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Trials and Triumph: Lesbian and Gay Young Adults Raised in a Rural Context

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Abstract: The rural context at times is characterized by heteronormativity and conservatism. For individuals who identify as a sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer), the rural context may pose particular challenges to the development of a healthy, coherent sense of self. Seven young adults (18–24) who identified as gay or lesbian participated in in-depth interviews regarding their experiences coming out in a rural Appalachian context. Findings suggest sexual minority individuals experience both trials and triumphs coming out in the rural context. Two overarching themes and six subthemes are discussed with implications for supporting sexual minority youth in the rural context.

Keywords: sexual identity; lesbian; gay; rural context

1. Introduction

The process of identity development is one of the key developmental tasks in adolescence [1]. For sexual minority youth, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ), this process of defining one's identity may be complicated as they attempt to develop a positive sense of self in a largely heteronormative environment. Recent researchers have highlighted the importance of context on the development of self [2]; the rural environment is a context that may uniquely impact the process of self-identification, particularly for individuals who identify as a sexual

minority. The aim of the current study is to develop a rich understanding of this developmental process for seven lesbian and gay young adults raised in a rural context and the interplay of various factors on their emerging sense of self.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Identity Development

The development of a coherent sense of identity has been historically understood as one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence [1]. Recent scholars have extended this initial period of self-exploration and identity development past adolescence into the young adult years, calling this time period emerging adulthood [3]. Sexual identity development includes the processes of recognizing sexual attraction, exploration, self-labeling, and incorporating a sexual self-label into an overall sense of self. Researchers have developed various models for understanding the process of sexual identity development for individuals who identify as a sexual minority.

Traditionally, the process of sexual identity development has been understood from an essentialist viewpoint, viewing development as a series of prescribed steps until an individual “achieves” their “true” sense of self [4]. However, recent researchers have acknowledged while similarities exist in the development of a sexual minority identity, individual differences are numerous as the construct of identity is fluid [2,5] and subject to contextual influence [6]. Social constructionists hold that sexual identity, sexuality and self-labeling are social constructs, facets of the particular context and time in which an individual resides [7–9]. For example, coming out as “gay” had different meaning in the context of the 1930s than it would today. Similarly, a youth coming out in a rural context may have dramatically different experiences than another youth coming out in an urban environment. When examining the state of research on identity development, Diamond [10] called for researchers to focus on an integrative understanding of the multiple contexts that shape the development of an individual’s overall sense of self for both same- and other-sex attracted individuals.

2.2. Rural Context

The aim of the current study is to investigate the impact of the rural context on the experience of coming out, a vastly understudied context in the literature on sexual minority development [11,12]. The majority of the literature on the experiences of individuals who identify as a sexual minority is situated in urban contexts, where the sexual minority population is more easily accessible. As noted above, the process of sexual identity development may be complicated in a context such as a rural community, as coming out as a sexual minority may not be always accepted due to more conservative beliefs and values [11,13]. The research that has examined experiences of sexual minority individuals in the rural context has been conducted with primarily middle age to older adult populations and has concerned service provision and/or health outcomes. Little research exists looking at the interplay of identity development and context during a key time period, emerging adulthood.

While in recent years, advances toward equality have been made for sexual minority individuals, stigma, marginalization, and oppression still exist, particularly in rural communities [14,15]. Heteronormative beliefs are common in rural locales [16], perpetuating the norm of heterosexuality

and a stigma surrounding LGBTQ identification. In his study of eight self-identified gay adult men (aged 40–50 years) living in rural Wyoming, Boulden [11] found that many of his subjects felt the need to conform so they would not face ostracism or assault. In fact, he noted his participants experienced a sense of “don’t ask, don’t tell” within their rural communities, an unspoken agreement between community members to disregard a person’s sexual orientation as long as the individual “passes” as heterosexual. One participant shared, “the guys that tend to be more masculine, and less stereotypically gay in appearance tend to survive better” ([11], p. 67). While participants worked to conceal their sexual identity, compartmentalization was not associated with increased feelings of safety. Swank, Frost, and Fahs [17] found in their sample of 285 LGBT adults (18–75 years, mean age 39.75 years) perceived stigma and heterosexist threats more common than enacted discrimination in individuals who resided in a rural context. In addition, the authors noted a higher sense of isolation and less satisfactory relationships with LGB communities and resources for individuals in the rural context.

One possible reason for the increased experience of stigma and heteronormativity in rural locations is the fact that conservative religious values are often espoused in rural communities. Historically, most Christian religious denominations have condemned same-sex attractions and/or behaviors [18]. While some religious communities have recently become more accepting, the long history of condemnation and heteronormativity continues to permeate religious culture. As a result of this mentality, many sexual minority individuals feel ostracized in religious circles, and may refrain from disclosing their sexual orientation and/or dis-identify with religious culture to facilitate greater self-acceptance [6,18].

Further, researchers have noted a stark lack of support networks and other LGBTQ resources in rural locales [16,17,19]. D’Augelli [16] noted there is a dearth of knowledge about LGBTQ identities that pervades the rural context; many adolescents in the process of identifying as a sexual minority in rural locations have very little access to positive information about LGBTQ identities. As a result, the Internet becomes a primary resource for sexual minority youth for information in rural areas [20]. Further, while one may assume an individual’s peers would be a source of support for sexual minority youth, the heteronormative bias that permeates the rural context is found within their social relationships and school settings as well. Connolly and Leedy [12] noted that many sexual minority youth feel that the school setting is an institution particularly susceptible to homophobia while others have documented rural sexual minority youth’s experience of both verbal and physical abuse in the school context [21]. This lack of support may be associated with the development of both less helpful coping strategies and negative health outcomes.

Consistent with the pervasive heteronormative bias, felt stigma, and lack of support, the health of sexual minority individuals in rural communities is concerning. Greater feelings of isolation and disconnect, paired with a greater occurrence of discrimination and a lack of coping resources, exacerbates the overall level of stress experienced by sexual minority individuals in rural areas [15,17]. Poon and Saewyc [22] discovered that rural youth overall are at a greater risk for substance abuse compared to their urban peers, but rural LGB youth are at a more elevated risk. Similarly, in their review of the literature, Cohn and Hastings [14] found that LGB youth are more at risk for mental and physical health concerns and are more likely to self-harm or attempt suicide.

The aim of the current study is to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of developing a sexual minority identity amidst a rural environment. Specifically, the authors were curious about the

interplay of various factors related to the rural context on the development of the participant's sense of self and process of self-identification. Few studies have examined the experience of coming out in the rural context; little research exists documenting this experience with individuals currently and/or recently having undergone this experience, emerging adults.

3. Methods

A qualitative design allows researchers to examine the interplay of complex factors, gaining an enriched, holistic understanding of the phenomenon studied [23]. As such, this type of research design is valuable when considering the role of context on the experiences of sexual minority youth. For the current study, the researchers utilized a phenomenological approach to identify both convergent and divergent experiences and the role of the rural context in the lives of seven sexual minority youth. Consistent with this approach, the researchers' lens has the potential to impact the data collection, analysis, and interpretation. At the onset of the study, the researchers each explored their own personal experiences with the topic to become more aware of their own biases, and attempted to set aside these experiences in the process of data collection and analysis [23,24]. The authors recognize that the data is still filtered through these lenses and, thus, provide a brief introduction to their individual perspectives. The authors of the current study each identify as allies and have been active in LGBTQ support organizations and/or roles. The first author was raised in both rural and suburban contexts; the second author was raised in a traditionally southern, rural context; and the third author was raised in a suburban context.

3.1. Participants

The seven participants in the current study were recruited from a larger, quantitative, online, anonymous study of the experiences of LGBTQ young adults raised in a rural context. The rural context was defined to include the open countryside, towns of less than 2500 people, and towns with populations between 2500–49,999 people that are unlinked to an urban area [25]. Specific information regarding the contexts in which the participants were raised in is provided below. Participants were eligible if they were 18 to 24 years of age, self-identified as LGBTQ, identified as having been raised in a rural context, and provided their contact information at the end of the initial survey indicating interest in continued participation. All participants were recruited from the Appalachian region. Additional participant information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant data.

Chosen pseudonym	Self-identified sexual orientation	Religious background	Openly identified	Area raised
Kelly	Lesbian	Christian	Yes	Rural countryside
Brian	Homosexual	Methodist	Yes	Town < 2500
Kyle	Gay	Christian	Yes	Town < 6000
Mark	Gay	Methodist	No	Town < 4000
Erica	Cisgender lesbian	Catholic	Yes	Town < 3000
Zeus	Gay	Catholic	Yes	Town < 4000
Steve	Homosexual	Christian	No	Town < 10,000

3.2. Procedures

Participants were recruited through targeted advertisements on social networking websites, word of mouth, and LGBTQ group listservs at colleges in the Appalachian region, including targeted areas in Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina and Alabama. The participants initially completed an online, anonymous survey. At the end of this survey, participants were provided the option of entering their contact information to participate in an in-depth interview regarding their experiences of identity development and the rural context. Eleven individuals indicated interest in the interview and seven individuals responded to the request to complete the interview.

A semi-structured interview was utilized with follow-up questions being asked as needed for clarification. The third author conducted the interviews and initiated the conversation with an introduction to the study, gaining consent for the audio recording. Participants chose their own pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. The interviewer then asked participants two broad questions to guide the interview [24]. Specifically, participants were asked to share their process of coming out and identity development, and the ways in which their rural context may have impacted this experience. Follow-up questions were used to probe for more information regarding the participant's first awareness of being lesbian or gay, their process of self-labeling, their coming out story, their current understanding of their sexual identity and the role of the rural context in this process. Interviews were held via telephone and audiotaped; each lasted between 15–45 min. Participants were sent a \$15 gift card for their participation in the study.

3.3. Analytic Strategy

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Utilizing a phenomenological approach, the researchers examined the transcriptions independently. The researchers first identified significant statements and quotes provided by the participants in describing their experiences followed by the development of various clusters, themes that emerged from the participant narratives [23,24]. The researchers then discussed themes that emerged and engaged in a comparison of the themes with both existing research and anecdotal report to facilitate triangulation. Throughout the process, the researchers revisited their perspectives and biases in an attempt to separate the researchers' own experiences from that of the participants. Ultimately, the researchers identified two major overarching themes and several subthemes within the data.

4. Results

When analyzing participant interviews, two overarching themes emerged when considering the impact of the rural context on the participants' experiences of identity development. These included experiences characterized by trials and those characterized by triumph. Within each of these themes, there were a number of subthemes, providing a more detailed understanding of the negative and positive experiences of the study participants. These themes connect the stories of the seven participants and provide a window into the experiences of identifying as lesbian or gay in a rural, Appalachian context.

4.1. Rural Context

Participants were asked to “paint a picture” of their rural context at the onset of the study to facilitate a greater understanding of the participants’ perception and experiences. Brian, who identified as homosexual and having been raised in a town of less than 2500 people, described the area in which he was raised as a “very isolated place not around a lot of other people” with “a lot of farms...older people...and mostly white” individuals. Similarly, Mark, a gay man who identified being raised in a town of less than 4000 individuals, described his context as “mostly white” and a “hub for the Ku Klux Klan”. Kyle, a gay man who was raised in a small town of less than 6000 individuals, described his town as one where “everyone knew everyone” and “did all activities together”. Zeus, a gay man who identified as having been raised in a small town of less than 4000 people, described his town “cows...outnumbered people in some areas...so fairly small, not a lot of major development...one stop light in the entire city and it was blinking red the entire time.”

Both Erica, a cisgender lesbian raised in a town of less than 3000 individuals and Steve, a self-identified homosexual man raised in a town of less than 10,000 people, described their rural contexts as politically and religiously conservative. Erica shared “it was a small town, everybody knew everybody, and everybody was in everybody’s business. If you weren’t in this religion you were wrong, and if you didn’t feel this way and marry this person you were wrong. It was really the size of the small town that effected the way I felt...and how I felt safe.” Finally, Kelly spent much of her developmental years living in the rural countryside. However, during late adolescence she moved to an urban context, and provided reflections on the disparity between the rural and urban context and the impact on her development.

4.2. Trials

The first major theme included the trials experienced. Participants noted an overall conflict between their rural, often religiously affiliated identities, and their identification as a sexual minority. The trials faced by the participants included identity conflicts in the religious community, relational issues with families and peers, a lack of information and structural support, and an overall experience of inner distress.

4.2.1. Trials: Religious Context

The first major subtheme that emerged as participants described their own struggles coming out in the rural context involved the trials they experienced religiously. Many rural contexts have strong, religious values; many religious groups have historically condemned or disapproved of same-sex attractions and/or sexual behavior [26]. Erica described the relationship between the rural context and religious context saying, “religion is for a lot of people, especially in this small town where [I grew up], it’s their moral zone...everything they did was governed by what the Bible said.” Similarly, Kyle shared, “you know, in the South, religion is a big deal...if you aren’t a member of the church then you are...an outcast, especially in a small town.” Six of the participants shared negative experiences within the religious community in relation to their lesbian or gay identity. Due to the pervasiveness of the religious culture within the rural context, the participants described the religious influences as synonymous with the rural culture.

One participant, Mark, a gay man whose family members were devoutly Baptist, recalled, “to my religion and family values, being gay...you would be frowned upon, so for most of the time, I grew to force myself not to believe that it [identifying as gay] could possibly be true for myself.” Steve, who grew up in a very traditional Christian household stated, “I was raised in a church that had...sermons where they just talked about how homosexuality was a sin and how awful it was.” Several participants noted that many religious community members held traditional, and occasionally ignorant ideas regarding sexual minority identities, including the idea that being lesbian or gay is a “choice” and can be “fixed” with prayer and repression of feelings. Steve recalled his coming out to his family, “I remember my dad was sitting on the couch with like a Bible on his lap, and I guess...he was expecting to use that somehow, to make me straight.” Four participants described their experience was consistent with the old adage of “praying the gay away”. Kyle shared, “people knew something was different about me...and I think those people thought that they could change that over time if I stayed in the church.”

4.2.2. Trials: Interpersonal Relationships

The second subtheme that emerged involved the trials faced by the participants within their relationships with friends and family. The reactions by friends and family members to the participants’ self-disclosure while varied, was often negative. Kyle stated, “the community [I was raised] as a whole never really accepted me, and still hasn’t really accepted me to this day.” Each of the participants described the reactions of those to whom they were close to as being disappointed, rejecting, unsupportive and in an overall state of denial. In addition, many of the participants feared peer rejection upon disclosure of their sexual identity due to the stigma surrounding LGBTQ identities in their rural context. One participant, Erica, who first labeled herself as a lesbian in high school, stated,

“at my high school...people started commenting about it and trying to taunt me about it...I just kind of ignored it but, after coming out, I definitely learned that I can fight back with words, and not put up with peoples struggles, with their issues.”

Erica coped with the harassment by taking a direct approach, though not all participants were able to do so. Mark recalled his high school experience, “when it came to students, they definitely frowned upon it [publically identifying as gay]. Those who were seen...seemed to be out...they acted in stereotypical manners, they were bullied pretty harshly.” Zeus described his context by saying, “it wasn’t necessarily the blatantly homophobic atmosphere but...subtle intolerance...there were maybe one or two openly gay individuals in the school and they were pretty much... ostracized...they got pushed...the typical rural [reaction].” Peer rejection was quite common among the participants throughout their high school years.

Participants also shared their struggles coming out to their families. Nearly each participant that had self-disclosed to their parents faced some initial level of disapproval. Steve shared he first came out as gay online before coming out to a friend as a way of increasing his self-confidence before telling his family. He began the process of disclosing to his family with his sister. He recalled her reaction, “[She] is crying her eyes out and the first words she says are ‘how could you do this to our family?’” Many of the participants, when describing their coming out to family members, shared their fathers had more negative reactions. Kyle recalled his coming out to his father,

“my dad especially was not happy with me, and he thought that he could change the way I was by sending me to therapy...[the family counselor] basically had the job of de-homosexualizing me and needless to say, that didn't work out very well.”

Denial from family members was a common reaction experienced by the participants; participants described their parents as questioning the truth of their feelings. When Erica told her mother she was a lesbian her mother responded, “are you sure you're gay? Like are you covering for somebody? Is this how you really feel? Um, are you sure?” Erica recalled her mother asking several times a day for weeks if she was “sure” she was a lesbian. Up to the point of the interview, Erica shared she felt her mother never really accepted her identity as a lesbian. While Zeus' parents were more accepting of his sexual identity, his mom was concerned for his safety given the rural, conservative context in which Zeus resided, “they were on the brink of passing [legislation] fueled by religious dogmatism and right-winged conservatism...she was more concerned...not so much about her son not being straight...but being an identified minority that has a history of violence against them.”

4.2.3. Trials: Information and Structural Support

A third subtheme that emerged was the lack of information and structural support regarding LGBTQ identities available due in part to the rural context. Mark described this, saying “I can't recall ever knowing anyone who was gay until I was in college and met people...it wasn't a topic very widely discussed there especially with influences such as the KKK still active.” Kyle shared that being gay “was not talked about in my community at all. I mean, I didn't know there was such a thing as a gay person. I didn't know you could have an attraction towards someone of the same sex...it wasn't ever discussed.” Erica shared that her peers tried to start a gay-straight alliance to increase information about sexual minority issues in her high school; their group was ultimately unsuccessful and they were told “no by the principal because he didn't want to deal with the phone calls or the paper work, or the outcry from the Christian club on campus who found out about it and pitched a royal fit”.

While 5 of the 7 participants turned to the Internet for support given the lack of information in their communities, Zeus stated that even access to the Internet was difficult, “I grew up with dial-up which basically means that the Internet is inaccessible because you can't upload anything.” As a result, Zeus shared that he relied on television shows such as “Will and Grace” for information on what it means to be gay since there was a dearth of information in his rural community. Kelly, reflecting on being raised in a rural countryside noted the disparity between the rural area she spent most of her childhood and early adolescence, compared to the urban context she moved to during late adolescence. She shared by seeing a larger number of people who self-labeled as gay or lesbian in the urban context she gained information LGBTQ identities. As such, she stated she was able to “admit” to herself that she was lesbian and ultimately accept her emerging sense of identity, attesting to the power of both role models and information.

4.2.4. Trials: Intrapersonal Processes

The final subtheme that emerged when examining the trials faced, occurred internally, as the participants dealt with a variety of intrapersonal reactions while coming out. The participants described

feeling a strong sense of internalized homophobia, turning a sense of disgust and hatred upon themselves in relation to their sexual minority identity. Steve shared, “gay was this alien creature...you didn’t want to talk about it...it wasn’t okay.” Zeus labeled his feelings as “inappropriate and not normative” as a result of the stigma he experienced in his context. When discussing this, Steve shared, “it was scary, because growing up through middle school, I felt like something wasn’t right...something wasn’t fitting together...I was fearful of saying anything that might even remotely point me out as being different or odd... I didn’t want to draw attention to me.” Brian recalled his feelings of attraction as a child towards a famous male actor and associated feelings of shame. Specifically he stated, “my greatest fear was this is not right, something is really wrong...I had a big struggle dealing with it all...” He shared his internal reaction was directly related to the conservative, rural context which he believed drove him to doubt, and even dread his own thoughts and feelings. This interpersonal process of coming to terms with their emerging sense of self was perhaps the most difficult trial participants described.

4.3. *Triumphs*

Despite the trials experienced by the participants coming out in the rural context, many triumphant moments also occurred. This theme is broken down into two subthemes, those of the interpersonal relationships and the intrapersonal processes. Though these are fewer in occurrence than the trials experienced, they are still noteworthy because of their significance; the interplay of an LGBT identity in a rural context is not necessarily completely negative.

4.3.1. Triumphs: Interpersonal Relationships

One major subtheme that emerged as participants described their coming out in the rural context involved the triumph related to their interpersonal relationships, occurring both in-person and over the Internet. Participants described feeling accepted and supported by some of their friends and acquaintances when coming out. Five of the seven participants used the Internet to first come out and explore their emerging sense of sexual identity; it felt relatively safe in contrast to their rural contexts. Brian shared it also increased his understanding of what it means to have same-sex attractions, “I found out...I wasn’t the only one [gay person] alive because through the Internet I found...I wasn’t obviously the only one alive.”

After using the internet as an initial “stage” to come out, Steve came out to one of his close friends,

“the first person I told in person is the person I’m with now, the guy I’m with now. I told him...he didn’t push me out at all, but he...gave me confidence in being more comfortable with it I guess, comfortable with it for myself.”

Likewise, several participants found their initial disclosure to a person who also identified as a sexual minority to be helpful. Zeus first disclosed to an openly gay classmate by first asking questions of his classmate regarding his own process of self-identifying as gay. Zeus gradually came out to this classmate after realizing he felt similar to his classmate. Other peers, though not LGBTQ themselves, were unconditionally supportive. Brian shared he experienced “nothing but support from my peers”.

Notably, each participant found peer support after graduating high school and leaving their hometowns. Erica recalled her first interaction with a college peer, “one of the first things my RA ever

told me was that we didn't discriminate here, based on gender or sexual orientation or anything like that and that she wouldn't tolerate any kind of bullying." Mark stated at college, "there were so many new ideas that were introduced, so I felt like I was less ignorant, and more willing to accept myself as gay because I learned I wasn't quite as sinful or morally wrong as I had previously believed without research."

Though the majority of participants stated that their parents were somewhat ignorant of their sexual identity, one participant, Kyle, said that his parents have gradually grown to realize that his sexual identity is simply one facet of his identity. When talking about his parents' current attitude he stated,

"they've gotten over it, and they've realized that being gay is only a small part of who I am as a person, and that all the other good parts of me are still there; they haven't gone anywhere because I'm gay, that's just a small piece of the puzzle."

Kelly, an openly lesbian woman, struggled to reveal her sexual identity to her parents because her siblings had both self-identified as bisexual and her parents did not approve. However, when Kelly finally disclosed her sexual orientation to her parents she stated "it turned out my parents were okay with [being] gay, they weren't okay with bi, and that was the issue with my siblings."

4.3.2. Triumphs: Intrapersonal Processes

The other major subtheme that emerged was related to the intrapersonal processes of the participants. Participants described an awareness of their "true" sense of self, and process by which through reflection, they reached a point of self-acceptance, overcoming some of the pressures and stigma they experienced. After initial conflict within the self, several of the participants felt more at ease with themselves after self-identifying. Mark stated,

"I feel like I've been able to identify myself better as a person. I just know myself more than I ever did before. I feel like a lot of things in life became more clear afterwards and it definitely got rid of a piece of the puzzle that was perplexing me for quite a few years."

Similarly, Zeus, when asked about the positive experiences when coming out stated,

"I mean, being open in general is a level of self-acceptance. You call yourself a gay man...and it's a kind of final acceptance of who you are. And it's not a resistance against it, or a denial of it. So in that sense you are finally at peace with who you are...it's almost like the acknowledgment that you can be proud of who you are and not have to hide it or be fearful of it."

Similarly, Kelly stated, "I struggled with same sex attraction...now, I don't really necessarily think it's something to struggle with. I don't think there's anything wrong with it...". Each of the seven participants described similar processes of self-acceptance. The resiliency of the entire sample was evident in their ability to accept their emerging sense of self amidst the stigma of their rural context.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the interplay of the rural context and the development of identity. The narratives of seven lesbian and gay young adults were analyzed to gain greater insight into this developmental process. Two key themes emerged after examining the data—the trials and triumphs faced by the participants when coming out in the rural context. These two themes were further divided into subthemes that gave greater insight into the phenomenon studied.

Consistent with the existing research on the impact of the rural context on identity formation [11,13], more conservative values surrounding same-sex attractions and sexual behavior found in the rural context may complicate one's attempt to negotiate a positive sense of self. A history of church teachings condemning same-sex attractions and sexual behavior combined with a context of heteronormativity have created an environment in which sexual minority young adults may feel unsafe and unwelcomed. As a result, some sexual minority individuals hide their emerging sense of self, putting their same-sex attractions aside. Blending in to their environment and “passing” as a heterosexual may serve a self-protective role, affording sexual minorities in rural contexts some external protection [11,27]. However, this compartmentalization comes with a cost as they deny their true sense of self.

As such, perhaps the greatest struggle of the participants in the current study was that of internalized homophobia. Several participants shared self-loathing, fear and shame regarding their emerging sense of self. Participants noted they had learned the negative connotation with identifying as gay or lesbian in their rural and often, religious context. The messages taught throughout their rural communities, the pulpit, their schools and homes, were pointed; identifying as lesbian or gay was not accepted. Participants internalized these messages. As they increased in their own level of personal self-hatred and shame, it seems like a logical, self-protective move that they also increasingly isolated themselves from the community.

Participants did share their sense of isolation felt, particularly when coming out to individuals who did not meet their self-disclosure with warmth and acceptance, such as their families. This sense of isolation may have been exacerbated in the rural context given the dearth of LGBTQ support networks; often, sexual minority youth turn to LGBTQ support groups when facing rejection and denial at home [28]. For youth in the rural context, this might not be an option. Because of the stark lack of resources in their contexts, five of seven participants noted turning to the Internet to research and develop their newfound sexual identity. Gray [20] conducted a case study of two, rural gay males to examine the impact of the Internet on the development of a sexual identity. The author found that the participants found stereotypically biased information online about what it meant to be a “gay male”. Participants shared their own experiences conforming to some of these stereotypes during their coming out process, as that is the only information they had regarding what it “meant” to be gay. Similarly, participants in the current study utilized the Internet to explore and develop their own identity; through this exploration they were able to find a support system noticeably absent in their rural contexts.

The lack of support noted in this study highlights the importance of creating and/or making supportive individuals and networks more visible in rural areas. Providing factual information on sexual minority identities is crucial as many of the participants shared they did not know “gay existed”. Starting with the elementary schools, making information about sexual minority individuals and identities visible may make huge gains in normalizing a youth's feelings of “differentness” and thus decrease

stigma surrounding same-sex attracted identities. Further, providing factual information and training to teachers, school administrators and community leaders in rural areas might also be a beneficial “step” to making change in the overall climate for sexual minority individuals in rural contexts. These types of trainings might help our leaders become aware of the struggles experienced in the rural context when identifying as a sexual minority, and also encourage them to help create “safe-zones” and/or supportive groups for sexual minority youth in these area. For example, gay-straight alliances (GSA’s) are effective tools when utilized that provide support and education for youth and young adults who would otherwise be without it [14]. Further, as the majority of participants shared their parents were either naïve or ignorant regarding gay and lesbian sexual identities, it may be helpful to provide not only support for sexual minority youth themselves, but more resources for their families, so they could better understand and support their son or daughter. This increased knowledge can help break down some of the stumbling blocks experienced by sexual minority youth in rural areas.

While the participants each shared their painful experiences coming out in the rural context, it is important to note that they also shared stories of support, self-acceptance and resiliency as well. Similarly, Boulden’s [11] gay male participants reported enjoying the level of community connectedness found in their rural locations. One of the strengths of rural America is the depth and breadth of relationships that occur in these communities. As participants noted, a stigma existed due in part, to the lack of information available in rural contexts regarding LGBTQ identities. If systemic change could occur as noted previously, starting with the youngest generations, this community connectedness might serve a more protective role for sexual minority youth than currently reported. Future research might consider ways to build off of the strengths of the rural context, such as community connectedness, for intervention development.

Participants shared much of their trial narrative was tied to their identity as a rural resident; once participants moved out of their rural context, their support systems changed. This change of context dramatically impacted their story of coming out. Gorman-Murray [29] posited that individuals exploring an identity that is not affirmed in one context will search for a context that is more affirming to explore their sense of sexual identity. Lewis [30] noted that this process of migration is far from linear and can result in many pathways, including trying on new identities and/or a potential “reentry” into the metaphorical closet to negotiate the context the individual resides. For participants in the current study, their migration away from the rural context to a more liberal and/or accepting context was key in the participants’ own process of self-acceptance.

Perhaps the most hopeful and notable finding from the study was that every participant, in their own time, had reached a sense of self-acceptance despite the challenges that they faced when coming out. Each participant saw their sexual identity as an important part of themselves, strategically choosing environments and befriending individuals that would support their emerging sense of self. This is a testament to their resiliency in face of adversity. Despite feeling ostracized for their same-sex attractions, the seven participants in the current study negotiated the negative messages and heteronormative context to develop a life of authenticity. This finding can provide hope and promise to other lesbian or gay individuals in the midst of self-identifying in the rural context; the participants in the current study can attest, it truly does get better.

Throughout the participants' stories and the subthemes presented, the importance of context is highlighted. To ignore the interplay of the participant's rural upbringing, religious affiliation and/or sexual identity would lessen our understanding of this developmental process and do a disservice to individuals who identify as a sexual minority. With that said, it is recognized that there may be overlap between the experiences of sexual minority individuals raised in multiple contexts. For example, some of the religious pressures faced by participants are certainly not unique to only the rural context. However, it is possible that these stressors are exacerbated in the rural context, echoing some of the same messages found in the more fundamental religious denominations or other contexts with more conservative values. Making a definitive claim about this is beyond the scope of this study and its methodology.

6. Conclusions

The primary purpose of this study was to examine in-depth the experiences of the seven lesbian and gay young adult participants during a key developmental time period within a particular context. As Hammack and colleagues [31] noted, the goal of research with sexual minority individuals is to make sense of the "diverse specificity of the lived experience" as it both intersects with continually changing history and culture ([31], p. 286). As such, rather than making generalizable assertions about the experiences of all sexual minority individuals raised in a rural context, the goal of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in the lives of seven young adults currently undergoing the process of identity formation. It is acknowledged that the current study lacks the characteristics to make the data generalizable, including a small sample size, the use of convenience sampling, and the methodology chosen.

The current study makes a useful contribution to the literature in understanding the experiences of seven lesbian and gay emerging adults raised in the rural context during a key developmental time. The rural context may intersect with a sexual minority emerging adult's development in both positive and negative ways, including religiously, relationally, structurally, and intrapersonally. Future researchers might consider investigating the creation and effectiveness of support networks in rural contexts; the impact of community trainings; the experiences of transsexual, transgender and bisexual individuals in the rural context; and factors related to both risk and resiliency in rural sexual minority youth. Armed with this knowledge, we can make steps towards promoting the health and resiliency of sexual minority individuals raised in a rural context. We look forward to future contributions in this area.

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Author Contributions

Angie Dahl has been conducting research on LGB identity development and context over the past 9 years and has provided leadership for the study. Rachel Scott and Zachalee Peace have both served as

undergraduate student researchers on this study, helping with study design, data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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