some photos with me of himself dressed that way at the various pride events. He likes telling me how people want to take photos of him at these events and was sort of bragging about how his photos were going to be all over the Internet. However, the smile that George had on his photo was like that of C. J.'s photo. Having our photos taken half-clothed is something that Adrian and I would never do; however, this goes much further than just being photographed half-naked. Both C.J. and George are not afraid to be their authentic self and fully enjoying Black queer joy. They are experiencing the joy of fully being their authentic selves and could care less who sees them. Both C.J. and George appear to be able to handle any opposition, issues, or

troubles that might arise. Despite how much we want to be our authentic selves and experience the Black queer joy that C.J. and George are experiencing, because of the times we grew up and lived in, the experience of Black queer joy is elusive to Adrian and me.

This is not to say that nobody from our older generations experiences Black queer joy; it is simply to state that cultural conditions can support or discourage it and that cultural conditions change over time. On the following page, I include a timeline that demonstrates some of the cultural changes that have made it easier for C.J., the youngest of the participants, to experience Black queer joy as someone who was born in the late 1990s—as opposed to my experiences, starting with my birth in the early 1960s. Significant cultural change with consequences for SGL Black males took place in those three decades. Some of the “turning points” in that cultural change are illustrated in the timeline on the following page. Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly still members of C.J.’s generation who are still closeted out of fear of repression. The culture still has a long way to go, despite those turning points.

Figure 5.1 provides evidence of change in the nation’s culture with respect to SGL individuals and the SGL community. Some changes are in the legal realm, others in the media, and some in group-organized activities. The purpose of this very selective timeline is not to claim any causality with respect to the study participants’ behaviors and choices. However, by mapping basic milestones of the participants’ school experiences against such events in recent SGL history, the figure illustrates differences in the national culture and climate as the participants matured across four different decades. For example, the early-2000s culture in which the youngest study participant, C.J., began to realize his own sexuality in elementary school was a different national climate—post-Stonewall, post-initiation of Gay Pride Week, post-legalization of same-sex marriage in Massachusetts and other states, post- *Will & Grace*—than

the national climate in which the author entered 3rd grade or even college. By the time the first Big Boy Pride Parade celebrated overweight SGL Black males in New Orleans in 2011, the author had already graduated college and was still closeted, while CJ had yet to enter high school, where he would encounter an LGBTQ support group and would soon thereafter come out while still in college. Figure 5.1 illustrates that C.J. came out to a different cultural landscape than what the author knew when he was in college. The other participants experienced school and society in the decades in between.

While the primary source for this timeline is Wikipedia, not the standard for scholarly resources, much of the data are taken from a credible primary source: evidence presented in influential federal legislation, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 2009.

Figure 5.1: An Incomplete, Subjective, and Illustrative Timeline of Recent Events in SGL History as it Compares to Key Stages of the Study Participants’ Trajectories in School

Recent Milestones in LGBTQ history	School milestones: elementary, secondary, college			
	C.J.	George	Adrian	Author
1960s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1961 Illinois decriminalizes same-sex sexual activity 1964: release of first US film to use the word "homosexual"—<i>The Best Man</i>. 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City draw national attention to repression of LGBTQ community 				Born 1962
1970s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1970: First Gay pride Week 1970: Release of influential <i>The Boys in the Band</i>, one of the first US films to focus on gay characters 1973: The American Psychiatric Association declassifies homosexuality as a mental disorder. 1978 Rainbow Flag created 				Enters 3 rd grade 1970
1980s <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1983: Gerry Studds becomes first openly gay member of US Congress 1987: Homosexuality declared not a mental disorder 1987: ACT UP raises AIDS awareness 		Born 1986	Born 1980; enters 3 rd grade 1988	Graduates HS 1980; Graduates college 1985

<p>1990s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1993: President Clinton signs “don’t ask, don’t tell” act, enabling LGBTQ people to serve in military if closeted, not “out” 1998: U.S. Executive Order prohibits employment discrimination based on sexual orientation By decade’s end, sit-coms such as <i>Ellen</i> and <i>Will & Grace</i> depict LGBTQ couples in prime-time TV 	Born 1998	Enters 3 rd grade 1994	Graduates HS 1998	
<p>2000s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2003: U.S. Supreme Court strikes down laws in all states making same-sex sexual activity illegal 2004: Massachusetts is first state to legalize same-sex marriage; many other states follow suit in the decade 2009: <i>Modern Family</i> becomes another prime-time television show portraying a gay couple 	Enters 3 rd grade 2006	Graduates HS 2004; graduates college 2008	Graduates college 2002	
<p>2010s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2011: First Big Boy Pride Parade celebrates SGL Black males who are overweight 2011: Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy is no longer enforced 2015: Same-sex marriages legalized by Supreme Court in all 50 states Moonlight becomes first LGBT-centered film to win Academy Award for Best Picture 	Graduates HS 2016			
<p>2020s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2020: Supreme Court rules that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited employment discrimination against LGBTQ people, 2021: Pete Buttigieg becomes first openly gay person approved by Senate to a U.S. Cabinet position The 2020s anti-LGBT movement in the United States is an 	Graduates college 2020			

<p>ongoing movement from <u>social conservatives</u> against <u>LGBT people</u>. It has included <u>legislative</u> proposals and passage of more than one hundred laws on gendered bathroom use, bans on gender-affirming care and drag performances, <u>anti-LGBT curriculum laws</u>, book bans, <u>boycotts</u>, and <u>conspiracy theories</u> around grooming.</p>				
<p>Source:</p> <p>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Timeline_of_LGBT_history_in_the_United_States and</p> <p>https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Shepard_and_James_Byrd_Jr._Hate_Crimes_Prevention_Act</p>				

4. *Paradoxes*

In certain instances, it seemed that the participants faced certain experiences that seemed to be paradoxical. A paradox is a “seemingly self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true”, according to dictionaries. For the participants in this study, for example, some of the sources of their greatest stress and even despair would also become their greatest sources of resiliency. The overused aphorism “What doesn’t kill you can make you stronger,” comes to mind, but without humor because of the high suicide rates among SGL youth (Newport Academy 2024).

One of the first paradoxes is found in the relationship the participants had with their families. Although homosexuality was not accepted in their families, the participants still had loving yet strained relationships with their respective families. Although estranged from his family, when C.J. came out to them he still knew had a place to live when there was no other place to stay. C.J. told me that he remains close to his younger brother even though the relations with his parents and other siblings are still in the reworking phase. At first George’s family did not want to accept his SGL identity because of the fear of being gay bashed, however being his family’s first grandchild and being raised with the help of his grandparents, George’s family came to accept his SGL identity and is very supportive of George especially through the death of his mother almost twenty years ago. In Adrian’s family, because of the lack of communication, the family does not know of his SGL because it was never discussed and if they did suspect, that

was never discussed also. Adrian's job keeps him moving and living in various cities; he never spoke of any desire of returning to his hometown.

In my family I had a close relationship with my parents and siblings despite the way I was treated because of my alleged SGL identity, although it was never discussed in my family. I was often called "sissy" by parents and my older sister because I wanted an action figure every Christmas. I had to beg and cry to get an action figure and my other siblings would simply get what they want, which would make any child have harsh feelings toward their family. In addition, during my freshmen year of high school, my parents simply refused to get me anything for Christmas for no apparent reason, which would make any child grow up to resent their parents. However, I was the child who remained close to my parents, remembering their birthdays and anniversaries, and making sure they always got presents for those and every holiday—and supporting them financially when my other siblings could not. It seemed the more my parents despised my SGL identity, the more I loved them. I was the only sibling that was with my father when he passed away and I was the sibling to do the obituaries and make the arrangements when both my parents passed. I am sure my parents loved me, but at times, I knew they did not like me as much as their other children and that would make any child want to leave their home to find a place where they are loved, liked, and accepted. However, despite my parents' feeling for me and dislike of my sexual identity, I am still the only one of the children to visit them every year to put flowers on their graves. *I got strength of some kind out of being a part of a family and doing the things that a family member does.* This complicated family experience has become a source of strength for me in my relationship to my SGL nephew, to whom I provide love and support. In return, I am fed by that bond with my nephew, who clearly

values our relationship. Family, which was for so long a source of isolation and sorrow for me, is in this instance part of what makes life worth living.

There were times when the participants faced loss and isolation yet remained resilient in their pursuit of continuing their lives. For example, the participants were isolated during their middle and high school years. They did not associate with their peers for fear of the possibility of being outed. C.J. and George remained isolated, yet persevered, up to their middle-school and high-school years when they both found someone with the same sexual orientation as theirs who would comprehend their struggles and feelings. Adrian remained isolated through his middle and high school years and did not meet SGL people until he was in college. Although I did have friends in late high school and throughout college, I still felt isolated because I could not be my authentic self. I did not have any SGL friends until my late thirties and early forties. Yet during these isolations the participants remained resilient by putting their focus on other things that schools offered. C.J. and I put our focus on being studious and becoming honor students. George and Adrian put their focus on various extra-curricular activities such as joining sports teams. George joined an African American club in high school and Adrian was on the basketball team. Their SGL identities were not fed by schools, which on the whole influenced them to suppress those identities. But paradoxically, specific elements of the school—even when they were potentially hostile to SGL identity, such as sports and an African American club—provided support for other elements of the subjects' identities. In general, school was an unsafe environment, but school provided ways for us to find identities that would sustain us into adulthood.

One of the most significant paradoxes is that of religion and faith. All the participants were raised going to church every Sunday. All the participants have faith and believe in God and

believe the Jesus is the Son of God. However, organized Christian religion rejects homosexuality, and it is considered a sin against God. C.J.'s father was a pastor of a church that C.J. had to attend every Sunday. C.J. told me that hearing his father speak against homosexuality and saying how gays should be repent and be converted to being straight took a toll on his self-esteem which caused him to be quiet and isolate himself from the rest of his family. George admits liking going to church but does not like what he calls the Bible-thumping of the church, telling people what they are and what God does not like, and where they are going as a result of their sins. That is the main reason that he does not go to church now. Adrian attended private Christian schools and had religion as part of the curriculum. Adrian said that in the doctrine taught in his classes, he heard a conflict between being gay and having Christian faith. This conflict between being gay and having faith shaped Adrian during that period in a way that still continues today. Adrian said he did not want to risk being outed or criticized because of his sexual orientation and this negative impression about being gay from the Bible contributed to his becoming a very private person. Yet through our conversations, Adrian told me he still believes in and loves God, deriving personal strength from his faith although he has no church affiliation as an adult.

I am the only one of the participants who is an active member of a church and attends every weekend. My faith in God has helped me through many challenges. I grew up hearing television pastors like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggert assert that homosexuality is a sin against God and that they could pray the gay away. During the experience I was having with Bobby I attended a Joyce Meyers' event held at the UIC Pavilion. I needed to hear some encouragement and Joyce Meyers' book *Battlefield of the Mind* was one of the books that helped me to remain resilient. The thing that did turn me off about seeing Joyce Meyers was at the end of the sermon

she showed a video of a young man who was gay who gave his life to Christ and was no longer gay or so she thought. It made me feel more guilty about being gay because of what I was going through with Bobby. Meyers was saying that those who need prayer for being gay or for any need come down and get a cassette tape and turn your life over to Christ. My life already belonged to Christ, but for some odd reason I went down to receive a cassette tape because staring at the widescreen monitor it was like she was staring right into my soul, and although I took the tape, I never listened to it.

When I had no one to turn to when Bobby was threatening my life, however, God was the only one I could turn to. I came to my faith through my family and the church, both of which discouraged my SGL identity in damaging ways. The paradox has left me stronger.

5. *Learning and Growing Through Navigating and Negotiating Identities*

The participants have learned and have grown in navigating and negotiating the multiple identities of being a SGL male of color. Although all the participants had experienced isolation, confusion, and loss early in life, they have learned and grown over time. C.J. was the most expressive and most positive of all the participants. He learned that there will be trials and tribulations being a SGL male of color but that you can grow a thick backbone and not let others stop you from enjoying your life as a SGL male of color. I can infer that C.J. is demonstrating a kind of Black queer joy (Oliver, 2022) although C.J. told me that term sounds too gay to him (a mini paradox!). C.J. said he grew up thinking that being SGL was a sin and he was wrong for being the way he was. He now says being SGL is not wrong and that everyone should be able to love who they love. C.J. was the most assertive in navigating his multiple identities by, for example, painting his fingernails and toenails in front of his mother, who is still in denial of C.J.'s sexual orientation. C.J. says that there is nothing his mother can do because he is SGL and

that is that. C.J. is still growing by surrounding himself with people who love and care about him, joining Adodi and more recently joining Onyx. He summarizes the agency he is demonstrating by stating that you only live life once and the only person living your life is you.

George says he has grown by learning about himself, and that the gay community is not only about sex which is what he once thought. George learned that you do not have to have sex with someone to be loved or be in a relationship. George believes that body image is the biggest issue plaguing the gay community regardless of race. George says when growing up, he was overweight and hated going to physical education class, in addition to being made fun of for being overweight made him bulimic as a teenager. When George lost weight, due to being on the track team in college, he had a body that he thought was desirable to others. George demonstrated a new identity when he showed off his new body, especially at pride events when people took photos of him. However, after the incident in which he was told to come back for an audition only if he lost weight, George felt that such rejection was a major issue for the gay community: body image and size. However, George grew from these experiences by becoming a life coach, helping other SGL males of color through various life challenges. He found a way to shape an identity that used his life experiences to help others.

Adrian used to believe that ageism was a big issue in the gay community. Adrian thought that when a person reached the age of 40 they were updateable and undesirable in the gay community. His views of this have shifted because he is close to 50 and still get asked for dates. However, Adrian has learned that he will probably never be 100 percent comfortable with his sexual identity of being SGL. Adrian says this is mainly due to fear that was instilled in him as a child and teen from his family but mostly from the Christian schools he attended. He is open to a very few select people and said if he were navigating his identity properly, he would be more

open about his sexuality and form better relationships with people instead of feeling like he is hiding something. Adrian believes that fear is the biggest reason that he has not navigated his SGL identity in a fully satisfactory way. As a conservatively dressed technology marketer with a master's degree in business, Adrian has carved out at least two separate identities, one public and one private, at a cost to his own feeling of authenticity. As he said in the interviews, "I think I have hindered myself from forming better relationships by not being open. For me, I am not giving you the true me."

I feel similar to Adrian because I do not feel that I navigated my sexuality the way I would have liked. The fact that I did what I knew how to do, inadequate as I now judge it to be, is an illustration of epistemic injustice. I did what I knew to do; I now know differently. I cannot help but be somewhat envious of both C.J. and my favorite nephew, who I see as successfully navigating their identities and experiencing Black queer joy. Like Adrian, I am out only to a select few, but I am learning to be more open about my sexual identity by trying to understand it better, by engaging with others who share that identity, and by writing this dissertation. However, I feel that I was the most naive of all the participants because I thought that all SGL Black men were in the closet and on the down-low like me. As I described above, I thought that SGL Black men might have had their little sexual twists and then return to their "normal" lives. I did not think that SGL males of color dated or were even in loving monogamous relationships. I thought only White men did that because that is all I saw in the media and books of White men dating or in loving relationships and if I wanted to be in a loving relationship, it had to be with a White man. The book *B-Boys Blue* had a profound effect on me because I was ecstatic that SGL males of color date, can be in loving relationships with their own race, and they can have the support of family. Although I do not have the full support of family, I have been in 5

relationships (one of which was the destructive relationship with the imprisoned Bobby) and all with Black men. Unfortunately, my last relationship ends when my boyfriend of 4 years passed away in July of 2023, during the conduct of this research. This left a big void in my life, but it is good to know that I can be in a loving relationship with another SGL male of color.

E. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore how SGL males of color navigated and negotiated their identities over time. I conducted the study from the dual perspectives of having navigated being a SGL male of color as well as an educator who is concerned with today's and tomorrow's generations of such males' experience of families, peers, schools, and other institutions. I interviewed participants who I believe were trying to be honest and accurate as they discussed navigating their identities from childhood to the present.

Today, there is evidence that educators are becoming more aware of, and empathic toward, issues and challenges that are faced by SGL males of color (McCready, 2004 & McCready, 2010). We also see increasing attention among educators to the mental health needs of their students in general and to making space for their learning. (McCready, 2012; Hall & Rogers, 2018). It should be emphasized that a qualitative study such as this one does not support specific recommendations for educational policy and practice. But it does provide information that could suggest insights for educators seeking to respond to social-emotional, and therefore the academic, needs of Black SGL students.

It seems important to know, for example, that elementary school boys as young as 10 might be feeling confusion and a sense of estrangement and isolation from their families and peers due to the dawning awareness that their gender identity is “different.” It also seems

important for educators to recognize that these students are part of two marginalized group and that their issues may not be the same as gay White students or lesbian students. SGL males may benefit from support that is lacking in the home, school, and community. And if, as was the case with the subjects of this study, the boys and young men are visibly overweight, it may be useful for educators to recognize that the sense of isolation can be intensified. It is not clear from the literature what supports would be most helpful at different age levels. Nor is it clear what local school districts will allow in an increasingly polarized national climate around gender identity. One community might support LGBTQ+ support groups in high schools, for example, while another will not. But for those teachers and administrators who believe in providing support for students according to their needs, this study may help them identify and support students who would otherwise be fending for themselves.

One reason I conducted this study was to learn more about how the study participants, like an unknown number of others, did or did not have adequate support as children and youth, especially from their homes and schools. As a teacher, I was aware of two SGL students of color who needed desperate help that they were not getting at home and at school. As their teacher, I desperately wanted to help these two students, but with the lack of resources and knowledge, and fear of outing myself, I did the best I could without risk to myself.

Project 10 was started by Lance McCready (2009) in California as a safe space for gay students in an urban setting in hopes of giving support for all gay students, especially for the males of color. Unfortunately, no males, including those of color, attended the meetings because it was mainly attended by gay female students regardless of color. Policy and practice solutions for the intersectionality challenges of SGL boys of color will not be easy. Educators will have to co-construct what it means to create spaces that invite such boys to participate. For example,

instead of creating a “safe space” for SGL males of color, it is worth recognizing that the word “safe” implies that there must be some sort of danger or harm (Cook-Sather, 2016, Arao & Clements, 2013). Educators can think in terms of creating brave spaces for SGL males of color because although there might be danger or harm, a person must have courage to face the risk or challenges that they are already encountering. Cook-Sather (2016) argues that it is important for children and youth to know they will be taken care of, and their pain experiences will be acknowledged and supported, rather than avoided or eliminated.

Several years ago, I asked a professor in one of my classes at UIC how a dissertation using autoethnographic narratives could be used help when it comes to education. The professor, Dr. William Schubert, said that someone reading such a dissertation might be going through the same thing the researcher might have written about. In this study, the participants went through multiple challenges such as the death of family members, the death of friends or partners, the loss of relationships with family, friends, or significant others, or even having their lives threatened. Many, many other people have experienced these same things. What made these experiences especially challenging for the participants in this study was how isolated they were from others in addressing these life changes. There were many challenges that the participants endured yet they remained resilient and made it through those difficult experiences. I hope that any SGL male, especially those of color, who might read this study would find the strength to know that regardless of whatever challenges that might come, with faith and the sheer will to survive they can make it through those challenges. The study in some ways echoes the public service campaign intended to support SGL youth with the tagline, “It gets better.” It can even get better for gay, Black, overweight males caught in a web of intersectional oppression.

Because this is a study in the field of education, it might also be of value to any educators who are seeking to deepen their knowledge of the experiences of SGL Black males.

F. Limitations

Using autoethnography methods has the potential to generate valuable data through personal narratives. Here there are limitations of this study worth discussing. First, this study cannot be generalized to all gay Black men because the focus was on the personal experiences of only three participants and the author. Second, this study is not intended to address the problem of HIV/AIDS in the Black community although it is extremely important for the Black community. Therefore, there was no effort to address HIV/AIDS in the Black community, though the issue arose incidentally. Nor is this study intended to address a much wider range of issues within the LGBTQ+ community, such as the experiences of SGL females of color or SGL transgendered people of color, although their issues are important. Finally, as indicated earlier, this study has no direct implications for educational policy and practice, though it may well provide insights that would be valuable to educators, policy makers, and practitioners.

G. Implications for Further Research

The literature on LGBTQ youth advocates that school districts should look at their current policies when it comes to SGL students, and this study underscores that this may be especially so with those that have a high enrollment of students of color (e.g., Mustanski, et al., 2016). These students need support especially when there are not support coming from the homes. School districts can, if they choose, establish brave spaces for SGL students, especially those SGL students of color.

But more research is needed on the kinds of policies and practices, in districts, schools, and classrooms, that will be of most help to Black male SGL students. Educators and administrators need to understand that not all gay people are the same. We come from diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. There might be an instance where a teacher thinks she might be helping a student when in fact it could be detrimental, even deadly, to the student (Newport Academy, 2024). For example, a White teacher thought she was supporting her half-Black and half-Latino student who was SGL by bringing him a dress to wear at school without the parents' permission, but encouraged because the administrators at the school did not want to violate any student's civil rights. The SGL student went so far as to give another boy a Valentine's card. The boy who received the card was so embarrassed that later that week, he killed the SGL student who gave him the card (Setoodeh, 2008). The administrator and teacher, who all were White, meant no harm, but they needed to do more research and get more support from others to help SGL students of color in this and other situations.

Also needed is further research on SGL males of color based on generational differences. This study shows a generational difference in C.J.'s life experiences and supports as opposed to my own, for example. Another illustration: when HIV/AIDS first came out, it was considered a death sentence. Now there so many advancements in medicine that people with HIV/AIDS are living longer and there are commercials on television about the drugs helping people to live longer. People my age still consider HIV/AIDS a death sentence whereas SGL males of this current generation see HIV/AID as an illness that one can survive with proper medication and support of others. Adodi was started as a support group for SGL males of African descent living with HIV/AIDS. However, Adodi later saw the need of support for SGL males of African descent regardless of HIV status. Children today see same-gender couples on many kinds of television

ads, in contrast to my generation, which saw none. Research could investigate whether such environmental differences experienced by the newer generation have any impact on their sense of isolation, agency, and resilience. This is not a small matter when studies show much higher rates of suicide for LGBTQ+ youth (Newport Academy 2024). Research could also reveal the extent to which gay Black male youth are any more or less at risk than the larger group of which they are a part.

H. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows the difficulties that four SGL males of color have had, in navigating and negotiating their identities over a period of decades. The intersectionality of being part of two marginalized groups (in addition to a third, namely overweight people) demonstrates that these SGL males of color were able to persevere over time despite the multiple challenges they faced throughout their life. First the SGL males of color recognized their SGL identity at an early age. They had to deal with the fear of being outcasts from their families. They dealt with opposition from organized religion, lack of support from educational settings, and being outcasts from both the White gay and the Black community, part of which was due to problems of body image. These SGL males of color had the will to survive in a world where their racial identity and their sexual identity were marginalized. Through the voices of the participants sharing their personal narratives, this study is intended to add to our understanding of a population that been largely silenced. Such understanding will be critical to dismantling the systemic oppositions that hold back SGL males of color from fully enjoying their lives.

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APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONS

These semi-structured interview questions were approved by UIC's Office for the Protection of Human Subjects. Some of the questions were not asked, for example, if that particular question was connected to another question in which the participants answered "No". If a participant answered no to having other siblings, then the question about the position was not asked. If a participant sufficiently answered a question in response to another question, then again the question could be omitted from the interview, though the response was recorded and transcribed.

Sexual identity

- How do you identify yourself? (SGL, queer, gay, etc.)
- Are you out about your sexual identity? If so at what level?

Family History

- How many siblings do you have and what position (oldest, youngest, middle) were you born?
- What type of household did you grow up with?

Education, Religion, Occupation, Groups

- What is your current employment and education?
- Where and what schools did you attend in elementary, middle and high school?
- Did you attend college? If so which one(s)?
- Did you grow up in the church? If so which denomination?
- Are there any SGL groups or community-based that you are affiliated with? If so which one(s)?

Elementary School Age

Tell me about your childhood.

- Describe the type of elementary school you attended (size, teachers/administrator, racial, socioeconomic makeup).
- Who were the most important people involved in your childhood and how were they involved?
- Can you describe any family discussions about race and sexuality? What was said?
- What did you learn from those discussions?
- Tell me the moments when you first recognized that you were a SGL male? What impact did this have on you as a person of color?
- When you were in elementary school, were there moments that helped you to understand that your sexual and racial identity?
- Was there anyone in your elementary years that helped you to understand your sexual identity like a peer, teacher, priest, etc.?
- Describe any role models during this time period of your life. What made you gravitate to them?
- Describe how you begin to understand sexuality from a church or religious point of view. Tell of any conflict with your family's, school's or peers' views.
- What moments, if any, stick out for you that helped shape the person you are today?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about this time period in your life that we have not discussed?

Middle School Age

These questions are similar as the ones from the Elementary School time period with some slight variations.

- Describe the type of middle school you attended (size, teachers/administrator, racial, socioeconomic makeup).
- During the middle school years, how did you navigate dating or going to school dances or other middle school-related activities? Can you tell of any moments when this might have conflicted with your SGL identity?
- What did you learn from this time period and where did you get support at that time period, if any?
- Middle school years are considered a very awkward time period in the stages of life. What made you the most awkward or uncomfortable during this time period knowing about your sexuality? How did you navigate the awkwardness during this time period?
- Was your relationship with your family during this time? Where they are more supportive at this time period? What about your relationship with your peers?
- Were you able to express your sexuality at this time? If so, describe how this was done.

- Where and how did you find any support in the middle school years? What did this mean to you?

High School Age

Tell me about your experiences in high school. What was it like being a SGL male of color?

- Describe the type of high school you attended (size, teachers/administrator, racial, socioeconomic makeup).
- What was your high school like for SGL students? How did this affect how you dealt with your own sexuality?
- Was there a source of support you turned to during your high school years? If so, how did this support system look? Who did it include? Describe the support that was offered.
- Were there any role models during your high school years? What led you to them and how did they become your role model? What did you take from this role model?
- Were there any visible LGBTQ groups at your high school? If so, were you a part of that group?
- If you were a part of that group what made you associate with that group and what made you associate with that group and what did you learn about yourself as being part of that group?
- If you were not a part of that group, tell why you did not want to associate with that group.
- Were there other SGL males of color who attended your high school? Did you identify with them regardless if you were friends with them or not? What made you realize you were similar or different from them? Did that mean anything to you?
- When did you disclose your sexual identity? To whom did you disclose your identity? Describe your feelings before, during and after this event. Tell how this disclosure impacted your life.
- What did you learn about yourself as a SGL male of color during these experiences?
- Were there any extracurricular groups or events in which you participated? Describe your time in these clubs and how they might have supported or conflicted with your being a SGL male of color.
- Tell what you knew about the SGL community during high school. What experiences did you have in understanding the gay white and gay black communities? Describe a specific moment when you first interacted with the gay community.
- Were there any black LGBTQ groups in your community? How did you find out about these organizations, and did you understand what these groups were to be? Did you become involved in any of those groups?

- How did you present yourself during this time period? Describe the ways you presented yourself. What were the reactions, if any from family, peers and others in your life?
- What were your family's views on sexuality during this time period? Was it different from the elementary and middle school views?
- Overall, compare your experiences in high school to that of elementary and middle school. How do these experiences build on one another?

Present Life

- Describe the SGL community you are or not involved with in the city where you live.
- Tell a recent moment when you faced a challenge related to your race and sexuality and describe the outcome of that situation.
- Through all of your life experiences, what have you learned about yourself being a SGL of color? Has any views shifted or evolved over time about being a SGL male of color?
- Would you describe yourself as effectively negotiating and navigating through family, school, and society? How would define the word "effectively" as it applies to your navigating and negotiating your life?

Dr. David Charles Hickson, PhD.

EDUCATION:

Undergraduate: Chicago State University
Major: Elementary Education
Graduated Cum Laude
B.S. in Education, 1985

Graduate: Chicago State University
Major: Curriculum and Instruction
M.S. in Education, 1990

Northern Illinois University
Major: Instructional Technology
M.S. in Instructional Technology in Education, 2001

University of Illinois at Chicago
Major: Curriculum Design in Education
PhD in Education, 2024

LICENSURE:

Illinois Professional Educator License

Endorsements:

Type 3 Elementary K-9
Social Science 5-8
Computer Applications 5-8
Computer Science 5-8
Technology Specialist K-4
Technology Specialist 5-8

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Colin Powel Middle School 2017 to 2023 (Retired)

Teacher of Computer Education to 6th to 8th grade students

- Developed lessons that provided differentiated projects to accommodate a variety of learning styles and ability levels for students through project-based learning.
- Promoted the integration of technology across subject areas to increase student engagement using Google Education and MS Office Suite.
- Developed and implemented technology lessons that reflect the ISTE Standards.
- Collaborated with STEM teachers to actively promote a technology curriculum throughout the school.

John Drake Elementary School, Chicago, 2014 to 2017
Teacher of Computer Education to Pre-K to 8th grade students
Technology Coordinator
Testing Coordinator

- Developed lessons that provided differentiated projects to accommodate a variety of learning styles and ability levels for students through project-based learning.
- Integrated technology across subject areas to increase student engagement.
- Collaborated with teachers to implement technology in primary-level computer classes.
- Developed and implemented a technology curriculum that reflects the ISTE Standards.
- Assisted and collaborated with teachers to integrate technology in the core curriculum.

William Ray Elementary School 2013 to 2014
Teacher of Computer Education to 1st to 8th grade students
Technology Coordinator
Testing Coordinator

- Developed lessons that provided differentiated projects to accommodate a variety of learning styles and ability levels for students through project-based learning.
- Integrated technology across subject areas to increase student engagement.
- Collaborated with teachers to implement technology in primary-level computer classes.
- Assisted and collaborated with teachers to integrate technology in the core curriculum.

Northwest Middle School 2001 to 2012
Teacher of Computer Education to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students
Technology Coordinator
Yearbook Coordinator

- Developed lessons that provided differentiated projects to accommodate a variety of learning styles and ability levels for students through project-based learning.
- Integrated technology across subject areas to increase student engagement.
- Assisted and collaborated with teachers to integrate technology in the core curriculum.
- Collaborate with school administrators to determine the specific technology needs of the school.

Chicago Public Schools Summer School Program, Chicago, 1998 to 2002
Monitor/Trainer
Writer of the Eighth Grade Summer Bridge Program

- Collaborated with teachers to develop and write the eighth-grade Summer Bridge reading program.
- Provided professional development for the Early Intervention, Making the Grade, and the 3rd, 6th, and 8th grade Summer Bridge Programs.
- Mentored and coached teachers in the Early Intervention, Making the Grade, and Summer Bridge Programs.

De La Cruz Math, Science, and Technology Specialty School, Chicago, 1995 to 2001
Teacher of Social Studies to 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students

- Created, planned, and implemented curriculum for world history, early US history, and contemporary history lessons for students.
- Incorporated the use of technology with social studies lessons.
- Implemented the National Junior Beta Club as a faculty facilitator.

Chicago State University, Chicago, 1994 to 1995

Instructor in the Department of Early Childhood and Elementary Education

- Instructed undergraduate students in methods of teaching science to elementary school students in grades K to 8.
- Instructed undergraduate student in methods of teaching social studies to elementary students in grades K to 8.
- Instructed undergraduate students in methods of teaching the fine arts and humanities to elementary students in grades K to 8.

Robert A. Black Magnet School, Chicago, 1991 to 1994

Teacher of Social Studies to 7th and 8th grade students

Coordinator of the After School Social Center Program

- Developed and implemented a coherent social studies curriculum plan to ensure students' academic development.
- Developed interesting and interactive social studies activities for students.
- Served as Co-facilitator of the National Junior Beta Club.
- Managed students as faculty advisor for the Robert A. Black yearbook.

Simmye Anderson Community Academy, Chicago, 1990 to 1991.

Teacher of Social Studies to 8th-grade students

- Developed social studies and civics lessons that facilitated whole class and small group instruction.
- Collaborated with other teachers to continually improve students' academic success.
- Prepared students for the Public Law 195 Constitution Test.
- Member of the Anderson Local School Council.

Donald Morrill Elementary School, Chicago, 1989 to 1990.

Teacher of 7th Literature and Social Studies

Teacher of After School Science Program

- Developed literature and social studies lesson plans that facilitated whole class, small group, and individualized instruction.
- Adapted instruction to accommodate students' ability levels and learning styles
- Developed lesson plans and material to ensure students' academic success

Mary C. Terrell Elementary School, Chicago, 1988 to 1989.

Teacher of 4th grade students

- Developed lesson plans that facilitated whole class and small group instruction.

- Adapted instruction to accommodate students' ability levels and learning styles.
- Developed lesson plans and material to ensure students' academic success.

St. Dorothy Elementary School, Chicago, 1985 to 1988.

Teacher of 7th grade students

- Developed lesson plans that facilitated whole class and small group instruction.
- Adapted instruction to accommodate students' ability levels and learning styles.
- Developed lesson plans and materials to ensure students' academic success.

Teachers' Material Center, Chicago State University, Chicago, 1984 to 1985.

Librarian Aide

- Managed books, periodicals, documents, and teaching aids
- Aided students with locating appropriate books and material
- Aided students with educational research

PRESENTATIONS:

John B. Drake School 2015

Implementing Successful Use of iPads in the Classroom

Colin Powell Middle School 2019-2022

Using the Operating System on the Chromebook

Implementing Pixton Comics in the Classroom

Using Google Jamboard in the Classroom

There's More from Google for Education

GRANTS AND HONORS

Thanks to Teachers Semi-finalist, 1996

Small Teacher's Grant Winner, 1997

Outstanding Young Man of America, 1998

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:

Kappa Delta Phi, 1985.

Phi Delta Kappa, 1993.

Illinois Digital Educator Alliance

International Society of Technology in Education

REPORTS, PUBLICATIONS, THESIS:

The Effects of Ability Grouping on Sixth Grade Achievement: M.S. Thesis

Chicago State University, Chicago, IL. 1990.

The Navigation and Negotiation of Identities and Life Experiences of Same-Gender-Loving Males of Color Over Time: PhD Dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago, Chicago, IL. 2024.