

## GAY MALES IN FRATERNITIES

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*The experiences of gay men in college social fraternities serve as the focus of this study. Representing five inter/national fraternities and five colleges and universities, five men share their coping strategies, homosexual identity development, and the reactions of their fraternity brothers to their “coming out.”*

As undergraduates, students face personal, professional, social, and emotional challenges that cause them to reconsider “their self-perceptions, develop new skills, and master developmental tasks” (Levine & Evans, 1991, p.1). This process often becomes especially complicated for those students who are gay, for they have challenges not met by their heterosexual counterparts (Stevens, 1997). Gay adolescents face discrimination, isolation, and often their own internalized homophobia (Johnson, 1996). Subsequently, students who are submersed in environments that might not offer any support or validation for being gay experience the difficult, if not impossible, process of developing a homosexual identity.

Quite likely, the American college fraternity is a prime bastion of a collegiate environment that exudes heterosexism (Bryan, 1987). Subsequently, gay males who join college social fraternities may face adversity because of the values, attitudes, beliefs, and prejudices held by society and merely reflected in fraternities. Although college social fraternities are generally unsupportive of homosexuality, there seems to be a significant number of gay males who are active fraternity members (Case, 1996; Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005; Windmeyer, 2005).

Affirming that gay men achieve membership in fraternities, Windmeyer and Freeman (1998) and Windmeyer (2005) gave voice to the lived experiences of selected fraternity men and their involvement as gay males in a college social fraternity. Similarly, Case (1996) distributed a national survey to lesbian, bisexual, gay (lesbigay) fraternity and sorority members, with over 90 percent of the more than 500 participants being non-heterosexual male members of college social fraternities. These efforts reflect that many gay males are active fraternity members.

This study details the self-described experiences of five gay males who joined fraternities and came out to fellow members of their fraternities while undergraduates. Specific attention is devoted to their use of coping strategies (e.g., behaviors and attitudes connected with heterosexism and homophobia), the variables that facilitated their coming out (i.e., prevailing diversity within chapters, levels of homosexual identity development, belief in brotherhood, pent-up frustrations), and their individual coming out processes (e.g., sharing one’s sexual identity with individuals or entire fraternity memberships).

### ***Homophobia and Heterosexism***

To understand the phenomenon of why gay individuals would willingly submerge themselves into what may be considered a stereotypically heterosexist institution, one must first recognize the impact of homophobia and heterosexism and the effect of internalized homophobia on gay men. Adams, Bell and Griffin (1997) defined heterosexism as the “societal/cultural, institutional, and

individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable orientation” (p. 62). Homophobia, as described by Adams, et al., is

The fear, hatred, or intolerance of lesbians, gay men, or any behavior that is outside the boundaries of traditional gender roles. Homophobia can be manifested as fear of association with lesbian or gay people or being perceived as lesbian or gay. Homophobic behavior can range from telling jokes about lesbian and gay people to physical violence against people thought to be lesbian or gay (p.162).

### ***Coping Strategies***

Upon recognizing that one might be attracted to persons of the same gender, learning how to cope becomes an essential task for the young adolescent trying to survive in a society perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism. Many gay males are able to manage the pressures that result from being rejected and marginalized (Boies, 1997; Lasser, 1999; Mahan, 1998) by adopting specific strategies that help them cope in certain situations. Mahan asserted that coping should be viewed as contextual, “referring to the individual’s thoughts and behaviors within a specific context” (p. 51). Simply put, coping is a function of both the person and the environment. Thus, two gay people immersed in the same environment may employ different coping strategies. On the other hand, a gay person might use the same coping strategy in different environments (Windmeyer, 2005) or different coping strategies in different environments.

Case (1996) estimated that the majority (70%) of gay males who joined fraternities chose not to come out because they encountered homophobic or heterosexist attitudes within their chapter, usually in the form of derogatory jokes or comments. Homophobia was also frequently evidenced in membership selection. Case chronicled what happened when a potential member was rumored or perceived to be gay. Almost universally, members of the chapter in question were likely to summarily vote against offering him a bid to join. Likewise, if chapter members discovered or believed a pledging member to be gay, the chapter’s members were inclined to dismiss the new member. More often than not, the closeted initiated gay members would voice no opposition to the discrimination, fearing that to do so might cause other members to question their motivation.

A number of gay males in college social fraternities could successfully conceal their sexuality, yet make a conscious decision to disclose their sexuality (i.e., come out) in spite of possible adverse reactions and conditions occurring. This article contributes to the literature addressing the experiences of gay males in fraternities who have come out to other fraternity members while still enrolled as undergraduate students. The primary researcher investigated four research questions:

1. What is the perceived atmosphere within college fraternities in regard to sexuality?
2. What are the coping strategies of gay males in college social fraternities prior to coming out?
3. What variables facilitate gay men coming out to their fraternity?
4. What specific approaches do gay males employ as a means of coming out to their fraternity?

### **Method**

This is a phenomenological study (Jones, 2002) of the coping strategies of self-disclosed gay males in college social fraternities. The constructivist perspective allowed the gathering of data to determine the socially constructed reality of this group (Guido-DiBrito, Chavez, & Lincoln, 2006). In addition, the selection of in-depth interviews permitted examination of the experiences of the participants from their own perspectives.

### ***Selection of Participants***

In concert with purposive sampling (Patton, 1990), participants consisted of individuals who self-identified as gay, are/were active members of a college social fraternity, and who disclosed their sexuality to other members within their fraternity while undergraduate chapter members. The primary author collected data via one-on-one unstructured interviews. Audio-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and narratives were analyzed in search of patterns and themes to formulate interpretations.

Studying such hidden populations as gay males in fraternities can often create unique research issues that complicate participant recruitment and research design. According to Case (1996) and Case, Hesp, and Eberly (2005), the number of gay men who disclose their sexual orientation to their fraternity as undergraduate chapter members is difficult to estimate. Case and Case, Hesp, and Eberly referred to this group as hidden members, suggesting that the recruitment of a useful sample could be difficult to obtain. Thus, the primary researcher encountered several obstacles when trying to locate participants who specifically (a) fit the criteria, (b) were willing to participate in a research study, and (c) were within a reasonable distance to be able to participate in a face-to-face interview.

To locate a sample of the population that would fit the scope of this research, a call-for-participants' email was developed that, through the help of a few colleagues, was sent out over a number of sizeable listservs that focused on issues pertaining either to fraternity men, gay men, or gay fraternity men. In a period of 3 weeks, 19 individuals responded to the call-for-participants' email. Six individuals met the criteria of this study, while also being within the desired driving distance from the primary researcher. The primary author then sent an email to the interested individuals stating that they had been selected as participants for the study. Each selected participant was asked to reply to the email and include both contact information and his choice from a selection of available interview dates provided. Five of the six selected individuals responded. Each of the interviews took place during early March 2003.

All five participants in this study were White males who attended five different Midwestern colleges or universities and were members of five different North-American Interfraternity Conference (NIC) campus chapters. Each participant had completed his group's pledging processes and was an initiated member prior to his decision to come out. Four of the five participants were out to the entire chapter membership; one participant was out to some, but not all of his fraternity brothers at the time of the interview; and two participants were still undergraduate students at the time of their interview. Each participant joined his fraternity during his first year and all but one elected to come out to his entire chapter or selected individuals during the junior years.

The first participant attended a midsize public university. At the time of the interview, he was a junior in college and had only come out to three fraternity members. However, he planned to be out to the entire brotherhood before the end of his next semester. A second participant obtained his undergraduate degree from a small private university and had since completed a master's program at a large public university. He joined his fraternity the sixth week of his first year but did not come out to his fraternity brothers until the fall semester of his junior year. The third participant attended a midsize public university and was a sophomore at the time of the interview. This participant joined his fraternity the summer before he began college but waited until the second semester of his first year before coming out to half of his chapter. The following summer he came out to the remaining members of his chapter. The fourth participant attended a large public university and he joined his fraternity the first week of his first year. This participant came out to his fraternity

brothers near the end of his junior year and had graduated at the time of the interview. The fifth participant attended a small private liberal arts college. At the time of the interview, this participant was a doctoral candidate at a large prestigious private university. This participant joined his fraternity his first year but waited until the beginning of his junior year to come out to his fraternity brothers.

## **Results**

### ***Student Voices***

Qualitative analysis provided rich description as to how five gay males managed their sexuality within their fraternities prior to coming out within their respective chapters. Several themes emerged as participants discussed the complexities of their lives. Four of the five respondents indicated perceiving the environments within their fraternity as homophobic. One participant recalled his initial impression of the fraternity as “a fairly open and accepting place ... but when I got there and was ready to move in, the first day I heard so many gay jokes and anti-gay slurs and I was just instantly back in the closet. I didn’t even think about coming out for the next month or two.” This experience was echoed by other participants who claimed that it was essentially impossible to avoid hearing their fraternity brothers make negative comments about gay people in some fashion, whether it was in the form of a joke or through the excessive use of slurs. One participant, who was still in the process of coming out to his entire chapter, shared his reservations about coming out based on his perceptions of the existing homophobia:

I hoped it would be all good but I knew it wouldn’t. I knew there would probably be some guys in the house that wouldn’t be able to accept it.... So I knew our relationships would change in a way. I hoped it would all be positive, but I knew it wouldn’t.

As participants’ involvement in their fraternities increased, their perceptions of what was previously thought to be overt homophobia began to change. While they did not deny the existence of homophobia within their fraternities, they initially attributed the homophobic comments or gestures as more out of habit. One participant asserted, “...they’re just a bunch of normal teenage guys with the same kind of macho, swaggering attitudes most teenage guys do. They could just as easily have said ‘you’re an idiot,’ as ‘you’re gay,’ and it didn’t matter.”

### ***Heterosexism***

All participants had a clear understanding that heterosexuality was the only accepted form of sexuality within their fraternity. One participant stated:

I was in a Greek<sup>1</sup> [sic] system that had very clear, defined gender roles. On that campus, there was the kind of subtle reinforcement that heterosexuality was right and what was necessary to be successful.

Such feeling was reinforced through the expectation that a brother bring a female date to all fraternity socials. Although one participant claimed his fraternity was not homophobic, he still thought it was only proper to tell his fraternity brothers in advance, should he ever bring a male date to a fraternity function, exclaiming, “You need to prepare them for something like that.” Another claimed that his fraternity not only expected, but also subtly imposed, heteronormality. He felt that he had to have an actual dating relationship with a female or others would begin to have suspicions as to whether or not he might be gay.

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<sup>1</sup> Since not all organizations adopted Greek letters, it is now customary to refer to such groups as fraternities rather than Greek-letter or Greek organizations.

In addition to a pervasive atmosphere of heterosexism, one participant explained that it was very common for certain members of the fraternity to be teased about their sexuality, even though it was never suspected that anyone in the fraternity was actually gay. Said one participant:

I think these were a bunch of men, who, just because of their lack of exposure to homosexuality, didn't have a conception that there really were gay people, that there would be gay people who would join the fraternity.

Another participant adopted a similar viewpoint after coming out to one of his brothers whom he suspected to be least accepting of homosexuality. This participant realized that the person was not necessarily homophobic but simply unaware that he would be actually offending someone by his words and actions:

One guy in particular, I was scared of him. He was this huge football player who lifted weights all the time and talked about gay people all the time ... faggot, queer. He always called everybody else that. He always told jokes, stuff like that. I was really afraid of what he was going to think because he was kind of perceived as a little mean, and not very approachable. Now he is one of my good friends. It's really weird. Right after my coming out to him, he said, "You do realize I don't care. You are probably a better friend now because I know more about you."

### ***Coping Strategies***

Participants' levels of homosexual identity development appeared to be a contributing factor in determining the type of coping strategy used. Three primary themes emerged from the data: avoidance, passing, and assimilation. Avoidance referred to either running away from or not dealing with an issue. A perceived lack of control in a given situation often warranted using avoidance as a way of coping with undesirable thoughts, comments, or behaviors. Coping through avoidance was manifested in three distinct forms: repression, deflection, and separation.

***Avoidance-Repression.*** When the primary researcher asked participants why they repressed their sexuality, the typical response was that it was easier to keep it hidden or pushed down rather than deal with any pain of rejection. All but one participant had an early awareness of their sexual orientation. Three mentioned wanting to explore their sexuality when going away to college, but soon learned that, after joining their fraternities, the desire to advance in their stages of homosexual identity development would need to be put on hold. One participant stated he specifically went out of state to college to explore his sexual orientation, but that his sexuality was very quickly repressed, or pushed aside, after joining the fraternity:

I knew I was gay but I thought I was still not going to act on it when I went to college. That was my thing. I knew what I was and that I could do nothing about it, so I decided I needed to just get over it.

***Avoidance-Deflection.*** Deflection, another type of avoidance strategy, meant ignoring comments or behaviors that participants perceived as homophobic or pertaining to homosexuality in some fashion. Growing up, participants learned not to acknowledge the homophobic statements that were prevalent within larger society. One reason for not acknowledging such statements within their fraternities was the realization that homophobic comments or behaviors often resulted from mere ignorance or unawareness. With increasing expectation that such comments would be included in everyday banter among male peers, it became easier for the participants eventually to train themselves to focus their attention elsewhere. One participant noted:

I think a lot of the time I just sort of trained myself to block it out and just completely ignore it. I never ever went along with anything or laughed at any gay jokes. But, I wouldn't necessarily acknowledge them either. I would just ignore people. So, I couldn't tell you what processes were going on in my head because, as far as I know, there wasn't one.

Another participant echoed this response, claiming that he had become so accustomed to hearing negative comments about homosexuality that it no longer affected him:

I just tend to pass it off. I don't really think about it. I've just been used to it my whole life. And, when I hear things like that, those kind of terms and little phrases, lately, it kind of rolls off my back.

**Avoidance-Separation.** Separating from the fraternity was another strategy participants used to keep their sexual identities concealed. As one participant stated, "Sometimes there is a wall on what you let other people see and what you don't." Constructing walls within the fraternity chapters allowed participants to create artificial senses of closeness with others. For instance, one participant said he would listen to any of his brothers if they needed to talk about their relationships with women, but he would never reciprocate any of his own personal information. Another participant stated, "I never talked to anybody about my relationships or lack thereof, or never talked to anybody about who I thought was cute."

Participants also created separation from their fraternities by limiting interactions with specific members; especially any member they feared would be able to detect their sexual orientation. One participant mentioned keeping a safe distance from someone who would always find ways to tease people about being gay. Oftentimes, this participant would go so far as to find an excuse to leave the room for fear of having to interact with this member.

Rather than just avoiding specific members, another way participants would create separation was to avoid their chapters as a whole. One participant stated, "I was sort of a recluse for the first two months because I didn't want people to know that I was gay. I sort of spent most of my time in my room and didn't really connect with anybody." Another participant explained that he had minimal contact with his fraternity his first year as a way of limiting any suspicions that others might have about his sexual orientation. One participant explained that he had only spent a total of four hours with his fraternity before his pledge induction. He stated, "In those four hours ... I didn't say a lot. If someone talked to me, I talked to them."

### ***Passing***

When a gay male is able to camouflage himself in such a way that others are unsuspecting of his homosexuality, he is said to have the ability to pass. In this context, passing is defined as being observably heterosexual either by consciously altering one's behavior or by deliberately creating an image through deceit or the manipulation of convenient circumstances. Two sub-themes of passing emerged from the data: censoring behavior and fabricating an image.

***Passing-Censoring Behavior.*** One participant was proud of how he could walk past "a total stranger on the campus" and not be viewed by that person as someone who would be gay:

I really try to get rid of people's pre-conceived notions of how gay guys should look and act. I guess when I came out to people it surprised them, because I don't really come off as gay most of the time. I don't really fit most of the stereotypes."

Other participants who self-described as not fitting most of their perceived gay stereotypes received similar reactions upon coming out from their fraternity brothers. One participant admitted consciously not censoring his behavior, claiming there was no reason for him to pass because he did not even realize until his junior year that he was gay. In contrast, other participants were quite aware of being different early in life, and went to great lengths to modify their behavior. For example, when visiting his fraternity house, one participant "tried to be more macho, or to maybe watch the

things that I would say or the way that I would act, or try to not necessarily have them suspect that I would be gay.” For two of the participants, it was not necessarily as important to “be more macho” as it was to just be mindful of not discussing issues that could be seen as “stereotypically gay.” Not discussing issues, in this context, should not be confused as being an avoidance strategy, as previously discussed. The difference is that participants were not necessarily avoiding certain types of conversation but rather just being careful to edit the content of their dialogue. For example, rather than not talking about a significant other, they might instead use non-specific gender pronouns or alter the “he” to a “this person,” or “they.”

Participants were also more careful about bringing up certain topics they felt their brothers would not be interested in discussing. One participant stated:

I often would not talk about some of the activities I was involved with, such as the theatre, because with my fraternity brothers, I either didn't think they would be interested or thought that they would think it to be 'gay' for me to talk about being interested in the theatre.

***Passing-Fabricating an Image.*** “You can't stop people from guessing. If they want to assume, they can, but you can't stop them from guessing about your sexuality.” While this may have been the viewpoint of one participant, the others seemed to think otherwise. As mentioned previously, all participants prided themselves on being “non-stereotypical” in that others would generally not be able to detect their homosexuality. However, one way for the participants to ensure against the possibility of being found out was to fabricate an actual image of being heterosexual by purposely engaging in heterosexual behaviors with the awareness that others would become knowledgeable of such behavior. One example shared involved deliberately engaging in intimate activities with a female for the sole purpose of proving an interest in women to others:

Mmm yeah, on New Year's Eve of my sophomore year I made out with this girl just to make out with her [laugh]. She was another fraternity guy's ex girlfriend. So, I thought, well, this will be good because she will go tell him and nobody will suspect anything. And, it was just like that, I could say I had this crush on this girl and stuff ... I would tell my fraternity brothers about how I thought she was cute and wanted to date her and blah blah blah. And it was all bullshit, I mean [smirk] it was just an act. I really didn't have any deep down desire for her. I thought maybe I could have some type of feeling if [pause] I wasn't gay. [Laugh] I mean, it's really pathetic to say that, but I mean, I did it and that's how I proceeded at the time.

It was common for participants to go so far as to make up elaborate stories. However, participants often felt that just bringing a female date to fraternity functions would suffice. This was indeed the case for one participant who said, “The fact that I had a friend who was a woman and that I brought her to events was a good enough cover...” However, some participants took a slightly different approach. Rather than bringing a female date and having to play the role of showing interest in her, one participant explained how he learned to play the system. He indirectly avowed that there were definite advantages to his leadership position:

I was social chairman and I planned all parties. And, for course, the social chairman can never date because they are too busy running the parties, so that was fine ... I mean, when you are social chair of a house and you are expected to put on parties every weekend, how the hell do you have time to date when you are supervising parties? Making sure that the kegs are there, and the band is on time, and this person is happy, and this person isn't throwing up in the bathroom, and this person isn't passing out, so you would never bring a date to a party because there just wasn't time to pay attention to them.

While this rationalization seemed legitimate with no pretenses, it was not completely without underlying intentions. This participant appeared to be very knowledgeable of the convenience that his position afforded him. When asked what he would have done if he was not social chair, his

response was, "I probably would have just brought a friend that was a girl, until I was ready to tell them."

### ***Assimilation***

In simple terms, to assimilate means to become like or to be incorporated. Assimilation is an appropriate term for one method in which participants were able to manage their sexuality prior to coming out. Two sub-themes of assimilation emerged from the data: blending and fusing. Although these sub-themes existed apart from one another, a pattern emerged suggesting that participants first attempted to blend before becoming fully incorporated within their fraternities.

***Assimilation-Blending.*** In reference to blending, one participant believed it was more a matter of instinct. He associated gay men with chameleons, claiming that gay people have acquired the ability to "change their skin and their colors in different situations. They have already been doing this their whole lives without their knowledge. It's something that's inherent and intuitive." This participant provided an explanation about why he thought being a chameleon was intuitive rather than a matter of conscious thought:

It's a matter, of course, that you're born [gay], but the way you're raised doesn't nurture you to be gay or straight. What I should say is, you're born gay, in my opinion, but your parents raise you as straight. You don't question your parents, they're your parents, and you don't know what gay is because they are your parents and unless you've got two daddies or two mommies, you wouldn't know that is okay too. So you spend your whole life pretending, but you're really not pretending because that's really your skin. And then you figure out who you are and your skin changes to that different hue. But there are many hues in the coming out process and by the time you come out you can go to any color of the rainbow, that chameleon adaptation, because it is something that is inherent in you. It's the way you are raised. You're raised as an individual that turns out to be the individual that you were raised to be. So your whole life has been this alternating universe, you know, here and there and you don't realize what those colors were until you're like, "Oh my God, I'm gay," but you've already been through all the colors.

While this explanation seems logical and believable, numerous inconsistencies within the data suggested that the participants were distinctly aware of their efforts to blend. For instance, when talking about his fears of being noticed as being gay, one participant stated, "I tend to look around the room and stuff like that to make sure people stand out," claiming that he needed to get a feel for the atmosphere in his fraternity before he could be comfortable. Another participant who also had concerns about being comfortable in his fraternity stated, "I wanted to pick a fraternity that maybe I could blend into without necessarily sticking out as someone who would be potentially gay." For these participants, blending was something consciously and purposely done to not draw attention to themselves.

Seeking others who shared commonalities within the fraternity was another way in which participants initially blended. A participant who was also a guitar player stated:

One of the guys played guitar and he was teaching me to play guitar as well, so it was like, I had an upperclassman on my side before pledgship even got into the thick of things. So it was ... it was just a smart move.

Another participant commented on not being all that good at sports, so he opted not to play on any of the fraternity sports teams. However, he did not want to seem standoffish or uninvolved in the fraternity so he found other ways to connect with his brothers. This participant stated, "I went to all the community service projects, like the fundraisers, campus sings, talent shows ... and I always did stuff like that."

Essentially, these participants sought out ways to participate within the fraternity without necessarily standing out or isolating themselves in such a way that anyone would begin to have suspicions of their sexual orientations. While some participants were able to find successful ways to effectively blend in as just another brother, their blending efforts seemed to have a reversal effect in that the participants became highly recognized by their fellow chapter members as possessing desirable qualities of leadership. Thus, it was not long before the participants of this study began to take on leadership positions within their fraternities.

***Assimilation-Fusing.*** Fusing means ingraining oneself into the formal structure of the fraternity. Although similar to blending, fusing is distinctively different. One aspect that makes fusing different is that the person actually holds a formalized leadership position within the chapter. What also sets blending and fusing apart is that fusing means having an automatic, unquestioned degree of connection with the fraternity. Conversely, blending involves seeking out ways in which to connect as a means of drawing attention away from oneself. As such, all five participants successfully fused with their fraternity. One person stated:

When I first joined [my involvement] was very little, but after the second semester, I became pretty deeply involved with things. I still wasn't out, but I became the secretary for the house and I took over the alumni relations committee and was pretty heavily involved with the other groups too, with the social committee and the entry house rush committee, and all that.

This participant also reported that had his chapter not closed when it did, he would have been the next president of his fraternity chapter. Another participant's response for having such a high level of involvement within his fraternity was, "You must learn to play the system, and I learned to play the system early on." President of his pledge class and social chair, this participant had accumulated the most chapter points by his senior year, which afforded him the luxury of having the largest room in the house with a private bathroom. A similar experience was shared by another participant who "held an office every year in the fraternity ... I was four officers" during my undergraduate years.

### **Variables that Facilitate Gay Men Coming Out to their Fraternity**

Gay men in fraternities make a conscious decision to come out for a multitude of reasons. Six variables were influential in facilitating the participants of this study coming out to their respective chapters: (a) the enmeshed nature of fraternity life; (b) prevailing diversity within the chapter; (c) participant's level of homosexual identity development; (d) belief in the concept of brotherhood; (e) reflections of previous coming out experiences; and (f) pent-up frustrations. Each of the variables mentioned was common to at least four participants. Furthermore, the six variables differed significantly in relevance to each participant's experience.

#### ***Enmeshed Nature of Fraternity Life***

Fraternity life appeared to be the primary social outlet for the majority of the participants. One explained that on his campus "the first thing that you would say when you would talk about other people on campus was what house they were in, not what their major is, or where were from, or anything like that." This participant, as well as others, felt as if there was literally no sense of separation from being a college student and being a member of a fraternity. According to one participant, "The Greeks [sic] were so infused in the workings of the university, in the academic part of it and in the social part of it, that you never got away from it." Another participant echoed this: "You see them every waking hour of the day." It was common for participants to eat most meals with their brothers or to sit next to some of them in classes.

As previously mentioned, all five participants in this study ascribed to a high level of involvement in their fraternities. This often meant an increased level of interaction with the brothers to the point where participants felt as if they literally could not keep their personal lives private. One participant explained the complexities of trying to date:

If you try to leave to meet a gay friend at midnight, you are not going to get off campus without somebody asking where you are going. And people are going to think it's weird if you pop in at 3:00 a.m. and have class the next day. They are going to ask you, "Why were you out so late?" So not being out was always hard because I had to make up so many lies on where I was, what I was doing, and who, if anybody saw you out with somebody that they didn't know.... If I was out with a gay friend or a boyfriend or something, they would always want to know. They would ask, "Oh, well how do you all know each other?" And you would have to make up this big elaborate story. So, yeah, it was hard. You had to be creative.

For some participants, the major issue was not necessarily that the fraternity was an enmeshing experience; the enmeshment of the fraternity within the campus culture simply exaggerated matters. Participants felt the need to remain secretive about their personal lives for fear of rejection from their fraternity brothers. Had the brothers been perceived as more accepting, participants would have felt less stress trying to keep their personal lives concealed. Thus, the greater issues were the perceptions of homophobia and heterosexism, whether real or merely imagined.

### ***Prevailing Diversity Within Chapters***

One element common to all participants was the observation that a high level of diversity existed among the brotherhood. Participants were quick to assert that their chapters included more diversity in comparison to the other chapters on their respective campuses. As such, participants avowed that homosexuality was "just one more form of diversity."

We had a number of international students and African Americans. We also had people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, which was not quite as common at the university because it is a fairly expensive private university. So, I think that the diversity of my chapter within the strict confines of it being presumably all heterosexual men ... I think it was a fairly diverse group of people, and so that made me feel comfortable being a part of them.

This response was common among the participants, as they each explained how their chapter seemed to be more inclusive of diversity than other chapters on campus. One participant said that members of his chapter used to make many jokes about Jewish people. After discovering that one of the brothers was Jewish, the members made a concerted effort to be more respectful toward him. This same participant assumed that a similar level of respect would be given to him when he came out to the chapter members. As such, this participant felt that his fraternity was more heterocentric and less homophobic. He stated, "I learned that calling each other "fag" and "homo" was just part of the common banter between the guys. I think had they known previously that I was gay, they might not have used those words."

### ***Participants' Levels of Homosexual Identity Development***

It was apparent that all five of the participants were highly developed in their homosexual identity prior to coming out to other fraternity members. As discussed previously, it was common for the participants to repress their homosexuality because of not feeling able to explore being gay while concurrently being a member of a fraternity. However, despite not being able to outwardly express their sexual orientation, these participants managed to progress in their homosexual identity development.

A major indication of having a high level of homosexual identity development is not only having an awareness of, but also being able to admit being homosexual to oneself (Johnson, 1996). One participant stated, "I am gay ... it's just who I am. It's part of me." Similar responses were expressed by the other participants who claimed to also be comfortable admitting being gay to themselves prior to coming out within the fraternity.

All five participants had come out to at least one person prior to coming out to their fraternity brothers. The simple act of coming out to at least one person indicated a milestone in development, for it is at this point when one's sexual orientation is no longer a self-kept secret. All the participants were very aware that telling someone else meant relinquishing a certain degree of control. One stated:

I mean, as much as I love these people, they are going to talk to each other about things, and if I didn't want anybody to know, I would not have told anybody. You know, I was smart enough not to say anything before.

Another participant explained he purposely set a goal to come out to one of his friends upon arriving back at campus after being away and having time to reflect all summer. Hence, the participants' previous coming out experiences were not happenstance. These participants were very aware of the possible consequences of coming out to others, but were at a point in their lives when it was becoming personally important to be more open with their sexual orientation.

The time span between achieving a high level of homosexual identity development and actually coming out to other fraternity members varied from participant to participant and appeared to be highly dependent on the perceived level of acceptance by the other fraternity brothers. One participant who claimed to be very comfortable with his homosexuality prior to joining his fraternity stated:

I was walking into the house preparing to, you know, not necessarily say, "Hey, I'm gay," but not be discrete or closeted about it either. And, people are already there making fag jokes and calling people queer and I was like, alright, that's not going to happen.

Another participant claimed suddenly to become aware of his sexuality while on vacation. This participant seemed to have an instantaneous acceptance of himself as being homosexual and claimed that the only reason he did not share his new awareness with his fraternity brothers directly upon arriving back to campus was because he thought it would be more respectful to come out to his parents first. The participant who had yet to come out to his entire chapter stated:

If someone was questioning my sexuality, I would hope that they would at least come and ask me.... I won't defend it if someone asks me anymore. And I will not lie to them.... There is no one that I don't want to know I'm gay.

### ***Brotherhood***

For these participants, brotherhood authenticity meant more than just camaraderie and fun. Brotherhood was a very sacredly held aspect of fraternity life. One participant defined brotherhood as "a very deep understanding of the other person and how they work and what makes them tick." Another shared a similar definition:

Brotherhood is loyalty like no other. It's kind of like being siblings. You can yell at this person for doing something stupid, but ten minutes later, you can be like, "Hey, let's go get a slice of pizza," and everything is forgiven. It's a bond that we share, and unless you go through it, you really don't know.

Subscribing to such an altruistic ideal of brotherhood carried with it a certain degree of skepticism for study participants. They often thought that if true brotherhood actually existed, their fraternity

brothers would be able to look past their prejudices to see more than just sexuality. In this sense, participants felt that coming out to their fraternity brothers was one way of evaluating the authenticity of brotherhood. As one participant put it:

I was sick and tired of it. I told too many lies and was recapitulating them in my head over and over. I said to myself, "Okay, these people are preaching this brotherhood thing, and I bought into it this far. And you know what, either it's true or it's not, and if it's not, then I'm getting the hell out of here, and if it is, then I'm going to stay."

Some participants relied on brotherhood to be the redeeming feature when coming out to fraternity brothers during a chapter meeting:

I stood up and I said, "You know, guys, I was home over spring break and I told my parents something. If you really are a fraternity, and you really are my brothers, then you'll be fine with what I am going to tell you. And if not, then I'll leave." And I said, "I'm gay." I got the snaps after about 30 seconds of silence because no one knew what the hell to do [laugh].

This participant went on to explain that being accepted by his fraternity gave him a sense of reassurance because he really wanted to believe in "this thing called brotherhood." Another explained that he was not necessarily testing the authenticity of brotherhood; rather, he just wanted to be authentic himself:

These guys were becoming my really good friends and they were some of the best guy friends that I had had. And, I really liked that, and they really liked me for, what I thought, was for who I was. But, they really didn't know all of who I was.

### ***Reflections on Previous Coming out Experiences***

One factor that seemed to have an impact on whether participants came out to their fraternity brothers was previous coming out experiences. Coming out was usually considered a process of trial and error. In this sense, participants often evaluated their own previous coming out experiences to determine whether it would be beneficial to continue coming out to different people. One participant stated that he was more apt to come out to his fraternity brothers after having a good coming out experience with one of his female friends:

I met this friend of mine and she was the first one, the first person I told openly that I really thought that I was gay. She treated me no different. She treated me as a friend. And ... knowing that people won't change how they act around you, I just didn't care anymore if people knew.

In addition to evaluating coming out experiences, participants were often very attentive to any information regarding past coming out experiences of other fraternity members in an attempt to make it work. One participant sought out a past non-disclosed gay member of his fraternity to ask his advice on coming out. It was after having the conversation that this participant deemed it appropriate to come out to the fraternity:

Another big catalyst for me [to come out] was that our alumni board president was an openly gay guy. Well, I didn't know that he was openly gay until somebody said some snide remark. But, he was one of those guys who was not your typical queen, I guess, at all. And so, I just always thought that he was straight or whatever. But when I found out, I was like, okay, so I need to talk to this guy [Laugh]. So we set out to dinner. He told me what it was like when he was in the fraternity, and he didn't come out until way after college. And, he said, "There have always been gay people in fraternities. When I was there, I knew of a guy that was gay in my same pledge class and nothing was ever said." And I asked, "Do you look back on what you have done and ever wonder, and say, "Wow, you know, I wish I would have come out to them." He said, "Sometimes, but the time wasn't right. And the society wasn't right for it and it would have had nothing but negative results." So after talking with him, I said to myself, "You can do this. I mean, yeah, some people have kind of come out but they have never made it work. You can make it work. You can change these people's attitudes. You may be giving up something. You may be giving it up if it turns out wrong, but you need to give it a shot

because gay people need to give it a shot, because it's not going to change on its own. You have to do it yourself." And that was what I told myself.

### ***Pent-up Frustrations***

Some participants discussed having an overwhelming sense of frustration toward their fraternity brothers just prior to coming out. One participant explained that he was tired of hiding himself and that he was "just as equal as they were." Another participant expressed his level of frustration regarding the senseless homophobic jokes when he stated, "After a while, I just got really fed up." Still another participant felt as if he had earned his right to be accepted by the fraternity:

I thought, okay, give me a break here ... I'm really unhappy right now and ... I thought, I pay money for functions. Why in the hell can't I bring my boyfriend to a function? I pay for it just as much in dues as they do. I go to all this stuff. I'm a damn officer, and I was getting real hostile over it.

### ***Specific Approaches to Coming Out to the Fraternity***

All but one of the five participants had come out to their entire chapter brothers, but even this participant had come out to several fraternity members but was not out to his entire chapter at the time of the interview. The data gathered from the five participants revealed there was not one specific approach that gay males exercised as a means of coming out. Rather, one of three basic approaches to coming out within a fraternity was used: (a) member specific approach, (b) systematic approach, and (c) passive/reactive approach. The participants used a combination of the three approaches, suggesting that perhaps these approaches co-existed as concentric circles.

***Member Specific Approach.*** The member specific approach involved coming out only to specific members. Often, participants would come out to specific members based on three criteria: formal status, perceived level of acceptance, and degree of familial attachment.

***Member Specific Approach – Formal Status.*** Two participants shared their reasons for first coming out to their fraternity presidents:

I take a lot of pride in the letters I wear. And not to say that I would disgrace them, being gay, I just didn't want to disgrace them and I didn't know what the whole fraternity standpoint on it was. So, I wanted to see what he thought about it ... whether I should deactivate or not. Had he suggested it, I pride those letters so much that I would have deactivated.

***Member Specific Approach – Perceived Level of Acceptance.*** Another participant explained that he came out to someone because he perceived him to be very accepting. More specifically, he thought the person to be gay himself, but later found out that this member was just very open-minded. This participant believed that telling others whom he felt most accepting to be the best approach. Fortunately, the only reactions received were either of acceptance or of indifference.

***Member Specific Approach – Degree of Familial Attachment.*** Two participants first came out to others with whom they felt a strong attachment. When explaining why he first came out to a specific member, one participant stated, "I came out to him because he is the one I'm closest with in the fraternity. He was just the person that I felt the strongest connection with."

***Systematic Approach.*** Participants who used a step-by-step approach viewed coming out as having a specific order of events, rather than just knowing to whom the participants wanted to come out, as in the member specific approach. The systematic approach involved elements of the specific member approach, in that these participants often came out to one person and then a small group of people at the same time. Extending beyond the member specific approach was the notion of having

a pre-set plan of not only who to come out to, but also in what sequence. One participant explained how he first told his president on a Friday, discussed it with his fellow executive board members on Saturday, and on Sunday brought it up during the new business discussion at the chapter meeting. This participant stated, "I'm an orderly person and I like things to go in a calm fashion. I wanted to get their feedback on it. It was testing the waters."

Another participant went so far as to outline a strategic plan, stating:

I made a list. Drew up a list of people who I was sort of worried about coming out to and then went through and actually sort of discretely talked with each of them. Over the course of several months, I worked on the people who would be least safe. I wanted to make sure they wouldn't have excessively negative reactions. And, then I sort of went for all the neutral people.

**Passive/Reactive Approach.** The passive/reactive approach involved setting the stage to come out indirectly to members within the fraternity. For example, one participant who had a gay affiliated magazine sitting on his desk did not attempt to hide it when one of his brothers stopped by to hang out. As he described the situation:

I had a subscription to the *Out Magazine* sitting on my desk. So he picks it up and starts to flip through it as he is talking to me [Laugh]. And then, I could see on his face that it dawned on him that what he was looking at was a gay magazine. He was surprised, and as he put it down, he said, "What is this?" And I said, "Well, it's a magazine. It's a, you know, gay magazine." He said, "Why do you have a gay magazine? And I said, "Well, you know, because ... I'm gay." And so our conversation kind of ended, and at that moment I knew it was really going to get back to the rest of my fraternity brothers.

Another participant set the stage by involving a female friend. The plan was for the female friend in the sorority to tell some of her sorority sisters, knowing that these sisters would discuss it with their boyfriends. Hence, it was not long before the brothers who became privy to such information spread the news throughout the chapter.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify existing themes in the experiences of gay males who concealed their sexual orientation prior to coming out as undergraduate fraternity members. The results of this study have been compared with the existing literature and the following is an interactive discussion addressing the lead researcher's conclusions as derived from the analysis of these comparisons.

The scope of this study did not include reasons why gay males join fraternities. However, it is perplexing to think that someone would purposely put himself in a potentially hostile (homophobic) environment. Hughes and Winston (1987) reported, "Promoters of the Greek [sic] system praise fraternities for encouraging the formation of same-sex friendships" (p. 405). Likewise, the participants of this study expressed having a desire to increase their number of male friends, even if it meant keeping their sexual orientation concealed. Similarly, Hughes and Winston claimed, "Members, through their identification with the fraternity, are willing to make sacrifices and contributions to the group at the expense of their own freedoms of action" (p. 409). This may be one explanation of why the study participants were able to endure the open homophobia they experienced.

Bryan (1987) stated that fraternities “cannot be defined as bastions of tolerance when it comes to ... sexual preference [sic]” (p. 47). The participants’ initial perceptions of their fraternities supported this claim; a majority describing that upon joining their fraternities they felt as if there was no possibility of ever coming out to anyone in the chapter. Participants claimed that other members were very blatant about their homophobia, often telling, “Fag jokes” and making fun of anyone in the fraternity who “acted gay.” In addition to these perceptions of homophobia, there was also an intense pressure to conform to the heterosexual norms and practices set forth by the fraternity members. It was not enough to attend fraternity functions alone; participants often brought a female date to fraternity functions for fear that others would develop suspicions if they did not.

Although initial perceptions of acceptance of gay sexual orientation by fraternity brothers were often disconcerting, it appeared as if the participants’ perceptions evolved over time to seeing their fraternity brothers as being less homophobic and more heterocentric. In this sense, it might not be that fraternity members are intolerant of differences, as Bryan (1987) asserted, but instead just ignorant to the possibility that some members are gay, or that they do not understand how their language reflects intolerance. Supporting this idea are the reactions the study participants’ received from their fraternity brothers upon coming out. For instance, one participant claimed to be shocked when the one person he thought to be the most bigoted was actually very accepting. Other participants reported similar reactions, claiming to have mostly positive coming out experiences. Nevertheless, participants employed a variety of coping strategies in attempts to keep their sexual orientation concealed until they resolved coming out to their fraternities.

Mahan (1998) asserted that coping is “contextual” (p. 51) and that “individuals adjust coping efforts from context to context depending on whether they appraise the stressful event as a harmless threat or a challenge” (p. 52). Mahan’s explanation of coping appeared to be consistent with the findings of the present study. For instance, participants mentioned having friends outside the fraternity who were both aware of and accepting of their sexuality. As such, they felt it unnecessary to employ any coping strategies in this external context. At the same time, participants reported using a variety of coping strategies to conceal their sexuality from fraternity members.

Woods (1992) reported that gay males in the corporate world used three basic coping strategies to manage their sexuality: avoiding a sexual identity, counterfeiting an identity, and integrating an identity and this study produced similar results. For example, participants would intentionally avoid issues of sexuality or fabricate an image of being heterosexual to dispel any suspicions that others might have had. Although the participants in this study “integrated an identity” by coming out to other fraternity members, this was not considered a coping strategy as defined in the context of the present study because coming out is the opposite of concealing one’s sexuality.

Case (1996) reported that a large number of participants surveyed had a “tendency toward ‘overachievement’” (p. 2). Each participant of this study held at least one executive position in his fraternity chapter and one participant held four executive positions during his undergraduate experience. Another participant claimed to have had the most points earned in his fraternity chapter by his senior year. Case also noted that over 20 percent of those he surveyed had been either the president or vice president of their fraternities. Furthermore, of the thirty coming out stories chronicled in Windmeyer and Freeman (1998) and the twenty-six in Windmeyer (2005), a strong majority contained references to the writers as officers or leaders. Likewise, one participant of this study held the position of vice president of his chapter. Had his fraternity not closed when it did, he was very confident that he would have been elected as the next president.

This “tendency toward ‘overachievement,’” Case (1996) reasoned, “may reflect a desire for validation and acceptance by the group” (p. 2). Desiring acceptance appeared to be a distinct possibility as to why the participants of this study attained executive status (fused) within their fraternities. As such, all five of the participants appeared to follow the “reaction pattern” of what Johnson (1996) called the “best little boy on the face of the earth” (p. 38). One participant cemented this claim when he stated, “Before I began college, who was I? I was the oldest child, practically perfect in every way.”

Some participants described themselves as “chameleon.” One participant stated that gay people have always had to learn to “change their skin and their colors in different situations” to survive. This same participant asserted, “You must learn the system, and I learned to play the system early on.” Other participants also referred to “playing the system.” From a social perspective, fusing appears to be less of a “reaction pattern” and more in line with what Cox and Gallois (1996) described as a “social change strategy” (p. 20). One such social change strategy is to “select new comparison groups against which favorable comparisons can be made” (p. 20). Essentially, the focus of this strategy is on intragroup comparisons, whereby a gay male seeks ways in which to compare himself with other gay males. For example, a gay male who not only gains membership but also attains a high status within his fraternity may look down upon other gay males who are unable to attain fraternity membership. As such, this gay male might perceive himself as being closer to what he perceives as normal because he has mastered the ability to assimilate into the dominant group (i.e. heterosexual and high performing males). Often, there was an air of pretentiousness among the participants as they repeatedly stressed being unlike “the stereotype.” Supporting this analysis, one of the respondents in Dille’s (2002) study of non-heterosexual college men from 1945-2000 stated, “Over the years, I’ve come to realize that I joined the Greek [sic] system to prove to myself that I wasn’t gay. My being a fraternity member would alleviate anyone’s doubts, if they thought I was gay” (p. 76).

The gay stereotype was defined by one participant as “someone who lisps and is very flamboyant.” As observed in the interviews, the mannerisms exhibited by the participants of this study appeared to be dissimilar to this definition of the stereotype. However, while the participants may have perceived themselves to be atypical, it appeared as if the process by which four of the participants developed their homosexual identity was very typical. In many ways, these participants’ developmental processes were similar to those outlined by Cass (1979) and based on two assumptions. One assumption was that “locus for stability of, and change in, behavior lies in the interactive process that occurs between individuals and their environments” (p. 219). Incidentally, this assumption precedes five of the six variables that facilitated the gay males of the present study to come out to their fraternities. As such, these five variables, when examined collectively, illustrated the participants’ yearning for congruency between their public and private lives.

Having a high level of identity development was thought to be the most significant variable that facilitated participants to come out to their fraternities. This is not surprising, for Cass (1979) explained that it is in the final level, stage six, when a person’s personal and public sexual identities synthesize into one sexual identity. Moreover, stage six is when people recognize that homosexuality is only one aspect of who they are. Similarly, the participants in the present study often stated, “Being gay is only one part of who I am.”

Reflections on coming out experiences facilitated participants to come out to their fraternities. Cass (1979) explained that reflecting upon one's own coming out experiences is part of the developmental process. However, what distinguishes this variable from the previously mentioned variable is that participants would often reflect upon their own experiences but also on the specific coming out experiences of others. One participant explained that someone had come out to his fraternity prior to his own revelation, but "it didn't work. I thought I could make it work."

Boschini and Thompson (1998) asserted, "If Greek-letter [sic] organizations are to survive and flourish within the modern college and university, it is imperative that they understand the importance of diversity" (p. 19). The participants of this study avowed that a sizable amount of diversity was prevalent in their chapters. Often, participants would assert that being gay was just one more form of diversity. As such, the participants were hopeful that their fraternity brothers would have a similar view. Interestingly, some participants mentioned that when deciding on which fraternity to join, they purposefully sought out fraternities that included diversity. One participant stated, "I think it was a fairly diverse group of people, and so that made me feel comfortable being a part of them."

As discussed previously, participants may have fused with their fraternities as a way of achieving "validation and acceptance by the group" (Case, 1996, p. 2). As a result, some participants expressed feeling as if they were always in the spotlight. For instance, one participant explained that it got to the point where he had to cautiously date males from other campuses and then make up stories as to where he was and what he was doing. Interestingly enough, some participants expressed feeling as if the fraternity life on their campuses was so enmeshed with the campus culture that they felt no possibility of escape from their fraternity identities. As expressed by one participant, "The Greeks [sic] were so infused in the workings of the university and in the academia part of it and in the social part of it that you never got away from it." It is confounding to think that someone who feels no escape from an environment chooses to become even more immersed within that environment. As such, becoming even more immersed might further substantiate the notion that fusing was a coping strategy. Nevertheless, participants indicated the enmeshed fraternity environment was one of the deciding factors that led to their coming out.

Prior to coming out, participants reported struggling with mixed views of brotherhood. It was common for participants to have feelings of guilt because of not being very honest (authentic) with their brothers. This desire to be authentic equates to stage six of Cass' (1979) model, suggesting that these participants were highly developed in their homosexual identity. On the other hand, participants claimed that while they wanted to believe in the concept of brotherhood, there was only one way to feel certain of whether "this whole idea of brotherhood" was real or not. The participants' rationale was that acceptance meant proof that brotherhood was real. Moreover, brotherhood appeared to be used as the participants' artillery in coming out. Upon coming out to his fraternity, one participant stated, "If you are really a fraternity, and you really are my brothers, then you'll be fine with what I am going to tell you." Thus, brotherhood emerged as one of the variables facilitating participant coming out to their fraternities.

The motivations behind the five aforementioned variables appear to be consistent with what Cox and Gallois (1996) described as "striving to become whole" (p. 9). Explained differently, participants were seeking acceptance to enhance their self-esteem. In this sense, continued acceptance upon coming out to one's fraternity would mean not only gaining true acceptance but also experiencing a sense of completeness. As such, the sixth variable facilitating participants to

come out, pent-up frustrations, does not equate with the presumed motivations of the other variables. Rather, this variable appears to be more in line with what Cox and Gallois described as a social change strategy because it was an attempt to “level the social status of the minority group with the dominant group” (p. 9). The basis of this observation stems from the response of one participant who was very expressive about his level of frustration that resulted from feeling constrained in his sexuality. Specifically, this participant stated, “Why in the hell can’t I bring my boyfriend to a function? I pay for it just as much as they do. I pay my dues. I go to all this stuff. I’m a damn officer, and I was getting real hostile over it.”

Cass (1979) observed coming out as a milestone of development. Coming out to someone does signify a higher order of development. However, coming out to others might be about more than just development; it may also serve as a means of affecting change. Cox and Gallois (1996) asserted that “social competition” was the only way to affect actual change between the minority group (homosexuals) and the dominant group (heterosexuals). They also stated, “Direct competition with the dominant group is required” (p. 20). From this perspective, it may be that a gay male (representing the minority group) divulges his sexuality to his fraternity (dominant group) for reasons other than what Case (1996) proposed as “validation and acceptance by the group” (p. 2). It may be that someone comes out to his fraternity in an effort to “level the social status of the minority group with the dominant group” (Cox & Gallois, 1996, p. 9). While it might be that the participants of the present study did not come out to their fraternities for this reason, it certainly appears to be a distinct possibility. Regardless, four of the five participants of this study were out to their entire chapter and the fifth participant was out to several members of his chapter at the time of the interviews.

Previous studies focusing on approaches of gay males who come out to their fraternities were not obtainable. In this study, the primary researcher observed that participants exercised a combination of three basic approaches when coming out to their fraternities: (a) member specific, (b) systematic, and (c) passive/reactive. These three approaches appeared to have a significant connection to the six variables identified as facilitating the process of coming out to other fraternity members. It is therefore possible that these three approaches co-exist as concentric circles. However, the question arises as to what persuaded a participant to use one approach more so than another approach.

The answer to the question as to which path to take presumably lies somewhere between the intersection of the various coping strategies employed and the variables that facilitated the participants to come out to their fraternities. Furthermore, additional factors appeared to affect a participant’s decision to use one approach more so than others. One example of an additional factor that was highly significant was timing. Four of the five participants joined in their first year of college, but came out during their junior year of college. However, one participant explained that he did not plan a specific time in which he was going to come out. He stated, “I just knew that when the time was right I was going to let them know.” Another significant factor appeared to be the contextual backdrop. One participant explained that he intentionally waited until the summer to begin coming out to his fraternity members because he knew there would be fewer of them staying in the house over the summer. Hence, he felt it easier to concentrate on a select few rather than the entire group at once.

### **Recommendations**

The findings in the current study are consistent with those of similar studies of gay students, their sexual identity development (Dilley, 2002), and coping strategies and coming out experiences (Case, Hesp, & Eberly, 2005; Windmeyer, 2005). The recommendations of the findings in this study for professionals involved with campus social fraternities include:

- (a) The necessity for an awareness of the dynamics of each student's sexual identity development stage;
- (b) The ability to recognize psychological and sociological coping strategies specific to sexually repressed groups;
- (c) An awareness of issues surrounding the coming out process for gay males who are members of social fraternities on campuses where heterosexism dominates the dynamics of fraternity life; and
- (d) The inevitable changes that take place as fraternities evolve and exhibit acceptance of members of sexually diverse orientations.

Should this study be replicated, attention should be given to the following suggested modifications and recommendations.

1. Future studies should include gay males who attend college in other geographical regions to determine if similar patterns of coping and coming out exist;
2. This study examined the experiences of gay males in fraternities only from the perspective of the gay male member. A stronger research design could include the perceptions of other, non-gay fraternity members who experienced someone coming out amongst them;
3. Participants in this study expressed receiving mostly positive reactions upon coming out to fraternity members. Another study of gay males who did not receive positive reactions from their fraternity brothers upon voluntarily coming out or who were involuntarily outed to their brothers is recommended. A comparative analysis of the three coming out processes and outcomes will aid in determining the effectiveness of individual coping strategies and coming out approaches;
4. All participants in this study came out to their fraternities after at least one semester of initiation into full membership. A future study could include the lived experiences of gay males who come out prior to becoming an initiated member to determine if participants share similar pledging experiences and relations with non-gay brothers;
5. Participants in this study were highly involved, having held at least one executive board position in their fraternities. A replication study might include participants who held an executive position and those who did not hold an executive position, to determine whether the level of fusing and coming out affects the reactions of fraternity members;
6. Researchers and practitioners know little about the effects on the organization as a whole when members learn that a gay member is within its ranks. Another study could focus on the short-term and long-term effects that may occur within the culture of a fraternity because of someone coming out within the organization;
7. Similar studies could be conducted into gay males who are members of other all-male college sub-cultures (e.g., athletic teams, musical organizations, and residence hall communities) to identify possible consistencies or disparities in the coping strategies that are employed by gay members within the groups;
8. A cross generational qualitative study focusing specifically on gay fraternity men using Dilley's (2002) methodology would help in our understanding both the changing atmosphere within the

- college fraternity in regard to sexuality across time and the comfort level required for gay men to reveal their sexuality within the context of fraternity;
9. Participants in the current study were White males. A similar study should investigate members of historically African American, Latino, and/or other culturally-based college fraternities, among others; and
  10. Whereas this study explored issues of sexuality only from the gay male perspective, similar studies should be conducted within women's collegiate sororities and fraternities.

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