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Microaggressions: The Lived Experiences of LGBT Graduate  
Students at a Southern University

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Counselor Education

by

Amy Broadwater  
Eckerd College  
Bachelor of Arts in Human Development, 2014  
Missouri State University  
Master of Science in Mental Health Counseling, 2017

July 2020  
University of Arkansas

This dissertation proposal is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Kristin Higgins, Ph.D.  
Dissertation Director

---

Erin Kern Popejoy, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Danette Horne, Ph.D.  
Committee Member

---

Paul Blisard, Ed.D.  
Committee Member

## **ABSTRACT**

Established microaggression research highlights the internalized effects of microaggressive experiences. Microaggressions have been linked to PTSD, identity development difficulties, depression, low-self-esteem, anxiety, and relationship difficulties. Research regarding members of the LGBT community suggests LGBT students face adversity in systems of higher education. In fact, existing literature iterates that among marginalized and underrepresented groups, that college climates are least accepting of people who are LGBT. Further research establishes that perceived negative campus climates can affect how well LGBT students do in the academic arena and could affect attrition if not dealt with by administration. Previous studies have highlighted LGBT undergraduate students' experience of microaggressions across college campuses. In counselor education, there have been three studies done within in the last 30 years involving LGBT graduate students in counselor education programs and only one dealt specifically with microaggressions. There is also little to no research on how intersecting identities may affect LGBT graduate students' experience of microaggressions. The literature suggests that belonging to more than one oppressed group may compound the impact of LGBT microaggressions.

The purpose of this study was to explore LGBT graduate students' lived experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. Eight participants voluntarily participated in this qualitative study. A transcendental phenomenological research approach guided this study. Utilizing phenomenological reduction, themes were identified from individual and group interviews. The identified themes elucidated the experiences of microaggressions on LGBT graduate students and the impact of campus climate on LGBT graduate students as a result of microaggressions. The findings reveal implications for campus-wide microaggression trainings

for faculty, staff, and students; a centralized LGBT specific center; more inclusive language in emails and communication from a top down perspective, and more representation and visibility in administration, faculty, and staff. These implementations would improve campus experiences for LGBT graduate students and greatly benefit LGBT students.

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## **DEDICATION**

For my Dad, Polly, and Alex

*“The woods are lovely, dark and deep, but I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep. And miles to go before I sleep.”*

-Robert Frost, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty-five years, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals have slowly gained more social acceptance and increased civil rights (Renn, 2017). For example, the diagnostic criteria for Homosexuality, as a mental health disorder, was completely removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed., rev.; *DSM-III-R*; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1987. And the World Health Organization removed Homosexuality from ICD-10 classification in 1992. In 1993, Bill Clinton signed a law known as Department of Defense Directive 1304.26 (Don't Ask Don't Tell), which theoretically lifted a ban on homosexual service in the military instituted during WWII and directed personnel not to pursue or harass anyone about their sexual orientation. Inadvertently, this policy created a barrier for LGBT individuals to be open about their identity or to even speak about medical concerns without fear of legal recrimination. In 2010, this directive was repealed, giving LGBTs the right to serve openly in the military without fear of legal consequences (Don't Ask Don't Tell Repeal Act of 2010).

Finally, in 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States declared marriage as a right protected under the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment of the Constitution and therefore same-sex marriage must be recognized in all states (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015). Effectively, this landmark decision legalized same-sex marriage in the United States. Many of these victories brought a decrease in blatant discrimination and an overall increase in tolerance by the general public of LGBT individuals, as well as advancing LGBT civil rights (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Interestingly, these shifts were also thought to increase more covert microaggressions (Sue, 2010b).

Current political events continue to impact social environments and institutions, as well as policies. Under this administration there have been thirty-eight actions taken against LGBT members and their civil rights (deVogue, Mallonee, & Grinberg, 2017). Examples include an

executive order prohibiting transgender individuals from serving in the military, withdrawal of federal protections for transgender students to use the bathroom of their choice, and removal of requirement of federal contractors to be in compliance with non-discrimination policies against LGBT individuals (Villareal, 2017). At present, thirty-two states do not have LGBT discrimination protections related to housing, employment, credit, federal funding, and students within education systems. In other words, in many states it is legal to discriminate in employment, education, and housing based on sexual orientation and or gender identity (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). LGBT prejudice and discrimination continue to be at the forefront of cultural, legal, and educational arenas in this country. Despite many overt gains in recent years, it is clear homophobia persists in and outside of education systems (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Traditionally, university campuses have been viewed as “complex social systems defined by the relationships between the people, bureaucratic procedures, structural arrangements, institutional goals and values, traditions, and larger socio-historical environments” (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998, p. 296). According to the national research study, *2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People*, published by Campus Pride, members of the LGBT community continue to face adversity in systems of higher education (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). The report also indicates that university leaders struggle with creating a welcoming and safe environment for LGBT members (Rankin, et al., 2010). In fact, Rankin et al. (2010) found that among marginalized and underrepresented groups that the college climate “was ‘least accepting’ of people who are LGBT” (p.30).

The impact of a less than welcoming campus climate has been shown to produce negative outcomes for LGBT students. Platt and Lenzen (2013) link these negative outcomes with heterosexism. *Heterosexism* according to Blumenfeld (2010), refers to “the overarching system of advantages bestowed upon heterosexuals based on the institutionalization of heterosexual norms or standards and is founded on the ideology that all people are or should be heterosexual” (p.373). Heterosexism can manifest in several ways with the most prominent being *microaggressions*. Sue (2010a) defines microaggressions as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p. 3).

Research shows that microaggressions experienced by LGBT individuals are linked to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), identity development difficulties, depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, and relationship difficulties (Nadal, 2013; Wright & Wegner, 2012). Microaggressions are noted to be particularly harmful because they can be so subtle the victim is left to doubt whether it was actually a microaggression motivated by their minority status (Sue, 2010a). Other times, microaggressions can be overt and obvious, supported by systems of power in place (Nadal, 2013). For students, perceived negative campus climates can affect how well they do in the academic arena (Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005). Research suggests that those who experience microaggressions may feel more isolated and marginalized if staff or faculty do not address the microaggressions (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). If microaggressions persist or are frequent, students may disengage from their programs, thus affecting attrition. LGBT students inherently face microaggressions and discrimination outside of academia, as well. Balsam et al. (2011) indicated that belonging to more than one oppressed group may compound the impact of LGBT microaggressions.



## **Purpose of Study**

According to Blumenfeld (2012), lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students appear more visible on college campuses than ever before in the history of the United States. However, this population remains minoritized in relation to the majority cisgender, heterosexual student body. This group also continues to be marginalized, which means they are the targets of discrimination and oppression by those in positions of power (Blumenfeld, 2012). There has been a myriad of research around some of the difficulties that LGBT students deal with on university campuses (Nadal, 2013; Plat & Lenzen, 2013; Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Wright & Wegner, 2012). Discrimination and homophobia are factors identified in those studies, however, LGBT microaggressions in the South have not been explored specific to LGBT students. There is a dearth of literature on LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions and how they are impacted at the intersection of multiple identities.

The purpose of this study is to explore LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions at a Southern university. The researcher hopes to attain a greater level of insight into experiences of LGBT graduate students (and intersecting identities) in order to help elucidate campus climate at this university, add to higher education literature, and to the field of counseling. In chapter five, suggestions are offered for future research, as well as potential policy changes that may help improve LGBT student's experience on this campus, as well as other university campuses.

## **Research Questions**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenological research guides a qualitative study most appropriately by asking a foundational question from which sub-questions are then created. The following research question guide this study:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university?

In order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experiences of microaggressions within the context of intersecting identities at a Southern university?
2. How do LGBT graduate students describe the personal impact of microaggressions at a Southern university?
3. How do LGBT graduate students describe their perception of campus climate at a Southern university, as a result of microaggressions?

## **Need for the Study**

The existing literature on the harmful experience of LGBT microaggressions within higher education highlights the internalized effects of those experiences (Nadal, 2013; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). Because microaggressions often occur within a larger system and can sometimes be part of the culture of higher education, LGBT students are more likely to internalize their experiences rather than speak up about them (Wegner, 2014). Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of these LGBT graduate students' experience could be beneficial not only to this Southern university, other universities, but also to the field of counseling and counselor education. Illuminating these experiences could potentially help effect change on a systemic level, inform classroom and program environments, and possibly inform counseling and

counselor education. Since 2013, the association for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in counseling competencies (ALGBTICC) for counseling with lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, inter sex, and ally individuals (LGBQIQA) has provided a list of competencies for counselors (and counselor educators). These competencies request counselors to be aware of and have knowledge of how experiences of oppression, stereotyping, discrimination, and systems of power affect LGBT members (Harper et al., 2013).

This researcher seeks to understand and provide knowledge of discriminatory practices and experiences specific to LGBT graduate students at a Southern university. While previous studies have addressed LGBT undergraduate difficulties on college campuses, further exploration of the experience of microaggressions is warranted. Homophobia and discrimination were identified in those previous studies, however, LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university have not been explored. There is also a paucity in the literature as to how intersecting identities may impact LGBT graduate students' experience of microaggressions.

### **Researcher Position in the Study**

I identify as an able, white, middle aged, LGBT graduate student working on my doctoral degree in a counselor education program at a Southern university. My god-brother, a hemophiliac, passed away from AIDS at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Our families experienced micro-aggressions and discrimination from healthcare workers, life-long friends, neighbors, family members, and the Christian Church. I was a freshman in college, grappling with grief and coming to terms with my own sexual orientation. Because AIDS was so firmly tied to homosexuality, this news was not well received by family or friends, many of whom walked away. At the time, I was working towards a degree in early childhood education and when I started my student teaching, I was informed I could not be an out lesbian and teach

children due to morality clauses in teacher contracts. I was sent to a Christian conversion program in order to eradicate the gay but did not last long there. The oppression and shame became internalized and I eventually went back into the closet and denial.

I finally came out again to myself and others in my mid 40s while I was in graduate school, working on my master's degree in a small southwestern university. An instructor in a professional and personal development class invited me to consider that it was not a choice and further invited me to just breathe into the '*be*' of me. It was a transformative moment that revolutionized my life. As I began to work through the internalized messages and shame, I lost a lot of fear and came out to every person in my life, including my 88 year old grandmother and the pastor of my family's church. I was no longer willing to betray myself in any way. During the time my spouse and I were dating, LGBT marriage became legal and we were married shortly afterwards.

Living in a small southwestern town brought many experiences of discrimination and homophobia including: having people from a local Christian church picketing homosexuality with signs outside a restaurant we were eating at, being refused service at or asked to leave several other restaurants, and being spit on and called derogatory names while I waited for my wife to pick me up from school on more than one occasion. However, the microaggressions that occurred as part of systems of power within the university, were far less overt and at times more painful and oppressive. I have experienced microaggressions in and out of the classroom, as both a master's degree student and a doctoral student. I have also experienced support within both programs.

Even though I have overcome many obstacles, I understand the ways in which I am also privileged. I have been exposed to opportunities I may not have had if I had not been born white and able-bodied. My LGBT identity has been the most salient of my identities to me, even

though I have experienced oppression on many levels because of it. I have also experienced marginalization as a result of age and gender. Because of my experiences, I have a deeper understanding of the power of context at the intersection of my own identities.

My experiences have shaped my perception of LGBT microaggressions in higher education and may help me engage my participants on a deeper level. However, these experiences also have the potential to inhibit my understanding of participant's experience as well as bias my data collection and analysis. I acknowledge that other LGBT graduate students may have vastly different experiences than my own. Each participant in this study will have their own unique story to tell and to minimize the imposition of my own biases during data collection and analysis, I plan to use peer debriefing, external auditor, and reflexive journaling as necessary.

### **Assumptions**

In relation to the topic of the study, I openly acknowledge my position and assume by doing so researcher bias will be minimized and the data will reveal participant experiences. For the purpose of this study, the following assumptions are also identifiable: All participants will respond candidly about their perceptions and take part out of a voluntary position unless they remove themselves from the study. Lastly, the participants will be able to provide data, by explicitly describing their experiences of LGBT microaggressions, that will be beneficial to higher education and counselors who work with this population.

### **Definition of Terms**

A brief exploration of the definitions of specific terms pertinent to this paper on microaggressions will be provided in the following paragraphs. Terms central to understanding LGBT microaggressions include: *cisgender*, *cissexism*, *gender identity*, *heteronormative*, *heterosexism*, *LGBT*, *microaggressions*, and *sexual orientation*.

## **Cisgender**

*Cisgender* is a term that was first used Carl Buijs, from the Netherlands, in 1995. It is derived from the Latin prefix 'cis' which means 'not across' or 'on the side of.' Cisgender is utilized to describe people who identify with the sex they were assigned at birth (Serano, 2007).

## **Cissexism**

According to Bauer and Hammond (2015), *cissexism* includes anti-transgender attitudes coupled with systemic policies that marginalize transgender individuals. In other words, cissexism refers to systemic oppression that seeks to use power, privilege, and essentialism to exclude trans identities. Cissexism can also occur on an individual basis and is more commonly referred to as *cissexist bias* or *prejudice* to denote the difference between systemic and individual (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010).

## **Gender Identity**

According to GLAAD (2016), gender identity is a "person's internal, deeply held sense of gender" (p.6). This does not have to match the gender designated on birth based on dominant sex organs. Gender identity may also be non-binary and not ascribe to male or female typifications (GLAAD, 2016).

## **Heteronormative**

*Heteronormative* is a term that refers to the idea of the normal family being between two cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, and monogamous individuals. Heteronormative is a notion sanctioned by privileged groups and members of a given society. According to McNeill (2013), heteronormative connotes an ideal of dominant culture and is inclusive of sexual orientation, class, race, as well as other characteristics (Nadal, 2013).

## **Heterosexism**

*Heterosexism*, according to Blumenfeld (2010), refers to “the overarching system of advantages bestowed upon heterosexuals based on the institutionalization of heterosexual norms or standards and is founded on the ideology that all people are or should be heterosexual” (p.373). In other words, it is the systemic marginalization and discrimination against anyone not identifying as heterosexual. According to Dermer et al. (2010), individual bias and discrimination is differentiated and referred to as sexual prejudice.

## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT)**

*Lesbian* is a sexual orientation term, according to GLAAD (2016), which refers to a woman with “enduring physical, romantic, and/or attraction to other women” (p.6).

*Gay* is a sexual orientation term which refers to men with “enduring physical romantic, and/or emotional attraction to other men” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 6).

*Bisexual* is a sexual orientation term which refers to individuals who have “the capacity to form enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attractions to those of the same gender or those of the opposite gender” (GLAAD, 2016, p. 6).

*Transgender* is an umbrella gender identity term according to GLAAD (2016), which refers to “people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth” (p.6). It is important to note that transgender, as a gender identity, is not dependent upon physical appearance or medical procedures.

For the purpose of this study, the term LGBT will be used as a broad term to describe a group of marginalized people who are identified by their sexual orientation and gender identity. This will be done with the understanding that there are many intersecting and sub-identities within the acronym LGBT.

## **Microaggressions**

*Microaggressions* are defined by Sue (2010) as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p. 3).

## **Sexual Orientation**

*Sexual orientation* refers to an individual’s “enduring physical, romantic, and/or emotional attraction to another person” (GLAAD, 2016, p.6).

## **Summary and Dissertation Overview**

In this initial chapter, I have provided a brief introduction of the concept of LGBT microaggressions, how microaggressions impact the well-being of LGBT individuals, and noted the gap in the literature about LGBT microaggressions in graduate school. Chapter two includes a discussion of the relevant literature regarding microaggressions, LGBT microaggressions, LGBT identity development, and LGBT microaggressions in higher education. Chapter three examines the selected methodology of transcendental phenomenological analysis and discusses the process of conducting this study. In chapter four, an overview of the participants and presentation of themes that emerged from the data are presented. Lastly, chapter five includes a discussion of research findings and implications of these findings for higher education, counseling, and for future research.



## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The principal ambition of this study is to examine LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions at a Southern university. In this chapter, an overview of relevant literature on microaggressions, LGBT microaggressions, and LGBT student's experience of microaggressions in higher education will be provided. This review will begin with a brief discussion of microaggressions, followed by an in-depth exploration of LGBT microaggressions. The final focus will be a discussion of the existing literature on LGBT students' experiences of microaggressions and the need for further research on the experiences of LGBT graduate students and microaggressions. This is a comprehensive study of the literature on microaggressions, LGBT microaggressions, and LGBT student experiences of microaggressions in higher education. Furthermore, this review will serve as a contextual framework for the research questions at the heart of this study (mentioned in the previous chapter) and help elucidate further areas for possible future study.

### **Microaggressions**

According to Sue (2010a), *microaggressions* are defined as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p. 3). Microaggressions, types, and themes as they were originally identified by Sue et al. (2007) will be explored and then followed by a discussion of LGBT microaggression taxonomy.

### **Origin of Microaggressions**

Historically, microaggression research and literature was focused on the perspectives of racial minorities. In early research, microaggressions were spoken of in terms of insults, offensive and/or derogatory remarks, subtle bias, and verbal harassment (Herek, 1993; Rankin,

2003). In fact, when the concept of microaggressions was first introduced, it was defined as, “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are ‘put downs’” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978 p. 66). Racial microaggressions have been defined by others, more recently, as racially related attitudes and/or acts perceived as hostile or subtle (verbal or non-verbal) racial insults experienced by people on a repeated basis (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). These ideas of racial microaggressions are congruent with other concepts of covert racism including everyday discrimination and perceived discrimination (Moradi & Risco, 2006; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997).

Even though Dr. Chester Pierce (1978) originated the term *microaggression*, it did not become operationalized until Derald Sue (2007) and his colleagues created a classification system, or taxonomy for microaggressions. Unfortunately, until that point, there was not much in the way of significant professional literature on the subject. However, once Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin (2007) utilized the term, a taxonomy was created. It was initially created in order to better understand how subtle bias and racism could be perpetrated by white counseling professionals. The work Sue et al. (2007) put forth on microaggressions also suggested applicability towards many forms of minority membership (Sue et al, 2007; Nadal, 2013).

### **Taxonomy of Microaggressions**

In *Microaggressions and Marginality*, Sue’s (2010a) critical work, he offered a rudimentary definition of microaggressions as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership” (p.3). In order to completely examine microaggressions, Sue (2010a) posited

them in terms of oppression and marginalization. He described the way in which microaggressions operate as a means for inventing the idea of “us” and “them” also known as othering. Microaggressions also have an invisible nature which creates the person committing them from being unable to recognize the impact of them. In other words, perpetrators do not see their participation in creating psychological dilemmas or minorities or their part in creating disparity in employment, healthcare, and education. The invisibility factor makes microaggressions easy to explain away or deny (Sue et al, 2007). Microaggressions are classified into three different types with their own distinct levels: *microinsults*, *microinvalidations*, and *microassaults* (Sue, 2010a).

**Microinsults.** Sue (2010a) defined microinsults as “communications that convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person’s racial heritage” (p.29). Furthermore, microinsults are often subtle and outside the awareness of the perpetrator and may not be expressed with harmful intentions. A common form of microinsults is stereotyping or making implications that members of a group are similar (e.g., calling a person of color articulate). Microinsults may also infer that members of other groups do not deserve equal treatment or are somehow inferior (e.g., ignoring a disabled coworker). Microinsults are the most common and tricky microaggression. Overall, they convey contempt and disrespect for the “other.”

**Microinvalidations.** Sue (2010a) described microinvalidations as the most dangerously subtle form of microaggressions. He defined them as a form of “communications that exclude, negates or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality” of members of a minority group. Microinvalidations may or may not be unconscious, however they can be particularly harmful due to the ability of majority groups to define reality for minority groups. In essence, these often-unconscious comments or actions serve to erase or even silence the experiences of others (Sue, 2010a). A common example of microinvalidations occurs whenever a

person from a minority group reports an act of discrimination and are told by someone in a majority group that they are being too sensitive or that the discrimination did not happen. Such responses deny not only the impact but also the minority person's experience.

**Microassaults.** According to Sue (2010a), microassaults are conscious biases expressed with words or actions against a minority member's identity. Sue (2010a) iterated that these are understood to be active manifestations of bigotry and can include name calling and avoidant behavior, as well as purposeful acts of discrimination. He furthered that microassaults resemble "old fashioned" racism on an individual basis (Sue, 2007). These interactions are intended to threaten and/or intimidate minority members. Generally, microassaults are expressed in ways that allow the perpetrator some level of anonymity. Sue et al. (2007) state the danger inherent to microassaults are that "people are likely to hold notions of minority inferiority privately and will only display them publicly when they lose control or feel relatively safe to engage in a microassault" (p.274). Loss of control could be due to intense emotions such as rage or terror or the influence of drugs or alcohol (Sue & Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008). Some common microassaults are deliberately serving White patrons before minority patrons, displaying signs associated with discrimination such as a swastika or noose, referring to someone as "Oriental" or "colored" or using racial slurs or epithets (Sue et al., 2007).

**Themes.** As a result of two focus groups with Asian-Americans, Sue et al. (2007), described nine specific themes that epitomize racial microaggressions. They include: *alien in own land/foreigner*, *ascription of intelligence*, *color blind*, *criminality/deviance*, *denial of racism*, *myth of meritocracy*, *pathologizing cultural values/ communication styles*, *second class citizenship*, and *environmental microaggressions* (Sue et al., 2007; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012). The *alien in own land/foreigner* theme involves assumptions that persons of color, Latinx Americans, or Asian Americans must be in another country and are therefore not

‘real’ Americans. This can also appear when perpetrators treat minorities as if they do not belong. The second theme of *ascription of intelligence* refers to assumptions of lower intelligence solely based on race. *Color Blindness* occurs when White people attempt to deny the existence of racism in general or their own. It is an attempt to neutralize a discussion by taking color out of it and claiming not to see it.

The fourth theme, *criminality/deviance* occurs when perpetrators assume people of color are in some way deviant, dangerous, or criminal. *Denial of individual racism* is descriptive of when a majority member or white perpetrators refuse to acknowledge they have any prejudice towards members of other racial groups. *Myth of meritocracy* is based on an assumption that those from minority races who succeed only do so because of special treatment or affirmative action. This involves majority members who assume people of color are lazy and/or incompetent. The seventh theme, *pathologizing cultural values/communication styles*, is the assumption or belief that non-dominant cultures are inferior and need to assimilate to dominate culture. *Second-class citizen* describes preferential treatment of those in dominant culture over those in minority culture. This causes those in minority culture to have less privilege or advantages than those in majority culture. And lastly, *environmental microaggressions or invalidations* refer to microaggressions that may be more apparent on a systemic level. This happens when there is no person from minority culture represented in a position of power (Sue, et al., 2007; Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012).

The themes originally set forth by Sue et al. (2007) were intended to describe microaggressions that were the most frequently experienced by ethnic or racial minorities. Sue, Capodilupo, and Holder (2008) found that different minority cultures experience these thematic microaggressions at different intensities. For example, Latinx Americans may experience ‘alien in own land’ microaggressions more often than African Americans. However, African

Americans experience ‘criminality’ more than Asian Americans (Torres-Harding, Andrade, & Romero Diaz, 2012). In other words, there are many different ways in which individuals experience each of these themes or microaggressions and they can negatively impact an individual’s sense of worth and self (Sue, 2010a).

### **LGBT Microaggressions**

As stated previously, most of the literature on microaggression is in reference to racial and ethnic minorities. However, much of this research has applications within sexual orientation and gender identity minorities (Nadal, Rivera, & Corpus, 2010; Sue, 2010b). There has been some public discussion in recent years about T (transgender) not being a sexual orientation and thus not belonging on the LGB (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual) initials. This author has decided to include transgender (T) because, although not a sexual orientation, there are some inherent relationships between LGB and T communities. Furthermore, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) is a term that was thoughtfully and respectfully chosen to encompass both sexual orientation and gender identity and will be used throughout this paper as a way to identify both.

According to Nadal et al. (2016), LGBT microaggressions are defined as, “brief and commonplace slights and insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative heterosexist, homophobic, transphobic slights and insults towards gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people” (p. 492). In 2015, LGBT individuals were granted the right to be married and yet due to the current anti-LGBT political climate, microaggressions based on sexual orientation or gender identity appear to be more overt (Nadal et al., 2016). These discriminations continue to follow the three types previously outlined in regard to racial and ethnic microaggressions: microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults (Sue, 2010b).

## Themes

The themes of LGBT microaggressions differ from the themes of racial or ethnic microaggression themes. Sue (2010b) identified the following themes: *heterosexist/transphobic language, endorsement of heteronormative culture, sinfulness, assumption of abnormality, denial of individual heterosexism, oversexualization, and homophobia* (Sue, 2010b; Nadal et al., 2010). Nadal (2013) added the theme: *physical threat or harassment*. Platt and Lenzen (2013) completed another study in an attempt to add more contextual validity to Sue's (2010b) seven LGBT microaggression themes. Five of the themes they found were consistent with Sue's (2010b) findings: endorsement of heterosexist language, endorsement of heteronormative culture, sinfulness, oversexualization, and homophobia (Platt & Lenzen, 2013). One theme from Sue's (2010b) study, LGBT identity as abnormal, was not found and there is a possibility this may indicate the beginning of a cultural shift. Platt and Lenzen (2013) also identified two additional themes: undersexualization and microaggressions in the form of *humor*. The following table (Table 1) illustrates the microaggression themes taxonomy:

Table 1.  
*LGBT Microaggression Theme Taxonomies*

	Sue (2010b)	Nadal et al. (2010)	Platt & Lenzen (2013)
Themes	Heterosexist Terminology	Heterosexist or transphobic terminology	Heterosexist terminology
	Endorsement of heteronormative culture	Endorsement of heteronormative or gender normative culture	Endorsement of heteronormative culture
	Sinfulness	Discomfort/disapproval of LGBT experience	Discomfort/Disapproval of LGBT experience
	Assumption of Abnormality	Assumption of sexual pathology/abnormality	
	Denial of individual heterosexism	Denial of individual heterosexism	Denial of reality of heterosexism
	Oversexualization	Exoticization	Exoticization
	Homophobia	Assumption of universal LGBT experience	Assumption of universal LGBT experience
		Nadal (2013) Physical threat or harassment	Undersexualization
			Microaggressions as humor



*Heterosexist or transphobic language* could be overt in terms of utilization of derogatory LGBT terms intended to insult or injure relative to meaning including mis-gendering an individual who goes by specific pronouns. Heterosexist/cis-sexist language can also take on more subtle forms that involve referring to sexual or gender identity preference, rather than sexual orientation or gender identity (Sue, 2010b). Another example is automatically assuming a spouse is of the opposite sex. The second theme, *endorsement of heteronormative culture* means to assume that heterosexuality is the natural sexuality and this theme of microaggression overlooks diverse experiences. This theme is furthered by the lack of visibility of LGBT representation in society and education at every level. It can occur when LGBT individuals are pressured to act heterosexual or cis-gendered (Nadal, 2013). *Sinfulness* stems from religious doctrine in some Christian churches that condemns homosexuality. Some churches also equate LGBT with pedophilia, bestiality, and overall depravity (Sue, 2010b). Individuals who express strong sinfulness beliefs toward LGBT individuals often do so because they feel protected by God and the nature of their church membership (Super & Jacobson, 2011). Frequently, sinfulness can be environmental, as well as cultural, and systemic microaggressions (Sue, 2010b).

The fourth theme of LGBT microaggressions is *assumption of abnormality*. This theme is closely related to the fact that homosexuality has been seen as a mental disorder for years. All diagnostic criteria for Homosexuality was completely removed from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd ed., rev.; *DSM-III-R*; American Psychiatric Association, 1987) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1987. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) removed homosexuality from ICD-10 classification in 1992. Despite these changes, the assumption of abnormality persists (Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011). *Denial of individual heterosexism* happens when people who belong to heteronormative culture claim to not be biased and have an inability to address their own prejudice. Often

statements such as, “I don’t see how who you sleep with matters” or “I know lots of gay people” (Sue, 2010b). The sixth theme of LGBT microaggression is *oversexualization*. This theme involves oversimplifying an individual and defining them as only sexual being. Hyper focus on sexuality ignores the scope of an individual’s being, their relationships, and can create invalidating experiences as some heterosexual individuals may attempt to discuss highly private sexual matters with LGBT individuals (Sue, 2010b). Conversely, Platt and Lenzen (2013) discovered the theme of *undersexualization*. This microaggression is an assumption that an LGBT individual may just be going through a phase and are not really LGBT. This microaggression reinforces the idea of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ and the message that same-sex relationships are not acceptable. In other words, as long as an LGBT individual is not dating someone, then there are no issues (Platt & Lenzen, 2013).

*Homophobia* is the seventh microaggression theme mentioned by Sue (2010b). Shelton and Delgado-Romero (2011) describe homophobia as an irrational fear of LGBT individuals. Microaggressions in this category can be verbal or non-verbal, implicit or explicit and often involve fear of being close to LGBT individuals. Homophobia is commonly manifested in some individuals preventing children from spending time with LGBT friends or family lest they be recruited into the lifestyle or molested (Sue, 2010b). Nakamura and Zea (2010) posit another example of homophobia as the irrational belief that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is spread by LGBT on purpose.

Platt and Lenzen (2013) identified a final theme of *microaggressions as humor*. This is a commonplace microaggression delivered in a humorous and or joking manner in an attempt to make the LGBT microaggression comment more acceptable. The perpetrator may find the comments funny but the LGBT individual to whom they are delivered may find the comments demeaning or even harmful. This theme stands out as a reminder that there are many different

fashions in which LGBT microaggression are delivered (Platt & Lenzen, 2013). Another example of a style in which LGBT microaggressions are delivered was in a theme found by Nadal (2013): *physical threat or harassment*. When LGBT microaggressions are delivered in this fashion, they are usually tied to an irrational fear, belief, or ideology. The threat of physical harm and harassment remain real and LGBT are a vulnerable population due to marginalization and lack of majority privilege (Nadal, 2013).

### **Impacts of LGBT Microaggressions**

According to King (2005), discrimination creates stress and has been shown to decrease mental well-being. Gender identity and sexual orientation microaggressions are forms of discrimination. Although they are detrimental to individuals and groups, some microaggressions may appear to be harmless and are routinely underreported (McCabe, Dragowski, & Robinson, 2013). The nature of microaggressions may be constant and continual and the cumulative effect of these experiences can have varying negative impacts including lower self-esteem, feelings of isolation, lower sense of well-being, shorter life expectancies, and physical health issues, (Nadal et al., 2011, Sue, 2010a). LGBT microaggressive experiences were even linked with posttraumatic symptoms in a recent study by Robinson (2014). The study found the strong sense of disempowerment or helplessness that resulted from systemic oppression and discrimination could be classified as trauma.

While research on microaggressions and LGBT microaggressions has increased significantly over the last 10 years, there is a lack of research regarding how LGBT individuals experience and make sense of microaggressions. There is a plethora of research on the general deleterious effects of microaggressions. However, more specific literature on the long-term outcome or effects of LGBT microaggressions is fairly limited and nearly non-existent. For the purposes of this study, this section will provide a brief overview of the impacts of LGBT

microaggressions, as outlined by Sue (2010b), who identified four major impact areas: 1) visibility, level of being in the closet; 2) internalized homophobia or stigma; 3) identity development; and 4) psychological distress/mental health issues.

### **Visibility**

Sue (2010b) found that the results of being in the closet can lead to fear, isolation, and exhaustion. The term “in the closet”, as defined by Pachankis, Cochran, and Mays (2015), refers to individuals who have not shared their identity with other people. Sue (2010b) posited there are two causative experiences that create LGBT individuals desire to hide their identity: The first set of experiences are in relation to conflict between expectations and reality of feelings. According to Sue (2010b), individuals who find themselves experiencing such a conflict may inhibit their sexual or gender identity development, deny their own sexual or gender identity, “and engage in self-deception” (p. 198). The inhibition or disruption of sexual or gender identity development, self-deception, and denial of sexual orientation or gender identity may lead to further feelings of confusion, isolation, and psychological distress (Sue, 2010b). The second set of experiences are related to individuals who may accept their sexual orientation or gender identity but may be in a position that prohibits disclosure due to real or imagined threats of harm. Sue (2010b) further posited that when an LGBT individual is faced with the choice of silence or harm, it can be damaging to the individual’s sense of integrity which can also create self-anger or even self-hatred.

### **Internalized Homophobia/Transphobia**

According to Sue (2010b), this concept is about the internalization of homophobic/transphobic, heterosexist/cissexist language and behaviors experienced in the world context of the individual. This is the most “insidious and harmful outcome” (Sue, 2010b, p. 199). The two major results of internalized homo/transphobia are identity separation and identity

derogation. Sue (2010b) indicated that identity separation is characterized by an individual separating their sexual orientation or gender identity from their sense of self. This results in increased feelings of conflict, otherness, and loneliness. The ensuing conflict and separation, according to Sue (2010b), is derived from the struggle to see self as “good, moral, worthwhile,” against feelings of LGBT identity as “immoral, indecent, and repugnant” (p. 199). The term identity derogation or denigration encompasses the recognition of sexual orientation or gender identity by the individual and the conflict of guilt or repugnance towards the identity. This is experienced internally, regarding self, and externally in relation to others. Over a period of time, this state of turmoil can take a toll on the well-being of the individual (Sue, 2010b).

### **Identity Development**

Sue (2010b) considered the identity development of LGBT individuals as a sometimes vulnerable but healthy journey, in which society can and does cause conflict and disruption. Immediate damage and common disruptions are caused by framing the healthy process of exploration of sexual and gender identity as a “passing phase.” Furthermore, Sue (2010b) viewed LGBT identity development through the lens of Cass (1979), which is discussed later in this review. Lastly, Sue (2010b) described hetero/cissexism as such an impactful force that it can seriously disrupt identity development. He felt many may not make it out of the first stage of development and still others “may be stuck in earlier stages throughout their lives” (p.203).

### **Psychological Distress**

Many LGBT individuals suffer from psychological distress and/or mental health disorders. To be clear, LGBT individuals are not inherently mentally ill but living in a hetero/cissexist society can produce depression and anxiety as well as lead to substance abuse (Sue, 2010b). Many LGBT individuals suffer from minority stress which Wegner (2014) defined as the “excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a

result of their social minority position” (p.3). Wegner (2014) indicated that the amount of minority stress an LGBT individual may experience is affected by the degree of perceived homo/trans negativity. This homo/trans negativity negativity is related to anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation (Robins & Rubin, 2015; Wegner, 2014).

### **Microaggression Research**

Since Sue et al. (2007) put forth their illuminating work, more research has been conducted to test and extend microaggression theory. Most notably, the microaggression construct has been expounded upon to include expressions of bias regarding other marginalized groups including women, people with mental illness, immigrants, Muslims, and folks who identify as LGBT (Platt & Lenzen, 2013; Nadal, 2013; Robins & Rubin, 2015). There is an extensive body of literature that examines general microaggression experiences and effects on well-being.

Exposure to microaggressions has been linked to depression, emotional distress, lower self-esteem, mental health issues, somatic complaints, and suicidal ideation (Robinson & Rubin, 2015). Research findings are suggestive that the experience of LGBT microaggressions may be mitigated by intersecting identities of the individual (Balsam et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2015). Age, race, religion, gender-identity, and identity visibility may all be influential factors in experiences of microaggressions by LGBT individuals. In other words, LGBT individuals do not experience microaggressions uniformly (Nadal et al., 2015).

### **LGBT Identity Development**

The earliest theories of identity development were almost exclusively based on studies of white males. As underrepresented groups began to be researched, starting with women and moving out to individuals of color, LGB identity development theories were birthed. Many of the pioneering researchers of LGB identity development either later expanded theories to include

gender identity development or created new ones. The literature regarding sexual and gender identity development models is rife and expansive, however, for the scope and purpose of this study, the discussion will be contained to a broad overview of the most seminal models (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

### **Sexual Identity Development**

According to an examination of sexual identity development models by Bilodeau and Renn (2005), models can be divided into stage (linear) and lifespan (non-linear) models. The main emphasis of stage models is on progression through each stage as individuals develop their sexual identity. One of the criticisms of stage models is that they imply an endpoint arrival and view that destination as the “healthiest outcome of identity development” (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005, p. 35). Another important criticism of the early stage models was they did not consider cultural or demographic factors in relation to their influence on LGBT identity formation and development (Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014).

Cass (1979) developed the Homosexual Identity Development model, which was a six stage model to help illustrate the coming out process for LGB individuals. The six stages are: identity questioning, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Although the model by Cass has been widely criticized for not considering the ever expanding diversity within LGBT communities and for being too shortsighted and linear, it set an important stage for LGBT scholarly research (Renn, 2007). Criticisms aside, the Cass model is still considered the most widely utilized stage model for sexual identity development and is regarded as the primary foundation for subsequent LGBT identity development theory (Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014).

Researchers expanded on Cass’s work by more closely examining the coming out process and inclusion of bisexual individuals (Pope & Reynolds, 1991). Other notable developmental

models include Troiden's (1989) four stage model which acknowledged back and forth movement between stages. D'Augelli (1994) constructed a six task lifespan developmental model that highlighted the pertinence of environmental/cultural factors on identity development. The six developmental tasks D'Augelli (1994) outlined are: departure from heterosexual identity, development of LGB identity, development of LGB social identity, disclosure of LGB identity, development of LGB intimacy, and entrance into LGB community. His lifespan approach was inclusive and complementary of stage models and involves back and forth movement between developmental tasks (D'Augelli, 1994).

Finally, Fassinger and Miller (1997) posited a four stage process model that moved from awareness to integration or synthesis and was more inclusive of the diversity within LGBT communities. Overall analysis of the various models suggest that LGBT identity development may be more complex than is accounted for by the stage models alone (Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). It is important to note that, most of the early models posit that LBG identity development begins during the college years. However, more recent research is suggestive of endorsement of lifespan models and recognizes many individuals come out before the college years (Savin-Williams, 2006). Coming out appears to be a pivotal construct in all LGBT identity development models (Taulke-Johnson, 2008). As such, it may be important to note where participants in this study are in the coming out process. This could have implications for participant's experience of campus climate.

### **Gender Identity Development**

In recent years, researchers have posited several transgender identity development models. Notably, Devor (2004) created a 14 stage transgender identity development model that builds on Cass's (1979) model. Devor's (2004) model is built upon two social processes: witnessing and mirroring. The idea is that witnessing is a type of external validation related to



others seeing self as self is seen internally. Mirroring is the idea that self identifies with someone who is viewed similarly. According to Devor (2004), the initial stages are met with anxiety and some confusion, both of which are relieved as self becomes mirrored and witnessed by other individuals. The main stages move from anxiety or unsettlement about gender identity, active questioning, identity comparisons of individual's gender with others, discovery of transgenderism, identity confusion, identity comparison with other transgender individuals, tolerance of transgender identity, delay before acceptance, and finally acceptance of transgender identity (Devor, 2004). According to Devor (2004), after an individual has arrived at acceptance of their transgender identity, the next stage is beginning the process of undergoing physical transition and then acceptance of post transition identity. Over time, the transgender individual integrates pre and post transition identity and operates within society as an integrated individual, sometimes keeping their identity secret. The final stage is pride and involves internal and external identity affirmation (Devor, 2004). These stages are not necessarily linear and many individuals will find themselves looping back through different stages at different levels.

In 2007, Bockting and Coleman presented a model of coming out for transgender individuals that resembles some sexual identity models. The stages begin with a pre-coming out phase in which the individual becomes aware of their gender non-congruence and proceeds to the coming out stage (acknowledgement to self and others). Individuals then proceed to the exploration stage of gender expression, transgender identity and community, followed by the intimacy stage. According to Bockting and Coleman (2007), in the intimacy stage, individuals develop intimate relationships with others and increasingly grow more comfortable and open with their identity. Finally, individuals reach identity integration as they become comfortable with their identity and expression of that identity (Bockting & Coleman, 2007).

It is important to note that many of the criticisms of sexual identity development stage models or theories are also applicable to transgender identity development stage models. According to Rowniak and Chesla (2013), the final stage appears to be the destination and infers that it is a fixed or stable identity, when in reality identity development is a fractal, layered, and ever-evolving process. Criticisms aside, there appears to be some evidence that the very process of witnessing can be crucially important for both transgender identity development and sexual identity development (Devor, 2004; Rowniak & Chesla, 2013). Furthermore, the American Psychological Association (2015) reviewed the literature on transgender identity development and indicated that transgender identity development may also affect and perhaps influence sexual identity development. The social fusion of gender non-conformity with same-sex attraction may initially create some transgender individuals to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. As transgender individuals become more accepting and aware of their gender identity, they may also change how they identify sexually (Dickey, Burnes, & Singh, 2012).

### **Microaggressions and Identity Development**

There appears to be some paucity in the literature regarding sexual or transgender identity development and how LGBT individuals experience microaggressions. Despite this lack of research, Jones and Galliher (2015), posited that there may be some connection with how individuals experience microaggressions dependent on group identification and self-acceptance. According to Dickey, Burnes and Singh (2012), the experience of microaggressions could be more painful for those with less social support who may also be in the early stages of identity development. Individuals in the early identity development process may, conversely, not perceive microaggressions as microaggressions. As a stronger sense of LGBT identity emerges, microaggressive experiences may be perceived more accurately and may feel greater stress. However, this distress or effect of microaggressions could be mitigated by LGBT affirming

support (Dickey, Burnes, & Singh, 2012; Jones & Galliher, 2015). Microaggression experiences may impact identity development and identity development may be impacted by microaggressions (Jones & Galliher, 2015). Lastly, an individual's degree of identity self-acceptance, level of identity integration (internally and externally), and their location and identification within the broader LGBT community impacts the individual's overall well-being (Kennedy & Oswalt, 2014).

### **Microaggressions In Higher Education**

Since the late 1960s, the presence of LGBT students and LGBT student organizations has been formally acknowledged by colleges and universities but scholarly research did not begin to emerge until the 1990s (Renn, 2007). Much of the literature from the 1990s and early 2000s was focused on the experience of white, gay, cisgender males and was not representative of the diversity within LGBT student populations (Renn, 2017). LGBT students are more visible on college campuses, across the United States, than ever before in the history of academia. Despite this growing visibility on college campuses, LGBT students remain as underrepresented minorities that are targets of discrimination and oppression by systemic and individual forces (Renn, 2017). There has been a plethora of research examining the difficulties faced by LGBT college students, especially undergraduate students (Nadal, 2013; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). While some literature is suggestive that campus environments have become warmer and more inviting, Rankin et al. (2010) posited that despite some improvements, higher education remains a contentious environment for LGBT individuals. This section will provide a synopsis of the current social climate in the United States, and a brief review of the literature on campus climate and LGBT experiences on campus.

## **Current Social Climate**

In the decade before this current political administration in the United States, LGBT individuals gained increased visibility and won some long-awaited civil rights. These civil rights included open service in the United States armed forces, marriage equality, and some state and local protections against discrimination and hate crimes (Renn, 2017). Unfortunately, since 2016, there have been many rollbacks on some of those protections under this political administration (deVogue, Mallonee, & Grinberg, 2017). These rollbacks include an executive order prohibiting transgender individuals from serving in the military, and withdrawal of federal protection of transgender students to use the bathroom of their choice (Villareal, 2017).

At present, thirty-two states do not have LGBT discrimination protections related to housing, employment, credit, federal funding, and students within education systems (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). Currently, there are no federal laws to protect LGBT students from discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation. However, there are 20 states that currently have protective laws that address discrimination and bullying of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Seven states have laws that restrict the inclusion of LGBT topics in schools. And lastly, two states have laws that specifically prevent schools from protecting LGBT students (Human Rights Campaign, 2016). In other words, in many states it is legal to discriminate in employment, education, healthcare, and housing based on sexual orientation and or gender identity. After a few civil rights gains in recent years, sharply followed by rollbacks, it is clear that discrimination, homophobia and heterosexism persist in and outside of education systems (Human Rights Campaign, 2016; Renn, 2017; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011).

## **Campus Climate**

Campus climate is defined by Rankin (2005) as, “the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential” (p. 17). According to Sue (2010b), campus climate directly affects the experience of LGBT students in terms of academics, outcomes, outness, identity development, involvement, and wellness (Sue, 2010b; Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012). Historically, higher education has been an affirmative environment for the identity development of students (Renn, 2017). However, for many years, research regarding campus climate has reported that LGBT students experience discrimination and harassment at considerably higher levels than other student groups (Rankin et al., 2010). In the 1980s and 1990s scholarly research regarding campus climates were structured to specifically address and increase visibility for LGB students in higher education (Tierney & Dilley, 1998). This research drew attention to the fact that campus climates were not empowering places for LGB individuals. Since those early studies, research inclusive of transgender students has found that campuses are more hostile towards transgender students than their LGB peers (Rankin et al., 2010).

Susan Rankin completed much of the foundational research on campus climate regarding LGBT individuals. In 2003, she was commissioned by the Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force to study “Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People: A National Perspective.” Rankin (2003) explored the ways in which harassment and discrimination block the academic and professional achievement of LGBT individuals. She found that campus climates are hostile regarding LGBT students, administrators, faculty, and staff. Rankin (2003) further noted that “nearly 60 percent of students conceal their sexual orientation/gender identity to avoid intimidation” (p.25). She observed that when students were harassed “63 percent were in public campus spaces, 40 percent in their residence, and 30 percent

were in the classroom” (p. 29). Burn et al. (2005) iterated that despite social progress and progress in higher education, heterosexism continues to be worrisome due to its perpetuation of stigma and marginalization of LGBT individuals.

The literature continues to support the fact that many LGBT individuals experience a negative or hostile campus climate (Vaccaro, 2012). According to Arum and Roksa (2011), negative campus climates have negative effects on student learning outcomes. Rankin et al. (2010), found that college campuses are rife with harassment, intimidation, and hostility towards LGBT students. As a result, research indicates suicidal ideation is significant among LGBT students related to reduced sense of belonging (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2012). Woodford and Kulick (2015) found that heterosexism on campus was associated with lower integration socially and academically for LGBT students. The negative and troubling messages found on college campuses can send the message that LGBT students do not matter.

### **LGBT Experiences on Campus**

Studies show that LGBT students experience more challenges and barriers on college and university campuses than heterosexual and cisgender students. Oswalt and Wyatt (2011) found that LGBT students experienced more mental health issues due to “environmental responses to their sexual orientation” (p. 1257). Woodford et al. (2012) reviewed heterosexist language and the impact of LGBT students’ experiences on campus. They found that microaggressive language not only impacted LGBT students in a negative social context, but also in a negative physical wellness context. In fact, they posited that students were more likely to feel detached or precluded from the college or university related to experience of heterosexist comments (Woodford et al., 2012). Beemyn and Rankin (2011) found that many LGBT students also experienced feeling excluded in the classroom and on campus by lack of LGBT role models in faculty and administrative roles. The experience of lack of inclusion decreases a student’s sense

of belonging and may increase their sense of loneliness (Martin & D'Augelli, 2003).

Recent research strives to examine the experiences of individuals that fall under subsets of LGBT umbrella and community (Renn, 2017). For example, research is beginning to explore the interactions of multiple identities such as race and ethnicity in relation to LGBT identity. According to Newhouse (2013), research is beginning to expand in exploration of transgender student experiences. He posited that transgender students are easily ignored by higher education professionals because of the complications associated with gender identity (Newhouse, 2013). Beemyn et al. (2005) found that some transgender students avoid utilizing campus restrooms in order to avoid potential harm, discrimination, or harassment. According to Beemyn and Rankin (2011), this continues to reinforce the experience of transgender students who often feel invisible and completely ignored in university settings.

Though many colleges and universities have diversity statements that speak to providing an inclusive, equitable, and diverse campus, there is evidence that campus experience is more often reflective of the greater social context (Renn, 2017). Research has shown that LGBT students experience microaggression on a daily basis on college and university campuses across the United States (Rankin et al., 2010; Renn, 2017). Due to visibility issues associated with microaggressions, it is difficult to determine the number of LGBT students who are in higher education. The number is estimated to be around ten percent across all universities (Rankin et al., 2010). The number of LGBT faculty is assumed to be even lower than the number of students. At the Southern university where this study is being conducted, the number of LGBT students and faculty are both unknown but considered to be relatively low. The Princeton Review (2019) ranked this university as one of the top twenty most unfriendly LGBT campuses in the nation.

## **Conclusion**

An in-depth exploration of microaggressions and taxonomy of microaggressions was undertaken in this literature review. Ethnic or racial microaggressions and LGBT microaggressions were both presented. Both types of microaggressions can be experienced through microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, 2010a, 2010b; Nadal, 2013). Nine themes of racial microaggressions were identified and discussed utilizing the critical work of Sue et al. (2007). Next, LGBT microaggressions were presented and explored in a similar manner including an in-depth description of themes as identified by (Sue, 2010b; Nadal et al., 2010; Nadal, 2013; and Platt & Lenzen, 2013). A review of the literature indicates the experience of microaggressions is harmful to the recipient. It is clear that defining microaggressions and LGBT microaggressions is merely the tip of the iceberg. Impacts of microaggressions and LGBT identity development was also explored in depth. Finally, a review of the literature was presented on microaggressions in higher education. This was highlighted by much of the foundational research done by Rankin (2003) on campus climates with an exploration of LGBT student experiences. However, most of the literature in relation to campus climates and LGBT student experiences is related to undergraduates.

Despite many of the studies mentioned in this literature review, there is clearly a dearth in the literature regarding qualitative research of LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions in a university setting. Singh and Shelton (2011) completed a ten year content analysis of leading counseling journals and found as few as twelve empirical studies published from 1998 to 2008. While there has been a number of quantitative studies in recent years, there is a lack of literature regarding the lived experience of LGBT college students, most notably graduate students (Garvey & Rankin, 2018; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). For the purposes of this



study, semi-structured individual interviews with LGBT graduate students at this Southern university will be utilized to explore their experiences of microaggressions.

### **CHAPTER III: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore LGBT graduate students' lived experience of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university and to examine how LGBT individuals perceive and experience microaggressions through the lens of intersecting identities. This chapter serves as a discussion of the research methodology that was utilized in order to augment the assimilation of these experiences through: phenomenology, theoretical framework, research design, reflexivity, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness.

#### **Phenomenology**

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological strategy in an attempt to identify the structure of experiences as described by the research participants. Phenomenology, introduced by Edmund Husserl in 1913, is a philosophically inspired research tradition firmly rooted in the philosophies of Mach, Kant, and Hegel (Guignon, 2006). Husserl placed importance on the description of lived experience as a means of uncovering and describing the basic structure of life-world (Husserl, 1931). Literally, phenomenology is the study of phenomena (objects and events which appear) in life-world and how humans make sense of and transform experiences into consciousness (Patton, 2002). The primary aspiration of phenomenology is to acquire the accurate essence of experience through the perception of the experiencer (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Perception is the original awareness of how one views an experience. Husserl felt that the perception of reality of an object (phenomenon) was dependent on the perceiver (Husserl, 1931; Guignon, 2006).

In order to comprehend another person's experience with a phenomenon, a detailed description of what was experienced and how it was experienced is imperative. The essence or core meaning of an experience is then determined from the description of the experiencer

(Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931) identified intentionality of consciousness as being central to phenomenology. He furthered that thoughts about objects or experience cannot exist without either perception or conception (Husserl, 1931). According to Moustakas (1994), this means that objects exist in the mind in an intentional way. Therefore, intentionality is a way of knowing reality. It carries the meaning of subjective reality and is an essential part of life-world (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is the recommended approach for this study because the goal is to understand LGBT graduate students' experiences of LGBT microaggressions and their perception and experience of microaggressions through the lens of intersecting identities, as it pertains to the phenomena of human consciousness and serves as a reflective analysis of lived experiences (Creswell, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The review of the literature in Chapter II contains the basic foundation for the theoretical framework that guided this study. This section explores the emic viewpoint, idiographic perspective, constructivist paradigm, existential framework, and the theoretical lens of intersectionality, through which this study was viewed. *Emic* is a term used in field research to describe a viewpoint. It refers to the perspective of the subject from within a group (Ponterotto, 2005). Emic is commonly utilized to refer to the behaviors or characteristics that are unique to the individual and typically a point of view used to give rich description to experiences of phenomena (Ponterotto, 2005). This viewpoint is congruent with the phenomenological inquiry of LGBT graduate student's experience of the phenomena of LGBT microaggressions. According to Ponterotto (2005), idiographic perspective is concerned with the unique individuals or subjective phenomena. This is inclusive of an individual's unique life history that sets them apart from other individuals. Idiographic writing tends to be rich and descriptive. Therefore, the idiographic perspective is congruent with phenomenology (Ponterotto, 2005).

Constructivism-interpretivism is a relativistic paradigm in which reality has multiple assumptions that are valid. This is a subjective viewpoint and maintains a hidden meaning which must be brought to light through deep reflection via interaction between researcher and participant. Thus, the researcher and participant construct findings from an interactive dialogue. Reality is then constructed by each individual person's experience. Constructivism-interpretivism is a view that is used to understand "lived experiences" of subjects. This is a foundational cornerstone of phenomenology and has an emic and idiographic perspective (Ponterotto, 2005).

### **Intersectionality Theory**

Intersectionality theory is the lens through which this study was examined. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), a black feminist, initially coined the term, "intersectionality" to describe the ways in which gender and race overlapped and interacted in the lives of black women. In subsequent years, the term has gained broader utilization and application to describe how individual experiences are affected by privilege, intersecting identities, and oppressive systems (Collins, 2015). Intersectionality theory is the idea that individual realities are influenced by various social identities (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, black women experience forms of discrimination that white women, or black men do not because of their intersecting identities of being both black and women. For the purpose of this study, the intersection of singular identities such as age, gender, class, and race was examined as they contribute to the experience of LGBT microaggressions, and also to experiences of oppression and privilege. (Collins, 2015; Gopaldas, 2013).

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological approach was used for this qualitative study because it is a research tradition that is process oriented, seeks to understand the unique experience of individuals and

the meanings they ascribe to the process and/or experience (Hays & Singh, 2012). The focus of this study was to comprehend the LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggression across multiple identities. The aim of the researcher is to richly describe the experiences of the phenomenon.

The basic tasks of transcendental phenomenological study methods that were used as a design for this study were outlined by Moustakas (1994): Epoché (setting aside of bias in order to open self to new knowledge), phenomenological reduction (rich textural descriptions), imaginative variation, and synthesis of composite textural and structural descriptions. Epoché is a Greek word that means to set aside preconceived ideas or judgments regarding the phenomena under investigation. This allowed the phenomenon to be seen again as if new. The researcher examined and described her subjective experience and feelings about the phenomena before data analysis.

Phenomenological reduction or eidetic reduction is the process of going beyond surface thoughts, actions, or patterns to reveal the universal essence or basic components of phenomena. It is the process of reducing the data of experience into meaning units (through horizontalization). Imaginative variation is a process to expand the scope to reveal hidden or veiled meanings. The researcher takes into account various frames of reference, using the imagination, to better understand precipitating factors that account for individual experience of phenomena. While conducting imaginative variation, the researcher aims to provide a description of the 'how' of the conditions that highlights the 'what' of experience. The result of this process is a structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

Through the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994), the phenomenon and meaning of the research questions were recorded and analyzed simultaneously. The phenomenon that was examined in this study was the lived experiences of graduate students who experience LGBT

microaggressions and their experience of microaggressions across intersecting identities. This method provided a deeper understanding of those experiences to help examine how LGBT microaggressions were experienced across multiple social identities.

## **Participants**

Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the researcher's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A) before participant selection. This study explored LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions on a southern university campus. Creswell and Poth (2018) iterate criterion sampling works well for a phenomenological approach because all participants are exposed to the same event. The participants were recruited and volunteered from a criterion sample of university students who were current graduate students at a Southern university (or graduate students who graduated within the last 2 years) and identified as LGBT. For the purpose of this study, 8 participants were utilized which fits into the recommended sample size for phenomenology of three to 25 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Recruitment was by word of mouth and emails (Appendix B). The recruitment letter was sent in 98 emails to various graduate department chairs and coordinators. A Fifteen-dollar Mastercard gift card was offered for completing the study as compensation for participant's time. Once the researcher became aware of potential participants, a meeting was arranged to discuss a description of the research study, confidentiality, informed consent, and to answer any questions participants may have about the study. Participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix C).

## **Data Collection**

This study used phenomenological inquiry through in-depth semi-structured interviews to obtain LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions at a southern university. The phenomenological approach was used to assist in understanding subjective facets of LGBT

graduate student's experience from their frame of reference. A signed informed consent (Appendix C) was obtained before interviews are conducted, and/or other data was collected. A demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) was utilized to collect biographical and demographic information from participants regarding graduate level program, age, level of out, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The demographic information helped add to the understanding of the specifics of the population that was studied. Creswell and Poth (2018) asserted that qualitative research is dependent on multiple forms of data collection. Transcriptions of face-to-face audio-recorded interviews and focus groups with participants, participant journal prompt, researcher's reflexive journal, and field notes were the forms of data collected. This section further discusses the data collection methods this study employed.

**Interviews.** This study utilized the method of individual, face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth, interviews of LGBT graduate student's experience of microaggressions, as the basis of the phenomenological study. Creswell and Poth (2018) posit that interviews can be unstructured, structured, or semi-structured but are purpose driven. A semi-structured interview approach was chosen for this study due to the flexible framework and allowance for a focused but conversational interview, which is congruent with phenomenology (Hays & Singh, 2012). For the purpose of this study, these interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. Interview questions were developed based on a review of current literature and in order to address the primary concern of this study (Semi-Structured Interview Protocol, Appendix E).

Questions were constructed as open and flexible in order that participants were able to freely express and describe their experience of microaggressions. Spontaneous questions were used, as needed, to clarify or gather additional information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research questions that formed the basis of this study and were used as semi-structure for the interviews:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of LGBT microaggressions at Southern university?

In order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experiences of microaggressions within the context of intersecting identities at a Southern university?
2. How do LGBT graduate students describe the personal impact of microaggressions at a Southern university?
3. How do LGBT graduate students describe their perception of campus climate at a Southern university, as a result of microaggressions?

**Focus groups and journal prompt entries.** Another form of data collection was two separate focus group with three members each that were held after the interviews were transcribed and initial themes emerged (Appendix G). The focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed in order to help the research gain a greater depth of understanding of the data. They took place in a private conference room on campus and lasted an hour to an hour and a half each. In qualitative data, focus groups are used to help provide another data collection point and opportunity for more data to emerge. They also allow the participants to interact with other participants' experiences and this can allow new data to emerge (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A journal prompt (Appendix F) was given to participants to fill out between the initial individual interview and the focus group. They were asked to email or bring the journal prompt with them to the focus group. Two out of the eight participants filled out the journal prompts. The journal prompts underwent the same data analysis as the interviews and focus groups.



**Researcher's reflexive journal and field notes.** This researcher kept a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis that contained the bracketing of her biases and experiences. I scheduled extra time before the in-depth interviews with participants to ponder anticipated issues, inventory my thoughts or beliefs, and reflect on my feelings. These reflections were documented before each interview. Immediately following each interview, the researcher also documented her reflections of the experience, any biases or feelings that may have come to light, and or any concerns related to interviewing or bracketing. I kept field notes that were observational in nature. Shortly after the interview, the researcher entered these into a separate section of the reflexive journal. The field note observations consisted of any nonverbal behaviors, emotional responses, and participant characteristics that were noted in the participant (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Ethical considerations.** Appropriate permission to conduct this study was granted by the University Institutional Review Board (Appendix A), which ensured ethical conduct of this study, as well as the safety and security of the participants. Informed consent, confidentiality, and a written explanation of the nature of the volunteer study was reviewed with each participant and signed (Appendix B). Due diligence was taken in the manner data was stored on password protected USB data drives that were stored under double locks. All transcripts were de-identified and participant transcripts were assigned a random number between one and eight, in order to protect participant confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process allowed the researcher to observe and analyze the data as it was being collected. Once the data was collected, it was analyzed using the transcendental phenomenological model as set forth by Moustakas (1994). The methods of phenomenological

data analysis are outlined by Moustakas (1994) in three parts: phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of descriptions.

### **Part I: Phenomenological Reduction**

The first step, which occurred before data collection and analysis, was epoché, which is a Greek word that loosely translates into “suspension of judgment” (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher bracketed out her own experiences by writing about her position in the research in Chapter I. I kept a reflexive journal of my experience with the phenomenon and my biases, and preconceived ideas about the phenomenon of LGBT graduate students’ experiences of microaggressions and my own perceptions and experiences of microaggressions. This setting aside of the researcher’s experience, ideas, beliefs, and biases enabled me to access the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective and allowed me to see the phenomena again as if new; a perpetual beginner (Moustakas, 1994).

After collecting the data through the phenomenological interview with graduate students who experienced the phenomenon of LGBT microaggressions, the researcher closely examined and transcribed the interview tapes verbatim without the use of assistive software. The next step in the phenomenological reduction according to Moustakas (1994) is horizontalization. This was the process of listing the statements or key meaning segments, made by participants, which were relevant to the lived experience. All statements or descriptions received equal value. Statements, which were repetitive or irrelevant (to the lived experience), were disregarded. The data that remained was called horizons (meaning units). These horizons were unique qualities of the participant’s experience of the phenomenon. Related horizons were then clustered into themes. Each theme consisted of related meaning units. The researcher then synthesized the themes and meaning units, which provided the textural descriptions of the participant’s experience (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Part II: Imaginative Variation**

In order to analyze the structural description of “how” the phenomenon was experienced by the participants, Moustakas (1994) suggested using imaginative variation in which the researcher, first, reflects on the participant’s textural descriptions. The researcher attempted to vary possible meanings of the themes and meaning units and look at the data from various points of view, such as opposite meanings and views. Free consideration was given to various structures that may have created the textural experience. The researcher wrote a list of structural qualities of the experience then cluster those qualities into themes. I used universal structures as the themes: Time, space, relationship to self, to others; bodily concerns, casual or intentional structures. I integrated structural qualities and themes into structural descriptions of the experience of the phenomenon. Long and direct descriptions from the participants were utilized as a way for the participants’ voices to be heard through the words of their own experiences. This helped to endorse the themes of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Part III: Invariant Essence**

Lastly, the researcher construct a synthesis of textural and structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Intuitively and reflectively the researcher integrated the textural and structural descriptions of the participants in order to develop a synthesis of (or uncover) the meanings (the “what” and “how”) and experiences of the phenomenon: the essence (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness refers to the confidence a reader can have that the study’s findings are an accurate representation of the experience of the participants of the phenomenon being studied (Hays & Singh, 2012). This was accomplished by establishing credibility, dependability, and

transferability. Qualitative research that does not establish trustworthiness loses value in terms of usefulness and applicability for future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### **Credibility**

Credibility was the first aspect of trustworthiness that needed to be established. Lincoln and Guba (1985) posit that credibility is often seen as the most important element in trustworthiness because it links the study's findings with reality. Means of increasing the likelihood of credibility in qualitative research include but are not limited to triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, field notes, and prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Triangulation.** Collecting data from multiple data sources was a way of ensuring a more complete and therefore accurate research study. Triangulation was employed in this study as data was collected from corroborative sources such as the literature review, participant interviews, reflexive journaling, field notes, peer debriefing, and an external auditor. Triangulation was not only important for establishing credibility but also important in uncovering important meaning found in various perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012).

**Member checking.** Member checking involved taking transcribed and analyzed data back to the participants to check for accuracy in their intended meaning. Creswell and Poth (2018) identified member checking as the most critical method to establish trustworthiness. The researcher engaged in member checking after initial transcriptions of interviews were completed. The researcher provided each participant with a copy of the transcription of their initial interview and asked them to review it carefully to ensure it was an accurate transcription of their interview. They were asked to further elaborate on experiences noted, as they wished. Two separate focus groups of three participants each were held and served as a form of member checking after initial themes were identified. This ensured participants believed the themes generated from the data

were congruent with their intended meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The six participants in attendance confirmed the initial themes as being congruent with their experiences.

**Peer debriefing and external auditor.** Peers and faculty members familiar with the methodology of this research were useful in enhancing credibility and ensuring validity. The debriefers were impartial but knowledgeable and read transcripts, final report, methodology and offered suggestions or asked questions that elucidated the researcher's process and intent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A doctoral level external auditor at another university was of assistance in checking the coding of transcriptions and helped the researcher remain aware of biases, beliefs, and any reactions that arose. As suggested, the researcher met with peer debriefers and the external auditor on a consistent basis throughout the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Field notes.** The researcher's field notes are part of her reflexive journal, which contain her own experience with the phenomenon, as well as various biases and preconceived ideas I wanted to set aside or other more in-depth observations about any aspect of the study. A separate part of the notebook contained the field note observations, ideas, short phrases in relation to patterns that become evident, or nonverbal observations of interviewees, and thick descriptions. There were also notes that were written in the margin but were observational in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Prolonged engagement.** Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe prolonged engagement as the investment of enough time to learn the culture, recognize any misinformation or distortions of self or participants, and build trust. As a fellow graduate student and LGBT identified, the researcher has established some understanding of the LGBT graduate student culture on campus. The researcher also has some established visibility in her clinical position on campus and has built some credibility within the LGBT campus culture.

**Dependability**

In a qualitative study, dependability is a part of the validation process. As such, qualitative researchers are encouraged to provide data management plans. Dependability helps to establish the research study's findings as consistent and repeatable. This usually involves keeping a detailed audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This researcher utilized a detailed audit trail to track collection of and maintain raw data, record data analysis and changes, and all process notes.

**Transferability**

Generalizability is synonymous with transferability and is established by providing evidence that the findings are applicable to other populations, contexts, or times. The researcher, themselves, cannot prove the results are transferable but instead simply provides evidence that it may be applicable. This was done through rich, thick description of the phenomenon through notes and reflexive journals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These descriptions allow other researchers to research similar queries in other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Table 2.  
*Data Management Plan*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>
1/16/2020	Received IRB approval
1/17/2020-1/21/2020	Emailed participant request/recruitment letters
1/20/2020-1/28/2020	Identified participants, scheduled interview date/times
1/22/2020-2/05/2020	Interviewed P1-P8
1/24/2020	Conducted Focus Group 1, collected journal prompt entries
1/25/2020	Conducted Focus Group 2, collected journal prompt entries

### **Summary**

This chapter presented details and justification of the phenomenological qualitative approach that will be implemented in order to gain understanding of LGBT graduate student's experiences of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university and how these microaggressions are perceived and experienced in the context of intersecting identities. The eight participants were volunteers currently in graduate school at a Southern university. They identified as LGBT graduate students. The researcher conducted semi-structured, face-to-face interviews guided by one main research question and three sub-questions aimed at helping answer the main question. The researcher collected data from interviews, focus groups, journal prompt entries, reflexive journaling, field, notes, peer debriefing, and member checks.

The phenomenological data analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) was employed for analyzing the data in this study. This entailed epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesizing of textural and structural descriptions of the experience of phenomenon in order to arrive at the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Protection

of participant confidentiality and data security were ethical considerations for which the researcher will make appropriate preparations. Finally, clear steps were outlined which helped ensure accurately reported findings from this study.



## **CHAPTER IV: RESULTS**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine LGBT graduate students' lived experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. The researcher believes a more clear understanding of this particular phenomenon could be beneficial in helping to inform university administrators and leaders about LGBT student perceptions of campus climate. Ultimately, this information could bring more awareness and lead to changes that may improve the experience of LGBT students as they navigate their graduate studies. This chapter provides a brief but detailed overview of participant demographic data, a review of the research question and two sub questions relevant to this study, and a brief discussion of the data analysis process employed. The themes of individual participants and focus groups will be introduced in this chapter through textural description and textural structural description of the participants' experience of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university. Finally, a description of the essence of the phenomenon is followed by a chapter summary to conclude the chapter.

### **Participant Data**

The eight participants for this study were all graduate students at a Southern university who identified as LGBT and had completed at least their first year of graduate work. Four participants were in PhD programs and four were working on their master's degree. Six of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, with one identifying as Black and White/Biracial, and one as Asian. Two of the participants stated their gender identity as cis-men, four as cis-women, one as fluid, and one as non-binary. Sexual orientation was also identified by participants. Three identified as lesbian, two as pansexual, one as bisexual, one as homosexual, and one as gay. All eight participants rated their level of out on a scale of 1-5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being very out. Five participants stated their level of out as 5. One participant changed their level of out

from 5 to 3 after the focus group. Two participants indicated their out level as 4 and one participant reported he was not out at all. Participants' ages ranged from 22 to 35 with a mean age of 28. Religious and/or spiritual affiliation and relationship status amongst participants was varied. Table 3 provides a summarization of participant demographic data and was obtained through a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) given to the participants before the individual interview. Participants were assigned a random participant number by the researcher and will be referred to by that number throughout the study.

Table 3.  
*Participant Demographic Data*

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Out Level (1-5)	Relationship Status	Religious or Spiritual Affiliation	Program Degree
1	29	White/Caucasian	Cis-Man	Gay	5	Partnered	Atheist	PhD
2	22	White/Caucasian	Fluid	Pansexual	4	Married	Agnostic	PhD
3	30	White/Caucasian	Cis-Woman	Lesbian	4	Married	Ex-Baptist	PhD
4	25	Black and White/Biracial	Cis-Woman	Lesbian	5	Single	None	MS
5	24	White/Caucasian	Cis-Woman	Lesbian	3	Single	Christian Leaning	MS
6	28	White/Caucasian	Non-Binary	Bi/Pansexual Queer	5	Single	Agnostic	MS
7	28	White/Caucasian	Cis-Woman	Bisexual Queer	5	Life Partner	Unitarian Universalist	PhD
8	35	Asian	Cis-Man	Homosexual	1	Single	N/A	MS

### **Participant 1**

Participant 1 was a 29-year old White/Caucasian cisgender male who was simultaneously working on his PhD and an additional master's degree at the time of data collection. He identified his sexual orientation as "gay" and disclosed his relationship status as "partnered." He further disclosed his religious/spiritual affiliation as Atheist. Participant 1 described his level of being out as a 5 (out to nearly everyone) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all. He was in the third year of graduate work towards his doctorate prior to the start of the study.

### **Participant 2**

Participant 2 was a 22-year-old White/Caucasian individual who described themselves as assigned male gender at birth but identified as gender fluid. They were working on their PhD at the time of data collection and identified their sexual orientation as pansexual. Participant 2 indicated they were married and reported their religious/spiritual affiliation as Agnostic. On a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being out to nearly everyone, they disclosed they were a 5. Participant 2 also self-identifies as having a disability and specifies it as chronic pain. Prior to the start of the study, they were in their third year of graduate work towards their doctorate.

### **Participant 3**

At the time of data collection, Participant 3 was a 30-year-old White/Caucasian cisgender female who was working on her PhD at the time of data collection. She identified her sexual orientation as lesbian and indicated she was married. Participant 3 described her religious/spiritual affiliation as ex-Baptist. She reported her level of being out as a 4 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being out to nearly everyone. She described herself as

having a disability and identified it as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Participant 3 was in her second year of graduate work towards her doctorate prior to the start of this study.

#### **Participant 4**

Participant 4 was a 25-year old Black and White/Biracial cisgender female who was working on her master's degree at the time of data collection. She identified her sexual orientation as lesbian and reported her relationship status as single. Participant 4 described her religious/spiritual affiliation as none and disclosed her level of out as a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out and 5 being out to nearly everyone. Prior to the start of the study, she had completed her first year of graduate work towards her master's degree.

#### **Participant 5**

Participant 5 was a 24-year-old White/Caucasian cisgender female who was working on her master's degree at the time of data collection. She identified her sexual orientation as lesbian and reported her relationship status as single. Participant 5 described her religious/spiritual affiliation as "Christian-leaning." She reported her level of being out as a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being out to nearly everyone. After the focus group, this participant changed their level of out to 3. Participant 5 was in her second year of graduate work in her master's degree program prior to the start of this study.

#### **Participant 6**

Participant 6 was a 28-year-old White/Caucasian individual who described themselves as assigned female gender at birth but identified as non-binary. They were working on their master's degree at the time of data collection and indicated their sexual orientation was bi/pansexual/queer. They reported their relationship status as single and described their religious/spiritual affiliation as Agnostic. They described themselves as having a disability and

identified it as sexual orientation focused Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). They further described themselves as having a size diversity. Participant 6 disclosed their level of out as 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being out to nearly everyone. Prior to the start of the study, they were in their third year of graduate work towards their master's degree.

### **Participant 7**

Participant 7 was a 28-year-old White/Caucasian cisgender female who was working on her PhD at the time of data collection. She identified her sexual orientation as “bisexual/queer” and indicated her marital status as life partner. She describes her religious/spiritual affiliation as Unitarian Universalist. Participant 7 indicated her level of out as a 5 on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out and 5 being out to nearly everyone. She was in her third year of graduate work towards her doctorate prior to the start of this study.

### **Participant 8**

Participant 8 was a 35-year-old Asian/Chinese cisgender male who was working on his master's degree at the time of data collection. He reported his sexual orientation as “homosexual” and indicated his relationship status was single. He described his religious/spiritual affiliation as “none.” Participant 8 disclosed his level of out as 1 (not out at all) on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being not out at all and 5 being out to nearly everyone. Prior to the start of the study, he was in his 7<sup>th</sup> year of graduate work towards his master's degree.

## **Research Questions**

The following research question was addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions at a Southern university?

In order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions within the context of intersecting identities at a Southern university?
2. How do LGBT graduate students describe the personal impact of microaggressions at a Southern university?
3. How do LGBT graduate students describe their perception of campus climate at a Southern university, as a result of microaggressions?

## **Data Analysis**

In order to answer the research question, a transcendental phenomenological approach was employed to understand the experience of the participants in their own terms. This approach serves to provide a rich-thick description of the LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. As described in the previous chapter, the researcher followed the methods of phenomenological data analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994). Initially, the researcher engaged in personal bracketing, or epoche, then engaged the process of phenomenological reduction as outlined by Moustakas (1994). This allowed the researcher to acknowledge and set aside personal experiences and views in order to be able to fully focus on the participant's experiences. Peer debriefing, journaling, and field notes were utilized as a way to continue to bracket out preconceived ideas about microaggressions. Once participants were interviewed, the interviews were transcribed and the researcher spent time reading and re-reading

each interview and then engaged in the process of horizontalization to find non-repetitive meaning units related to the experience of the phenomenon. Next, these horizons, or invariant constituents, were placed into clusters of meaning. As a result of this process, the themes of the study emerge from the meaning clusters and the researcher then writes the textural and structural description which reveals the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

## **Themes**

The researcher carefully examined the horizontalized statements and identified statements significant to the research question. Those statements were grouped into clusters and from the clusters of meaning, themes began to emerge. Multiple themes were identified in each participant's interview transcript. Seven main themes emerged as a result of the analysis of LGBT graduate students' experience of microaggressions: Visibility, awareness, anger/frustration, security, sense of belonging, advocacy, and message of worth. All seven themes emerged from the individual interviews, as well as both focus groups. A strong sub-theme of awareness that emerged in the individual interviews and even more in the focus group was: difficulty verbalizing microaggressions. All seven main themes also emerged from the journal prompt entries.

## **Individual Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix E) and audio recorded with each of the eight participants. The audio interviews were then transcribed by the researcher and the process of transcendental phenomenological reduction was engaged as described previously. After the interviews were transcribed and initial themes emerged, the participants were given an opportunity to read the transcripts and emerging themes.

This served as a member check to ensure the researcher accurately captured the experiences of the participants.

### **Journal Prompts**

In order to collect more data, participants were given a journal prompt (Appendix F) after their individual interviews and were asked to complete it before the focus groups. Participants were asked to record any experiences, feelings, and/or thoughts that came up for them after the individual interview but before the focus group. Two out of eight participants returned the journal prompt entries. Both journal prompt entries were subjected to the same data analysis process as the individual interviews: statements of significance were identified, clustered into groups of meaning, and the same seven main themes emerged from the journal prompt entries.

### **Focus Group**

Three weeks after individual interviews were completed, two focus groups with three participants each were conducted on two separate dates to accommodate participant schedules. These focus groups served as a member check and another source of data collection. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized for the focus groups (Appendix G) in order to review initial themes and gather more data. Six of the eight participants were able to attend and participate in the focus groups. The focus group was audio recorded, transcribed, and subjected to the same data analysis process as the individual interviews: statements of significance were identified, clustered into groups of meaning, and the same seven main themes emerged from the data.



## Themes

Themes emerged from clusters of meaning, as previously described and textural descriptions were developed utilizing participant quotes. These quotes serve to elucidate the themes that emerged from participant data as outlined in transcendental phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Seven main themes emerged from the individual interviews and Table 4 outlines those themes utilizing statements made by the participants. Themes that emerged from the journal prompt entries are listed in Table 5. Finally, Table 6 identifies themes that emerged from the focus groups and is supported by quotes from the participants. A more in-depth exploration of the themes will be provided in the textural descriptions that follow the tables.

Table 4.  
*Individual Interview Themes*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger/Frustration	P1:	"I mean, to me, it's anger. Just because of the history of it."
	P2:	"Sometimes it also just sends like bullets of sweat or just like, 'Here we go again.'"
	P3:	"My external reaction was just like, 'Oh, okay, well I don't agree with that...My internal reaction was heartbroken.'"
	P4:	"There's even some anger there for me. I'm just completely baffled by the ignorance."
	P5:	"I get annoyed. I'm annoyed most of the time I know it's happening."
	P6:	"And I just, I don't know, constantly felt put off. "
	P7:	"...it makes me frustrated that this guy does not understand my everyday life experience at all."

Table 4. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger/Frustration (cont.)	P8:	"... the microaggression first from the society, is, oh goodness. It just makes me kind of schizophrenic."
Security	P1:	"And it takes you right back to that moment of basic security of just being able to walk and breathe ... being threatened, even if you don't feel like you're being overtly threatened. It's that sense."
	P2:	"...because there is no assurance from administration, or faculty, or staff that that person who harmed you would be immediately reprimanded or removed from the situation, it doesn't make you feel safe."
	P3:	"...it immediately sort of makes me think of safety, security. Like it makes me just automatically assume, 'Okay, well that's not a person you want to be gay around.' Like they're not going to have your back."
	P4:	"I definitely felt more secure in my hometown because it was more diverse."
	P5:	"But at the same time, I don't express who I am. My experience on this campus has really affected my sense of security."
	P6:	"I had a lot of fear. And if I tried to confront, either I was going to be harmed, or that teacher's going to be harmed, in some way, without there being an opportunity to just have a dialogue about it."
	P7:	"...it makes me want to go into an actual safe place and then to remind myself, "Okay, I only have this amount of time left and then I graduate."
	P8:	"Kind of frightened because I don't want to come out and always being afraid that I will not be accepted if I was out."

Table 4. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Awareness	P1:	"I knew, in that class, I was in the minority."
	P2:	"...it has made me very aware that there are definitely people in the department where I don't have a space to exist."
	P3:	"... in order to have any kind of positive experience here, I feel like you have to be aware of the negative climate and be intentional about navigating that."
	P4:	"I'm definitely more aware that I'm a minority now. ...Definitely hyper aware."
	P5:	"I find myself censoring how I am and the ways that I express myself verbally as well as maybe even externally."
	P6:	"...there were definitely times where, because other people, and I'm amongst students, I was like, 'Is this...' I felt maybe some of my peers would end up being unsafe..."
	P7:	"I have to make sure it's not just me reading into things. 'I'm not crazy. This is what's going on, right?' Her being like, 'Yeah, no. That's not okay.'"
	P8:	"I'm constantly trying to figure out if the people I am around are safe. "
Visibility	P1:	"I feel that's what I keep coming back to...it's like I'm not seen."
	P2:	"Which- was like it's ok if you are, just don't put it in the space where I have to see it. So, my silence was required. Be who you are but don't be visible."
	P3:	"Erasure essentially of the queer teacher as an identity or the queer student."
	P4:	"Visibility. I mean I see the newsletters for the groups meeting and stuff, but I've never met any of these people and I feel I would know if I'd seen people on campus."

Table 4. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Visibility (cont.)	P5:	“There's no models at all. There's no representation. I mean, I can't speak for all of the departments, but in my department. So you're kind of like hoping you can find a friend who also knows what to do.”
	P6:	“There was even a sense of how my future family might look not being represented. I felt invisible.”
	P7:	“We have one visible LGBT leader in the program.”
	P8:	“So it feels very invisible which I take as a kind of microaggression, actually.”
Sense of Belonging	P1:	“I don't think we have a place for students who really identify as queer to just be able to say, “This is my home on campus. And this is where I'm going to find my community and my people.”
	P2:	“I mean, in an ideal with a world, they/them should be the default. But it's not because we live in a very binary society, so they're going to assume male, which in and of itself is a microaggression.”
	P3:	“It would be so much easier and so much less stress and less time if I have community here that was always supporting me, but instead, I'm seeking outside community.”
	P4:	“I really can't think of five people that I know that are part of the community, which is I wouldn't think that at a college campus. That surprised me.”
	P5:	“You feel small. You feel like-unseen Yeah. Like, you must be like everyone else and so you're just not actually you, yeah.”
	P6:	“...just being on the outside, and it's this fun thing where people are, ‘Oh, here's this exotic thing we may experience with someone they work with’...”

Table 4. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Sense of Belonging (cont.)	P7:	“...it just makes me ready to leave and just do whatever it takes to finish as quickly as possible, so that I don't have to be in that situation anymore.”
	P8:	“But on the other hand, the whole atmosphere doesn't feel very welcoming.”
Messages of Worth	P1:	“...in some sense, I felt like they were saying, gay people don't deserve to exist.”
	P2:	“Blend in, you don't really matter enough for us to ...”
	P3:	“...part of the message that gets conveyed is this is intentional and I don't matter, my group of people doesn't matter.”
	P4:	“I spent all this time thinking of myself as a second class citizen and I don't deserve that.”
	P5:	“...they're better than me. That I'm not equal.”
	P6:	“That there is something wrong with me. Almost to the point of it not being dehumanizing, but being, ‘Here's normal people, and here's these people.’”
	P7:	“...so then it makes me feel like he thinks that I'm that way, like I should feel that way.—taboo and dirty.
	P8:	“You are not worthy. You're not human. You are not one of us, therefore, you have to die or disappear even physically or mentally or socially.”

Table 4. *Individual Interview Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Advocacy/ Responsibility	P1:	"...again, it's, "This is an LGBT issue, and no one else in this room that I'm aware of is going to speak up on it." So I had to. I felt compelled to, but also, felt like I also wanted to."
	P2:	"Part of me is like, "This isn't what I was called to do but I'm going to do it because it helps me and it's going to help other people." But sometimes, it's tiring."
	P3:	"It's also made me more want to advocate for myself and for other queer people."
	P4:	"...there for the purpose of giving him insight into different cultures but I'm not really part of the discussion...."
	P5:	"Again, I'm like the expert. I know what every LGBT person goes through. That it must be a universal experience because we are all the same."
	P6:	"I feel like, if I'm out, and I'm one of the few people that I'm aware of that are out, I have to have my identity perfectly cemented down, and have the perfect verbiage, and there's not a lot of room to come outside of that box."
	P7:	"...it kind of makes me feel like I'm supposed to be the expert...That I'm supposed to educate everyone."
	P8:	N/A

Table 5.  
*Journal Entry Themes*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger/Frustration	P1:	N/A
	P5:	“I never feel like I can step up and say something for myself. I usually just want to get out of the situation as quickly as I can.”
Security	P1:	“I know there are staff and faculty on this campus who truly love, care, support, and defend the LGBTQ community, but I do feel that there is a profound silence on securing a center (or at minimum staff member) whose focus is to support LGBTQ students.”
	P5:	N/A
Awareness	P1:	“I didn’t know how they’d react, and I didn’t want to have a whole semester sitting in front of someone who may think differently of me for knowing I have a same-sex/gender partner.”
	P5:	N/A
Visibility	P1:	“I looked into other SEC institutions just to compare. While not every campus has a center devoted to queer student services, most do. And those that don’t at least have a webpage that compiles every LGBTQ resources on campus into one quick and easy webpage. The university doesn’t do any of that, and I honestly find that sad.”
	P5:	“When I just think about the university there is no one who stands out as a prominent LGBT figure.”
Sense of Belonging	P1:	“Do they not see LGBTQ students as deserving resources? I feel like if I were in a different place in my own life or development, I would feel invisible. I feel like the argument would always come back to money.”
	P5:	N/A

Table 5. *Journal Entry Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Messages of Worth	P1:	“To me, that just shows a lack of care.”
	P5:	N/A
Advocacy/ Responsibility	P1:	“I would love to be able to someday say it is not necessary, but in our current social, political, geographic, and local culture, it is absolutely necessary.”
	P5:	N/A

Table 6.  
*Focus Group Themes*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Anger/ Frustration	P1:	“I'm surprised how many times anger came up because I'm not really an angry person, but I was reading through it and I was like, wow...”
	P2:	N/A
	P3:	“I mean, yeah, I think I come in irritated. I just assume everyone's going to suck.”
	P5:	“I don't feel comfortable having that conversation with you. Because I don't know, I don't want this to cause a weird thing between us.”
	P6:	N/A
	P7:	“It's like, wow, you know what, that actually really upsets me. And that's really frustrating when you think about and, wow, that happens a lot.”
Security	P1:	“What do I say to you because I have to spend a whole semester sitting in a chair in front of you and wondering what you think? And honestly in the moment, because it was an old white man, I was like, I'm not going to bring it up. I was like, I'm just going to brush it off.”



Table 6. *Focus Group Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Security (cont.)	P2:	“I'm still just afraid to push, ‘No, I've changed my name’ or I've... Because it's not legally changed yet, but that shouldn't really matter.”
	P3:	N/A
	P5:	“Today this outfit is me going back to my safe. I know that nobody's going to say anything to me.”
	P6:	“I would say probably now I do have more concerns about how my peers view me and how supervisors view me. Because I want a job. And so I'm definitely closeted in some respects.”
	P7:	“...here you don't talk about it because people are trying to come across as like, I'm in academia, look, I'm a progressive person. But they aren't and it isn't safe.”
Awareness	P1:	N/A
	P2:	“I'm more aware of personal impact.”
	P3:	“So, microaggression almost feels like a definable incident or something. And I was like, if this is something that's always the way it is, is it ongoing or perpetual microaggression? I didn't know how to describe it.”
	P5:	“I feel like what's happening is it's kind of what do you say or not say? What's okay?”
	P6:	“...also just kind of sucking the pleasure out of identity related stuff. I feel there'd be a lot more joy in it if it wasn't something I had to think about like at work or professionally.”
	P7:	“...microaggressions, even though it says micro in front of it, it just sounds like once you put that label on it, you're labeling those people, people that you interact with, have respect for and that you know respect you in different ways, but who are still doing this and so they're still hurting you in that way.”

Table 6. *Focus Group Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Visibility	P1:	“There was nothing at my old institution to here where I can actually see things happening. But I also think had I not been a student affairs GA, I wouldn't have seen it happening.”
	P2:	“It's having spaces that are more visible that people can go to.”
	P3:	“...there's nothing for queer grad students, the few RSO's that are dedicated to LGBTQIA students are undergrad programs.”
	P5:	“That's why I don't go to the office because I'm like, "I don't want to deal with it. So bye.”
	P6:	“I would definitely say those things are bad, especially the visibility and invisibility, kind of going back and forth, thing very big one way or the other.”
	P7:	“No, I just don't share that information for the most part.”
Sense of Belonging	P1:	N/A
	P2:	N/A
	P3:	“And this university is worse than the ones I've been at. I have heard people say that, that have come from, at least in my department, that have come from other similar R1's or SEC schools and they're just like, it's way worse here.”
	P5:	“I think for me... Someone said it perfectly, I feel like I'm a bird stuffed back in a cage.”
	P6:	N/A
	P7:	“I came from a much more liberal background and then so coming here was like taking three steps backwards. Being like, whoa.”

Table 6. *Focus Group Themes (Cont.)*

Theme	Participant	Statement
Messages of Worth	P1:	N/A
	P2:	N/A
	P3:	N/A
	P5:	N/A
	P6:	N/A
	P7:	“I'll use the general, ‘they’ pronoun even for a singular individual describing a singular individual. And I'm told even though that's grammatically correct, it's not accepted in my department so I can't use it.”
Advocacy	P1:	“I looked at all of the SEC and was like literally the only one, I think maybe two others don't have a center on campus.”
	P2:	“There's the pressure on me too though. I'm just like, Okay, Let me go know everything about everyone's identity and out of my queer circle of friends who aren't here. What are your personal experiences and what are yours? And file them and have all of the language available at my fingertips and constantly keep up with it.”
	P3:	N/A
	P5:	“I'm tired of being the expert because I'm not, I'm not, I don't know. I know I don't know a lot.”
	P6:	N/A
	P7:	“Well sometimes it's just frustrating to always be on you to be the person to educate and explain.”

Six out of the eight individuals in this study participated in the focus groups and two completed the journal prompts entries. Overall, participants made several statements related to each theme. A more in depth exploration of longer quotes and context will be provided for each method of data collection to show that while a participant may not have addressed a theme in one form, they addressed it in other forms of data collection.

### **Textural and Structural Descriptions**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the primary aspiration of phenomenology is to acquire the accurate essence of experience through the perception of the experienter and that is accomplished by looking at the textural “what” and structural “how” of an experience. Textural and structural descriptions are created by utilizing the participant’s own words and context to illustrate the identified themes. Subsequent to the textural descriptions, the researcher depicted the structural descriptions to give context to the participant’s experience of the phenomenon of LGBT microaggressions. The steps of phenomenological reduction by Moustakas (1994) were used to develop structural descriptions. This process, imaginative variation, includes the consideration of different possible structural meanings, recognition of underlying themes, consideration of possible universal structures, and seeking illustrative and vivid themes in order to arrive at structural descriptions that relate or convey the essence of the experience. In the following sections, textural and structural descriptions for each theme are examined starting with the themes from individual interviews, then journal themes, followed by focus group themes.

**Themes.** There are seven main themes that emerged from the data to address the research question for this study. They are: *anger/frustration, security, awareness, visibility, sense of belonging, messages of worth, and advocacy/responsibility*. Each of these themes were found in all three forms of data collection: individual interviews, journal prompt entries, and focus

groups. In the following section, each theme will be described and context will be provided for participant statements related to each of the themes and will include statements made across all three data collection points.

***Anger/frustration.*** Statements made by participants revealed experiences in which they felt a range of anger that included hurt, dismay, disempowerment, and discomfort. One participant described his anger and sense of disempowerment during a classroom discussion on gender inclusive language:

And I remember there are two people in the class, who were very much just, "Why? That's stupid. There's no reason, it's been like this forever, we have no reason to change it." And I tried, I remember I tried pushing back against them a lot, because I was like...Well, I was, "There are people who identify outside of the gender binary, or people who don't identify as men. And we're using this term 'freshman' to label large group of people. And that could be disorienting, or cause dysphoria, or make somebody uncomfortable, using that label and hearing it all the time." And so, I remember, I tried saying stuff like this. And these two students were just, "No," and "Never." But then, there was this one comment that just really irked me, and one of the students was like, she was, "They're making such a small issue such a huge issue. If this is how those people are going to act, they're never going to get a seat at the table." And I remember thinking, "What the fuck?" I'm like, "Is that really how you think?"... (Participant 1).

Another participant described her response to a coworker's discriminatory comments about the LGBT community:

There's one person that started saying stuff and was like, "Oh, the LGBT community is this and that." And I was like, "You know me." I straight up told them that. I'm like, "You know me. Am I a bad person?" And he just kind of ... I was done. It had been a day where it was like probably a lot of people had been saying stuff. And I said, "You know me. Have I done anything to you or anyone else? I'm a human being too." And you could just tell he kind of sat there and was like-...it had an impact. I don't know if it had the right impact, but it definitely impacted him because he just kind of was, "Okay. Someone else can talk now." So yeah.... (Participant 5).

One woman described her dismay at how the word 'fag/faggot' is used by students on campus:

I regularly am walking around campus and you can learn so much when you just are walking past wads of students. And I hear guys using the F word so much in regard to... It has a very negative connotation. Like, "Don't be an F. Oh, that's such an F thing to say. Well, he's just an F." Like it seems to be a very common word here at least among fraternity students and among certain populations of male students. So that was pretty shocking for me because I remember the first time I heard a student using it here when I came, it was my first semester, first few weeks or whatever, and I just heard someone saying it, just standing there talking to their friend. They just kept on using the F word that way and I was pretty shocked, and I was just like, "Wow, that must be like an isolated thing"... (Participant 3).

Another participant described a classroom discussion that took place surrounding their intersecting identity of being plus sized:

Being in my program, there, definitely, size can be an impact. And as someone who is very heavy, I'm aware of that...I just remember one time in class, we're talking about a case where someone had diabetes. They were talking about this enormous size, that this person is, they were giving an estimate of the pounds. And I remember the class just being shocked. I was like, "Dude, I weigh 50 more pounds than this hypothetical person." Oh, I was pissed off. Yeah, I was very pissed off. Yeah. I was enraged (Participant 6).

One participant described an interaction with a new GA in their workspace and the way this experience impacted them:

So the first time I bring up the fact that I have a husband, I'm like, "He stops by around and visits me for lunch." And she's like, "That's good. I just don't want to see you two making out. I just don't like PDA. If you were straight or gay, it doesn't matter." It was not prompted until that came up, and so I'm immediately like, "Warning signs." So she's still new, so I haven't had a conversation about that. And also because of that, I'm intrinsically annoyed at everything she does and I'm trying to let that go, let her be a professional, and...I felt terrible for two or three days, it still bothers me. It goes back and forth between anger and sadness because anger a lot of times is when you don't have another way to express that emotion, it comes out as anger. So frustrating and especially when I tried to like to talk to (fellow GAs) about the situation, they didn't recognize it as a problem. So when other people don't recognize microaggressions as a problem and it creates some doubt on my end and anger because it's like, "What if I misunderstood it" (Participant 2)?

Another woman discussed her frustration with how her departmental mentor treats the females in her department:

I do feel that my mentor and advisor is different around his female mentees and advisees. I've talked with the other girl in my research group, about it. We've had conversations about it a lot, actually, where he requires more of us than he does of the male members of our group. He's harder on us. He guilt trips. He's very ... He does that a lot. It gets frustrating. He especially does that with ... It's a tactic he knows works with women, more just because we're used to being made to feel guilty (Participant 7).

One participant described her discomfort and sense of disempowerment from classroom experience with a peer that was related to her identity as a biracial lesbian:

There was a certain chapter that we were studying and it was about the skin color hierarchy and black culture. He would set up questions like... Basically in black culture (a lighter skinned person) will be better than (a darker skinned person)? It was a clarifying type question, but then to say that out loud, it's like this is a stereotype you're playing into. Why would you give it life? But he's also the type that would ask loaded questions about being lesbian. He's very religious...I'm super uncomfortable, very uncomfortable. It's like, how do you respond to that? This is a type of class where everything goes. It's supposed to be an open discussion and then you can't get mad because of course then you're playing into the black stereotype, right? It's like I'm panicking on the inside but then on the outside I'm nonchalant. I don't know, maybe. I just play it off (Participant 4).

Another participant described feeling frustrated related to his experience of other students' attitude towards him as an Asian male related to the recent Coronavirus outbreak that started in China:

Because the people in China are dying because of this disease and you're very happy about that. I'm like, okay, it's very beneficial for America, but mm-mm (negative). Wow. It's as if Chinese or anyone that is not an American is not a human. It doesn't matter, because as long as it's beneficial for the United States, okay they don't even care about the rest of the people. That's very troublesome (Participant 8).

Participant 5 wrote about frequent interactions with a co-worker on campus and her sense of disempowerment to speak up for herself in her journal prompt entry:

I am unsure if I mentioned multiple times that there is someone in the department who tries to point out all the hot women to me all the time. Whenever we are somewhere that we can be separated from the people this person will start saying, 'oh this woman is hot or that woman has this wrong with her or that.' I never feel like I can step up and say

something for myself. I usually just want to get out of the situation as quickly as I can (Participant 5).

In the focus groups, discussions surrounding the theme of anger/frustration fell within the range of annoyance, irritation, and disempowerment. The participants described situations in which they felt annoyed, irritated, disempowered, frustrated, and/ or angry. After reading their transcripts, several of the participants commented on being surprised by the amount of anger/frustration that came up during their individual interviews. Participant 1 verbalized his surprise, “ I mean even reading through my own transcript, I'm surprised how many times anger came up because I'm not really an angry person, but I was reading through it and I was like, wow, I must've been mad this day when I did it or something. But yeah, I think it all seemed accurate to how I feel.” Participant 7 followed up Participant 1’s comment with her own surprise about how many times she talked about being frustrated in her individual interview transcript:

It's like, wow, you know what, that actually really upsets me. And that's really frustrating when you think about and, wow, that happens a lot. And so it brings out all these frustrations that even day to day I try not to have because I don't necessarily notice them as much. I'll be like I'll have a little indication and then just let it go and then move forward. But when you start adding them up it's like, oh, that's actually really frustrating (Participant 7).

One participant discussed her annoyance with her department regarding power dynamics, lack of diversity and bias training:

I think it's made me the opposite where I'm just like, you're so annoying and I'll just be more aggressive about it and just, I don't know, I'm at my limit with people and so I'm just more willing to not educate them, like you're saying, but also just not even try to change my opinion of them. I'm just like, I can't. Yeah. And it's just like, oh god, it's not even worth it. So, I just don't even try. I mean, yeah, I think I come in irritated. I just assume everyone's going to suck (Participant 3).



Another participant described her discomfort talking about her sexual orientation with a fellow student after a guy was hitting on her:

Like one of the times someone was like, "Oh is that guy trying to hit on you?" And I'm like, "You're my student resident. I don't feel comfortable". I'm just like wow, I don't know. And I just kind of moved on because I don't feel comfortable having that conversation with you. Because I don't know, I don't want this to cause a weird thing between us. So it's just like, I don't know. Let's go back to what we're doing right now. And just push it away (Participant 5).

Participant 6 went on to describe how in undergrad they didn't have a sense of themselves as a Queer individual but once they did, they started to understand microaggressions. They stated, "I think in undergrad I definitely did not have a sense of having a queer identity. I was just like, 'All the people are cute'. And it did not come to me like, 'Oh this is a thing'. And then as I got older and I started getting more into women, I was like, "Oh this thing pisses me off on this thing" (Participant 6).

**Security.** Various experiences were described by the participants in which they felt a range of emotions from fear, guarded, unsafe, and unsupported. These emotions encompassed physical as well as emotional security. Participants reported that they often felt apprehensive, untrusting, and at times were unable to speak up, participate in class, be themselves, and sometimes avoided other people in an attempt to protect themselves from harm.

One participant described hearing students utilizing the word, 'fag' and 'faggot' on campus and how the sense of the moment related to another time when he and his cousin were walking down the road in his hometown:

We were literally just walking down the street, a car drove by, and started yelling "Faggots!" At us. And they literally parked, and a guy got out. And I remember, in that moment, I was scared for my life. Because I was, "What? What's going to happen?" And so, it's just moments like that. So when I hear the word just used that casually, and, that public-your heart just stops. It's like, "Oh, God." And it takes you right back to that moment of basic security of just being able to walk and breathe...Being threatened, even if you don't feel like you're being overtly threatened. It's that sense (Participant 1).

Another participant described feeling unsafe when his professors are silent:

...because right now in the academic climate, if you are vocally opposed to people of other races, cultures or beliefs, you are reprimanded or are shunned, canceled to use the modern lexicon. But silence is kind of an indicator of lack of allyship at this point, and that silence gives people like me anxiety over whether I can be myself around you because then you could be silently against me and then that affects my grades, my recommendation letters, my connections (Participant 2).

One woman discussed how her negative experiences on campus and in her department have created her avoiding department events as a protective measure:

I think I'm protected from microaggressions because I'm not going to see anyone. Like I'm just almost protecting myself from them, in a sense, by not going to any of the department events and not going to the mixers, and not reaching out to the new students and things like that. What I'm saying is I feel less connected and it's definitely affected my sense of protection and security (Participant 3).

Another participant discussed her hesitance to be herself in her classroom related to her lesbian and biracial identities:

I can think of certain situations where I was hesitant to say my sexual orientation. There have been several instances where I had to almost do an autobiography, two minute who are you. I was hesitant to say, oh, my name is Participant 4. I have a girlfriend that we've lived together for a year. I have been hesitant just because of the demographic here. For sure we're underrepresented. I think especially I'm a minority, I'm gay and I'm in an interracial relationship. A little bit of fear regarding security comes up (Participant 4).

Participant 5 described feeling like she hides her LGBT identity due to her experiences on this campus and within her department. She stated, "Around here I feel like it is definitely not like an important part of me. I hide it, I feel like more here. But internally, it's important...But it also feels like it's not safe for me to have LGBT to be the most important piece."

One participant expressed their difficulty feeling safe enough to be themselves in their program, on campus, and with other people. They compared how they present themselves to a watered-down version of soda:

I'm afraid to just stick up for myself and my experiences in its entirety, and I share myself in a, I don't know... I'm thinking of soda and diet soda, and you get the shitty, watered down... Okay, if you had a lot of ice and a little bit of soda, I would have the very iced down version of myself in some areas. So I guess, how it's affected me is that, guess I don't feel comfortable being open with people. And yeah, I think that's the main thing. It is definitely risky even with people who may be safe (Participant 6).

Participant 7 described feeling reluctant, as an LGBT individual, to speak up during classroom discussions in order to protect herself from being hurt. She stated, "In classroom discussions, for example, where clearly this is not something that they support and they're already discussing it amongst themselves. I'm just like, 'I really don't want to put myself out there because this is just going to personally hurt to talk about.'"

Another participant verbalized how his identity as an Asian gay male has hindered his desire to speak up or be involved:

I do feel like I would be jeopardized if I ever speak as a gay and even as an Asian. Like I said, there's always this kind of stereotype that they label on you, which makes it very, very hard to get out of it and talk and express yourself. And if you do that outside all of these kinds of expectations or the boundaries and people will think, okay. He's not that trustworthy. And even worse, he's not even Asian, he's not even gay. It makes everything hard (Participant 8).

Participant 1 wrote in his journal prompt entry about not feeling secure or supported as a member of the LGBT community on this campus:

And I know there are staff and faculty on this campus who truly love, care, support, and defend the LGBTQ community, but I do feel that there is a profound silence on securing a center (or at minimum staff member) whose focus is to support LGBTQ students. I feel like some people are comfortable enough to say we have the MC, but that's not enough.

Security was discussed in both focus groups by multiple participants. Participant 1 discussed a situation in which it was assumed his partner was a woman and how he experienced fear about whether he should correct the individual:

I was just chatting with somebody before class and it was an older white man and he was asking about my girlfriend at one point because I kept saying partner and he said girlfriend. And I was just like... In my head I did that thing where I'm like, do I say? What do I say to you because I have to spend a whole semester sitting in a chair in front of you and wondering what you think? And honestly in the moment, because it was an old white man, I was like, I'm not going to bring it up. I was like, I'm just going to brush it off (Participant 1).

Participant 7 spoke about feeling fearful and guarded at this university:

...those experiences versus at this university, it's a public university. You got no idea. You had no idea what you're going to run into, you really don't. And so you have to be on guard, but you expect yourself to not always be on guard or at least not as much as you would in those situations. But it's just this big huge campus of like, I don't know. Am I going to tiptoe around (Participant 7)?

Another participant spoke about how their change (gender identity) has been slowed as a result of fear. They voiced reluctance to correct pronouns and push to have others call them by their chosen name due to fear:

It's been very slow because I'm still just afraid to push "No, I've changed my name" or I've... Because it's not legally changed yet, but that shouldn't really matter. Or I prefer these pronouns and even if the close people I've told within the department, those that try and like use my correct name and pronouns, really make me happy. But then it makes me aware of those that don't (Participant 2).

One participant discusses taking a gap year between graduate and undergraduate. She described this as a time of embracing herself and then returning back to this university and feeling the need to scale themselves back due to safety concerns:

I kind of found myself when I was not here because I had a gap year in between my graduate and undergraduate and then I came back here and now we got to step it back. ... Anyways. I think that's kind of what's happened, "all right, we'll just kind of go back to how I was before" because I know that that's safe and I know I'm doing... Today this

outfit is me going back to my safe. I know that nobody's going to say anything to me (Participant 5).

Participant 6 discussed how out they are with peers and instructors due to security concerns regarding possible future employment. They stated, “I would say probably now I do have more concerns about how my peers view me and how supervisors view me. Because I want a job. And so I’m definitely closeted in some respects. I’m not super visible as far as like not in the classroom setting, or in an internship site where I’m trying to make those connections.” They went on to discuss that they were out to a couple people but felt like they had to “step back” from being out about their non-binary status. They gave the following example:

“...for one of my sites I worked in a school setting and I was going to use an Mx. instead of Ms. and I got into a classroom and the teacher was very adamant about... It's very like a hyper conservative stereotype. I don't know how to... Well I'm going to reverse out of this one because I have to kind of... Working on that” (Participant 6).

**Awareness.** These experiences were those in which participants described a range of awareness. The participants described situations in which that involved feeling aware, hypervigilant, aware of privilege, difficulty verbalizing and classifying microaggressions, and feeling gaslit or doubting their experiences.

Participant 1 described a classroom experience in which he was aware he was in the minority and how that affected his sense of security, comfort, and ability to be himself in that class:

I knew, in that class, I was in the minority... I just think that there were only two or three of us who actually voiced our opinions, and I just happened to be the only one on my side that voiced my opinion. So it affected my sense of security in the classroom in one sense. Not just my comfort but my ability to be myself (Participant 1).

Another participant described their internal hypervigilance that occurs as an impact of microaggressions and campus climate, in general:

And constantly gauging is this person safe to correct? It's like you have to analyze, like looking around their desk, "All right. Do you have an LGBTQ ally sticker somewhere? Do you have any sign, it's like, do you have children's photos or your adult child, are they kissing someone of the same sex?" Looking for any signs of allyship or acceptance, physical, visible signs. There's a lot of internal work and vigilance (Participant 2).

One participant described her own awareness about her sexuality and her awareness about her student's awareness and how that affects how she shows up in the classroom:

Because even as a sort of femme presenting lesbian, one thing I worry about with students is like, "Oh." Not so much that they'll be like, "Oh, that's disgusting." Maybe with some of the female students, but with the male students, I'm worried they'll be like, "Oh, how cool. Like you're a lesbian?" And so I don't want that either and so I do my darndest to try to be as desexualized as I can in the classroom because I want my students to be able to learn and to really be able to grow from that process and trust me. And so that's something I worry about too, is I feel like with there being such little awareness about queerness here, it's also still in the dark ages about like, "Oh, lesbian is hot," and stuff like that (Participant 3).

Participant 4 described the impact that campus experiences have had on her sense of awareness of her biracial identity and minority membership.

I'm definitely more aware of the fact that I'm black now, and that's weird to say, but it's just because I never identified with black culture so I'm more comfortable with white culture and that's just what I was raised in. Now it's almost made me feel like I'm not a good person because I didn't identify with what people assume I am. I'm definitely more aware that I'm a minority now. Definitely hyper aware (Participant 4).

Another participant described feeling like her experience of microaggressions on campus have impacted her awareness of how she expresses herself. She describe feeling boxed in and needing to censor herself as a result:

I feel like I kind of live in a box more than I would like to live. I don't feel as confident with the microaggressions that happen. I'm kind of like, "Maybe if I don't do this, or if I don't say that, or if I don't wear this." I find myself censoring how I am and the ways that I express myself verbally as well as maybe even externally. It impacts my sense of security (Participant 5).

Participant 6 discussed being aware of discomfort as a result of microaggressions but having difficulty labeling it as a microaggression or doubting their experience. They stated, “I’ve definitely had moments where there’s been discomfort, or feeling I’m not equal in the situation.” They went on to further describe their awareness, “Yeah, there’s some reluctance to...I guess I’m afraid to label it microaggression, but probably, I’ll label it as a discomfort” (Participant 6).

One participant described being aware that conversations surrounding LGBT issues are not something she hears about on campus which leaves her uncertain about where professors may stand. She goes on to describe how that affects her sense of walking on eggshells or hypervigilance with professors and colleagues:

So, there’s nothing on LGBT issues. There’s some regarding race and criminalization, which is really cool. There’s nothing ... That conversation just isn’t had. So, I have no idea where these people stand. I assume that they’re progressive about it, they’re liberal, accepting, but that’s only because of things that they’ve said regarding other issues, and the fact that they’re professors who live in a liberal town. I don’t actually know. It’s not really necessarily microaggressions. It’s more so just a tiptoeing: “I don’t really know if I’m comfortable saying anything to you, because I don’t know where you are” (Participant 7).

Participant 8 described feeling hypervigilant about how others may be thinking or feeling about him in relation to his identity as an Asian gay male. He stated, “I spend a lot of time trying to figure out what people are thinking and feeling. I constantly worry about my safety. And it takes up a lot of emotional and mental energy. I’m constantly trying to figure out if the people I am around are safe” (Participant 8).

Participant 1 wrote about his internalized thought process when dealing with microaggressions from faculty, students, and colleagues. He wrote that he thinks, “‘how do I address this? Do I out myself? Do I continue on with the conversation like nothing happened? Do I keep just using the term ‘partner?’” It also makes me wonder how the person would react if I were to correct them” (Participant 1).

During the focus groups, some participants discussed feeling surprised about how much difficulty articulating microaggressions under the theme of awareness came up for them.

Participant 3 stated, "...the one that surprised me, but is also definitely true is, overall people not being able to articulate what is a microaggression. Because there's whole paragraphs of me trying to think of what would be a microaggression." She further stated, "But then I went on to describe them." Participant 3 continued to reflect on whether microaggressions were acts of aggression or ongoing oppression. She stated:

...microaggression almost feels like a definable incident or something. And I was like, if this is something that's always the way it is, is it ongoing or perpetual microaggression? I didn't know how to describe it. If it's the expected way that it's always going to be, we're always going to get a curriculum that assumes everyone has one gender that is made for straight people or things like that. We're always going to have teaching workshops that don't address positionality or things like that (Participant 3).

Participant 7 agreed with Participant 3 and added:

I don't know...microaggressions...even though it says micro in front of it, it just sounds like once you put that label on it, you're labeling those people, people that you interact with, have respect for and that you know respect you in different ways, but who are still doing this and so they're still hurting you in that way. So, it's hard to grapple with that where you're like, I don't want to label you as this type of person but you are doing these things and I need to at least be honest with myself on those things" (Participant 7).

Other participants discussed their awareness in terms of hypervigilance. Participant 2 described some of his internal thought processes when a microaggression occurs amongst peers, students, and professors. He stated:

When a microaggression happens, how do you correct it but maintain professionalism and when should you be at the point in your professional relationship before you feel comfortable correcting it? Do I do it now? Do I save it for later? If I save it for later will they argue that they've been doing it for so long now that it's too late to change? Anxiety brain (Participant 2).



Participant 6 discussed feeling like microaggressions have slowed their identity development in terms of how awareness of negative views impacts or impedes self-expression. They stated, “I think slowing is something I feel too and also just kind of sucking the pleasure out of identity related stuff. I feel there'd be a lot more joy in it if it wasn't something I had to think about like at work or professionally.”

Participant 5 indicated that in trying to navigate the university as an LGBT individual, she is constantly aware of her uncertainty about what is or is not acceptable and how others may react. She stated, “I feel like what's happening is it's kind of what do you say or not say? What's okay?”

**Visibility.** All eight participants discussed the theme of visibility in their individual interviews. Again, the theme encompassed a range of experiences from visible representation on campus and within their departments to experiences of feeling invisible and silenced. These experiences happened both in the classroom and outside the classroom.

One participant described the lack of resources and representation at the university for LGBT students and reported a sense of invisibility as a result. He stated, “Like I’m not seen...but it is this form of anger, because it shows that people don't care, and they don't see you. So, it's like, you're invisible. They don't see it as a priority to offer these programs to make campus better for us.”

Participant 2 described a microaggression experience with a coworker in which they felt the message conveyed was that their presence was welcome but visibility as and LGBT individual was not. They stated:

She was still attempting to be cordial, but she's trying to ignore the fact that I'm gay, she wants to be associated with me in a professional sense, ignoring my queerness. She doesn't want to acknowledge it, she doesn't want it around because that reminds her that I'm queer. Which- was like it's ok if you are, just don't put it in the space where I have to

see it. So, my silence was required. Be who you are but don't be visible. That's a fundamental problem for me because who I am and involves that, you can't separate me from that (Participant 2).

Another participant described how microaggressions and the campus climate have impacted her as an LGBT individual:

I'm just less visible. I might be running to a meeting with my advisor or something or just... Maybe I have to run up here to get a file or something and if I'm wearing like a dykey shirt or something, I take it off and I change because I'm like, "Oh, I don't want students to see me and say something weird or even administrators or..." I mean, like I'm just not visible. I feel like I spent a long time closeted and then even after I was out of the closet, I was the invisible thumb kind of problem (Participant 3).

One participant described her experience of being a biracial lesbian in classrooms with straight white males and feeling unable to speak up because then she plays into the race and sexual orientation stereotypes:

Yes. It's called the spiral of silence. If you're in a room with straight white males, all of them, including the professor and something is said, well then I'm just, if I speak up, then I'm the angry black girl that likes girls. So am I doing more good or more harm staying quiet? I don't know. But sometimes I don't think it's worth it because you're not going to get through it all in one day (Participant 4).

Participant 5 discussed the lack of visible LGBT leaders in her department and on campus when describing her experience of campus climate. She stated, "I don't think that that's evident. No administrators or models that I know of. There's no models at all. There's no representation. I mean, I can't speak for all of the departments, but in our department. So you're kind of like hoping you can find a friend who also knows what to do" (Participant 5).

Another participant discussed experiences of feeling invisible related to their intersecting identity of being plus sized and classroom chairs that are not made with larger people in mind.

They described the messages that get conveyed to them when classroom furniture and space does not take size into consideration:

...the message would be, "Hey, these people shouldn't be here." Or, "These people, people of this size, aren't worth considering enough to have a piece of furniture that fits." The fact people don't even think about it. Makes me feel invisible and sometimes, also just not worthy of consideration, in that respect. Because I think people know heavier set people exist. It's not worth adjusting or paying a few extra dollars to get a chair that would accommodate everyone (Participant 6).

Participant 7 discussed having one visible LGBT leader within her program and stated, "We have one visible LGBT leader in the program." But also indicated that discussing queer identity within her program is difficult and she receives the message, "Not here." She reported she often feels like going back to her GA office where she feels seen, "It honestly just makes me want to go back to my office and be like, 'Guys!' To go back to an actual space where I feel like I'm understood and accepted."

One participant discussed lack of LGBT visibility on campus and described the impact:

I don't know if there's any conference here even talking about these issues. I know there are gender study, there are conferences, cultural study conference and there might be one people or two talking about homosexuality, but it's not the major topic. So it feels very invisible which I take as a kind of microaggression, actually (Participant 8).

He went on to further describe the impact of lack of visibility. He indicated it makes it difficult to understand that LGBT microaggressions and discrimination are occurring:

This whole invisibility also makes things much, much worse. Because if you don't get an opportunity to get to know, to truly know how, why did you this way, how they do this way, and truly know them as a person, how can you even come to the realization that there is this kind of discrimination going on (Participant 8)?

One participant wrote that he had been thinking about the lack of representation and visible LGBT resources on campus since the individual interview:

I looked into other SEC institutions just to compare. While not every campus has a center devoted to queer student services, many do. And those that don't at least have a webpage

that compiles every LGBTQ resource on campus into one quick and easy webpage. The university doesn't do any of that, and I honestly find that sad (Participant 1).

Participant 5 also wrote in their journal prompt entry about the lack of visible LGBT community, resources, and leadership:

When it comes to the University as a whole I don't see much about the University ever doing much to point out LGBT. I watch the newswire a lot and I only ever see housing putting on events to learn more about the LGBT community in general. When I just think about the university there is no one who stands out as a prominent LGBT figure (Participant 5).

Visibility as a theme was discussed in focus groups. Participant 1 discussed the lack of visible resources on campus for LGBT individuals and stated, "And I looked at all of the SEC and was like literally the only one, I think maybe two others don't have a center on campus." Participant 3 agreed with Participant 1 and added, "There is nothing for queer grad students. The few RSOs that are dedicated to LGBTQIA students are undergrad programs." Another participant talked about the theme of visibility in terms of personal impact and her experiences of having to explain her intersecting identities. She stated:

I'll just tell people I'm queer and then not go any further into it because they still have problems with just labeling someone gay or lesbian, so they're not even going to understand what pansexual is or what it means that sexual orientation is a spectrum and not everyone is either straight or gay. So, I guess it's just, I've learned not to try to explain. And so people ask, I tell them or I'll mention past relationships like my ex-girlfriend and things like that, but I won't go into like, "Let me tell you." No, I just don't share that information for the most part (Participant 7).

Some of the participants also discussed visibility as a choice. One participant discussed situations in their department where they wrestle with maintaining some sense of professionalism and choosing visibility:

There's a difference between... On one hand you want to not say anything because you want to maintain professionalism or on the other hand you need to say something for visibility or else if you're not going to be visible, who is? And which is not the greatest thought to have. But it's a thought I have regularly (Participant 2).

Participant 5 reported she does not want to be put in that position. She stated, “That's why I don't go to the office because I'm like, "I don't want to deal with it. So bye.” Participant 6 agreed that the visible/invisible paradigm created by oppressive systems and microaggressions did not sit well with them. They stated, “I would definitely say those things are bad, especially the visibility and invisibility, kind of going back and forth thing; very big one way or the other.”

*Sense of belonging.* Another theme that all of the participants discussed during individual interviews was a sense of belonging. They spoke of this theme as a range of experiences from belonging, community/connection, isolation/alone, and unwelcome/excluded. Participant 1 described feeling like LGBT individuals were not very welcome on campus. He noted the absence of LGBT community on campus, “...lack of support, lack of resources, not having a central location on campus to call home. I think with that comes a lack of community, because small pockets may exist here and there, but there's not one place where I think queer people can just say, ‘This is my home on campus.’” He continued to describe the experience of campus climate, “I think it is an isolating experience, probably, to be LGBT on this campus, especially for people who I would say are younger, less comfortable, and probably out with a partner as well.”

Another participant described a sense of not being able to express or be themselves as an impact of microaggressive experiences they have had on campus. They stated, “They make me less confident in my identity, they make me question whether I can express myself fully because they're just like, ‘Okay, acceptance, acceptance, acceptance, good, great.’ And then that one thing takes root in my anxious inherently anxious mind and just explode” (Participant 2).

Participant 3 described not feeling a sense of belonging or welcome on this campus as an LGBT individual. She stated:

I almost didn't come here because I was just like, 'This place is spooky. Like everyone looks the same. Nobody is gay. It's scary.' I mean, I almost didn't come and really the only reason I did come was because I was able to work with my advisor who is queer and of color. And so, I wouldn't recommend it. Like I wouldn't be able to confidently recommend this school to anyone. I know that's a strong statement (Participant 3).

Participant 4 discussed the theme of sense of belonging by describing her reaction to the lack of community/connection on campus, "I really can't think of five people that I know that are part of the community, which is, I wouldn't think that at a college campus. That surprised me." She also went on to describe her experience of campus climate and not feeling a sense of belonging or community:

I think at least other minority groups are acknowledged and visible. My biggest problem with LGBT is that people talk about it, there's studies about it, there's research about it. Where are they? We're encouraged to do studies about it in class. It's talked about. But where are they? Srsly, where are they? I don't understand where they are. Like other minority groups, there's Latinx celebrations here. There's black history celebrations here. Where are they? Again. It's almost like it's not as important as ethnic identities I guess. But sometimes I think it's more important if you're fighting with yourself (Participant 4).

Another participant discussed feeling isolated in her department and feels that since she is the LGBT individuals in her department, she must be an expert. She described the impact of these interactions, "You feel small. You feel like-unseen Yeah. Like, you must be like everyone else and so you're just not actually you, yeah" (Participant 5).

Participant 6 described their reaction to an experience in a class where family systems and types of couples were being discussed. They expressed feelings of not belonging and exclusion as they describe the emotional impact. They stated, "I felt weird too, because as a person who's white, who people read as binary and female, I had never... It was my first time I

really experienced the sense of what I'm going through is not, I'm not part of whatever I'm participating in. I'm an outside observer. I don't know.”

One participant described feeling unwelcome on campus as part of the overall impact microaggressions have had on her:

Over time, I think it's just made me want to get done and just go. Wouldn't say that's the only thing that's made me want to get ... Obviously, it's just been a long time. Really, it's more so I'm ready for ... Seeing the positive environment that I have at work versus what I have in my program, it makes me ready to be like, "This is what I need. This is what's healthy," versus this is what I'm experiencing. So, it just makes me ready to leave and just do whatever it takes to finish as quickly as possible, so that I don't have to be in this situation anymore (Participant 7).

Participant 8 describes not feeling welcome on campus as an Asian gay male. He discussed this as being correlated to the recent Covid-19 viral outbreak that started in China:

Most of the time, but with recent events in China, you know, the new coronavirus and the whole host, well disaster or pandemic stuff. And occasionally people will look at me if I cough and if I just sneeze a little bit, they're like, hmm...Well, it's understandable. Seriously speaking, if I knew somebody came from Wuhan, the epicenter and recently or it's somebody from the Hubei Province, I would have probably said the same, like hmm. Yeah, it's understandable. But on the other hand, the whole atmosphere doesn't feel very welcoming (Participant 8).

Participant 1 wrote about the theme of sense of belonging when describing his experience guest lecturing on LGBT topics:

Most of the time, the classrooms are filled with (presumably) cis-hetero students. I remember once I was leading a session for an undergraduate class of (blank) majors, and I would get questions that (to me) were so basic. For example, I remember a student getting really hung up on pronoun usage. Saying things like, “I just don’t understand it.” And reflecting on that, it makes me wonder how sessions like that might go differently if we had a space focused on educating our campus community on LGBTQ topics and supporting LGBTQ students (Participant 1).

Several of the participants also brought up the theme of sense of belonging in their focus groups. Participant 7 described her experience at the university as having a less than welcoming campus climate, “I came from a much more liberal background and then so coming here was like

taking three steps backwards. Being like, whoa.” Participant 3 agreed to unwelcoming campus climate and added:

I went to a religious undergrad as well and then I didn't for my I went to a public school, and then I went to another public or like a land-grant university for my job, before this. And this university worse than the ones I've been at. I have heard people say that, that have come from, at least in my department, that have come from other similar R1's or SEC schools and they're just like, it's way worse here (Participant 3).

Participant 7 described her experience of lack of connection on campus by stating “I think for me...Someone said it perfectly, I feel like I’m a bird stuffed back in a cage.”

***Messages of worth.*** Participants all discussed messages of worth they received from some of their experiences on campus. The messages of worth received fall within a range that includes: *don't matter, abnormal, sinful, bad, not valued/valid*. One participant described the message that was conveyed about his worth after an experience on campus involving the word fag/faggot:

...it's different, when it comes from a place of ignorance or anger. And I felt like, that's where it was coming from, at that time. So it definitely was an uncomfortable experience, being there. I felt like it came from a place of ignorance and anger. So, in some sense, I felt like they were saying, gay people don't deserve to exist (Participant 1).

Another participant described the messages of worth they experience by lack of queer scholarship or follow through at the university:

The only queer scholarship on campus is funded by someone from Pride, and I know it's two older gay men who have a lot of money who actually just made it and just like, "All right, you as Pride now get to assign this out." And I don't know who they are. I just saw them at an event once, I don't actually remember their names. But they had to make it and yes, change does come from an individual but has to be reciprocated, like you hit one side and just kind of reverberates through and that reverberation needs to be by the administration as a whole. I think the general attitude is that LGBT folks on campus are treated in a way that the overall message is, "Blend in, you don't really matter enough for us to ..." but because of very vocal allies you feel relatively okay, but it could be a lot better, and again it's just voices, there's no backup to it. It's not funded, it's not a forefront of the mission. I seriously hear people saying some good things but there is no backup or follow through (Participant 2).



Participant 3 described a lack of training as queer teacher and for queer students and the message of worth that gets conveyed by the lack of acknowledgement and training:

I think just in our teacher training, the lack of any sort of mention of it, is really shocking to me. And to me, it reveals the priorities of the overall program, that this is not something we care about, even if this is the number one priority for some of the queer people coming in or some of the people of color coming in, and vice versa. It just comes across as 'we don't matter.'. Erasure essentially of the queer teacher as an identity or the queer student (Participant 3).

Another participant described her experiences with microaggressions as a biracial lesbian against the backdrop of having a strong ally in her department and finally and the messages conveyed to her about her worth and value. She stated, "I've even had people touch me because I didn't have the right man yet....I've had people make advances towards me and asked me, do we assume that I'm a freak. Sexually I'm a freak." She went on to further describe the positive impact of having a strong ally: "But my department chair actually boycotted a restaurant because of their views on gay and lesbian relationships. To have someone accept me for who I am, advocate for me, advocate for who I am in the community, that is above and beyond what I could've ever asked for." She ended with, "It makes me feel like I'm good enough and I struggled with that for a long time, which is why I did drugs. I spent all this time thinking of myself as a second class citizen and I don't deserve that" (Participant 4).

Participant 5 described an experience with one of her male peers and the message she received in relation to her worth as a lesbian:

So he's like, 'Oh, you're holding your pool stick wrong. This is how you should do it.' And I just kind of tapped it in there. And I was like, 'Okay.' But the other people, the other women in my department, I don't see that happening as much because they're trying to hang out with the guys and whatever. And I'm just over here, I'm hanging out with the guys but for a different reason I guess you could say. And I'm just wanting to hang out, play pool, have a drink, whatever, and be done with it. But they're like, "Let me tell you how it's done. Let me try to make you better." And I'm like, "No. I'm fine." The message that gets conveyed is that they're better than me. That I'm not equal (Participant 5).

One participant discussed the messages about their worth and sense of normality that were conveyed to them in relation to microaggressions around their intersecting identity of being plus sized:

That I'm shocking, that people of similar sizes to me are absurdly, just jarring to be around. That it's incomprehensible that someone can have gotten to that size, and live whatever life. That there is something wrong with me. Almost to the point of it not being dehumanizing, but being, 'Here's normal people, and here's these people' (Participant 6).

Another participant described messages of worth she receives from experiences with her departmental advisor:

Over time, we've gotten closer. He knows more about my personal life. I know a little bit more about his. I'll never feel fully comfortable talking to him about any of that. He's making it seem like there's something wrong with it. It's almost like it's taboo and it makes him feel dirty to talk about it, so then it makes me feel like he thinks that I'm that way, like I should feel that way (Participant 7).

Participant 8 is an Asian gay male who expressed the messages of worth that are conveyed to him by the lack of LGBT visibility both at the university and in China. He stated, "You are not worthy. You're not human. You are not one of us, therefore, you have to die or disappear even physically or mentally or socially. So yeah, that's what happens. That's what is happening in China too." He then went on to describe how lack of LGBT visibility combined with the messages conveyed about his worth as an LGBT individual create him going further in the closet. He stated, "I react by Just getting in the closet and passing as straight, because if you want to fight for anything, you have to survive first."

Participant 1 wrote about the message he feels the university conveys about the value of LGBT individuals, resources, and community on campus. He stated, "When you check our site, you will see separate webpages for services, like the mentorship program or SafeZone trainings, but none of it exists in one place, or if it does, it's not a quick simple find." He continued by

stating, “To me, that just shows a lack of care. We aren’t even doing the bare minimum, in my opinion, to care for LGBTQ students at this university.”

During the focus groups, Participant 7 discussed the message that LGBT individuals do not matter by her department not allowing her to use the “they/them” pronoun for her research on LGBT issues. She stated, “I’ll use the general they pronoun even for a singular individual describing a singular individual. And I’m told even though that’s grammatically correct, it’s not accepted in my department so I can’t use it.”

***Advocacy/Responsibility.*** All but one of the participants discussed the theme of advocacy in their individual interviews. They experienced this theme in a range that includes taking on responsibility to advocate, being put in the position of LGBT expert, and the sense of tired/exhaustion that comes with advocacy/responsibility. Participant 1 expressed feeling his experiences have prepared him to a position of advocacy. He stated, “I think that experiencing those things has helped me become more comfortable in standing up to the things that I believe in. I think that definitely comes with some doubt, sometimes, and some nervousness.” Participant 1 further stated, “But at the same time, I want to stand up for what I believe in. It’s sort of activated me to almost...an advocacy position.” He described an uncomfortable conversation in class about minority students and the sense of responsibility he felt to speak up. He said, “...again, it’s, ‘This is an LGBT issue, and no one else in this room that I’m aware of is going to speak up on it.’ So I had to. I felt compelled to, but also, felt like I also wanted to.

Another participant describes both his sense of responsibility to advocate for others and the exhaustive effort it takes:

It’s just a real sense that I’m Sisyphus pushing the boulder, and there are people that come and help for a little bit pushing the boulder and then they leave because they have other responsibilities and it’s not a priority. But it is for me because it’s my life and it’s the life of the many children I want to adopt and encourage their queerness to just spread

throughout the cosmos....Part of me is like, 'This isn't what I was called to do but I'm going to do it because it helps me and it's going to help other people.' But sometimes, it's tiring. It's exhausting, and that's why good allies are necessary, good allies, which are hard to find because it takes effort. It does take effort to be a good ally because you have to basically break out a whole new dictionary (Participant 2).

Participant 3 described being motivated into advocacy by the positive impact of having a LGBT leader in her program. She stated, "It's also made me more want to advocate for myself and for other queer people. It's more motivated me and it's also shown me, I guess you could say, a different way to do academia." She went on to say, "The struggle always feels uphill."

Another participant described feeling like her participation in class was to help educate her classmate without her necessarily being a part of the conversation:

It makes me feel like I'm there for the purpose of giving him insight into different cultures but I'm not really part of the discussion, I'm just a sub-let. Something he is using to further his prejudices rather than furthering the discussion. It's just an easy way for him to say what he's really thinking without getting any repercussions for it (Participant 4).

One participant described feeling like she is often put in the role of LGBT expert in her program. She stated,

I feel like sometimes conversation will get brought up about someone they might know in their personal life. I've had it happen with some professors, and they like to look at me and they're like, 'You understand.' And I'm like, 'No. How would I understand at all?' And of course, it's a professor and so you're just kind of like smiling and nodding. You're like, 'Okay, yeah. Sure, whatever you say is right.'...The message that gets conveyed is again, I'm like the expert. I know what every LGBT person goes through. That it must be a universal experience because we are all the same" (Participant 5).

Participant 6 described feeling pressure as an out LGBT individual to be more complete in their identity development so that other LGBT individuals are not impacted. They stated, "So I feel like, if I'm out, and I'm one of the few people that I'm aware of that are out, I have to have my identity perfectly cemented down, and have the perfect verbiage, and there's not a lot of room to come outside that box." They went on to say, "I'm afraid, if I seem wishy washy, then that'll impact other people."

Participant 7 expressed frustration that her program mentor directs LGBT questions to her. She described feeling the responsibility to educate others was being pushed onto her. She stated, "...it kind of makes me feel like I'm supposed to be the expert. It's not like I have a problem. I love talking to people about that...but because of how he acts in other situations, to be like, 'Oh, God. I'm not talking about that. Just talk to Participant 7 about that.'" She stated it leaves her feeling like she is "supposed to educate everyone."

Participant 1 wrote about his motivation for continued advocacy in his journal prompt entry:

Our campus, beyond people who are really intentional in seeking out opportunities to learn, is uninformed. I really hope that changes in the future, especially for younger students who are still learning, and growing, and developing in their sexual and gender identities. We truly need that space on campus. I would love to be able to someday say it is not necessary, but in our current social, political, geographic, and local culture, it is absolutely necessary (Participant 1).

The theme of advocacy was discussed in the focus groups and fell into the same ranges as the individual interviews. Four of the participants discussed advocacy. Participant 2 described their sense of responsibility as an out person in their particular field. They stated, "Because I'm in this field, I feel a great pressure to be visible as fuck because no one above me is." They further described their advocacy/responsibility, "Which is exhausting, but it goes back and forth between 'I'm too tired for this shit' and 'well if I don't do it, who will?' Participant 2 said, "I have to find extra energy that doesn't exist within my body to put towards something that...isn't for my career or job but it is to create a safer space for someone else." Participant 1 mentioned the importance of an on campus LGBT center. He stated, "I went on a tangent about that again, because I kept thinking about it after the interview. I was like it's so ridiculous that we don't." Participant 7 expressed frustration with feeling responsible to educate others. She stated, "Well sometimes it's just frustrating to always be on you to be the person to educate and explain. It's

like, can you just not assume that everyone's straight that you interact with? That would be nice."

Member checking was completed with seven out of the eight participants. Major themes were discussed and six of the participants were able to read and request changes or clarify transcripts and themes. The six participants who participated in the focus groups agreed with the identified themes and no changes were requested. The researcher reached out to the two participants who could not attend the focus groups. There was no response from one of the participants, the other participant sent an email with small edits to his transcripts and agreement with the major themes. Two focus groups of three participants each were held on two separate dates. All six participants who participated in the focus groups expressed a sense of appreciation for this research project.

All eight participants described their experiences of LGBT microaggressions and microaggressions across intersecting identities. They also described a variety of ways in which they were personally impacted and the messages that were received from the microaggressions. Participants also described their perceptions of campus climate as a result of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university.

### **Anger/Frustration**

All eight participants described feelings of anger/frustration and expressed a scope of experiences that encompass this theme. They included feeling angry, frustrated, hurt/dismay, disempowered, and discomfort across interactions with professors, colleagues, students, and peers. They verbalized their anger as a way to express injury or as a response to harmful things that were said or done. Participants also identified the connection of this theme to fear of being

stereotyped if they attempted to give their anger a voice. Often, their anger/frustration, discomfort, and feelings of disempowerment overlapped and intersected other themes, as well.

### **Security**

Each of the participants expressed feeling afraid, unsafe/guarded, and unsupported in classroom settings, within their departments, jobs, and across campus in general. They described worrying about their physical and emotional safety and identified responding in ways to keep them safe, which also intersected and overlapped other themes, especially visibility and awareness. Participants discussed being afraid to express who they are at the university because they do not feel safe or supported.

### **Awareness**

The participants also described their sense of awareness. They indicated this has been impacted by their perception of campus climate, as well. The spectrum of experiences regarding awareness that they described are general awareness, hypervigilance, awareness of privilege (their own and others'). They expressed awareness of microaggressions but difficulty verbalizing them and sometimes identifying them. Participants also reported awareness of feelings of doubt about whether they experienced a microaggression or not.

### **Visibility**

All of the participants described the theme of visibility as it pertained to their own visibility and the visibility of LGBT individuals and leaders across campus. Participants described an almost complete lack of any visible LGBT leadership or LGBT resources on campus, which impacted their perception of campus climate and intersected with other themes such as: sense of belonging and messages of worth. Participants described experiences of fear and feeling unsafe on this campus that also affected their ability to be themselves. Participants

discussed this theme sometimes intersecting with the advocacy/responsibility theme as they became hyper-visible when peers and professors put them in the expert position, responsible to educate and inform others about LGBT individuals. They expressed feeling invisible and silenced in their classrooms, departments, work, stations and on campus as a whole.

### **Sense of Belonging**

Each of the participants described a sense of community and connection that was impacted by the low visibility of LGBT resources or representation on campus. Participants expressed this lack of belonging in terms of feeling disconnected. They described encounters with students, professors, and peers, in which they received unwelcoming messages related to their various identities. Several of the participants also described feeling isolated and alone, which also intersected with the theme of messages of worth and advocacy/responsibility. Participants discussed the impact of not being connected or having community and how it contributed negative messages of worth.

### **Messages of Worth**

The participants described messages about their worth as a personal impact of microaggression experiences on campus. The spectrum of messages they verbalized receiving from microaggressions were don't matter, abnormal/sinful/bad, and not valued/valid. This theme overlapped and intersected with a sense of belonging, visibility, anger/frustration, security, and awareness. Participants described the messages of worth conveyed to them from microaggressions as both explicit messages and implicit messages. The lack of LGBT representation and visible resources on campus is one example of implicit messages about worth that participants attributed to their experience of this theme.



## **Advocacy/Responsibility**

All eight participants described experiences related to advocacy/responsibility. They expressed feeling both inspired and responsible to advocate for other LGBT individuals. Participants described advocacy and the sense of responsibility that comes with it on this campus as exhausting and tiring. They also expressed peers, coworkers, and professors sometimes putting them in the expert/token role to educate others about LGBT community/individuals and finding themselves feeling resentful and hyper-visible in ways that sent negative messages about their worth and belonging. Most of the participants discussed or mentioned others who advocated for them and how that affected them and intersected with themes of sense of belonging, security, awareness, visibility, and messages of worth.

## **Invariant Essence**

Invariant essence is the final step of transcendental phenomenological data analysis process. It involves a synthesis of the textural-structural descriptions. Essentially, it involves combining the what and how of the participants' experiences in order to arrive at the essence of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Participants described how they were impacted by microaggression in terms of frustration, anger, hurt, dismay, discomfort, and disempowerment. Participants are afraid of physical and emotional harm and this affects their ability to fully express themselves. They are aware of their own privilege, the privilege of others, and are hypervigilant about their safety. Participants feel unsafe and silenced. They are tired from hypervigilance and responsibility of advocacy. Participants experience campus climate as lacking community, representation, and feeling excluded and invisible. They receive messages that they do not matter, are not valued, and are not welcome.

## Findings Summary

All seven themes that emerged from the data, addressed how participants described the experience and impact of LGBT microaggressions. The personal impact of microaggressions themes overlapped themes for the participant's perception of campus climate as a result of microaggressions. And all seven themes were seen across participant's experience of messages received from microaggressions. In the following table, the number of participant statements are listed under each theme and Table 7 will provide the range of themes across clusters of meaning.

Table 7.  
*Participant Statements*

Participant	Theme						
	Anger/ Frustration	Security	Awareness	Visibility	Sense of Belonging	Messages of Worth	Advocacy/ Responsibility
1	15	8	8	12	12	10	5
2	4	15	15	10	6	8	14
3	26	14	10	14	7	14	7
4	13	8	4	8	10	13	3
5	13	6	12	8	3	5	8
6	11	10	11	7	15	5	6
7	14	4	16	8	8	14	15
8	6	4	13	9	7	10	4

Table 8.  
*Range of Themes Across Clusters of Meaning*

	Clusters of Meaning				
	Microaggression Experiences	Experience of Microaggressions and Intersecting Identities	Personal Impact of Microaggressions	Perception of Campus Climate as Result of Microaggressions	Messages Received by Microaggressions
Themes	Number of Statements				
Anger/ Frustration	Anger/Frustration				
Anger	9	5	11	5	1
Frustration	12	10	11	3	5
Hurt/Dismay	3	1	2	N/A	N/A
Dis- Empowered	1	2	5	2	2
Discomfort	5	3	8	N/A	1
Security	Security				
Fear	3	2	8	4	4
Unsafe/ Guarded	4	3	14	7	1
Unsupported	1	N/A	4	4	1
Awareness	Awareness				
Awareness	6	6	11	4	4
Hyper- vigilant	5	1	11	1	1
Privilege	1	9	2	1	1
Difficulty Verbalizing/ Identifying	7	2	N/A	2	1
Gaslit/Doubt	N/A	N/A	2	2	2

Table 8. *Range of Themes Across Clusters of Meaning (Cont.)*

<b>Visibility</b>	<b>Visibility</b>				
Representation	2	1	1	18	1
Invisible/ Silenced	4	4	16	8	6
<b>Sense of Belonging</b>	<b>Sense of Belonging</b>				
Lack of Community/ Connection	1	4	3	16	7
Isolated	N/A	N/A	N/A	5	1
Unwelcome/ Excluded	2	4	7	8	4
<b>Messages of Worth</b>	<b>Message of Worth</b>				
Don't Matter	N/A	2	5	9	7
Abnormal/ Sinful/ Bad	2	N/A	1	2	4
Not Valued/ Valid	2	8	5	5	7
<b>Advocacy/ Responsibility</b>	<b>Advocacy/Responsibility</b>				
Responsibility	N/A	2	10	1	N/A
Advocacy	1	2	10	3	N/A
Forced Expert	9	1	N/A	1	5
Tired/ Exhaustion	N/A	N/A	5	N/A	1

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study, which consisted of semi-structured individual interviews with eight participants, journal prompt entries, and two focus groups. The following research question was addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions at a Southern university?

In order to answer the research question, the following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What are LGBT graduate students' lived experience of microaggressions within the context of intersecting identities at a Southern university?
2. How do LGBT graduate students describe the personal impact of microaggressions at a Southern university?
3. How do LGBT graduate students describe their perception of campus climate at a Southern university, as a result of microaggressions?

Seven main themes emerged from the data as a result of transcendental phenomenological data analysis as set forth by Moustakas (1994). They were anger/frustration, security, awareness, visibility, sense of belonging, messages of worth, and advocacy. Textural descriptions for each theme were presented and supported by corresponding data from each participant. The data collection points included individual interviews, journal prompt entries, and two focus groups. Textural-structural descriptions for each theme were then presented and supported by corresponding data from each participant. Data collection points included individual interviews, journal prompt entries, and two focus groups. Finally, synthesis of textural and structural descriptions provided the invariant essence of the participants' experience of

LGBT microaggressions, as well as microaggressions related to intersecting identities at a Southern university.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore LGBT graduate students' lived experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. The researcher felt that acquiring a better understanding of LGBT graduate students' experience of microaggressions at a Southern university could inform university leaders and administrators about LGBT students' perceptions about campus climate. It is the researcher's hope that this study may also assist university administrators, leaders, and educators to make changes that could help improve the experiences of LGBT graduate and undergraduate students on this campus. This primary research question at the heart of this study was: What are LGBT graduate students' experiences of LGBT microaggressions at a Southern university? In order to answer this research question, three sub-questions were addressed: What are LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions within the context of intersecting identities at a Southern university? How do LGBT graduate students describe the personal impact of microaggressions at a Southern university? How do LGBT graduate students describe their perception of campus climate at a Southern university, as a result of microaggressions? This chapter includes a brief summary of findings, discussion of the implications for university administrators, leaders, and for counselors. Limitations and recommendations for future research are also addressed in this chapter.

### Summary of Findings

The analysis of the data collected from individual interviews, journal entries, and the focus groups, revealed seven main themes. The seven themes that emerged were: *anger/frustration, security, awareness, visibility, sense of belonging, messages of worth, and advocacy*. Each of the seven themes were identified in all eight individual interviews except participant 8, who did not identify advocacy/responsibility. One reason this theme may not have

emerged from his interview data is that he does not consider himself out of the closet and has no intention of coming out due to safety concerns. Two participants completed the journal entry prompts and between both of them, all seven themes emerged from their journal entry data. Two separate focus groups of three participants each were held and all seven themes emerged in both focus groups.

Participants most strongly identified the personal impact of microaggressions across the themes of *anger/frustration, security, awareness, visibility, and advocacy/responsibility*. In relation to the *visibility* theme, participants specifically identified feeling *invisible* and *silenced* as the personal impact of microaggressions. The microaggressions experienced were due to the participants' LGBT identity as well as any intersecting identities. The participants' perception of campus climate as a result of microaggressions was most strongly aligned with the themes: *visibility, sense of belonging, and messages of worth*. In terms of participants' perception of campus climate, the *visibility* theme was more strongly identified with *lack of representation* and/or *visible resources* on campus. Likewise, the theme of *sense of belonging* was most strongly expressed as *feeling a lack of community/connection* and feeling *isolated* and *unwelcome* on campus.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study are linked to existing literature on LGBT microaggressions and this section examines those alignments. A brief exploration of intersectionality theory in relation to microaggressions is noted in the following pages. Lastly, this section will conclude with a discussion of the implications for the profession of counseling.



## **Related Literature and Implications**

The findings of this study could contribute to the research on microaggressions in several different ways. This study may add specific knowledge of LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university and could help inform administrators and leaders, as well as other Southern universities. The findings of this study may also contribute to microaggression research and theory. Research and literature regarding LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions is scarce.

Data collected in this study was aligned with the work of Derald Sue (2010) who found that microaggressions are experienced in one of three ways: microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults as described in chapter two. Each of the eight participants spoke of microaggressions that fell into the three categories. The data also endorsed the LGBT Microaggression Theme Taxonomies (Table 1) of Sue (2010), Nadal et al. (2010), as well as Platt and Lenzen (2013). Those themes are also elaborated on in chapter two of this study. Participants described experiencing microaggressions such as terminology issues such as misuse of pronouns, the endorsement of a heteronormative culture on this campus, others' discomfort with their LGBT status, denial of reality of heterosexism, exoticization, assumption of universal LGBT experiences, physical threat, under sexualization and microaggressions as humor (Sue, 2010; Nadal et al., 2010; Platt & Lenzen, 2013). Participants affirmed these microaggression experiences across multiple intersecting identities.

**Personal impact of microaggression.** As they described the microaggressions they experienced, participants discussed the personal impact of LGBT microaggressions. As discussed in chapter two, Derald Sue (2010) identified four major areas of LGBT microaggression: visibility, internalized oppression or stigma, identity development issues, and

psychological distress. Each of the participants identified impacts of microaggressions that corroborate with Sue's (2010) research. They discussed *anger/frustration*, *security*, *awareness*, *visibility*, and *advocacy/responsibility* in terms of how they were personally impacted by LGBT microaggressions.

***Anger/Frustration.*** Each of the eight participants in this study expressed feelings of anger/frustration during their individual interviews more than their focus groups or journal prompt entries. This could be because the interviews were one on one and the focus groups were larger and perhaps participants felt less comfortable to express their anger/frustration in the group. In the individual interviews, participants talked about anger, frustration, hurt/dismay, disempowerment, and discomfort. They described it as the trauma or injury created by the microaggression. Robinson (2014) iterated that LGBT microaggressions was correlated with posttraumatic symptoms. The study found that the sense of disempowerment, discomfort, hurt, and anger that results from systemic oppression could be classified as trauma (Robinson, 2014).

As the researcher was going back over the emerging themes, it was noted that frustration and anger were sometimes mentioned interchangeably and many instances of frustration were described as a sense of feeling disempowered. This came up throughout the interviews and was mentioned in both focus groups. One participant talked about putting in a lot of effort with her department in terms of having conversations surrounding diversity, inclusion, and equality but feeling like nothing changed in the time since she arrived. In fact, she described the situation as getting progressively worse and herself as being "shutdown." She stated, "Whatever. I'm just getting my checks." Other participants consistently described feeling "small" or "shutdown" in their graduate departments or in their assistantship workplaces.

A possible explanation for what seems to be the injury of anger/frustration and disempowerment might have to do with campus climate and fear of being stereotyped. Sue (2010) spoke about stereotypes when he described it as a common form of microinsults. He posited that stereotyping stamps a minoritized individual's experience as invalid (Sue, 2010). One participant discussed a situation in which a microaggression occurred but they didn't feel they could acknowledge it. They stated, "I didn't want to be that dramatic queer person, you just get dismissed as that." Another participant described a class discussion about skin color hierarchy in which another student was asking what she felt were loaded questions and not out of curiosity. She stated, "you can't get mad because of course then you're playing into the black stereotype, right?"

There is very little to no literature on the climates in academic departments. But in general, Rankin et al. (2010), described campus climates to not be empowering places for LGBT individuals and in fact showed campus climates to be hostile and blocking of achievement for LGBT individuals. It would make sense that the injury of anger/frustration were expressed sometimes interchangeably with disempowerment/discomfort related to the invisible nature of microaggressions and systemic oppression.

***Security.*** All of the participants reported experiences related to their security. They described being cautious, afraid for their physical and emotional safety, being guarded and unsafe to be their authentic self in order to avoid harm. Some participants discussed attempting to fit in to heteronormative culture around them. Sue (2010) explains that for LGBT individuals fear is related to harassment, intimidation, and negative interactions from non-LGBT individuals. He further indicated that when faced with threats of harm, LGBT individuals may choose silence or muting of authentic self, which has deleterious long-term effects and internalized

oppression/acclulturation (Sue, 2010). One non-binary participant described going for interviews and being cognizant of fear and power dynamics. They felt presenting more masculine would provide them with more security and power than presenting as authentic non-binary self. During focus groups, participants discussed not correcting people when they were misgendered because of fear. They repeatedly discussed that it was risky to be openly out at times or to even voice a viewpoint in class that was predominately white and straight, including the professors. A couple of participants discussed fear of being invalidated if others knew they were LGBT. For example, one participant described teaching in a classroom as a teaching assistant and trying to be as desexualized as possible out of fear that her authentic identity could be the thing that invalidates her as a teacher.

Many of the participants described some fear of being too easily identified in this study and facing repercussions for speaking their truth. One participant described feeling fearful before he even came in for the individual interview and asked many cautious questions to decide if participating in this research would be safe. Six of the eight participants did not contribute journal prompt entries and two participants were not able to participate in the focus groups. This could be due to fear and the silencing effect it has on LGBT individuals.

Current political and social climate was another area in which fear was mentioned in terms of increased physical safety concerns. Participants discussed feeling like people in general are more blatant with some of their verbal microaggressions and intimidations both in person and on social media. As discussed in chapter two deVogue et al. (2017), described the many protective rollbacks on policy for protections since this current political administration came into office in 2016. With the shift to a more overtly oppressive national administration, it would make

sense that the LGBT participants of this study, who are already a vulnerable population, according to Sue (2010), would feel fearful about their own sense of safety and security.

***Awareness.*** Each of the participants in this study discussed experiences related to awareness. Participants expressed being aware of their own minority status in their work environments, departments, and in the classroom. They also described awareness of their privilege and the positions of privilege and power other people hold. Awareness was repeatedly discussed in terms of hypervigilance by all participants. Several participants described constantly weighing out the benefit vs the cost of responding to any perceived microaggression. This is aligned with the microaggression process model by Nadal (2013) mentioned in chapter two. One participant described being aware of the spaces where it was safe for them to exist as authentic self. A couple of the participants described being aware of their own privileges at varying intersections of identity. All of participants discussed being aware of some sense of microaggression but not necessarily being able to verbalize or identify it. A few participants expressed this as doubt, feeling gaslit, or crazy. One participant discussed that when other people do not recognize their experience as a microaggression it causes them to doubt themselves. They stated, “What if I misunderstood it?”

One reason participants may have had difficulty with their ability to verbalize some microaggressions may have to with the subtle nature of microaggressions. Some participants described vague discomfort after a microaggression. Still others described some microaggressions that either diminished or negated the participants’ experience as a microaggression and this left them questioning whether it was a microaggression or in some cases doubting their experience. This is in alignment with Sue’s (2010) position that microaggressions are subtle and often leave the individual questioning themselves and the

validity of their experience. Some of the participants appeared to have difficulty coming up with microaggressions when asked directly but then would go on to describe them and their impact in great detail. This could be due the fact that some microaggressions feel more aggressive and blatant than others. It's possible that this is also part of the cumulative effect of microaggressions. According to Nadal (2011), and discussed in chapter two, microaggressions can be continual and cumulative. It would make sense that a minority participant who was working and getting educated within a predominately white, heteronormative environment where microaggressions are occurring as part of the system, would have difficulty verbalizing them or identifying them.

**Visibility.** The participants described visibility in two ways: as an impact of microaggressions and as part of their perception of campus climate. For this section, the researcher will address visibility in terms of the participants feeling invisible and silenced as an impact of microaggressions. Participants expressed gender-identity and identity visibility as impacting their experience of microaggressions. In chapter two, research by Balsam et al. (2011) and Nadal et al. (2015) suggested that the experience of microaggressions was mitigated by intersecting identities and visibility and this appears to corroborate the participants' experience. One participant described an experience in which coworkers were not comfortable with the participants' gender identity or sexual orientation and expressed that the participant should not be visibly LGBT in the workspace. This created a problem for the participant. They stated, "...my silence was required." Other participants described feeling invisible and silenced as a result of fear, hypervigilance, security, and disempowerment. Derald Sue (2010) described visibility as a major impact area of microaggressions and posited that visibility is an issue that can lead to further fear, exhaustion and a sense of isolation. Having open dialogue about LGBT

issues can be difficult and many of the participants described experiences in classroom situations that were complex and emotional. It would make sense, given the conservative majority of this campus, that some participants would describe their choice of invisibility as a function of fear. Several participants discussed feeling like their lack of visibility was for everyone involved. All of the participants described feeling like they were leaving authentic self behind or betraying self in some form when invisibility was a choice. It would make sense for LGBT individuals to choose invisibility over visibility if they feel unsafe and unwelcome in a space.

***Advocacy/Responsibility.*** Each of the eight participants in this study described advocacy/responsibility as an impact of microaggressions. A couple participants shared experiences of feeling like they were forced by others to be the expert for all things LGBT. Many of the participants spoke about advocating for others and themselves. Two participants described situations in which they openly challenged friends or classmates about specific microaggressions. One of those participants expressed a sense of responsibility. They stated, “If I don’t, who will?” In one of the focus groups, participants had a brief discussion about sometimes advocating for others as a way to affirm self or correct an experience where no one advocated for them. One possible reason for this may have to do with where the individual is in terms of identity development. In chapter two, microaggressions and identity development are discussed at length. Dickey et al. (2012) iterated that affirmative support or advocacy can mitigate LGBT microaggression. In early stages of development across several models, individuals are coming to terms with their identity and are likely to experience higher levels of anxiety and may not be able to be others/self-affirming until they reach an acceptance stage (Devor, 2004).

Several of the participants also discussed a sense of exhaustion/tired that comes with advocacy/responsibility, especially in heteronormative campus climate. One participant

described themselves as Sisyphus pushing the large boulder uphill. They felt exhausted from the effort but not discouraged as others sometimes came and helped. The researcher found this aspirational and inspiring, given the tiredness that has resulted at times as a result of experiences shared by participants.

**Perception of campus climate as a result of microaggressions.** Finally, participants expressed their perception of campus climate as a result of microaggressions in terms of *visibility*, *sense of belonging*, and *messages of worth*. This corroborates the research on campus climates outlined in chapter two (Rankin et al., 2010; Sue, 2010b).

**Visibility.** The participants described visibility as an overlapping experience of personal impact of microaggressions and perception of campus climate as a result of microaggressions. In this section, visibility refers to representation on campus. All of the participants spoke about the lack of visibility LGBT representation in leadership roles on campus. They also spoke about the lack of visible resources. During one focus group, a discussion about the lack of visible representation and resources on campus took place. One of the participants mentioned that it creates a lack of belonging or community and sends a message that LGBT individuals do not matter. Another participant described going home after the individual interview and looking up other SEC institutions and described their disappointment that this campus was one of only two others in the SEC without a devoted LGBT center. As discussed in chapter two, this appears to be a systemic endorsement of heteronormative culture, which according to Sue (2010) is an assumption of heterosexuality as the norm and this denies diverse experiences. It would seem like the lack of representation at every level may possibly further the issue of visibility/invisibility. It would make sense that this would also affect sense of belonging and messages of worth.



***Sense of belonging.*** All of the participants described experiencing a lack of sense of belonging on campus. They spoke about it in terms of lack of community/connection, feeling isolated, and feeling unwelcome/excluded. One participant expressed feeling like other minority groups are acknowledged and visible but that LGBT community or connection is nonexistent and unwelcome on this campus. Another participant described the lack of visible LGBT representation in administrators and departments and reported feeling unwelcome and “small.” One participant shared that they do not fit in on this campus because there is no LGBT community or representation. A possible reason that participants might feel excluded on campus is due to lack of community, visible LGBT administrators, leaders, and educators. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) produced research that indicated lack of LGBT role models in faculty and administrative roles leads to LGBT students feeling excluded in classrooms and on campus. Martin and D’Augelli (2003) posited that exclusion decreased sense of belonging and may increase sense of loneliness and isolation.

***Messages of worth.*** Participants described experiences of messages of worth as a result of campus climate. Several participants discussed feeling like they personally do not matter and they as LGBT individuals on this campus do not matter. Other messages that participants identified strongly with were abnormal/sinful/bad and not valued/valid. One participant expressed experiencing negative messages related to worth such as feeling dirty and disturbing. Participants discussed these messages being explicit and implicit in their experience of campus climate. According to the research presented in chapter two, microaggressions and oppression can and do affect an individual’s sense of worth (Sue, 2010). It’s possible that these messages of worth are related to Sue’s (2010) *assumption of abnormality*, which is closely related to religious roots that equate LGBT with depravity (Sue, 2010) and the fact that homosexuality was just

removed as a disorder from Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1987. Both Sue (2010) and Nadal et al. (2010) found *assumption of abnormality* to be part of their LGBT Microaggressions Theme Taxonomy. Platt and Lenzen (2013) did not find it to be part of the taxonomy. This was attributed to advances in political and social climates at the time. This study found *assumption of abnormality* as part of the experience of campus climate. This could possibly be due to the current social and political climate on a national level but also because this is a Southern university, which has a more conservative student base.

**Interpretive lens.** Constructivism-interpretivism in conjunction with intersectionality theory were the lenses through which the participant's responses were interpreted. Both constructivism-interpretivism and intersectionality theory are congruent with transcendental phenomenological research. Both lenses focus on understanding the lived experiences of subjects and this is a basic cornerstone of phenomenological inquiry.

Intersectionality theory was originally used to illustrate ways in which race and gender overlapped and interacted in the lives of black women. The theory now has a broader utilization and application. It was used in this study to aid in constructing interview questions for the semi-structured interview. The researcher wanted to get an understanding of the lived experiences of LGBT graduate students' experience of microaggressions. This lens was helpful in examining the ways in which individual experiences were affected by intersecting identities and systems of oppression (Collins, 2015). For the purpose of this study, the intersection of identities within LGBT, race, size diversity, and levels of out were taken into consideration as to how they contributed to LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions, oppression, and privilege (Collins, 2015; Gopaldas, 2013).

**Implications for the counseling profession.** As outlined in chapter one, the association for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in counseling competencies (ALGBTICC) for counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, inter sex, and ally individuals (LGBQIQA) set forth a list of competencies for counselor educators and counselors. At the very minimum, these competencies request counselors to be aware of and have an understanding of how experiences of oppression, discrimination, stereotyping, and systems of power affect LGBT individuals across intersecting identities (Harper et al., 2013). It is imperative that those educating future counselors and counselors understand how LGBT individuals experience life in terms of microaggressions and oppressive systems. More representation and competencies within counselor education programs are imperative. As was illustrated in this study, LGBT individuals are not always able to verbalize or identify the microaggressions they may be experiencing on a regular basis. These microaggressions can be isolated incidents or part of larger systemic oppression and be continual and cumulative. It will be important for a counselor to understand the personal impact of LGBT microaggressions as this may be the presenting issue without the ability to identify microaggressions.

### **Limitations**

Limitations for this study included the voluntary nature of the study, sensitive subject of the qualitative inquiry, and potential researcher bias. Participants were asked to volunteer for this study. The researcher sent out 98 recruitment emails to every graduate department at this Southern university and asked department chairs to send the email to students via listservs. Eight participants volunteered from those recruitment emails. As a result, it may be likely that the sample reflects individuals who may have been more open/out regarding their LGBT identity. It would be difficult to assert whether or not the sample is representative of the population.

Because of the sensitive subject of the qualitative inquiry, there is a possibility that participants did not feel safe to share all of their experiences. Two participants voiced a concern about whether their identity might be recognizable through their experience descriptions. Though the researcher made every effort to protect confidentiality of the research participants, it is possible that participants did not wish to share everything that might be relevant to the study. Participants in this study were LGBT graduate students who attended the same Southern university and shared their negative experiences

Due to the subjective element of the study, it is important that qualitative researchers ensure that personal biases do not interfere with any part of the data collection or analysis. The researcher's professional and personal experiences did help guide the study and every effort was made to keep the researcher's experiences and biases bracketed. This was done through epoche, peer debriefing, and member checks.

### **Recommendations**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experience of LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. The researcher's goal is to be able to utilize the findings of this study to help inform university administrators and leaders about the impact of microaggressions, perception of campus climate, and to offer suggestions that would improve LGBT individual's campus experience. The findings of this qualitative inquiry sheds light on several areas that could benefit from further study and elucidation.

Administrators, faculty, staff, and students could benefit from microaggression and LGBT advocacy training. An institutional approach to addressing microaggressions and advocacy could be an affirming action for the targeted individuals on campus. This could help foster a stronger sense of belonging and messages of worth. It is likely that education around

microaggressions will need to consider the approach to environmental and interpersonal microaggressions (Sue, 2010b).

The campus counseling center holds a support group, but participants requested a support group outside of CAPS and this might be beneficial to help separate it from historical mental health stereotypes associated with LGBT. More publicity for the LGBTQ mentorship group is another suggestion to help promote connectivity and sense of community. Multicultural diversity seminars or classes should be an ongoing part of education across all disciplines. A more open and centralized Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee with rotating officers from every department (so that everyone serves on the committee over time) to help develop trainings and strategies to educate faculty, staff, and students, as well as identify and eliminate oppressive systems and barriers. It would be beneficial for every department to have a DEI committee.

The data and the participants suggest that an increase in LGBT visibility could be beneficial in addressing representation and invisibility. This would also help with diversity and inclusion. Participants suggested more gender neutral bathrooms, inclusive language in top down communications. Other suggestions included hiring more diverse leaders, faculty, and staff that would provide visible LGBTQ+ representation. Another area of visibility that the participants each addressed was a dedicated LGBTQ+ center for campus from which trainings, committees, and workshops could be implemented. This would help foster a sense of security, of belonging, and provide community, connection, and visibility across campus. It also conveys messages of worth and value to LGBT students.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

The current study examined LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions at a Southern university. Future research could seek to challenge or confirm the findings from this

study and to help develop a more comprehensive and accessible definition of LGBT microaggressions than the one used in this study and set forth by Sue et al. (2007). One area that could be further examined is LGBT students' "level of out" as an intersecting identity state and identity development process in order to look at microaggression experiences and resiliency. A correlational study related to levels of out and microaggression experiences could be beneficial, as well. Another area of future research may be a microaggression scale development for LGBT students in order to measure impact of microaggressions over various intersections. Finally, a study that could help connect and elucidate student outcomes in relation to LGBT microaggressions seems pertinent. This study highlighted that LGBT graduate students' sense of belonging was overlapped by visibility and messages of worth. A more in-depth examination of how these three themes are related could be beneficial to understanding LGBT students' experience of microaggression and perception of campus climate.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of this study suggest that LGBT graduate students experience a varied range of microaggressions at a Southern university. This study highlights that eliminating microaggressions altogether could improve campus climate, foster LGBT sense of belonging and well-being, and substantially improve the experiences of LGBT graduate students. For the benefit of all LGBT students on campus, administrators could choose to focus on improving LGBT representation in positions of leadership and in the classroom, establishing a centralized campus LGBT center, and receiving and providing microaggression and LGBT advocacy training for faculty and staff.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



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**To:** Amy R Broadwater  
BELL 4188

**From:** Douglas James Adams, Chair  
IRB Committee

**Date:** 01/16/2020

**Action:** **Expedited Approval**

**Action Date:** 01/16/2020

**Protocol #:** 1912236470

**Study Title:** Microaggressions: The Lived Experiences of LGBT Graduate Students at a Southern University

**Expiration Date:** 12/26/2020

**Last Approval Date:**

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

**Adverse Events:** Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Kristin Kay Higgins, Investigator

## APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Greetings,

My name is Amy Broadwater and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at the University of Arkansas. I am conducting my doctoral dissertation research on LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions.

**I would like to invite you to participate in this study if you:**

- 1) identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.
- 2) are currently enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Arkansas for a least one year or have left a graduate program within the past two years at the University of Arkansas.
- 3) have experienced some level of microaggressions or discrimination in your program or on campus (from faculty, other students, etc.).

**Participation:** Participation in this study is voluntary and if you decide to participate, you will be asked to:

- 1) complete an individual interview.
- 2) review a written transcript of your interview.
- 3) complete one journal prompt about any experiences, thoughts, or feelings that arise between the individual interview and focus group.
- 4) participate in a focus group about your experience of microaggressions as a graduate student.

The interview will last approximately 1-2 hours and will be conducted in person (or via video technology), using an audio recording device, as well as written notes. The audio recordings will be utilized to accurately transcribe the interview. You will also be asked to read and comment on the transcript of your interview, which may take an additional 1-2 hours. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group that will last for one to two hours. Those who participate in the study to its completion will receive a \$15 Mastercard gift card as compensation. You may withdraw from the study at any time. A decision not to participate will bring no negative consequences or penalty other than not receiving the \$15 Mastercard gift card.

**If you are interested in participating in this research, or have questions about this study, please contact the principal researcher, Amy Broadwater, by email at [arbroadw@uark.edu](mailto:arbroadw@uark.edu).** You may also contact Dr. Kristin Higgins, the faculty advisor for this project at [kkhiggi@uark.edu](mailto:kkhiggi@uark.edu). If you know others who might be interested in the study, please share this invitation with them.

Thank you for your time and participation.

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

**Investigator:** Amy Broadwater, M.S.  
University of Arkansas  
941-704-4442 arbroadw@uark.edu

**Faculty Advisor:** Kristin Higgins, Ph.D., LPC-S  
University of Arkansas  
479-575-3329 kkhiggi@uark.edu

**Description:** The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine LGBT graduate students' experiences of microaggressions (defined as brief and commonplace daily behavioral, verbal, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults) at the University of Arkansas. As part of your participation, you will be asked to sit for a semi-structured interview with questions pertaining to your individual experience. The interview should take approximately 1-2 hours and will be audio-recorded. You will be asked to review the written transcripts of your interview for accuracy, which may take 1-2 hours. Additionally, you will be asked to complete one journal prompt and record any experiences, thoughts, or feelings that arise in the weeks following the interview. Following individual interviews, a focus group will be scheduled where all participants will be invited to meet for further discussion of their experiences. This will take approximately 2 hours. Demographic information will also be collected, including gender, age, sexual orientation, identified racial group, socioeconomic status, relationship status, religious affiliation, and education level.

**Risks and Benefits:** Potential risks include discussions of microaggressions and other negative prejudiced or discriminatory interactions that may be emotionally difficult, therefore, a referral sheet for Licensed Mental Health Professionals will be provided to each participant. Benefits include becoming more self-aware of the circumstances unique to your experience and sharing suggestions that could improve your experience on campus.

**Compensation:** By participating in this study to its completion, you will receive a \$15 Mastercard gift card. In order to receive the offered compensation, participants will: 1) participate in individual interview; 2) review interview transcripts for accuracy; 3) complete journal prompt between interview and focus group; 4) participate in focus group.

**Voluntary Participation:** You are free to refuse to participate in the research or to stop participating at any point during the interview. A decision not to participate will bring no negative consequences or penalty other than not receiving the \$15 Mastercard gift card.

**Confidentiality:** Your responses to this study will be collected in a secure location. You will be assigned a participant code. All identifying information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University policy.

**Questions:** If you have any questions about the research, please feel free to contact me through the email listed above. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University's IRB Coordinator, Ro Windwalker, 109 MLKG Building, 479-575-2208, irb@uark.edu.

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I have read and understand the provided information and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason and without cost. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator's signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D: DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

**Graduate Program:** \_\_\_\_\_

**What is your status in your program?**

\_\_\_\_ Graduate \_\_\_\_ Year

\_\_\_\_ Left the Program

\_\_\_\_ Current Student

**What level is your program?**

\_\_\_\_ Master's

\_\_\_\_ Doctoral

**What is your age?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Are you a person with a disability?**

\_\_\_\_ Yes (if yes...what is the nature of your disability \_\_\_\_\_)

\_\_\_\_ No

**What is your sexual orientation?**

\_\_\_\_\_

How "out" are you on campus?

(1-not out; 5 out to nearly everyone)

1       2       3       4       5

**What is your gender identity?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**What is your racial/ethnic identity?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Marital Status?** \_\_\_\_ Single \_\_\_\_ Married \_\_\_\_ Life Partner

\_\_\_\_ Divorced \_\_\_\_ Widowed \_\_\_\_ Other (please specify: \_\_\_\_\_)

**Religious or spiritual affiliation:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E: SEMI STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name of Interviewee\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_

Preliminary script: “This is [interviewer’s name]. Today is [day and date and time]. I am here in [location] with [participant].”

1. Tell me a little about yourself: What identities are most important to you?
2. Briefly describe your “coming out” process or current status?
3. Tell me about your experiences of microaggressions here in your program?
  - a. Have there been situations you experienced microaggressions or discrimination because of your LGBT status?
  - b. Describe one of these situations.
    - i. How did you react?
    - ii. What message did you perceive was being conveyed to you?
    - iii. How did you feel after the episode?
  - c. Can you describe another situation where you experienced discrimination or microaggressions in your program because of your LGBT status?  
(Repeat a, b, and c until participant can recall no other incidents )
  - d. How are these experiences different or similar to previous experiences?
  - e. What has been positive about your experience?
  - f. Are there any visible LGBT leaders in your program?
    - i. How has their presence impacted you?
4. How have other things like your age, race, gender, or disability affected the discrimination or microaggressions you may have experienced in your program as a LGBT individual?
  - a. Describe one of these situations where you experienced discrimination or microaggressions in your program as (name the participant’s age, race, gender, or disability status)?

- i. How did you react?
    - ii. What message did you perceive was being conveyed to you?
    - iii. How did you feel after the episode?
  - b. Can you describe another situation where you experienced discrimination or microaggressions in your program as (name the participant's age, race, gender, or disability status)? (Repeat a and b until participant can recall no other incidents )
5. Describe the impact microaggressions have had on you.
- a. If you were in charge, what would you do differently to make things better?
  - b. What do you wish classmates, instructors, and administrators knew or were doing that might make your experience better?
  - c. How have you changed as a result of your experience of microaggressions on campus?
6. Describe your experiences as an LGBT individual on this campus.
7. Describe the campus climate here at this university regarding LGBT people.
- a. (Possible prompts: How are LGBT individuals treated on campus? Are there visible LGBT leaders on campus?)
  - b. What are current issues LGBT individuals on campus may be experiencing?
  - c. How does the climate for LGBT people compare with other minority groups on campus?
  - d. Has the campus climate changed since you have been here? If so, how?
  - e. How has your identity influenced your involvement?
    - i. Describe a time it hindered your desire to speak up or be involved.
    - ii. Describe a time it helped you to speak up or be involved.
8. Is there anything you would like to add about your experience on campus?

## **APPENDIX F: JOURNAL PROMPT**

Describe any thoughts, feelings, or experiences you have had since our initial interview in relation to LGBT microaggressions here at this university.

## **APPENDIX G: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

- 1) What changes in awareness about your campus environment and microaggressions have occurred since our interview?
- 2) How do you think your identity development has been impacted by your microaggression experiences?
- 3) What, if anything, is different about your microaggression experiences as an LGBT graduate student vs your microaggression experiences as an LGBT undergraduate student?
- 4) Do you feel the themes accurately describe your experience of microaggressions as an LGBT graduate student at this university? Why or why not?



## **APPENDIX H: EXAMPLE OF RESEARCHER MEMO**

### **Researcher Memo**

**Date:** 1/22/2020

#### **Interview #1**

This was my first interview and I was nervous. I found myself reading back over my interview protocol and wondering if the questions were going to capture enough data or even the data specific to my research questions. I felt a little better after the interview and certain that I may be able to capture enough data with seven or eight more interviews like this one.

Several different emotions came up for me as I was interviewing this first participant. I found myself slightly envious of his positive coming out experience and his identity development at such a young age. This seems to have added to some sort of resiliency and confidence in his advocacy efforts.

Conversely, he has dealt with microaggressions, culture stress, and fear as a gay male that is palpable. He seems to have allowed these experiences to move him forward in a quiet, unassuming energy for change. He also appears very well aware of his privilege as a cis-white male. I'm not sure I could have handled coming out as early as he did or lived in some of the fear he lived in related to microaggressions.

I believe this first interview was successful in terms of going well and capturing some good data. These researcher memo's may be a good outlet and an effective tool for my own self-awareness regarding participant experiences compared to my own.

## APPENDIX I: EXAMPLE OF AUDIT TRAIL

### Clusters and Themes of Invariant Constituents

#### Participant 1

#### Microaggression Experience

- ...and one of the students was like, she was, "They're making such a small issue such a huge issue. If this is how those people are going to act, they're never going to get a seat at the table." And I remember thinking, "What the fuck?" I'm like, "Is that really how you think?"--**Anger**
- I honestly think the professor just tried to steer to another conversation, because you could see the tension building--**Unsupported**
- And they were just, they just were talking about somebody, I didn't know who it was. But they just kept using the word "fag" or "faggot," over and over. And I was just, "Oh jeez." I was like, "You're standing here in public, in the middle of everybody, and just saying this word, like it's so comfortable." Which, that, to me, says you say it whenever you want to, probably--**Frustration**
- I knew, in that class, I was in the minority--**Awareness**
- We were literally just walking down the street, a car drove by, and started yelling "Faggots!" At us. And they literally parked, and a guy got out....In that moment, I was scared for my life. Because I was, "What? What's going to happen?" And so, it's just moments like that. So when I hear the word just used that casually, and, that public-your heart just stops. It's like, "Oh, God." --**Fear**
- And I remember saying something about my partner. And her response was, "Oh well, what does she do?" And I was just, "Oh God." "How do I address this? Do I just like correct her and move on? Do I try to make a thing out of it?" And it was definitely an awkward moment, because, someone just made an assumption, and I had to have this whole internal dialogue of, "Well, how do I handle this?"--**Discomfort**
- It is an uncomfortable scenario, because you don't necessarily know them well enough to be, "Oh, well, actually, it's a guy." So, you have to think through how they are going to react before you have that conversation, yeah. I was definitely left feeling uncomfortable.--**Hypervigilance**
- I found myself watching her reaction.--**Hypervigilance**
- a lot of what I want to do with that also has to do with non-binary identities. And everything is coded male, female, and there's never outside options. I've done a lot of research into the best way to collect data from LGBT people in a quantitative way. And I think the original survey was, Male, Female, Other, and I was, "No." So I gave them citations. I was, "This is why we need to ask it this way." I remember one person in class being, "That's just too much, that's too many." So again, it's, these students are assuming that we can send out this survey with three options, and call somebody an Other, and have them be okay with that.--**Advocacy**

## Experience of Microaggressions and Intersecting Identities

- I'm 100% privileged to identify the way I do. And I try to recognize that, and understand, and I understand why that is with societal pressures and systems in place, that, why I'm benefited over others.—**Awareness of Privilege**
- So, I have a lot of just, societal privileges, that have helped me, I think. And also, and to an extent, shielded me from some of the negativities that other people experience.
- privilege as a white cisgender gay male has kept me from having an intersecting identity that also affects levels of discrimination.
- that's also a part of my own privilege in that, I'm a cisgender man, and I dress and express my gender in a more masculine way. So it's like, I don't have a lot of visual cues, I would say, that would cause me to probably faces as many microaggressions, or at least cause me to feel I need to hide, or anything like that—**Awareness of Privilege**

## Personal Impact of Microaggressions

- And I remember, I was so mad, and in that moment I was, "You are literally saying it's a small issue." And I was, "These people are already fighting to have a seat at the table, where they're denied." --**Anger**
- ... I remember, thinking, "I'm going to have to be guarded in this class around this person. Because we are going to talk about such politically and personally charged things."--**Guarded**
- And I know I was probably visibly angry--**Angry**
- Yeah, I think I was angry, number one, but I also, I would say unsure, just unsure of myself in the class. --**Uncertain**
- I didn't know how to act, moving forward. I felt I had to then almost censor myself a little bit.--**Safety**
- So it affected my sense of security in the classroom in one sense. Not just my comfort but my ability to be myself.--**Security**
- I never want conversations like that to happen, and for people just to accept it as fact. I don't want them, that, to be the only exposure they have to this issue. So there was almost a sense of responsibility that came with that.--**Responsible**
- I remember when people were saying stuff like, "They're not going to get a seat at the table," just feeling so angered and wanting to speak up, because they're... I consider, like I said, the kinship with people of all sexual and gender minority because it's, I know it's... I know from experience, that's a tough identity to work through at times. --**Angry/Aware of other's privilege**
- Because I didn't want to, nobody wants to cause a scene in class. And I don't want to also be labeled as the, for lack of better terms, I hate this term, social justice warrior.
- ...And I was worried about getting that reputation--**Security**
- I mean, to me, it's anger. Just because of the history of it. It's been used to tear people down, and to make people feel worse about themselves, and to make people feel like shit, and put them down.--**Anger**

- this term has been used against gay people. But you don't know the anguish that came along with it being used. And you don't know the pain that it caused and everything. And it's just one of those things that you'll never have to experience--**Anger**
- And it takes you right back to that..moment of basic security of just being able to walk and breathe...Being threatened, even if you don't feel like you're being overtly threatened-It's that sense.--**Security**
- I think afterwards, I just, all I could really feel was anger.--**Anger**
- So it definitely was an uncomfortable experience, being there.--**Discomfort**
- So as an LGBT student here on this campus there is some definite frustration.--**Frustration**
- I feel like-angry.--**Anger**
- I feel that's what I keep coming back to...it's like I'm not seen.--**Visibility**
- I think that experiencing those things has helped me become more comfortable in standing up to the things that I believe in. I think that definitely comes with some doubt, sometimes, and some nervousness. But at the same time, I want to stand up for what I believe in. It's sort of activated me to almost...an advocacy position.--**Advocacy**
- So there's new programs that I'm seeing offered, and I know that there are people who want to do the work, but I just know that right now, there's not funding or priority being made for it. But I would, I'd feel like, just based on those alone, we're probably improving, but definitely have room for growth.--**Worth**
- there are still moments where it's not easy. So I remember, given that moment, thinking that, again, it's, "This is an LGBT issue, and no one else in this room that I'm aware of is going to speak up on it." So I had to. I felt compelled to, but also, felt like I also wanted to.--**Responsibility**

### **Perception of Campus Climate as Result of Microaggressions**

- ...most of the time, when I experience any type of microaggression on campus, it happens outside of the classroom
- We have places for fraternities and sororities, and we have places for athletes, and for students who would be involved in student government. And even, I'd say the Multicultural Center, to an extent, caters towards the students from minoritized racial identities more so than other identities.--**Belonging**
- the Grad Student Congress does their LGBT mixers for grad students, which is amazing. I've never gone, but I'm sure that they're great, and a supportive environment, but those things just don't really exist elsewhere. So it's like, these small pockets, and I feel a lot of them don't even work together. So people coordinating don't communicate, so...I think it is an isolating experience, probably, to be LGBT on this campus.--**Isolation**
- lack of support, lack of resources, not having a central location on campus to call home. I think with that comes a lack of community, because small pockets may exist here and there, but there's not one place where I think queer people can just say, "This is my home on campus.--**Belonging**
- I would probably venture to guess that our campus is not the most LGBT friendly

- I think our community probably is welcoming off campus. But on campus, it's hard for me to answer, because I feel it's just such a strangely masculine environment focused on fraternities and sports.--**Unwelcome**
- But I do remember thinking, "These aren't people I'd be comfortable around. It's not like I want to follow them to their table and sit next to them, or anything like that."--**Unwelcome**
- on this campus specifically, we'll find a lot of people, who will just assume heteronormativity, and assume everything's going to fit into this nice little neat box.--**Unseen**
- I reached out to somebody in the MC, and I was, "I just wanted to see if I could get the schedule or see when it's (Safe Zone training) offered." And basically the reply to me was, "Well, we don't really have anybody in charge of it, so we don't really have a schedule at this point."--**Worth**
- I see these (safe zone) stickers everywhere, and it's great that people have them, but we're not continuing, we're not pushing this program forward and encouraging people to go.--**Worth**
- We don't have a single person on this campus who, that is their job description... who, that's their sole focus, is to promote LGBT programs. And I think, being in a well-funded state institution, that that's sad, honestly.--**Worth**
- We have a very masculinized campus, and I think that comes with just starting our focus on fraternity and sorority life.--**Belonging**
- we don't have those visible resources.—**Visibility**
- So many large institutions have coordinators for LGBT programs. A lot of places even have centers devoted to LGBT students.--**Visibility**
- I think that speaks towards the larger priorities of the university, and also our state legislature, to be honest.--**Visibility**
- But I still think that, for the size and that we are and the funding that we have, it is a very sad reality that we don't have somebody, who, that is their job description, is to make this a better place for our LGBT students--**Visibility**
- So do they care about us being here, if they're not going to prioritize these things?--**Worth**
- If only we had a place on campus that, like an LGBT coordinator, who I could say, 'Here are some programs that are being offered, here are some, even meetups or movie nights,' or something for geared towards LGBT students, just to help him build community.--**Belonging**
- We have places for fraternities and sororities, and we have places for athletes, and for students who would be involved in student government. And even, I'd say the Multicultural Center, to an extent, caters towards the students from minoritized racial identities more so than other identities.--**Belonging**
- , I don't think we have a place for students who really identify as queer to just be able to say, "This is my home on campus. And this is where I'm going to find my community and my people." Yeah. And that's, I think that's sad.--**Belonging**
- I think it needs to come from the Chancellor's Office, and I think until we have a Chancellor who says, "We're going to do this," it's probably not going to happen. Because we need somebody who's going to say, "We're going to do this," and then, we need

somebody who's going to back that up, and really stay and fight that fight. But I don't see happening any time soon.--**Worth**

- I've talked to a staff member here who identifies as non-binary, and their experience is, even as a staff member, I think we're not... We don't support our staff, we don't support our students.--**Belonging**
- I've met people through the mentorship program, but I feel like, even that program is fairly underground on campus. It happens, and I think it does some great work, but at the same time, it's, I feel it's not really heavily publicized anyway.--**Visibility**
- But I would assume that we're probably straighter than most campuses, which I think is a phenomenon that happens in a lot of, more conservative or Southern States. But I think that that alone speaks volumes.--**Unwelcome**

### **Messages Received by Microaggressions**

- the takeaway was, "We're not or I'm not concerned about the issues that don't happen to me"--**Angry**
- She was coming from a position of privilege, and also conveyed that, "I have the power to keep people from a seat at the table"—**Angry/Disempowered**
- So, to me, that just showed, just, a lack of empathy and a lack of care.--**Disempowered**
- in some sense, I felt like they were saying, gay people don't deserve to exist.--**Worth**
- I feel like a lot of times, it's assumed, hetero relationships are assumed.--**Invalid**
- it is this form of angry, because it shows that people don't care, and they don't see you. So, it's like, you're invisible. They don't see it as a priority to offer these programs to make campus better for us.--**Visibility/anger**

- 

#### **Positives in Program**

- Having some visible leadership, that it's identifying as LGBTQ has been very impactful for me {In his grad program}.--**Visibility**

### **Suggestions for Change**

- if I was in charge, I would definitely work towards building some type of dedicated center. Because I think we need it. I think we have enough students here who identify as queer in some way, that it's a needed resource.—**Visibility/Representation**