ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of African American transgender college students. The study proceeds within the context of discussing external factors that might define these students’ experiences, such as the church and/or religious affiliation and the family. The impact of the family and the church, which are to a great extent highly important in the African American community, helps to begin to reveal the transsexual experience from an African American perspective. Also discussed are masculinity and gender-role issues and the influence of those two constructs on the gender identity development of African American men.
Certification: In accordance with departmental and Graduate School policies, this dissertation is accepted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements.

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CHAPTER 1
OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The life experiences of members of the African American gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) community are rarely explored in the context of a college or university setting. When students arrive at college, it is often the first time they consider their identities independent of direct input of their familiar environment (e.g., family, peers, or church) (Pusch, 2004). The formation and development of identity is one of the most vital aspects of the transition from youth to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Students arrive with an inherited set of values from their communities. How then do undergraduate college students begin to juxtapose their identity with their environment? How do they start to define themselves?

The life experience of the African American GLBT population is particularly problematic considering the historical legacy of racial divisions in the United States (Doss & Hopkins, 1998). The establishment of identity of African American men is fraught with problems stemming from pressures to assimilate to a certain degree of manliness. Several researchers have attempted to describe masculinity in African American culture and how the traditional male role might create conflict for African American men (Carter, Williams, Juby, & Buckley, 2005; Franklin, 1987; Majors & Billson, 1992). The historical representation of African American men as less than
human or as emasculated beings is a central issue in the idea of masculinity. At the end of slavery, African American men found that in the midst of newfound freedom, they still had to prove themselves as men. This proof, however, meant subscribing to a White American definition of what a male is or should be (Franklin, 1987). But African American men are typically raised in a fashion different from that of White men and thus have been socialized to hold a worldview different from that of White men (Franklin, 1987). This different view of the world creates two separate ideas of what masculinity is. This point is underscored by Majors and Billson (1992), who identify the traditional African culture (e.g., church, family, race uplift) and the impact of slavery (e.g., race, class, and gender oppression) as key influences on the gender-role development of African American men. Racial oppression, in particular, has been emphasized as having particular psychological identity consequences on African American men. For example, as a result of racism and classism, some African American men experience poverty and are blocked from achieving aspects of the majority culture’s ideal of masculinity (e.g., head of household, primary breadwinner) and thus experience gender-role conflict (Clatterbaugh, 1990).

Additionally, within the broader context of establishing identity, how do students come to construct aspects of their gender identity? Carter (2000) notes that when we discuss students establishing their identities, seldom does that discussion involve the identification of gender. Levinson (1996) adds that the discussion of trying to determine male or female identity rarely becomes apparent until the student has had the opportunity to explore and question those identities. In addition,
transgender identity poses an interesting dilemma because here again the student who has been raised under one construct (male or female) may now be attempting to explore an identity that is the ideal of his or her anatomical opposite.

What Is “Transgender”

Transgender is an umbrella term used to describe individuals who do not identify with their biologically assigned gender (MacKenzie, 1996). Transgender is most widely recognized as the “T” in the acronym GLBT. The term “transgender” is not an identity unto itself; rather, it encompasses several identifications that people can use to define themselves, including transsexuals (both men living as women—male-to-female [MtF]—and women living as men—female-to-male [FtM], including those who may or may not be seeking to have sexual reassignment surgery), transvestites (those who derive erotic pleasure from dressing as the opposite gender), and intersexed individuals (those born with both male and female genitalia). Although their biological makeup determines them to be male, MtFs believe that they were born in the body that is opposite of the way they perceive themselves (Brown, 1996).

Purpose

This study aims to explore the experience of being an African American MtF transsexual college student. Youngblood (2004) addresses the difficulty African American transsexuals might encounter, describing a stigmatized and marginalized experience of double minority status. African American transsexuals are both racial
and sexual minorities and thus are more marginalized than non-African Americans. The double minority status makes the process of transitioning and living as a transgender person more difficult and lessens the value of the coming-out process in the minds of these individuals. The relative homophobia present in society in general and in the African American community specifically, along with the influence of the church on the community, creates an atmosphere in which some African American GLBT individuals may be uncomfortable. The chances of scorn and dismay are so great as to cause some African Americans who are in the sexual minority to not verbalize their gender identity. This reluctance to make their gender identities public also extends into hesitancy to join support groups or other social networks for the larger GLBT community. However, they often reach out to other individuals who are suffering the double minority status of African American and transgender (Youngblood, 2004).

The exploration into the African American male-to-female transsexual experience is accomplished in this study by investigating how two major sociocultural influences (i.e., church and family) interact and counteract in shaping an individual’s experience. Given the church-based foundation of many African American communities and the strong familial relationships, gender and sexuality lines are forged early and rigidly enforced (Youngblood, 2004). As a result, the study attempts to explain how these influences impact the transsexual lifestyle in the African American community and how transsexuals navigate this environment to arrive at the realization of their identity and self-concept.
Research Questions

The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. How does a person’s family inform his/her transgender experience?
2. How does the church or an individual’s religious affiliation inform his/her transgender experience?

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that this study can establish a foundation for a greater exploration of the process of gender identity in African American transgender males and, at the same time, reveal the issues that impact their quality-of-life experiences. Although empirical research pertaining to the GLBT population is growing, research focusing on members of the African American community remains relatively small. African American students do not generally disclose this type of information as often as majority students do; thus, they have proven to be a difficult target for gender and sexuality research.

The influence of the African American church, along with the widespread homophobia among members of the African American community dampens any urge for most students to come forward and speak about their gender identity (Boykin, 2000). For this very reason, however, research must be done to study African American gender identity. Although the GLBT lifestyle includes many African Americans, some are less than forthcoming out of fear of being ostracized by their community, fear of violence, and difficulties surrounding their religious affiliation.
Further, although there are many similarities in the life experiences between African Americans and other ethnicities, there are cultural dynamics that influence development that are not addressed by the previously conducted research. Higher education professionals, both academic and student affairs practitioners, need to be cognizant of historical legacies surrounding African American males in the United States. Within the African American community, a great premium is placed on maleness, and that emphasis makes living outside the boundaries of the “traditional” gender system especially difficult.

To date, there is no study that examines the life experiences of African American transsexual college students. Other theoretical models are presented to define the processes of homosexual, lesbian, and bisexual identity development, but none of those existing models has included transgender individuals and neither do they investigate the African American GLBT life experience and identity formation from the standpoint of how it is negotiated when the family and church are taken into consideration. As a result, this study attempts to account for the two most prevalent sociocultural influences (family and church) present in the African American community and how transsexual individuals’ life experiences are shaped in the presence or absence of those influences.

The Internet as a Primer

The use of the Internet proved to be invaluable to this research. Transgender individuals are often isolated and desire to remain inconspicuous in their everyday
lives; however, their population finds support, information, and social contacts in the online environment (Wilchins, 1997). As an outsider to the GLBT community, I wanted to familiarize myself with the terminology, tone of speaking, and other everyday issues surrounding the GLBT culture. The Internet provided me with a number of options as a researcher to observe, ask questions, learn terms, and, most importantly, meet people who were living the culture. The use of the Internet by the transgender community allows them to explore safely their transgender identities, which may in turn impact their presentation of self in real life. Over the last few years, persons who identify as transgender have been using the Internet increasingly to find community, support, and the opportunity to come out to others in a way that is safe (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002). The Internet allows persons to present gender as they choose without being judged by physical characteristics. I can say that I have a solidified grasp on the issues faced by the GLBT population, despite not having walked a mile in their proverbial shoes, and I can certainly sympathize with their experience. Within the specific context of the transgender population, I was able to visit transgender-focused forums, chat rooms, and blogs to read past discussions and sign in as a guest user to become acquainted with the fellow users.

This research was conducted via three instant messenger software packages: America Online Instant Messenger (AIM), Microsoft Instant Messenger (MSN), and YAHOO! Messenger (Yahoo). These software programs are available free from their respective providers and are widely available for download. Flowers and Moore (2003) acknowledge that this medium of data collection reduces geographic hurdles.
sometimes associated with performing interview research, as in this current study. Another advantage that Flowers and Moore point out is the elimination of the costs of transcriptions. Aside from the financial burden of paying a transcription service to record one’s data into print, transcription can be a time-consuming process fraught with potential researcher error. The African American transsexual population is one that would have been difficult for me to contact if not for the ability to communicate with them electronically. Additionally, their confidentiality and privacy were more easily assured using electronic means in which they, as respondents, remained in control of the research context.

Presupposition

**African American Experience**

As an African American male, I have personally traversed the journey to discovering my gender identity. Although I identify as heterosexual, the process of a typical orientation of manhood in the African American community was still a difficult process. The cultural dynamics that serve as the theoretical foundation for the research questions were critical to my own understanding of my identity development, and I believe they are critical to the understanding of the transgender life experience as well. Given the church-based foundation of many African American communities, gender and sexuality lines are forged early and rigidly enforced (Youngblood, 2004). The influence of the African American church cannot be understated in the context of
this discussion. Spirituality has always been a stabilizing influence in the African American community, and thus it is revered as part of most decision-making processes. Religion was the one form of expression that was consistent throughout slavery and the civil rights movement and into present times (Hill, 2002).

As the church is the cornerstone of many African American communities, the peer group and family support structure are often connected to this spiritual center. For example, a family attends a particular church, and through that church membership, their children develop peer groups that are comprised of other children in the church who typically live in the same neighborhood and have parents who hold similar values and worldviews. As a result, there is considerable pressure placed upon members to reject any sexual or gender-related lifestyles outside of heterosexuality and male/female. Young African American girls and boys are raised to conform to what it traditionally means to be a woman and what it traditionally means to be man. Because of the legacy of slavery and what it means to be accepted by the majority culture, significant pressure is exerted on all members of the community to conform to the perceived cultural norms of the majority group. It is often unacceptable in the African American community for a young boy or girl to display opposite sex characteristics. I witnessed this firsthand growing up and saw the impact that it had on GLBT individuals within my community.

I was exposed to the transgender identity and lifestyle four years ago when a close friend revealed himself (now herself) as transgender. She started in the simplest terms explaining to me that although she was born with male attributes, she had
believed since the age of four that she was a girl. At this point, I was in a position in which I had to give myself a crash course in gender identity—not only the scholarly aspect, but within myself, what it really meant to be me, a Black male.

Within the context of this study, I bring my own perspective of gender identity along with a set of heterosexual life experiences. To be a male or female, as I interpret their meaning, becomes apparent as I proceed through the research. However, my perspective is not the only perspective and certainly not the only valid perspective. I admit that I still have a bias toward the binary gender system and view the world through a heterosexual lens. Throughout most of our lives, we are raised to believe that there are two categories of gender: male and female. This conceptualization keeps the idea of gender in a neat box, with no gray area. However, there is much gray area to consider and to understand. Is there a general understanding of what maleness or femaleness means? Why are we so willing to accept the idea that there are only two genders? I have to overcome a lifelong set of teachings that requires me to think of gender as binary. As I work toward that point, I am certain that even in my terminology there are inadvertent reflections of my upbringing and inherent bias.

The title of this study, “Subcutaneous,” intends to serve two meanings. The literal meaning of the term “subcutaneous” means “beneath or underneath the skin.” The figurative use that I employ here signifies how persons who identify as transgender have an outer shell that cues others to perceive them from the framework of the binary gender system. But subcutaneously they are someone else. Beneath the
skin, transgender individuals have an entirely separate life story that few others know about.

Dissertation Organization

In this chapter, the scope and direction of the study have been presented. The experiences of African American MtF transsexuals are to be explored within the context of environmental factors such as family and church/religious affiliation. In Chapter 2, the extant literature is explored as it relates to the study of African American gender and sexual identity, African American male gender roles, and the impact of religion/spirituality and the family. Chapter 3 presents the qualitative study methods as well as methods of data collection, participant selection, data analysis, and an exploration of conducting research via the Internet. Chapter 4 introduces the study participants and the findings from the interviews. Chapter 5 closes the study with a discussion of implications for higher education practitioners, recommendations, and suggestions for future study of the topic.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, ideas are presented of what gender means and, more specifically, what gender means for the African American culture. The role of the family and church in the life experiences of transsexuals is also visited through a discussion on faith and spirituality and what previous literature has presented on the part played by the family. Also presented are the prevailing models of gender and sexuality and historical representations of gender in other cultures.

The Meaning of Gender

The idea of transgenderism is often described as a disturbance of gender identity in which individuals experience a sense of incongruence between their psychological sex and their anatomic sex (Meyerowitz, 2002). Other disturbances described but frequently confused with transsexualism include homosexuality and transvestism, which are, however, actually distinct from it. Homosexuals, who are sexually attracted to members of their own sex, and transvestites, who occasionally dress in clothes of the opposite sex, experience conflicts that are only superficially similar to transsexualism. Unlike transsexuals, they do not desire to alter their anatomy. Transsexuals, in sharp contrast, feel trapped in bodies of the wrong sex and
seek change, either through surgical intervention or through whatever means, including suicide, available to escape.

Gender is one of the first determinations we attempt to make about a person (Feinberg, 1998; Hirschauer, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Whether a child is a boy or girl is almost always the first question asked when a child is born. American culture tends to present gender is a dichotomous construct consisting of only two categories: male and female. These gender attributions are also assumed to be synonymous with one’s assigned birth sex; those assigned male are boys who will grow into men, and those female are girls who will grow into women. This sex/gender assignment is based solely on the appearance of genitalia, female or male, and is assumed to be dependent solely on one’s genetic makeup; this in turn, impacts an individual’s anatomy, hormones, and physiology. However, gender cannot be looked at as simply a set of fixed physical and psychological traits, but as constituted through interaction (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender is seen as a means of organized social experience, a means of understanding how individuals are expected to interact within society and how we construct our lives and ourselves. As Hirschauer (1997) comments, both the gender identity and the physical state of the body are in most interactions derived from how a person communicates their sex membership. Lorber (1994) argues that the objective of the binary gender system is to maintain gender inequality and to produce a subordinate class of women that can be exploited as child-bearers and emotional nurturers. Despite the controversy about transsexualism, the literature on the subject
does reflect some recurrent themes. First, each individual’s gender identity is well established by early childhood. Second, transsexualism usually manifests before puberty, and once the pattern is established, it is highly resistant, if not impossible, to change.

The prevailing theories of gender construction, although thorough in their own right, largely ignore the African American experience. Ways of living as masculine and feminine vary from place to place, generation to generation, and context to context, most certainly among races.

Prevailing Models of Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The most comprehensive presentation and study of transgender identity to date has been Devor’s (1997) 14-stage model of transsexual identity. Devor’s model is based on FtM and MtF respondents. The 14 stages of the model include (1) abiding anxiety, (2) identity confusion about originally assigned gender and sex, (3) identity comparisons about originally assigned gender and sex, (4) discovery of transsexualism or transgenderism, (5) identity confusion about transsexualism or transgender, (6) identity comparisons about transexualism or transgender, (7) identity tolerance of transsexual or transgender identity, (8) delay before acceptance of transexual or transgender identity, (9) acceptance of transexual or transgender identity, (10) delay before transition; (11) transition, (12) acceptance of posttransition gender and sex identities, (13) integration, and (14) pride. Some differences existed between his methodology and that of the current research: first, he used structured as opposed to...
unstructured interviews; second, his respondents were not delineated by race or
religion; and last, his respondents were not specifically queried and probed about their
family relationships. Devor’s model emerged as a result of numerous interviews with
transsexual individuals over a period of years. Like other models, Devor’s shows a
progression from recognition through pride, during which individuals come into full
acceptance of their identity.

Ekins (1997) conducted a study on transgender males. He posits that a linear
development of identity ensures that transitions are not problematic. Unfortunately,
however, cross-dressing and nonconforming gender representations are often viewed
as deviant behaviors; that is, “they fall outside the range of what most of us regard as
normal experience” (p. 49). Studying the concepts of sexuality and gender from the
perspectives of transgendered individuals can offer firsthand insight on how
individuals come to understand those concepts within the boundaries of Western
culture. Ekins also states that using the grounded theory approach to data analysis
enables the researcher not only to describe the social phenomenon under study but also
to theorize about social categories that emerge from the data.

To date, Beemyn (2002) and Pusch (2004) have done the only research to
emphasize the lives of transgender college students. Beemyn describes the life of a
transgender college student as an isolated existence. Pusch (2004) underscores the
findings of Beemyn in his study. He found that most transgender students experience
severe isolation due to widespread rejection from their peers. Although both Beemyn
and Pusch were groundbreaking in their research, their work did not delve into the life
of the African American transgender college student. Numerous articles exist on the study of gender in African American communities; however, Youngblood (2004) has been the sole source of knowledge of the African American transgender experience. His study includes both FtM and MtF transsexuals, and his cohort crossed several age groups.

The large body of information on GLBT lifestyles focuses almost exclusively on the gay or lesbian experience, and the information on transgender people has a decidedly clinical slant. As a result, there are few models of transgender identity that can serve as a cornerstone for the topic. In her book, *Transgender Emergence*, Lev (2004) provides an understanding of the transgender life experience. In what Lev describes as a trajectory, transgenders move from denial, to self-hate, to self-respect, and finally to gender congruence. She formalizes these movements into six stages of emergences for transgenders: (1) awareness; (2) seeking information and reaching out; (3) disclosure to significant others; (4) exploration through identity and self-labeling; (5) exploration through transition and body modification; and finally, (6) acceptance, integration, and posttransition.

To a large extent, there is a great similarity between the model Lev (2004) presents and the sexual identity models that student affairs professionals have commonly used to guide their practice. Levine and Evans (1991) identify four general developmental levels across the prevailing sexual identity models: awareness (Cass, 1979), self-labeling (Dilley, 2002), community involvement and disclosure (D’Augelli, 1994), and identity integration (Cass, 1979). Of the four, identity
integration is most salient to this discussion. Identity integration involves accepting one’s sexuality, gaining clarity of personal identity, and achieving a deeper sense of self-acceptance. Levine and Evans recognize deficiencies within these models, especially the fact that there was little empirical testing of the models and most of them focused on White gay men.

D’Augelli’s (1994) model involves six processes: (1) exiting heterosexual identity, (2) developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, (3) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, (4) becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, (5) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and (6) entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. D’Augelli emphasizes the impact of environment, context, and history. He also believes that given the heterosexism that exists in American society there are few visible appropriate socializing forces for young gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; therefore, much of their individual development is a consequence of their own choices and actions. In comparing D’Augelli’s work to the Levine and Evans (1991) framework, awareness, self-labeling, and community involvement and disclosure appear in some form in D’Augelli’s model. However, the notion of identity integration is absent. D’Augelli chose to highlight the process of an individual’s acceptance rather than show how their identity is made complete by acknowledgment of their sexual orientation.

The Cass (1979) model, one of the cornerstone studies on homosexual identity, includes six stages. These include (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis.
Individuals start at a point at which they begin to question their own feelings and must progress through to the identity synthesis phase. At the earliest stage, confusion and tumult are commonplace as they begin to realize that they are not heterosexual. At the final stage, identity synthesis, their personal and public sexual identities become synthesized into one identity, and they are able to integrate a LGB or T identity with all other aspects of self.

Early Origins of the Study of Gender and Human Sexuality

Scientific inquiry into the study of gender and human sexuality has existed for more than 200 years (Bullough & Bullough, 2000). Beginning in early 20th-century Europe, researchers wanted to determine what physical or psychological underpinnings led to identification as gay, lesbian, transgender, or heterosexual (Green, 1974). In this context, heterosexuality was the only accepted form of identification, with homosexuality being illegal and transsexualism being viewed as a fetish brought about by psychological dysfunctions (Money, Hampson & Hampson, 1995). Thus, the earliest inquiry of sexual and gender study took the form of trying to explain homosexuality. There has always been a level of curiosity as to how human beings come to know themselves in relation to their gender and their sexuality. The topic of gender and sexuality has been a fixture in the discourse in psychology, sociology, biology, and, ever increasingly, the field of higher education. As college campuses become more accepting in terms of being safe environments in which
students can explore their sexuality, the study of gender and sexuality in higher education has become more relevant (Pusch, 2004).

Modern research, although continuously advancing, has been unsuccessful in providing a conclusive answer as to what factors lead individuals to develop a transgender identity (Kessler & McKenna, 2000). By the mid-1970s, most people, in and out of academia, were beginning to accept that roles, appearances, and characteristics (what they called “gender”) were socially defined and culturally varied. However, biological features (what they called “sex”) were considered to be given by nature. Kessler and McKenna (2000) believe that the biological is as much a construction as the social is. They posit that although hormones, chromosomes, gonads, and genitals are real parts of the body, seeing them as dichotomous and essential to being a female or male is a social construction.

West and Zimmerman’s (1987) concept of “doing gender” serves as a cornerstone of the modern theoretical framework for gender identity. According to them, gender is an accomplishment or a point at which a sense of one’s gender is attainable. West and Zimmerman’s term “doing gender” speaks to individuals who are performing their own idea of what they believe gender to be or as something people do in their social interactions. This means that the way individuals dress, wear their hair, and even walk are the ways they “do gender.” Their argument disrupts the widely held belief that gender is simply a socially constructed role that an individual plays. They believe that doing gender is not simply acting but that the doing is embedded in every action one does throughout the course of one’s life.
Gender Identity and the African American Community

It is commonly believed that African Americans are less tolerant of GLBT lifestyles in comparison to other races (Lemelle & Battle, 2004). Unfortunately, this concept is not supported by actual empirical research and does not lend to understanding the direct effects of familial influence or church attendance/religious affiliation on attitudes toward GLBT lifestyles (Sikka & Baig, 1999). At this time, there has been limited research on African Americans’ attitudes toward males who do not conform to the masculine ideal. Alson (1974) reported that African Americans were more likely than Whites to disapprove of extramarital and homosexual relations. Ernst, Rupert, Nevels, and Lemeh (1991) reported a greater relative endorsement of hostile attitudes toward gay males with AIDS. These researchers’ analyses of gender, educational achievement, religious preference, and marital status show that racial difference in the condemnation of homosexuality was derived almost entirely from a difference in attitude between African American and White females, and thus is not generalizable to African American male attitudes.

Race and gender are important identities that often rank equally in their level of importance in the lives of minority students (Battle, Bennett, & Shaw, 2004). These identities are not mutually exclusive as they each help to define the unique experience of African American GLBT people. Boyd-Franklin, Franklin, and Toussaint (2000) asserted that African American men experience a set of socializing influences this is different from those of men of other races and, as a result, define their masculinity differently. African American men find themselves living up to two
standards of masculinity: the traditional masculine role (e.g., totalitarian family) and
the nontraditional role (e.g., emotional sensitivity, egalitarian family, humanism), thus
creating a gender-role conflict (Carter et al., 2005).

Two studies that specifically investigate the extent to which the construct of
gender-role conflict is applicable to African American men are Stillson's (1991) study
demographic variables (e.g., race, class, age) as predictors of gender-role conflict in
African American men. Stillson's study presents the finding that African American
men from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds experience more gender-role
conflict, which is rooted in ideas such as success, control, and the desire to win. Wade
examined the relationship between racial identity attitudes and gender-role conflict in
a sample of African American men and found that others' views of their racial identity
significantly predicted gender-role conflict and, conversely, the individuals' own
defined racial identity did not. Wade posited that African American men whose racial
identity is well developed do not experience gender-role conflict because they are able
to reconcile their own racial and gender role with the need for conformity to the
prevailing social and cultural norms. This finding supports the notion that Black
men's experience of gender-role conflict is dependent on the extent to which they
identify with the masculine norms of the dominant group.

However, these studies are not without their detractors. Pleck (1981) believes
that the foundation of the notion of gender-role conflict among African American men
is more largely based on social and racial stereotypes. Pleck believes that although
some African American men experience gender-role conflict, the level of identification these men have toward their race is the key component. Carter and Pieterse’s (2005) study, which involved other men of color, supports Pleck’s analysis, describing gender-role assumptions and conflicts to be attributed at least in part to the extent to which the male identifies with his own racial group. To this point, there has been no resolution to the gender-role conflict argument to prove or disprove either view, largely due to the fact that so few studies on masculine gender-role conflict have included African American men in their samples.

Schieman (1998) found in his sample of 189 university students that men, both African American and White, reported significantly higher levels of social distance and homophobia as it relates to GLBT individuals. He also reports that homophobia was higher among men who did not know or had no connection to someone with AIDS and among those who accepted media portrayals of the GLBT lifestyle as accurate. These findings are interesting for analyzing the perceptions of African Americans. There is no conclusive evidence that African Americans should be considered more conservative than Whites in terms of GLBT acceptance; however, the conclusions from this research add to the base of knowledge in this area.

Role of the Church

Despite having been a historically unapproachable topic in higher education, the interaction of students and their individual religion and/or spirituality has now emerged as an important area of discussion in higher education. Although discussion
on religion and spirituality has grown, not all college students have found their place in the discussion. LGBT students often see issues of spirituality and sexual orientation as contradictory and conflicting, a challenging aspect of their lives, and, in some cases, a source of mental anguish (Boykin, 2005). Lemelle and Battle (2004) found that religious attitudes and religiosity have also been shown to correlate with negative attitudes toward the GLBT lifestyle. Thus, spirituality becomes a seemingly insurmountable obstacle, given that spirituality is so often assumed to be the same thing as religion and most religious denominations reject nonheterosexual orientations (Love, 2002).

Even in light of this unwelcome environment, evidence exists that at least a portion of the GLBT student population places a priority on spirituality (de la Huerta, 1999). Love (1997) also found spirituality to be a driving force in the work of GLBT students addressing issues of oppression at one religiously affiliated liberal arts college. Specifically, spirituality represents a significant challenge for many African American GLBT college students. What little research has been done has indicated that many GLBT individuals experience a spiritual loss when developing their identities (Boykin, 2005). Possible factors influencing a spiritual decline are documented in the media: stories of protesting for the right to marry, the threat of violence, and discrimination that GLBT individuals experience. An unfortunate example addressed the nationally reported deaths of Stuart Matis and Clay Whitmer (Miller, 2000), two gay men who committed suicide after struggling to be active in the Mormon Church and be gay.
Fowler (1981) presented a landmark framework for faith and spirituality in his book *Stages of Faith*. He delineates six stages across which one can travel to arrive at a level of faith. These six stages are: Stage 1: Intuitive/Projective Faith, Stage 2: Mythic/Literal Faith, Stage 3: Synthetic/Conventional Faith, Stage 4: Individuative/Projective Faith, Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith, and last, Stage 6: Universalizing Faith. At the first stage, which is usually observed in young children, the child begins to develop an imagination of what the larger world holds. These imagined ideas are reinforced by the beliefs and norms of the parents. At the second stage, the child is concerned with a very literal approach to the world. This stage is characterized by the juxtaposition of good and evil, the development of morals and values with strong influence from the parental figures, and the start of an understanding of right and wrong. The third stage is marked by the start of adolescence and the questioning of traditional authoritative figures. At the third stage, individuals relate their experiences to the new and burgeoning interpersonal experiences that accompany adolescence. The fourth stage, which most often occurs in young adulthood, involves self-reflection about one’s place in the greater world and a cumulative review of previous beliefs and norms. At this point, individuals have a set of contrasting worldviews to consider against their own and often give serious thought to which opinions are most meaningful to their lives. At the fifth stage, individuals are typically at middle to late adulthood. Individuals at this stage have reached a level of identity integration, maturity, and introspection wherein they can evaluate realistically their past mistakes and successes. The sixth and final stage is
described by Fowler as a rarely achieved level of faith. At this level, individuals have reached self-actualization and have found peace with their station in life.

Parks (2000) added her perspective to the stages-of-faith framework of Fowler (1981) and other cognitive-structural developmental theorists to discuss faith as a way of realizing identity and meaning-making for young adults. Parks, in a manner similar to Fowler, described faith as more transcendent than religion or spirituality. She posits that “faith is the primary meaning-making activity that all human beings share; and faith serves as the capacity and demand for meaning that encompasses the self-conscious discovery of what is true and dependable in life” (p. 6). Faith and spirituality are ultimately processes that involve seeking coherence and completeness among identities, responsibilities, and the surrounding world—a process congruent with college student development. In summary, GLBT young people have great challenges developing their identity related to their sexual orientation, and they often experience rejection by the structures and institutions (i.e., religious denominations) through which most other people develop their spiritual identity.

Role of the Family

Each marginalized group in society faces challenges in identity development, given that negative messages are being received from society. However, identity development for nonheterosexual people is an even greater challenge due to the fact that most families and society in general do not provide the role models and visible socializing experiences to help them develop their identity and define who they are as
lesbian, gay, or bisexual people (D’Augelli, 1994). Little is known about the family structures and parenting behaviors of African American GLBT people (Bennett & Battle, 2001). What is known about the GLBT revelation process and, more specifically, the process for the transgender is that it often creates a great amount of turmoil within a family. Boykin (2005), who is African American, discusses in his book the fact that he did not reveal himself to his family as homosexual for over 10 years.

Research supports the idea that a supportive and accepting family eases the identity formation process (Lev, 2004) for transgenders. Ironically, the family is also frequently a source of rejection of the person’s new identity. Lev (2004) recommends the idea of providing psychological therapy to the entire family throughout, and even after, transition. She believes that it is far too difficult for a family to conceptualize what the person is going through without causing a disturbance in the family dynamics, and thus intervention might be needed.

Studies done in the context of the African American experience have presented conflicting findings. Warner (2002) points out that most African Americans who are not heterosexual choose not to disclose to their families, believing that “to be gay is not to be Black, and to be Black is not to be gay” (p. 324). In contrast, Boykin (2005) discusses his difficulty with revealing that he was gay but found his mother to be more supportive of his lifestyle more quickly than other family members.

Lorde (1984) sympathizes with the experience of the African American person who happens to be nonheterosexual, believing that they are cursed with two
suppressed identities, neither of which is fully acceptable. Unfortunately, this also means that they are rarely accepted by their families. It is hoped that this investigation can reveal insights into how the transgender identity and the family are navigated.

Prevailing Models Lacking

Evans and Wall (2000) state that throughout the 1990s there was an increased awareness of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and that student-affairs professionals were searching for more information about issues faced by this community of students. Although there is a growing body of research related to lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students, issues faced by transgendered persons attending college has been touched upon only briefly (Evans & Wall, 2000; Sanlo, 1998; Wall & Washington, 1991). Often publications directed toward higher education audiences focus on definitions of terms related to transgendered persons and strategies for working with transgendered students (Brockting et al., 1999; Lees, 1998; Maurer, 1999; Nakamura, 1998). Other writings on transgendered persons focus on the process of identity transition and the emotional issues during the process (Carroll et al., 2002). There is a need to educate the broader community regarding the experiences transgendered individuals undergo during college. There have been a few writings by transgendered individuals published in an anthology on GLBT students (Howard & Stevens, 2000); however, their voices are few and far between. Only 3 of the 28 accounts in Out and About Campus: Personal Accounts by Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered College Students were actually written by transgendered
students (Ribideau, 2000; Rogers, 2000; all cited in Howard & Stevens, 2000). The issues faced by transgender students cannot be fully understood without looking more closely at their lives and how they come to understand themselves as individuals who identify as transgendered within the context of a traditionally binary gender system.

Gender and Sexuality in Other Cultures

Anthropologists have studied transgender individuals in various parts of the world and have noted various views of gender identity across cultures. Researchers have noted that since ancient times, men have been documented as dressing in clothing and serving in roles that are currently considered to be traditionally reserved for women (Benjamin, 1966). Particularly in Native American cultures, transgender males or females are considered to have undergone a spirit change, after dreaming about either men or women too often during puberty. According to Yuma tribe legend, a boy or girl who dreamed too often of the opposite sex would suffer a change of gender (Benjamin, 1966). In these dreams the arrowweed plant repeatedly appeared as a sign that indicates the potential for a change in gender. According to Benjamin, it is believed that the “males who change spirits have poorly developed female sexual characteristics and in some cases retain their male genitalia” (p. 233). The Yuma tribe believed that a nearby mountain was home to a transvestite who had the power to bring about a sex change in men. The sex change was said to take place in childhood. These young men would come to be known in Native American culture as “berdaches” (p. 236). Berdaches in the Yuma culture married men and had no
children of their own. In other Native American tribes, the transformation from male to female was most common. Through various rituals and ceremonies, young men were transformed into female roles and places within society. Although these transgender men lived as women, they were unable to bear children, did not engage in sexual intercourse, and did not have menstruation; however, they nurtured the young, prepared meals for the family, and served every traditional role of women within that culture.

In Mediterranean, Indian, and African tribes, men who took on female identities were held in the highest esteem and were viewed as having supernatural powers (Benjamin, 1966). Among the Yakut of aboriginal Siberia, transgender men were the high priests and shamans of the society. Among the Chukchees living near the Arctic Coast, there was reported to be a special branch of shamanism in which men and women were alleged to undergo a change of gender, in part or even completely. Transformation would take place by the command of the tribal chieftain during early youth. There were various degrees of transformation. In the first stage, the person subjected to it would impersonate a woman only in the manner of braiding and arranging hair. The second stage was marked by the adoption of female dress. The third stage of transformation was more complete. A young man who underwent it left off all pursuits and manners of his gender and took up those of a woman. In sum, he became a woman with the appearance of a man (Benjamin, 1966). In Madagascar, men described among the Tanala as exhibiting feminine traits from birth dressed like women, arranged the hair like women, and pursued feminine occupations. They were
known as “sarombavy” (p. 247). Male children who were noted to be delicate and girlish in appearance and mannerisms were selected out from their peers and then raised as girls.

The phenomenon of assuming the role of a member of the opposite sex is not a unique occurrence among world cultures. Evidence of this is present in the oral traditions of various indigenous cultures and can be traced back hundreds of years. Among the cultures in which becoming transgender is common, there are also varying degrees of social acceptance.

Chapter Summary

The review of literature reveals a gap in what we know about GLBT students and, more specifically, African American transgender students. Much of the knowledge presented in the area must be extrapolated from sexual identity models and models based on research on the gay or lesbian lifestyle. However, as the data reveal, transgenderism is a life altogether different from that of a gay or lesbian person, and being both African American and transgender provides an additional layer of difficulty and complexity.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In Chapter 3, the qualitative approach, methods of participant selection, data collection and analysis, and coding for this study are all discussed. The concept of trustworthiness is presented, along with a discussion of the implications of the computer-mediated communication that was used as the data collection method for this study.

Upon examining the existing literature, the current body of knowledge revealed a dependency on models related to the gay, lesbian, and bisexual experience. In addition to most models being based on the experiences of the majority culture, they strongly tie the idea of sexuality to gender identity. To develop a clearer understanding of African American transsexuals' life experiences, this study proceeds from a qualitative methodology. In seeking to fully capture the picture of the life experiences of the respondents, having open-ended discussions that allowed for further probing were necessary to best facilitate the interviews.

Qualitative Approach

The freedom to allow ideas to emerge from the data was the greatest benefit of using grounded theory in this current study, particularly given that no work has
documented the experiences of African American transsexual college students as of yet. Glaser and Strauss (1967) describe grounded theory as an approach that allows a researcher to shape the theory to the contours of the data. Although this was not a study in which the end was to produce a theory, its exploratory nature lent itself to grounded theory just as well. Although other models of gender identity and sexual orientation currently exist, they deal largely with the concepts of maleness and femaleness and homosexual and bisexual identity (Bem, 1985; Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994). As a result, they are less applicable to the issue of transsexuality or, more specifically, African American transgender identity. Within the context of grounded theory, the constant comparative method was used for data analysis.

Participant Selection

This study focused on the role of the family and the church in African American transsexual college students. The parameters of those who could participate were limited to those individuals who had reliable computer access and had a working knowledge of instant messaging software or were subscribers and participants in the various transgender communities (list serves, transgender support forums, and ethnic-based transgender Internet groups). Another limiting factor that narrowed the pool of potential respondents was the necessity to be between the ages of 18 and 25 and have or have had at some point a religious affiliation.

Given that this particular set of respondents were likely to not openly communicate through face-to-face means, the relative anonymity provided by the
Internet served as a buffer that allowed them to feel comfortable responding to this request to interview. Further, because there is typically no visual or physical contact when communicating via the Internet, respondents were able to express themselves openly without the threat of ridicule or shame. The respondents the researcher found via the Internet were at varying points in their development, which offered an opportunity to collect a number of varying responses and attitudes. Respondents were solicited via invitations sent via individual e-mails (based upon referrals), forum posts, chat-room messages, or group e-mail lists. Each respondent self-selected to participate in the study, and the confirmation of their age and racial makeup was entrusted to the respondent’s self-disclosure.

Data Collection

Data were collected via semistructured interviews conducted via computer-mediated communications known as instant messaging software. Three instant messaging software packages were used: AIM, MSN, and Yahoo. Markham (2004) presents several advantages to using computer-mediated communication for data collection in qualitative research, the most important being greater access to participants without consideration of geographical boundaries. Conducting this current research without the use of computer-mediated means would have been prohibitively expensive and terribly impractical. Additionally, the openness of the respondents who might be embarrassed to discuss personal topics in a face-to-face
setting increased when they could sit at a keyboard and computer screen to communicate.

To begin the data collection process, the researcher spent several hours each day immersed in transgender forums and chat rooms. The researcher also joined several transgender-focused e-mail groups to begin receiving e-mails and observe the dialogue among members of the groups. Before joining the chat room, forum, or e-mail group, members were informed that the researcher was present for the purposes of conducting research. By being able to observe quietly without having to interject, I was able to make note of the various interactions of members of the groups, listen to the issues and concerns being discussed, and learn the mores of the groups. Aside from the larger, nonspecific forums, chat rooms, and e-mail groups, the researcher subscribed to several African American-specific focused forums, chats, and e-mail groups. Given the wide dispersal of the use of these types of communication, no distinct region of the country was targeted to solicit respondents. Upon responding to the invitation, respondents acknowledged consent and then directed the researcher to their preferred form of computer-mediated communication (instant messaging and/or e-mail). Respondents self-selected to participate and were sent the list of open-ended questions for the interview, but they retained the right to decline participation at any point if they chose to do so. The respondents were able to ask any questions of the researcher.

The data were collected and stored using compact disks and flash-drive technology. All three instant messaging software packages require their subscribers to
have user identifications, which could expose a user's identity. Although the user
identifications are unique and rarely if ever the same, anonymity of the respondents
might be compromised if user identifications were printed in the data; therefore, the
respondents were coded with a four-digit numeric identification both in the first
reporting of the data and on the consent forms. In the presentation of the data,
respondents were given pseudonyms in alphabetical order, and no correlation is
possible between the pseudonyms and the respondents' instant messenger user names
or given legal names.

The informed consent form was written in language understandable to an
average reader. There was no technical language or jargon that might confuse or
mislead respondents. To ensure that the respondents consented to participation in the
study, the researcher corresponded via instant messenger or e-mail with each of the
respondents to verify that they were able to comprehend the requirements to which
they were agreeing. The researcher explained the following: a statement that the study
involves research and an explanation of the purposes of the research; the expected
duration of the subject's participation; a description of the procedures to be followed
and identification of any procedures that were experimental; description of any
reasonably foreseeable risks or discomforts to the subjects; a description of any
benefits to the subject or to others that might reasonably be expected from the
research; and a statement describing the extent, if any, to which confidentiality of
records identifying the subject would be maintained.
In addition to the above confirmations, the researcher verified that the respondents were able to understand and read the English language and explained that their risk in participation was limited to any negative emotions they might have relating their story during the interview. He reiterated that there was neither risk of physical harm nor risk of their identities being revealed. He also explained the benefit of this study to the higher education community in its efforts to provide understanding of the African American transsexual experience.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) define trustworthiness as the ability to show that the inquiry undertaken by qualitative research should be recognized by the intended audience. They conceptualize trustworthiness in four distinct areas: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. An explanation follows of how each of these was achieved in the current study.

Several steps were taken throughout the conduct of this study to ensure credibility. Credibility, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), determines the level to which the researcher describes findings that are compatible with the data collected from the participants. The first step this researcher took to address credibility issues was to continue to conduct interviews until a saturation point was reached. Themes were recognized early in the research; however, upon the completion of 18 interviews, no new information appeared to have been emergent. Second, the researcher sought the counsel of other African American transsexuals who either chose not to participate
in the interviews or whom the researcher had met in one of the electronic media (forum, chat room, e-mail group). Findings were presented to several individuals (peer debriefers) who were able to support the findings based on their experience of having similar demographic background to the respondents in the study (African American transsexuals; 18 to 25 years old). To further test the findings of this study and the credibility of the peer debriefers, a secondary literature review was conducted to find resources that supported the findings. Based upon using the methods described above, the results found in the current study are credible.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe transferability as the level to which the findings of a given study can be applied to other contexts beyond those of the particular inquiry. This was especially important in this study given that the context in which these respondents were interviewed was fluid based on the occurrences in their lives. For example, one respondent had plans to move to Europe. If that respondent were interviewed from her own apartment in Europe, there is a great chance that her answers might be different from those she gave when she was interviewed from her apartment that she shared with two roommates. The experiences of the African American transsexuals interviewed here were found to have numerous similarities, despite having several different contexts across the respondents.

To address dependability, the same method was used that addressed credibility by conducting interviews to a saturation point. Although the purpose of this study was not to create a theory or model, a number of interviews were conducted to assure that the findings were consistent among the respondents. Although each of the
respondents reported varying circumstances and demographic information (age, religion, region of the country in which they lived or went to school), several similarities in their life experiences emerged from the data.

The last aspect of trustworthiness, confirmability, involved allowing the interview transcripts to be read and interpreted by individuals other than the researcher. Doing so allowed for a triangulation of the findings and diminished the influence of researcher bias on the reporting of the findings. Themes found by the researcher were also compared to those found by others who analyzed the data in order to offer various perspectives on emergent themes and to further conceptualize what the data reported. The most important aspect of confirmability is to show that the respondents’ voices are heard and that the researcher’s biases did not influence the reported findings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was performed with the constant comparative approach based on grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Martin & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1983). The researcher aims to generate a descriptive and explanatory model of the influences of the family and religion/spirituality in African American MtF transgender individuals. This approach best fits a study such as this because it is seeking to place the respondents at the center of the outcomes and allows the researcher to fully limit personal bias, thus increasing objectivity. The constant comparative approach can be described as an inductive methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theory
based on the general features of a topic and simultaneously ground the account in the observations and data being collected (Martin & Turner, 1986).

A primary assumption of constant comparison is that to produce accurate and useful results, the complexities of the particular context and similar contexts must be incorporated into the researcher’s understanding of the phenomenon rather than be simplified or ignored (Martin & Turner, 1986). As indicated above, a number of theoretical approaches address the idea of nontypical gender and sexual orientations. Using this particular grounded theory approach allows for those topics to have their fundamental underpinnings inform the current research, although they are separate in nature. The constant comparison approach is useful in generating theories of process, sequence, and change pertaining to people, institutions, positions, and social interaction (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The methodology of constant comparison requires a steady movement between concept and data as well as a constant comparison across types of evidence to control the conceptual level and scope of the emerging theory (Pettigrew, 1989). Pettigrew believes that the use of constant comparison provides an opportunity to examine continuous processes in context in order to draw out the significance of various responses and thereby “reveal the multiple sources of loops of causation crucial to identifying and explaining patterns in the process of change” (p. 14).

Glaser and Strauss (1967) suggest two modes for analysis and reporting so readers can be confident in a researcher’s finding. The first is for the researcher to make clear the systematic and sequential analysis of data. The second is for the
researcher to make explicit how conclusions were reached and what data were used to reach those conclusions. The constant comparative method uses procedures that address these modes.

The first mode, systematic and sequential analysis of data, demonstrates the reliability of the research. Glaser and Strauss (1967) identify two techniques that should be used: within-category integration and across-category integration. Within-category integration is the process of developing a code category by identifying examples, naming them, and defining them. This is done by first identifying a pattern in the data and labeling it, then giving a list of properties that define the label, and finally determining what support the data provide for these patterns (Shelly & Sibert, 1992). The category is further refined by seeking data instances that do not fit the code category.

The second mode seeks to explain in detail how conclusions were reached. Here cross-category integration is used to examine a working hypothesis generated during and after within-category integration. Cross-category integration is the same process as within-category integration but at a higher level of abstraction (Shelly & Sibert, 1992). In this process, the researcher first develops a working hypothesis and then tests it using code categories that inform the hypothesis. Again, the researcher looks for negative case data to test and refine the working hypothesis. Performing cross-categories integration also allows the researcher to determine where more data collection is needed (Shelly & Sibert, 1992). As the researcher examines a hypothesis, negative case data is actively sought in order to refine the working hypothesis (Becker
& Geer, 1960; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This process is systematic and cyclical; within-category and cross-category integration inform further data collection and analysis (Shelly & Sibert, 1992).

Coding

In reporting the findings, the researcher worked to assure that all respondents would remain anonymous. Before each interview, each respondent was asked to select a four-digit code that would serve as his/her identifier during data reporting. There is no correlation of the respondents’ four-digit codes and their sequence in the data collection. As an added security measure, the names of family members, churches, colleges, and any other information that could potentially identify the respondents were removed.

This study was based on the analysis of interviews with 18 African American MtF transsexuals who are enrolled in a college or university and are traditional college student ages (18-25). Following the data collection and analysis process of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1998), their responses were analyzed and notes were made about points that emerged from the data. As the collection, analysis, and coding continued, the answers to the research questions began to emerge.

In light of the sensitive areas of conversation being discussed between the researcher and the respondents, the risks to the respondents were minimized as much as possible. To help ensure that no respondents had to reveal themselves inadvertently
in a public setting, each of the interviews were conducted via an instant messenger software package (i.e., AOL, Yahoo, MSN). The researcher knew the respondents’ real names but eliminated all evidence that was traceable to them from the analysis and reporting of the data. Demographic information for the participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1
Respondent Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>College/University Region</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Age of Recognition</th>
<th>First Revealed To</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Ann</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belinda</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denise</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Apostolic</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fran</td>
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<td>East</td>
<td>AME</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>East</td>
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Note: AME = African Methodist Episcopal Church

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During data collection, each respondent was asked the same set of questions. As each interview progressed, the line of questioning was adjusted when necessary to elicit more information about a particular response or idea brought up by the respondent. Although some respondents proved to be more open and revealing, others required some extra prompting to fully explain their ideas, and thus the open-ended interview protocol was an effective strategy for these interviews. As each interview was completed, answers were analyzed and coded to explore how the respondent's family and church affiliation had impacted her life experiences.

Chapter Summary

The methodology used here references Lincoln and Guba heavily but will not follow the typical patterns purists of qualitative research look for. This study was conducted without the researcher and respondent meeting in person; data was collected via computer-mediated means, and the respondents had a great deal of control over the level to which they revealed information. All of these deviations from the purist's notion of qualitative research are mitigated by the nuance of the population being studied. African Americans who live lifestyles outside of the perceived societal norm, as do transsexuals, have cause to fear for their safety. In the interest of being an ethical researcher, the health and well-being of the respondents took first priority over the hard and fast rules of qualitative research.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the responses and reactions of an individual’s family members to her transsexuality, along with the church/religion’s initial reactions to transsexuality to determine how the respondents’ life experiences were affected. Interviews were conducted with 18 African American MtF transsexuals, and in this chapter, the results of the interviews are discussed along with discussion of what those results mean for the respondents of the study.

The Family

The African American Family

The first research question guiding this study asked how family members’ reactions influence the life experience of African American MtF transsexuals. Several themes emerged concerning the family reactions across the interviews conducted. These themes include overall decline in the quality of relationships among family members, female family members having a more positive reaction, and male family members having negative reactions and a misunderstanding of what it means to the respondents to be transsexual.
Before these themes can be explored within the context of the current study, an exploration into the construct of the African American family structure is in order. In Chapter 2, expectations placed upon male members of the African American community were outlined. However, male family members are not the only ones who played vital roles in the life experiences of the respondents. In several instances, aunts, nieces, sisters, and grandmothers are mentioned within the responses. The mention of these family members was not incidental but rather a trait common to the African American community wherein extended family is a primary factor in decision making and day-to-day living.

For the purposes of this discussion, the extended family (aunts, uncles, grandparents) is defined as those outside of the nuclear family (which includes parents and siblings). McAdoo (2002) cites the extended family network as a key to survival within African American communities. The communal relationship allows for a distribution of resources (e.g., money, food) and a set of shared responsibilities among members of the family (e.g., childcare, child rearing). These values, partially the result of the slavery experience, remain prevalent among many present-day African American families (McAdoo, 2002). In many African American families, it is not uncommon for schoolchildren to go to their grandparents’ home after school until a parent comes home or for children to visit family in other states during their summer vacations from school. At least half of the respondents in this study mentioned someone in their extended family during their responses, reflecting that aunts, uncles,
and grandparents not only are present in their lives but also have opinions that are valued by the respondents.

Several of the respondents came from two-parent households, judging by the mention of their fathers as a part of their responses. This point is important, given the male role among African American men as described in Chapter 2. Further solidifying the idea of the male role in African American families and the accompanying gender roles, Mandara, Murray, and Joyner (2005) found that male children with fathers present tend to fit into the traditional sense of masculinity. In contrast, Mandara et al. found that male children who were raised without the father present tended to be less masculine. The respondents in this study were not delineated by parental background, and thus, the presence of parents is presented as a subset of the larger thematic area on the family reaction.

Decline in Quality of Familial Relationships

Through the analysis of interviews conducted with 18 African American MtF transsexuals, it is apparent that the family plays a tremendous role in their happiness and acceptance of themselves. Unfortunately, the loss of the relationship with the family resulted in feelings of severe isolation and loneliness for the respondents.

If all it took was for me to do something they disagreed with for them to cut me loose, that ain’t family love. I wasn’t tryin’ to piss them off. I did most of the stuff they told me to do! Lol. I mean, I wasn’t a perfect kid and shit. But for the most part, I was squared up. So for them to flip out, I think, is disrespectful and heartless.
Every respondent interviewed reported significant changes in her family experiences after revealing her identity to family members. These changes ranged from complete isolation and rejection to limited contact with particular members at particular times (e.g., birthdays, family events). Cathy reported,

The last time I saw my mother was on her birthday, almost six months ago. She doesn’t hate me, but she doesn’t want to make my pops upset, so she only calls when he’s not around and invites me to come home only on special occasions. I saw her last at her 50th birthday celebration. The whole family was there, and my pops was mad, embarrassed. He never looked at me the whole time I was there. My mom tried to be cool, but I honestly deep down feel like I ruined her birthday. I didn’t try to do that; I just wanted to be with her on her day. She won’t have another 50th birthday, and I feel like shit for ruining this one. For now, I’m not planning to go back home for a while. I don’t like embarrassing my folks, and I don’t like being embarrassed.

The respondents experience great sadness about the loss of connections with their families. Not all the respondents became completely disconnected from their family members; however, a great majority of them have experienced negative changes in their familial relationships. A respondent named Erica noted, “None of my family talks to me anymore. I can’t come around on holidays, birthdays, or nothing.” She expressed,

The negativity ranges from being totally disowned and unacknowledged as a part of the family to the other end, where certain members of the family only accept me on their terms. I am not even allowed to see my nieces and nephews for fear of the “transgender contagion.” . . . It is almost unbearable to have the ones that you have loved and supported, many for more than half a century, suddenly decide that you no longer exist. . . . They have all abandoned me in one form or another. . . . My siblings have been the least supportive. They are the ones who have decided that if I do not play by their rules, then I do not exist.

The 14 respondents who had experienced a loss of family relationships rarely have contact with their families and talk to them only periodically, according to their
responses. This isolation is not of their choosing, but rather, their families have chosen not to correspond with them. A respondent named Inez offered,

We had a great relationship before, but now it’s totally gone. I almost wish I had never told them, but I wanted to be truthful with myself and them, and it really changed my life for the worse because I miss them.

The loss of the family relationship corresponds with the documented literature in which the surrounding family fails to grasp the emotions experienced by the transsexual family member. Despite being lonely and losing lifelong relationships with mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, uncles, and aunts, many of the respondents considered themselves happy with their lives, and some stated that they were happier at the moment than they had ever been before in their lives. The challenge for this set of respondents is to navigate their emotions as their longing for family connections re-emerge. In the gay and lesbian identity models, nonlinear development and acceptance are both present, and transsexuals also have phases of anxiety and acceptance throughout their development, which will present in a nonlinear fashion.

Female Family Members More Understanding

If there is encouragement to be gained from the life experiences of transsexuals and their familial relationships, it is the encouragement that lies in the support of the women in the family. Among those who reported that they did have a supportive family member, this family member was most often a female. Many respondents reported revealing themselves to their sisters or mothers first, and up to the current time, the mothers and sisters were named as being the family member most
supportive. Ann described her relationship with her mom: “She has supported emotionally, listening to me whine and complain. . . . and trusting that I am still the person she has always loved. . . . She has been there emotionally for me.” Kimberly said, “My sister was who I came out to, and she is a person who I confide in now on a regular [basis].” Cathy also relates well to her sister, noting that “she was really confused at first but now she is my strongest supporter.”

**Male Family Members Misunderstand Transsexualism**

African American men place a premium on maleness and masculinity (Majors & Billson, 1992), and thus, male family members found it difficult to accept that their son/nephew/brother was now living in another gender. The respondents in the current study were afraid of encountering other African American men for fear of violence. Although the experiences of this set of respondents is certainly not generalizeable to the entire African American population, the fact that a number of individuals from various areas of the country shared a common fear should not be ignored.

Respondents reported that the male members of their families were least supportive, including uncles, brothers, and fathers. The male members of the family were most often cited as rejecting the transgender identity and influencing other family members to be nonsupportive.

A number of respondents reported that their fathers and other male members of their families assumed that they were gay. As the respondents began to present themselves as women among their families, men had the most trouble grasping that
gender was being changed and not sexual orientation. One respondent named Ann stated that her father was least supportive of her transition and reported that her uncles “have no concept of what transsexualism is. The few times they saw me they asked how long I was going to keep dressing like a sissy.” Referring to her dad, Ann went on to add, “He won’t answer the phone when I call, he won’t sit at the table with me, won’t speak to me further than hello or goodbye. . . . I hate it, but to hell with it; what can I do?” Similar to Ann’s account, Inez also encountered a misunderstanding. She originally came out to her brother, who, she says, thinks she is gay. She recounted, “He was the first one I told, and he still thinks I’m going through what he calls a gay phase.”

Denise reported that she had not spoken to, seen, or “had any contact with my brother in two years.” Another respondent offered, “My brothers, they are younger than me. I don’t know if the estrogen is making me emotional or what, but damn, I really miss hanging out with my brothers. They don’t deal with me like that now, though. And I feel like I miss them.” Responses such as this were not uncommon; and there was little optimism among the respondents that there would be a shift in attitudes among the male family members.

The Church

The African American church and the accompanying religions hold a special place within the African American community. The second research question guiding
this study asked African American MtF transsexuals how their churches’ reactions
influenced their life experiences.

My Church Told Me to Go to Hell

The church is a mainstay in the African American community. The church and
the accompanying religion have at times been a source of counsel, a place for medical
assistance, legal assistance, education, and worship. In the collegiate environment,
spirituality remains as an important aspect of the African American experience.
Poynter and Washington (2005) state that GLBT students need to find an area of faith
that affirms their gender identity; nonetheless, this continues to be a hurdle for the
respondents of the current survey. Their trouble in finding a church home may
certainly be a result of the fact that the two largest African American denominations
(Church of God in Christ [COGIC] and the Baptist Church) both include statements in
their bylaws against any alternative sexualities (Lindner, 2005). Of the 18
respondents, 12 no longer had ties to any religious denomination. Another respondent
named Harriet said that being from the South and being Methodist, she knew that she
would have a difficult time:

My family has been in the church for three generations, and here I come with
this. I waited until I left for school to tell anybody, so I could save my parents
the trouble of kicking me out. But when I told my mother, she bugged out. I
mean she was trippin’ for real! She, of course, told my pops, and then he went
straight to the deacons. They said I wasn’t welcome in their church, and I
haven’t been back since. The saddest shit about this is that these same people
who now think I’m a dumbass were the same people who were preaching to
me about love and respect for other people. Not trying to offend you or your
beliefs, but all that stuff is bullshit. I’m doing me, not them! What the hell
does me being me have to do with believing or not believing? I would not be
so upset if this only involved me. My friend is getting married at the church, and guess who can’t go? My nieces and nephews will be baptized in that church, and I won’t be invited. My dad’s old ass is going to have his funeral there, and I suppose I’m not welcome to come [to] that either.

When I probed further to ask about how she viewed religion at this point in her life, she commented, “I love God, but religion is just stupid.” Natasha, a former Baptist, experienced a similar reaction from her church: “I was told that I was an abomination before God. What do you say after something like that?” She said that she had great friends in the church and what she believed was a great relationship with her minister. “It was a really ironic thing— they learned something they didn’t know about me, and I learned something that I didn’t know about them. They are damn hypocrites!” Other respondents recall similar experiences and recall having their faith in their chosen religious denominations all but eliminated. Monica said, “My church told me to go to hell in so many words. All the years of talking about love and understanding didn’t mean shit to them.”

Two of the respondents actually maintained an uninterrupted presence in their church. Cathy defines herself as an androgynous woman, and although she receives unwelcoming stares and whispers, her belief is that she has just as much right to be there as anyone else. “If they keep playing with me, I’m going to mess around and join the choir!” However, Cathy is the most glaring exception. Quentina continues to go to church but is growing uncomfortable with the way people stare at her with scowls on their faces and with the things being said about her by others in the congregation. “I enjoy going to church, but I hate the way those people look at me. I’m thinking, am I an alien or something?”
A remarkable aspect of the dialogue was the revelation that many of the respondents maintained a sense of spirituality despite losing the formal connection to their religious denomination. Many still professed a belief in a higher power with whom they had a spiritual connection.

The level to which they were connected to their spirituality was closely tied to their level of development. Only two of the respondents reported not having belief in a higher power any longer as a result of the rejection they received from their church. Denise stated, "I don’t feel it anymore. Why would God torment me like this if he’s a loving and caring person? Why can’t I walk into my church anymore? You answer those for me, and then we can talk about spirituality.” This respondent expressed a longing to still belong and a yearning to experience the spirituality, but too many negative emotions are tied to her experience at this time.

The respondents’ revelations about their treatment in African American churches were both the least surprising and most disappointing finding of this study. It was not startling to find that churches, which by their very nature tend to be conservative institutions, were not accepting of transsexuals. It was disappointing, however, to note that such a major community institution like the church would reject an entire segment of its constituency. The two largest African American congregations in the country (Baptist and COGIC) both have statements against homosexuality, so one could only deduce that they are against transsexuality as well. Despite the rejection of their former churches, the majority of students in the current study maintained a desire to pursue their spirituality.
The fact that the respondents still had a sense of spirituality, despite not having a religious affiliation, is an important one. For some, the idea of religious denomination and spirituality are not two mutually exclusive concepts. The idea that these respondents could make that distinction between the two shows evidence of advancement in cognitive ability by displaying a multiplistic view of their problem (not having a church home) (Perry, 1970). Making that distinction also shows signs of some respondents beginning to take steps toward self-authorship. Watson (2006) describes spirituality as an extension of freedom for African Americans, and it is reasonable to believe that these respondents are searching for a form of freedom. Their form of freedom is defining a relationship with a higher power and withdrawing that relationship from whatever denomination of which they might have been a part.

Other Emergent Themes

Early Self-Concept

On the micro level, the respondents’ self-concept was an outstanding idea that emerged from the data. As was seen in Table 1, a number of the respondents recall a desire to live as the opposite gender from an early age. This discovery involved the recognition of a gender system that identifies certain activities designated for either boys or girls and the capacity of the respondents to differentiate themselves from that construct. Currently, years later, as college students, the respondents used a similar pattern of cognition to separate themselves from potentially problematic situations and
to minimize scrutiny. Respondents noted that they “avoid bars and situations where alcohol is present,” maintain an awareness of “safe” areas, appreciate the openness of the collegiate environment, and believe that being African American presents a problem for them but no more so than being transsexual.

**College as a Mixed Blessing**

Quite a few respondents commented that college has given them a support network of people who do not judge them, are not frowning at them, and encourage their development. In most cases, this network is comprised of students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and other transgender students. Geraldine said that she “felt isolated at first,” but now she believes that she “has met some people she can trust.” She remained distant from most of the other students on campus; however, she has experienced less isolation than she did when she first arrived at college. She noted, “Of course, there was that bathroom situation, but then after that, I wondered, who will I hang out with? I let people find me so people wouldn’t think I was a freak when I was trying to meet them.” In addition to making connections with others, the benefits of being away from home were extolled as well. “I don’t have a lot of friends here, but I don’t feel as bad as I did at home. I was able to reinvent myself here,” stated Randi. Many of the students who related a positive college experience pointed to the support available on their respective campuses for GLBT students. “Me and the GLBT director are great friends,” stated Priscilla. She continued, “I’m in her office nearly every day, just chatting and talking about stuff. She helps me through a lot.”
Not all respondents were on campuses that employed a professional staff member to work with GLBT students, and they missed that support. According to Jaclyn, “I have friends that go to . . . a full resource center and their own office. I don’t think my school will ever do that.”

Many respondents described the opportunity to reinvent themselves in college. A notable point of discussion as it pertains to the college campus experience involves the anti-GLBT sentiment among the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Only within the last several years has there been a movement to form student groups that cater to GLBT students. Howard University had the first GLBT student group in 1979; nonetheless, it has taken the other HBCUs several years to even acknowledge these students on their campuses. To date, no HBCU in the entire country has on its campus a professional staff member who works specifically with GLBT students. How do the transsexual students at HBCUs find support? Where are the resources to serve them? As a group, GLBT students are largely ignored at HBCUs, a concept that is troubling, considering the number of students who might be living in misery at those institutions.

**Survival Techniques**

Despite the friendships and support present on college campuses, the college climate is not completely welcoming. Many campuses are still not equipped to serve transsexual students, either in facilities or in human resources, and thus the climate is not as hospitable as it could be (Tatum, 1999). Respondents reported a combination of
influences that negatively impacted the climate, largely the surrounding neighborhood of the institution and the ignorance of some students. “Being a transsexual in Tennessee is rough, and being Black and TS [transsexual] is even worse. I can’t wait until I’m done with school so I can leave,” stated Fran. Another respondent reported having derogatory names written on a dry-erase board near her room door: “I came back and saw that shit written on my door, and I knew it was time for me to get the hell out of the dorms,” said Lee. “I wanted to fight the clown that did this, but I just decided I should move off campus before I got kicked out of school.”

In the neighborhoods surrounding the campuses, the situation sounds even more daunting. “I avoid clubs at all costs,” said Erica. “The last thing I need is for one of them dukes of hazard to see me and flip out.” When asked specifically about fearing for their safety, most respondents believed that the threat was not from people on campus but from people in the area surrounding campus. “I’m more afraid of the Black dudes than the White dudes,” said Quentina. “Growing up around them, I have seen what they do to people who don’t fit in, and it’s something real. I have very specific areas I go to when I go out, and I never change those lanes.”

An analysis of research notes comparing interviews began to show that many respondents faced a similar set of issues and had similar outlooks on life. Increasingly, the interview notes contained quotes from the researcher such as “well adjusted” and “very much depressed.” Other notes pointed out that several of the participants were not prepared for the hostilities or the negative attention they received. Many had not established a solid supportive network of friends or family,
and many had not sought out professional counseling to deal with the difficult times they were facing.

### Racial Identity Struggles

Numerous student development texts (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1995; Phinney, 1990) refer to racial identity development as an important aspect of the collegiate years for students of all races. The respondents here were at various stages in their identity development, trying to construct what being African American means to them. When the question of what being Black means was posed to respondents during the interview, a range of responses was given. Inez offered, “Being Black is having to be nervous when the police are behind you, getting bad loans even if you have good credit, and having to perform better than everyone else at everything you do every time you do it.” Lee reinforced Inez’s opinion of being Black by saying, “I think it [being Black] has prepared me for being misunderstood and profiled since I have gone through that all my life being brown.” The majority of the current study’s respondents expressed that although being Black had generally made life more difficult, their identification as transsexuals overshadowed the concept of race at this point in their lives. Only two of the respondents expressed that being Black worsened their condition or decreased the quality of their lives.

Being a member of the GLBT community and being African American add layers of complexity to one’s lifestyle, as described here by Harriet:

Harriet: I think I have [it] harder than the Whites who do this.
Reseracher: Why so?

Harriet: Don’t know. White people just seem to be cool with all kinds of shit. Black people don’t be giving a shit about identities and inner thoughts and shit.

Compared to White transsexuals who always carry the privilege of being White, African American transsexuals are not afforded that privilege. The researcher does not believe that White GLBT individuals have it easy; however, when one changes one’s gender, one’s race stays the same. A respondent named Kimberly noted, “I think people try to figure out if I am a man or a lady when they first see me, so I think it’s secondary that I’m Black.” Lee went further, saying, “I think of how difficult it is to live outside of the world’s norms and how no one really understands what it’s like to be both TS [transsexual] and Black.”

Chapter Summary

African American MtF transsexual individuals lead what can be described as a paradoxical existence as both maligned and ridiculed and, at the same time, within themselves, living a life of personal happiness and relief. A respondent named Belinda explained, “Forget what the world says; I’m me.” The “world” she refers to as something to forget is the larger society that does not accept that she blurs the gender lines. The sentiment that “I’m me” was fairly prevalent among the respondents. To cope with the existence in which they live, many respondents have begun to try to lean on their own understanding of what their lives should be. The respondents expressed verbally the tribulations of being rejected by family members, being asked “to come home only on holidays or special occasions” (Cathy), and being
rejected by their respective religions, “unable to walk into a church anymore” (Denise). What was expressed less explicitly was the feeling of being torn and whole all at once. How does one deal with suddenly being rejected by family members? How does one deal with suddenly being rejected by one’s church? For countless of African Americans, the family and church are staples in everyday existence. When these staples are no longer viable, what or whom does the person turn to in order to replace them?

The respondents in the current study have largely turned to themselves and, to a lesser extent, their fellow students and university administrators. The previous studies on transgender identities in college students (Beemyn, 2002; Pusch, 2004) and transgender African Americans (Youngblood, 2004) gave extensive treatment to their feelings of fear and rejection. These emotions were not absent in the current study; however, they appeared to be less apparent issues in the respondents’ lives. Each respondent expressed that she was happy with her life. The emotional relief the respondents received from feeling whole within themselves appears to have outweighed the losses suffered as a result of coming out as transgender. A respondent named Erica explained,

Well, I feel a lot of anger, hurt, and betrayal at my family and friends who have abandoned me; . . . conversely, I feel free. Finally free. I am finally able to be me. That feels really good. Being someone I wasn’t was killing me. Now I feel free.

At the completion of the interviews, the researcher’s concept had begun to take shape regarding the transsexual life experience as it relates to the family and spirituality. This set of respondents was able to provide a completely new perspective
on the transgender experience. Previous readings surrounding the life experiences of transsexuals failed to emphasize how cultural contexts play a role in the individuals’ lives.
African American students face a tenuous plight on most college campuses, with well-documented struggles of problems with retention, engagement, racism, and finding mentors who look like them, among others. Couple the aforementioned hurdles with being transsexual, and the result is a situation by which a group of students becomes severely isolated on campus. In this chapter, the findings are summarized in relation to the extant literature, recommendations for practice are presented, recommendations for churches are offered, and the limitations of this study are discussed.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of family reaction and religion on the life experiences of African American transsexuals. Within the African American community, family and church are institutions that are highly respected and relied upon for guidance in everyday life and decision making (McAdoo & Hill, 2002; Poynter & Washington, 2005). The family and church are two mechanisms that allow African Americans to define themselves easily. Families and churches provide a context and basis for comparison and
development of values, life experiences, and, most importantly, a network of individuals among which to grow interpersonal relationships.

Summary

Summary of Family Findings

Numerous respondents described the rejection and turmoil they experienced after revealing their transsexuality to their families. Findings indicated that male family members were more hostile toward the idea of transsexuality. This negative reaction among male family members is surely an outgrowth of the masculinity issues faced by African American males. As one researcher noted, most African Americans who are not heterosexual choose not to disclose to their families, believing that being involved in any alternative lifestyle is the antithesis of being African American (Warner, 2002). Following the end of slavery, African American men began to emphasize their humanity through the expression of their maleness, despite having only a White male example for comparison (Franklin, 1987). As a result, African American men began to try to live the expectations of the White male ideal. This involved playing the roles of the provider for the household and the primary money earner and being the person in charge of the family (Clatterbaugh, 1990). What has resulted is a gender-role conflict in which African American values that existed preslavery and that included a more communal way of life have been replaced by a
patriarchal system based on dominance (Clatterbaugh, 1990). That patriarchal system rejects any inclination by male family members to be gay, bisexual, or transsexual.

To this day, African American men struggle with the pre- and postslavery perceptions of African American men as less than human and not being a man at all (Carter et al., 2005). Given the history of the struggle for African American maleness, the rejection of the transgender identity is not unfounded. As an African American male, I know of this struggle to be accepted personally. Gender and sexuality lines are forged early and rigidly enforced (Youngblood, 2004). Within my environment in the African American community, African American men’s masculinity is always on trial, and thus, deviations from the normal expected forms of masculinity are met with rejection.

**Summary of Findings on the Church**

The respondents’ revelations about their treatment in the African American churches were both the least surprising and most disappointing finding of this study. It was not startling to find that churches, which by their very nature tend to be conservative institutions, were not accepting of transsexuals. Lemelle and Battle (2004) found that religious attitudes and religiosity have also been shown to correlate with negative attitudes toward the GLBT lifestyle. It was still disappointing, however, to find that such a major community institution as the African American church would choose to reject an entire segment of its constituency. Many churches that claim to promote love and unity extend that love only to those who agree with their particular
doctrine against alternative lifestyles. The two largest African American congregations in the country (Baptist and COGIC) have both made public their beliefs and statements against homosexuality, so one can only deduce that they are against transsexuality as well. Despite the rejection of their former churches, the majority of the students in the current study maintained a desire to pursue their spirituality.

The African American family’s traditional reliance on religious organizations (Snowden, 2001) need to be overcome in order to be supportive of transsexual family members. The findings reported in Chapter 4 reflect an almost outright refusal by these churches to accept the transsexual membership in their congregations. Because spirituality is such an important construct to college students (Watson, 2006) and to African Americans in particular, the absence of the church can leave a tremendous void in the respondents’ lives. Although research has shown that they are reluctant to do so (McMiller & Weisz, 1996; Snowden, 2001), African American transgender individuals and their families should seek out a counseling professional to help cope with the emotions they are experiencing. In the absence of the ability to go to a pastor or reverend for counsel, the respondents in this study should seek out mental health professionals to assist with their development. Despite the necessity of mental health care, encouraging both respondents and their families to enter counseling may be an incredibly difficult task, particularly given the longstanding mistrust of the health professions by African Americans and their reliance on faith.

The fact that the respondents still had a sense of spirituality despite not having a religious affiliation is an important one. For some, the idea of religious
denomination and spirituality are not two mutually exclusive concepts. The idea that these respondents could make that distinction between the two reveals evidence of advancement in cognitive ability by displaying a multiplistic view of their problem (not having a church home) (Perry, 1970). Making that distinction also shows signs of some respondents beginning to take steps toward self-authorship. Watson (2006) describes spirituality as an extension of freedom for African Americans, and it is reasonable to believe that these respondents are searching for a form of freedom. Their form of freedom is defining a relationship with a higher power and withdrawing that relationship from whatever denomination of which they may have been a part.

Recommendations for Practice

Striving for Self-Authorship

Previous research has outlined some strategies for addressing the needs of GLBT students on campus, yet, none specifically for the African American transsexual student. Beemyn (2002) points out that there is often a shortage of support for transgender students because there is either a failure to realize that these students exist on campus or the campus does not know how to serve this group of students.

Given that the family and church have left a large number of respondents in want of a supportive environment, higher education professionals can play a vital role in the lives of transsexual college students. This researcher believes that the best approach to helping transsexual students is to encourage self-authorship. Self-
authorship is described by Baxter-Magolda (2001) as the realization that “external sources of belief and definition are insufficient in securing personal happiness and create an acute awareness that internal sources of belief and definition were necessary” (p. 93). The underlying conflict taking place within the respondents’ consciousness was that they were not accepted by their families or their churches. In the absence of these resources, individuals must seek to find definition within the framework of their own experiences. The point at which one realizes a need to seek internal definition is called “the crossroads” by Baxter-Magolda, which is an incident that creates disequilibrium in the student’s life. Experiencing the loss of contact with family members and not being able to turn to one’s church are certainly reasonable examples of events that would disrupt equilibrium. It is at that point that an individual must begin to examine his/her own life experience to find a new equilibrium. By encouraging transsexual students to move forward through the crossroads moment, higher education professionals can encourage the students to examine their lives on the way to self-authorship. African American transsexuals need to become authors of their own lives, and higher educational professionals can be an integral part of that process, if they so choose.

Seeking to Understand Faith in African American Culture

The concepts of faith, religion, and spirituality create a paradoxical situation for the African American transsexual individual (Boykin, 2005). In lieu of mental health counseling, African Americans typically turn to family members, followed by
their minister or church leadership. In the current study, turning to family or to the church is no longer a valid option for the respondents. The question then becomes, how do they learn to cope when they are not able to seek help or are not comfortable seeking help? Those respondents surveyed here who happened to be transitioning (beginning hormone replacement therapy) are seeing a counselor not to talk extensively about their experience of struggle but more for the access to prescribed hormones (which can only be prescribed after psychiatric therapy). The respondents are not talking to counselors, in higher education settings or otherwise, about the lost relationships with their sisters, the angry voice their fathers used when they came out, how church members shunned them, or how being African American compounds their entire situation. Counselors, GLBT center staff, resident assistants, and other student affairs staff who often initiate informal contacts with students on a regular basis need to be intentional and direct about being a resource for these students and filling the gap created by the absence of typical resources (family, church, and counseling).

Focus on Campus Safety for GLBT Students

In addition to campus decision makers not knowing exactly how to tend to the needs of the transgender population, transgender students face a litany of attacks and persecution from their peers. The fear of harassment and physical violence is one that is quite real to the transgender student population, as the respondents in the current study pointed out. Although the current respondents did not feel unsafe on campus, they did express great reservations about interacting with particular segments of the
community surrounding campus. Notable examples of this fear from the interviews include statements such as, “I avoid bars at all costs” and “I am more afraid of the Black dudes than the White dudes.” The concern for personal safety was a significant finding in Rankin and Beemyn’s (in progress) study. They found that “40% of students feared for their safety because of being transgender, and 30% concealed their transgender identity out of fear of violence” (p. 22). College and university leadership must take a strong stance against violence against transgender students and, in addition, take steps to show that regardless of personal beliefs, they can support the needs of every student on campus. The college campus, along with the professionals and students who create the campus community, must become the support network for these students.

Recommendations for Future research

GLBT People of Color

Additional research into the lives and experiences of African American GLBT populations is necessary to recognize how to create a more understanding environment for GLBT people of all races and ethnicities. Although the respondents in this study had experienced the loss of their church homes and their family connections, one can only wonder how many scenarios are being played out that are far worse than the ones described to the researcher. Have family members become physically abusive of the person they just discovered is transsexual? Have they become mentally abusive?
How does one pick between what one knows is one’s true identity and one’s religion? How often is the true identity rejected, causing a person to live in turmoil for the purposes of keeping the family and church foundations intact? These are the types of questions that need to inform future research on the topic. Further exploration into every aspect of the life of the African American transsexual can answer these questions and shed light on the arduous lifestyles these individuals must lead.

**GLBT Families of Color Need to Be Understood**

Exploration into the reactions of African American family members after one reveals him/herself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender would greatly inform future research in this area. McAdoo and Hill (2002) illustrate how important both the nuclear and extended family are in the African American experience; however, extremely little has been written on how these families adapt to a gay son, a transsexual nephew, or a lesbian daughter. Dynamics must be navigated within the African American family with persons who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. As of right now, it is not known how they approach coming out to their families and neither is the impact of coming out on the familial relationship understood.
Recommendations to the Church

What Can Be Changed?

If the African American churches continue their current practices against their GLBT members, there will eventually become a critical mass in the African American community who will demand change. It is the recommendation of this study that churches of all denominations, and particularly those churches that serve largely African American congregations, begin to find ways to serve their GLBT membership. The church gained its foothold in the African American community by being a place of refuge and understanding, especially when African Americans were being persecuted elsewhere. For the churches to believe now that the African American community can afford to be segmented along gender and sexuality lines is a mistake. Instead of banishing members or preaching messages that make their GLBT populations uncomfortable, churches should try the following methods to revolutionize their practices:

Create a GLBT support group: Historically, the church has been a safe haven for African Americans. Why should this no longer be the case if one happens to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transsexual/transgender? By creating a support group within the church, the church can maintain those individuals as members and at the same time be there for counsel in time of need.

Hire a GLBT resource person: Short of creating a group, having someone in the church who can serve GLBT congregants would be a great place to start.
person does not have to have an official title but would only need to be aware of the issues African American GLBT individuals face and be able to speak to those issues competently. In many instances, for GLBT people, having one person to talk to who understands is better than not having anyone.

**Host an “Open Doors Day”:** Invite GLBT community members to attend services at the church. Not only does this allow them to feel welcomed, but it also shows that the church is extending its arms to embrace as well. The church should be open to all anyway, and this type of event would really emphasize that the church is open to absolutely everyone.

**Invite a GLBT person to speak:** The level of homophobia in African American churches has been shown to decrease as education level increases. If church members can ask candid questions and have frank discussions with someone who is GLBT, their level of information increases, and some might tend to be less homophobic.

**Limitations**

This was a study of African American transsexual college students who responded to invitations in various chat rooms, listserves, and e-mail lists. There is reason to believe that there is a greater population of African American transgender individuals who would have submitted to this research; however, after limiting it to college-age students who currently or formerly held a religious preference, the sample became quite narrow. The sample size (n = 18) was not an ideal sample but was fairly
close to the 25 respondents that the research originally sought. If this research were to be repeated, a longitudinal approach should be taken that would allow more time to make contact with more respondents and follow their journey with their families and churches over a greater span of time.

Second, this survey was limited to those respondents who fit five distinct categories: being African American, having regular Internet access, being a college student, having a religious affiliation, and being between 18 and 25 years of age. Other research on African American transsexuals (Youngblood, 2004) cast a wider net, having fewer qualifiers for respondents to meet. Taking a broader approach in future research can allow scholars to begin to realize the nuanced existence of the African American transsexual. There are certainly similarities to be found when researching both college students and those among the general population; however, being on a college campus brings with it intricacies not faced in the general public sphere.

This research is limited by its inability to change the attitudinal environment for the respondents. After revisiting the interviews many times and reviewing the themes that they revealed, I realized that the respondents were not fully prepared to deal with the tremendous losses they would suffer as a result of their self-identifying as transsexual. The reactions from family members and the resulting sadness from the respondents reflected a hope that the family members would understand. Unfortunately, only in rare cases did this understanding materialize.
Personal Reflection

I am often asked how I came up with the idea to do this research. The short answer is that someone very near and dear to my life revealed herself to me as a transsexual woman in 2003. At the time, I did not realize that her revelation would inspire a three-year research project.

This project has taken me along a myriad of emotions ranging from confusion to sadness to fear. When my friend revealed herself to me, the confusion phase began. I originally believed she was joking just to see what I would say. After negotiating for two minutes what I thought was a joke, I realized that my friend was serious. Almost immediately I began to think about my reactions. Did I make her sorry that she told me? Did I appear to be angry? Although I didn’t want to upset her, I was trying to discern what my own thoughts were on the situation. After all, I had known her for eight years as a male, and then to hear her say she had always believed she was in the wrong body was truly stunning.

I began this research from that standpoint, being absolutely shocked and in disbelief about what I had heard. I, like many others, had heard the term “GLBT” but never really paid attention to the “T.” I had friends in all the categories except for transgender, that is, until 2003. I began by gathering books about transsexualism and doing informal research to acquaint myself with the topic. Between then and now, I can honestly say that my views on gender, religion, and family have evolved tremendously. I no longer accept the male or female dichotomy of gender that is imposed on us as early as birth. I now realize that gender is a concept that is
constructed and not an actual, tangible concept. Gender is what individuals make it, whether they choose to identify as male, female, or androgynous.

The findings about the African American church deeply saddened me. As have many other people, I considered the church a place of understanding. Regardless of one’s issues or problems, the church has always been seen as a place of refuge. Over the course of this research, I have learned that as a whole, churches serve selectively. If an individual is gay or lesbian, that individual is not to be served. If an individual is transsexual, that individual is not to be served. What happened to the understanding? What happened to the idea of coming to church as oneself? The church is passing up a tremendous opportunity to be of service to a segment of the African American community that desperately needs to be addressed.

The coupling of the loss of religious and spiritual ties and family relationships with their racial identities has created a tenuous situation, leaving many of the respondents feeling desperate and alone. As these students arrive at college campuses, they do not present a problem but a great opportunity. Campus professionals such as myself have the opportunity to help students fill wide voids in their existence and create at least one place where true understanding is a reality.

The silver lining in the findings in this research lies in the respondents’ moving forward to better their lives. None of the respondents mentioned an attempt at suicide, being part of the sex trade, or having second thoughts about their future. They are all in college at some level, either two year or four year, and mentioned plans for their lives that centered on finding normalcy. These facts are worth mentioning because a
great deal of the literature on transsexuals exists in the health and psychological areas and emphasize the transsexual HIV risk and the suicide rate among transsexuals.

In this chapter, discussion addressed the best ways to change the climate for African American transsexuals in their families, their churches, and on campus. The emergent theme from this final chapter would clearly be the need for dialogue. Human beings tend to fear and reject the things they do not know; they also fall into behaviors that perpetuate misunderstanding. The true responsibility is to seek to understand others, regardless of race, class, and, in the case of this present exploration, gender.


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