IN PLAIN SIGHT: THE LGBT COMMUNITY IN THE KANSAS FLINT HILLS


by


BRANDON HARLEY HADDOCK


B.S., Missouri State University, 2005
M.S., Missouri State University, 2007


AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION


submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree


DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY


Department of Geography
College of Arts and Sciences


KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas


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# Abstract

This research examines the intersections of sexuality and gender identity and how differing socio-cultural networks are important to how we can begin to address multiple issues affecting rural America. The overarching question of the research was: How do sexuality and gender identity minorities living in rural areas experience or perceive where they live and the community networks that they navigate? Subtopics included the factors that contribute to an LGBT individual living in the Flint Hills, whether individual sexual and gender identities and perception affect concepts of location and community, and how one's sexuality or gender identity affects the lived experience in a rural region. A multi-disciplinary approach based on Geography and LGBT Studies, using interviews and surveys of distinctive rural populations in the Flint Hills of Kansas, was applied.

Five focus groups and 31 individual interviews yielded information about LGBT community concerns in the Flint Hills. A broader region was represented through an electronic survey which accessed a large population anonymously through a variety of social networking sites. The survey yielded 119 complete responses.

Discrimination was a concern and sense of community was important. Many individuals acknowledged that they had a system of navigation of rural environments: where to go, to whom to speak openly, how to blend in to the larger population. Despite fears that were expressed, there was a sense of resilience among participants related to living in a relatively rural region. A sense of queer community and an acknowledgement of a rural community were important. Community connections are a major factor contributing to the individual's lived experience and perception of the Flint Hills. For most of the participants, identity as a rural LGBT person or as part of the (relatively) rural queer community is important. There is a strong affinity to what

individuals view as rural, and they view rural as being different from urban landscapes and communities.

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my life.  He has been there through the feelings of hopelessness and the elation of

accomplishment.  I could not have done any of this without you!

# Dedication

To my family; my mother and father, siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and to the plethora of cousins, you have helped me become the person that I am today. Some of you are with us today and some have moved on from this mortal coil. The foundation that you have all provided is unparalleled in your devotion and love for me and all that I do. Words cannot begin to describe my gratitude for accepting me for who I am and giving me so much in love and understanding.

To Jacob, through the good and bad, the thick and thin you have been unconditional in your love and support. The Bear and the Badger have taken this journey together and I am all the better for it.

And to my chosen family, the friends that have come into my life for a reason, a lifetime, or a season, I thank you. To Mikey Diebold who I can call up any time and get the advice I don't always think I need. To Jeremy Shipley who more often than not knows me better than I do. To Jody Lawrence who gave me a home and laughter when I needed it most. And to Kevin Stilley who helped this work be what it is through your wealth of knowledge and immense love for our community; you are all an inspiration.

And to those who are not with us today. Perhaps the hardest part of this research has been enduring the loss of friends, confidantes, and members of our big queer tribe. Thank you and I think of all of you often: Daniel Bodenhamer, sometimes I need a bonfire to keep it real; Joseph Nisil, listen to that music as loud as you want; Jennifer Cooper, your voice of reason and love can never be forgotten; Barbie DeSade, that laugh will always be with me; Jack Lewis, being rough around the edges isn't so bad; Gary Sanders, the hardest of times can only make us stronger; Christopher Fholer, pain can make us stronger; and Dayla Austin, I know you're hiking

on a trail in the beyond.  I hope that I have given you a voice that you may never have thought

you had.

# Preface

I grew up in a small town in the Ozark Mountains of Missouri. I know the taste of sassafras tea, where to catch the bigger fish or where the deer come down to the field in the evening, and how to run barefoot down a gravel road chasing fireflies. Family came first, and family was a term used loosely to include blood relatives and our neighbors. For most of us growing up in the hills and hollers there was never any choice about getting an education beyond high school. I was one of the lucky ones; my family was determined that I would go to college, get an education, and get out of the backwoods. It took a couple of tries and a lot of hard knocks for me to realize that I could and wanted to do what they had wished for me. I am a first generation, Native American, queer kid from the backwoods. Every now and then the twang of the hills will come out in my speech, and I'm okay with that. It reminds me of where I come from and I lovingly refer to it as the song of my people.

When I was young I met a Geographer who inspired me to look beyond my world of rivers and woods and who also shared the love of the place I will always call home. Dr. Milton Rafferty (Kansas State University alumnus and Emeritus faculty at Missouri State University) loves and has devoted most of his academic career to the Ozark Mountains. My copy of Rafferty's *The Ozarks, Land and Life* (1980) has a broken spine taped together with duct tape and pages dog-eared so many times that they sometimes shed off when I open it up. In many ways he has been a force that has inspired me to look both beyond the borders of where I am at but more importantly inside those borders to see the kaleidoscope of identities within our own backyards. I will forever call the Ozarks my home and will hopefully never lose sight of how far I have come.

The community and individuals that have participated in this work are really no different from those that I come from. Family, by blood or that are chosen, is important for those in the Flint Hills, especially for those marginalized due to their sexuality or gender identity those chosen families have helped them to survive the turmoil and even danger of being 'different.' In these chosen families are individuals from all walks of life. From poverty or wealth, from the suburbs, the cities, or from out in the 'sticks' we have a connection through this difference from the majority of the population. Some of us are open and affirming about our sexuality or gender identity, some of us have taken baby steps from the proverbial closet, while others remain embedded in those closets constructed of stigma and fear of those who are different.

Each one of us has an identity within the community. Both in that greater community of family, friends, and neighbors but also that chosen family of those who can empathize with the struggles and stigma of being in some way different from that greater community. We have reams of articles, books, and thoughts on those larger normative communities but so little in terms of those marginalized communities existing, often overlooked and silent, that are a part of the larger community and in many ways integral to the formation of a sense of community.

Life is a mash-up of experiences, some good and some bad. The people with whom we travel through those experiences may not always be a part of our lives; I always remind myself that our friends and family come into our lives and our journeys for a reason, for life, or a season.

Here's to another journey.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

A few miles from town a man works to fix the engine of a classic Cadillac prior to an antique car club trip; a grandmother keeps an eye on her twin grandsons while canning beans despite the sweltering temperatures; a small town bar owner evaluates inventory and cleans up from the previous night's crowd; and a woman rests her feet after a church luncheon. All of these images could be representative of almost any community in America, especially in the rural landscape. Yet, the definitive difference in the images mentioned above is that the man fixing the engine has been living with HIV for over 25 years, the grandmother has been living openly as a lesbian and with her partner most of her adult life, the bar owner has often been the only openly gay business owner in his town, and the woman just home from the church luncheon was assigned the male gender at birth. These are individuals that are living in plain sight of those that would attempt to denounce non-heterosexual sexuality or non-normative[1] gender identities. Each day these individuals choose to live their lives openly and honestly in a rural landscape that is often represented and perceived as a primitive or unaccepting place to those with identities outside of the normalized heterosexual and male/female binary gender identity.

## Rural America

Frequently, the representation of rural life that has been socially normalized is viewed through a lens that attempts to reflect a modernized version of Norman Rockwell's iconic

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[1]"Non-normative is used here as meaning not the "norm" or non-standard. Another meaning of "normative" is "ideal" or "desirable." While heterosexuality is viewed by many people as the "normative" state in terms of sexuality and gender identity it is defined here as being the socially "standard" or "norm/al" condition. Describing the LGBT (lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender) individual as "non-normative" refers to their non-"standard" status as far as long-term social tradition; it is not to be construed as being undesirable.

*Saturday Evening Post* imagery or even the beloved un-reality show of the 1960s, *The Andy Griffith Show* (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988). However, for most individuals rural life of the 21st century is far from the romanticized versions that have been embedded in the American psyche. Today's rural landscape and communities face significant obstacles: with highly variable populations and growth/depopulation, wealth disparity, and shifting livelihoods, the American rural countryside can appear to be changing much faster than the metropolitan/urban areas of the country. In this regard, many of the perceived changes are not ones that seemingly have occurred overnight but have always have been a part of the rural fabric as a whole (although not seen from the outside and perhaps not discussed on the inside).

### *Rural Perceptions and Inhabitants*

Of importance to understanding a modern perception of rurality is how rural culture has become more diverse in terms of who is living in the landscape, where they come from, why they choose to live there, and their perceptions of the landscape and their fellow inhabitants. Increased ethnic immigration and a changed perception of cultural norms in regard to gender and sexuality are examples of this evolving diversity (Cantu 2009, Puar 2013). Despite this evolution, political backlash against immigration by ethnic/racial minorities and movements toward un-doing protection of the rights of sexuality and gender identity minorities has become common (Cantu 2009, Puar 2013). Increasingly, political talking points have come to revolve around illegal immigration and preservation of what is termed "traditional" values. A difficulty for advocates of discriminatory policies is that non-white and non-normative populations have long been a part of the history and cultural fabric of rural America.

The perceptual image of the rural individual can conjure many pictures. Among idealized images of the rural American, the most common is the independent (e.g., farmers) or

wage-earning, heterosexual, youthful, and well-bodied white male. On the reverse side of this is an image that rarely fits the commonly perceived American version of the rural citizen: the "other" as described in Philo's (1992) historic call for reevaluation of rural identity. Philo based his concepts of 'the other' on the idea that the rural environment is inhabited by many more than just the white heterosexual male farm worker living in the countryside. As Paul Cloke and Jo Little (1997) noted, the reality is that the rural landscape is peopled by women, the old, the young, varied ethnic and racial identities, the handicapped, and the poor. These groups have often been overlooked through traditional representations of rural populations; the stories and lives of those who do not fit into the rural idyll are often ignored (Woods 2005). Through the advent of the "cultural turn" in the 1970s and 1980s and its adoption by cultural geographers there has been much more attention devoted to the idea of the other images of rural life. Evaluation of the rural "other" has offered many breakthroughs in the social construction and representation of rural places and has been important in the academic understanding of rural geography (Little 1999).

Although progress has continued to be made in terms of developing a framework for identifying and researching the rural "other," there remains much to learn. Little (1997:440) sums it up best by saying,

> "The 'rural idyll' has become dangerously credited with causal powers and too often carelessly employed as an explanation for rural social change. It has also served to detract from the recognition of variety and, indeed, alongside the concept of 'otherness' to simplify our understanding of power relations within rural society and of the contestation of the reality and representation of rural culture."

## Rural Sexuality and Gender Identity

One of the major shifts in the understanding of the neglected rural identities has come in the form of research into rural sexuality and gender identities as part of a holistic approach to the

rural landscape. Early research relating to rural sexuality and gender identity focused primarily on the absence and isolation of the non-heterosexual or gender-variant individual. The role of these individuals in the rural context was, and to a certain degree continues to be, neglected (Little 2002). Yet, there have been incremental advances. David Bell (2000), Jerry Lee Kramer (1995), and John Fellows (1998) have focused on how the rural sexual identity is closely related to hetero-normative construction of gender. Other researchers, such as Gil Valentine (1997) and Kath Weston (1995), have focused on the lives of lesbian women and how the construction of a feminine identity in rural places has led to the creation of a personal ideal of the rural idyll as an effective escape from rural patriarchal society. As for transgender identities, there is little or no work to examine.

Important to the modern interpretation of 'rural' is recognition of the invisible changes to the rural cultural fabric and how these changes can provide evidence of a rural life that the majority of individuals may not acknowledge within their own communities. Invisible factors such as non-normative sexualities and gender identities of these rural communities, and how lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) individuals have developed identities that in many ways differ from their urban counterparts (Gorman-Murray 2013). Though research on rural populations and sexuality and gender identity as a whole has only been publicly acknowledged for four decades, the amount of research devoted to urban populations has overwhelmed the general understanding of more rural situations. Within the rural context, sexuality and gender identity have had very little recognition in the past – only being noticed as a realm of serious inquiry during the late 1990s – and continue to be overlooked as a viable source of information as to how community formation and identity contribute to rural communities and social construction of place.

## Research Focus in the Lived Landscape

An understanding of how cultural aspects of community, particularly social networks and the role of community within an individual's personal environment of home, work, and interpersonal relationships, are formed and operate is important to rural issues of political, economic, and societal factors and how they relate to local, state, regional, and even national scales. One of the core aspects of recognizing rural populations' sexuality or gender identities involves understanding how members of this population perceive not only their own sexuality and gender identity but how those aspects of themselves are entwined with the affirmation or acceptance within the rural socio-cultural community. Also imperative is the acknowledgment of the differences within the queer[2] minority community: social, economic, and social justice differences between those of differing sexualities or gender identities within the community. Overall, understanding how individuals of particular social subgroups that identify as rural LGBT or as being part of queer community/ies may have similar or dissimilar experiences and perceptions of rurality can help to establish these individuals within the context of the lived landscape.

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[2] The term 'queer' generally identifies lesbian and gay communities but the analytical framework can include the subjects of cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity, and gender re-identification (Jagose 1996). The ambiguity of the term has seen some debate in academic theory (Jagose 1996; Knopp and Brown 2003; Cantu 2009). Most commonly, the debate arises from the use of the word as defining multiple but separate identities. For the purposes of many academics and for this work in particular, the term queer can be seen as 'another discursive horizon, another way of thinking about the sexual' (de Lauretis 1991). For the purpose of this research, LGBT has been denoted to represent lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals within a singular context. Queer is viewed as pluralistic and an encompassing terminology that is representative of the multitude of identities within sexuality and gender identity minorities. For additional explanation of terms used to denote specific sexual orientations and identities, see Appendix A.

It is important to acknowledge that individual perceptions of rural places alone may not be a determining factor of one's relationships to rural place and space. Acceptance of individual sexuality or gender identity on a familial and social level, and the perception of the living environment as hospitable are factors related to an individual's identity of openness and affirmation regarding sexuality and gender identity in general. In turn, there are socio-cultural factors that increase the individual's awareness of acceptability, such as specific sexuality and gender identity laws or ordinances that can discriminate against or protect an individual or community equal rights. Most importantly for LGBT persons, the perceived amount of freedom of expression of individual sexuality or gender identity is what reinforces the individual's positive conceptualization of rurality. The overarching question that I am approaching, with three sub-questions, is:

- How do sexuality and gender-identity minorities living in rural areas experience or perceive the places they live and the community networks that they navigate?

  a) Specifically, what are the factors that contribute to an LGBT individual living in the Flint Hills?

  b) Are individual sexual and gender identities and perception factors in their concepts of location and community?

  c) How does one's sexuality or gender identity contribute or detract from the individual's lived experience, connected to a rural region?

These questions recognize that LGBT individuals and queer communities within rural populations live in an environment that sometimes could be perceived to be discriminatory or even hostile to a part of one's self-identity. It is also recognized that LGBT individuals have adaptation skills or socio-cultural networks that help them to navigate rural environments.

This research is not an attempt to define a uniform concept of rurality; it is intended to offer a new perspective. This also is not an attempt to define the specifics of rural sexuality or gender identity; individuality is an important component of the sexuality and gender identity minority community and is continually held in highest regard. And, importantly, this is not a comprehensive evaluation of all rural sexualities or gender identities.

What can be said of this research is that it offers insight into the lives of a segment of the rural American population that is rarely discussed and is consistently marginalized. This is an attempt to bring a fresh look at community and individual social networks within rural culture. It is an opportunity for those who may have not had a voice to be able to educate us as to how rural lives and landscapes are intimately entwined. I hope that the information that this research provides can help to further advocacy opportunities and acceptance to rural queer populations. Future research and even public policy can benefit from further understanding of the lives of rural LGBT individuals.

## Structure of Inquiry

Chapters Two and Three will explore the literature regarding 1) queer studies and 2) how we evaluate rural landscapes and queer/rural connections. In part, this will examine how the individual within, and cultural fabric of, rural landscapes may be evaluated as both social constructions and individualized concepts. A focus of the literature lies in the concepts of sexuality and gender identity and how urban and rural conceptualizations may differ.

Chapter Four will examine the region that has been selected as the focus for this study. The Flint Hills of Kansas is a backdrop to examine the entanglement of sexuality and gender identity with rural regional realities of lack of employment, population loss, availability of

services, aging communities, and of course the lack of understanding or acceptance of others in dealing with sexuality and gender identity.

The methods chapter (Chapter Five) explains how the study population was developed, methods of inquiry, and how the basic tenets of the research were developed. This research represents a multi-method approach to understanding this particular population.

Chapter Six, covering the results of this research, will present what has been derived from application of the methods of inquiry. In this chapter the varied identities and populations as a whole are examined. Secondly, I will address how the lived experience of the individual influences the perception of landscape and the individual's sense of community, recounting experiential and perceptual information from study participants. The results explore how sexuality and gender identity minorities experience community networks and landscape as a part of and separate from the larger rural community, thus creating lived experiences that are at once a part of the landscape but made invisible through conformity to societal norms.

The final chapter, Summary and Conclusions, reviews the findings of the study and examines how this research may be utilized to further the understanding of culture and landscape, as well as to provide a voice to those who may not have the ability to speak. Evaluating the potential of data and conclusions as being influential to future work can help to bring awareness for the need to compare communities within the rural environment but also to evaluate differences between rural and urban ideologies of place, perception, and space. The final examination will view the changing perception of inclusion and diversity within American socio-cultural contexts and how these changes help to establish a higher standard of social justice than previously held. This discussion will examine what research is possible in the future, how it can be condensed and even broadened in the scope of queer lives in the rural landscape. I will

also evaluate how the research can be improved for future application and what can be done to increase the breadth of research on this topic.

# Chapter 2 - Queer Studies and Connected Geographic Inquiry

## Sexuality and Gender Identity Geographies

Geographers have produced a complex body of work on sexuality and gender identity during the past four decades.  The research and investigation on sexuality and gender identity has been an effort of building on the work of not only a small number of dedicated geographers but also researchers in other disciplines who have identified sexual space as having importance in their various fields of inquiry.  The concept of sexual and gendered spaces has been developed as an object of study and a valid conceptual tool of analysis.  Sexuality and gender identity spaces can be described as the notion that public spaces are constructed around the ideal of sexual and gendered presence that is exclusionary to individuals who do not adhere to monogamous heterosexual relations and those not identifying as a part of the binary gendered system of biological male and female (Hubbard 2001, Wilchins 2004).

Despite interest of social theorists in spatial awareness of sexuality and gender identity, there has been little actual interdisciplinary dialogue taking sexual and gendered applications to space seriously.  As Glen Elder, Larry Knopp, and Heidi Nast (2003) of the Sexuality and Space Specialty Group (SSSG) of the American Association of Geographers have noted, scholars outside of geography have exhibited a concept of space that is different from that in geography, or have simply neglected to recognize the conceptualization of place and space as relevant to the understanding of sexuality and gender identity (Duncan 1996).  Even within geographic research, studies of sexual and gender identity spaces tend to focus on how to define and map landscapes and communities instead of exploring the essential building blocks of the human composition of such landscapes. Primarily, the work concerning such spaces has focused on the urban

environments, and has neglected the sexualities and gender identities of the rural landscape and outside of the privilege of the Global North (Puar 2013).

In part, the lack of work involving sexual and gendered spaces is due to cultural taboos; however, it also related to the difficulty in defining marginalized sexualities or gender identities, and what it means to be of a minority sexuality or gender identity (Sinfield 1997). There can be an assumption that sexual activity with a same-sex partner defines what has historically been known as homosexuality. However, there is a distinction between homosexual or same-sex activity and personalized sexuality. As part of the complexity of sexuality, there are instances of individuals who may have same-sex experiences but not identify themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or homosexual. The sexual act does not constitute a sexual identity for these individuals. Others may identify themselves in terms of those sexualities such as lesbian, gay, or bisexual but not be sexually active, whereas others may consider themselves in terms of sexuality exclusive of gender identity.

It is important to keep in perspective that sexuality and gender identity are self-defined categories that are fluid and open to change (Wilchins 2004, Diamond 2008). Secondly, there are many individuals who will not admit to being of other sexualities or gender identities than those that are socially accepted because of fear of religious, familial, or other societal constraints. This enables the creation of an invisible sexuality and gender identity minority population. The lack of visibility and marginalization create systemic problems when trying to determine the actual size and composition of the sexuality and gender identity minority population.

Characteristics that determine queer identity in society are mostly a reflection of social and popular media and quantitative data taken from broad surveys that are often skewed because respondents are self-identified or not accessible due to a lack of understanding by those

conducting the research (Hughes 2002). Quantitatively defining the population is hindered by self-disclosure and the likelihood of asking the 'right' questions in interviews or surveys. By asking questions about sexual activity and not asking for a self-proclaimed identity there are often higher response rates (Mercer et al. 2013).

Finally, the "integrity" of queer culture(s) is threatened by both internal and external forces that can contribute to a loss of identity. Examples of these are arguably the results of social justice measures such as marriage equality and protections in work and housing designed to provide equity, rather than from heterosexual (or perceived hetero-normative) encroachment on perceived queer spaces. This suggests that there may also be individuals who seek to maintain barriers because of their attachment to personalized sexuality or gendered/agender identity (Concannon 2008).

To add to the lack of understanding of the queer community in general and most specifically within academia, most research on sexuality and gender identity space deals specifically with urban space and an urban construction of queerness. This maintains an attachment to urban identity and neglects the individuals and the identities that exist in rural space and the queer community that have embraced rural life. Focusing on the urban component of the queer community ignores the rural identity and community and constrains our understanding of social frameworks as a whole and how those frameworks create, relate to, and occupy space. Hence, it is essential to promote an examination and evaluation of rural sexuality and gender identities in order to fully understand the paradigm of sexuality and gender identity space as a whole.

*Deconstructing the Queer Studies Concept*

In the span of forty years since the drag-queens, rent-boys, trans-kids and dykes stood up to the New York City police in a little bar known as the Stonewall Inn, dramatic changes have swept the queer community. With a call of "We're here, we're queer, get used to it…," the historical queer community and allied individuals have stood up to oppression, ridicule, and endangerment for the right to be recognized; not as sexual oddities outside of what is deemed as normal, but as human beings that are very much a part of the social fabric of communities, cities, states, and nations. And, as Charles Kaiser (1997, x) proclaimed, "no other group has ever transformed its status more rapidly or more dramatically than gay men and lesbians" since Stonewall. Though the Stonewall riots have become known as a symbolic beginning of the Queer Rights Movement, history provides us with other accounts of heroic men and women who came together before Stonewall, not only for recognition for themselves, but to also establish a presence of community within mainstream society. These groups include organizations such as the Mattachine Society, who helped to create the foundations of a queer identity, experience, and history that enabled Stonewall to occur, and to make possible the scholarly evaluation of queer lives through modern academia in the form of 'queer studies' (Rimmerman 2002).

Through a better conceptualization of the identity, experience, and history of LGBT individuals and queer communities, the foundations of this work and of what we can generically refer to as Queer Studies as a whole can be formulated. These foundations within queer studies have evolved in not only modern academics but also how they have further developed the opportunities for social justice and equity platforms. First, it is essential to discuss the term 'queer' and the ideology behind it. I will then examine the broad foundations of queer studies − identity, experience, and history − and how singularly and in conjunction with one another

contribute to a better understanding of sexuality and gender identity.  And to conclude, I reflect

on how these foundations can continue to develop a further understanding of not only queer

studies and the queer population, but also the larger society.

*Queer in Context*

The term 'queer' has had many meanings throughout the past century.  As Annamarie

Jagose (1996:1) points out, the elasticity of defining the term lends itself to being adaptable to

the individual.  Historically, and even today, 'queer' can be used in the context of being

discriminatory and at other times used as an empowering symbolic umbrella term for those

outside of the heterosexual or binary (male/female) gender.  The word queer has come to

represent many aspects of the community.  These aspects include the individual as well as

community, and can be applied to lifestyle, economics, and even cultures as a whole.  However,

within the conceptual umbrella of 'queer' lays the problem of giving an encompassing identity or

definition to distinctly separate entities.  Researchers have begun to acknowledge the term's lack

of inclusiveness and have sought to investigate individual perceptions within the community

(Jagose 1996, Brown and Boyle 2000, Sinfield 2004, Halberstam 2005).  But whether applied to

traditional study, theoretical foundations, or methodologies in understanding this diverse

community, the re-taking of 'queer' from a slur to a descriptor of individuality and community

has occurred.  The term is adequate in description of the individuals and community that

comprise the subject in question, and, where applicable, distinctions may be made between the

individual gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender identity experience and history.

*Queer Identity*

The concept of a queer identity leads to the examination of performativity, experience,

and self-realization of the individual.  As a foundation of queer studies, it is important to view

identity as separate from experience and history as well as conceptualizing the three foundations as working as a process that helps to substantiate the other individual properties. Identity can be viewed as singular in relation to the individual, yet the experiences and history of the individual collaborate to influence the emergence of a specific identity. In the collective queer identity it is sexuality and/or gender identity that represents a differentiation from the mainstream heteronormative and fixed gender binary system. Most specifically, same-sex desire or non-binary gender appearance or role has come to be the foundation of the intersections of identity in queer studies.

Within the discipline of queer studies, it is understood that same-sex desire or non-binary gender identities are not new. Michel Foucault's (1990) work on sexuality and the historic evaluation of homosexuality has helped to establish the understanding of sexual identity and behavior. Foucault's work additionally helps to establish a further understanding of the workings of sex, gender, and sexuality in the context of power (Butler 1990; Sinfield 2004). The goal of Foucault's and Judith Butler's approach is to understand how the individual or collective queer identity is a part of larger socio-cultural foundations. Yet, as a collective identity there is often a neglect of the needs or wants of the individual.

Neglect of individual identity has become increasingly problematic in understanding identity as a collective within queer studies. Scholars such as Judith Butler (2002), Larry Knopp (2004), and Michael Brown (2005), have held that to neglect the individual identity and the differences between conceptualizations of identity categories within a collective queer population or community is to neglect the fundamentals of sexuality and gender. These fundamentals are an individual consciousness of basic desire, sex, and the expression of identity (Foucault 1990). Butler (1990:200-201) contends that placing sexuality or gender identity into

categories limits or constrains the possibilities of understanding that the very idea of gender or queer identity are meant to open up. The process of imagining the different sexual and gender identities as a collective can alienate those individuals who may not entirely realize themselves to be a part of the collective (Jagose 1996:62-63).

To view LGBT individuals as dependent upon the collective for an identity can place an individual in the position of having to choose a defined identity. In *Men Like That*, John Howard (1999) found that many men are culturally influenced to repress their sexual or gender identity in order to 'survive' in their environment. These men find themselves controlled by a heteronormative environment and can be unable or unwilling to admit to or exhibit a queer identity. Additionally, as in Will Fellows' (1998) narratives of rural individuals, the rural person who has same-sex desires or non-normative gender expression or identity may not relate to a generalized queer identity − an identity seen by many in rural areas as being a product of an urban environment, with no relation to rural lives or experiences. Lesbian populations have at times sought to disconnect with a queer identity by establishing communal living arrangements or social networks exclusive to women and in direct disagreement to a queer conceptualization of identity (Valentine 1993; 1996).

Falling under the umbrella of queer identity, the bisexual and transgender individual are not forgotten. In recent years, bisexuality has become viewed as more culturally discussed and has provided a platform for those admitting or exhibiting same-sex desire or non-traditional relationships without acknowledgement of a queer identity. Equally important to the conceptualization of a queer identity, the transgender community has found increasing acceptance through the media. Although there has been some disagreement within transgender organizations over the possibilities of becoming more separate from the queer identity, there has

also been major debate on the inclusion of transgender individuals under the queer umbrella (Stryker 2004, Halberstam 2005).

Overall, the identity of the individual remains that of the individual, despite the tendency of queer studies or modern culture to place the individual into an often over-reaching category. The experiences of the individual within society help to formulate and solidify personal identity.

*Queer Experience*

Perhaps the most influential of the foundations of queer studies is the idea that the experiences of the individual and collective community help to shape identity. Within queer studies, experience (precursor of performativity) is a foundation for the evaluation and understanding of the individual and population (Butler 2002). In many ways, experience is as appropriate to the LGBT individual and queer culture as it is in larger social contexts. Yet, the distinguishing factor of queer experience is that it lies outside of traditional socio-cultural definitions of what is acceptable in terms of sex and gender. This often makes the experiences and the individual non-conforming to those around them. As with the construction of identity, individual and collective queer experience has many similarities and disparities that are essential to queer studies.

To evaluate the foundation of experience, no discussion on Queer Studies should ignore the principle of performativity in understanding the queer individual and community. The concept of performativity was originally developed by Judith Butler (1990:179). For Butler, the individual's actions are a production of normalized collective performance of specific gendered traits. These traits obscure or contradict what the individual may exhibit outside of the norm. Performativity combines experience and identity, it is a catalyst for the action(s) that the individual or group routinely participates. In turn, these experiences help to develop or to

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discourage a specific identity.  In queer terms, performance can be considered an act of 'passing' for one's visible sexuality or gender identity.  This act of 'passing' creates a problematic situation where the culturally permissible outward appearance is in direct conflict with the individual's true actions or experience (Brown 2005).

The connection of true experience and performativity lies within the individual motivations in how one operates or navigates their identity in relation to the environment and to society.  For queer studies scholars, such as Larry Knopp or Michael Brown, the acceptance of a performative notion of gender or queer experience only serves to add to the discrepancies in understanding queer lives.  For Brown (2005), the metaphorical 'closet' that is used to hide one's sexuality enables a heteronormative society to further dictate what actions are right and wrong. Furthermore, as Knopp and Lauria (1987) point out, by accepting the notion that queer identity or experience is in some way socially or culturally dictated as wrong only serves to further objectify the queer experience.  However, as what research there is in queer studies exhibits, the queer experience is fundamental and moves past the theoretical concepts of gender or feminist studies to enable the queer narrative (Chauncey 1994, Duncan 1996, Fellows 1998, Kaiser 1997, Weston 1998, Howard 1999, Abraham 2009).

The queer narrative and experience are often the same; the personal emotions and actions of the individual help to create the experience that in turn shapes the individual identity, theoretically to eventually shape a queer identity.  These experiences, whether lived by a gay man in San Francisco or a lesbian in rural South Dakota, carry one consistent property common to the queer experience:  it is different from a heteronormative ideal.  However, this is where the similarity begins and ends.  The experiences of LGBT individuals are different from not only the norm but also from each other (Adam 1985).  And as Jon Binnie and Gill Valentine (1999) and

Jo Little (2002) agree, queer studies has been formative in applying distinctive qualities to those being studied, effectively creating a process of categorization intended to be a method of not subjecting any singular identity to erasure in the scope of queer experience.

The examples of separate queer experience in the form of individual identities of sexuality and gender identity tend to overwhelm the little information available outside of that provided by scholarly queer or gender theory (Butler 1990, de Lauretis 1991, Jagose 1996). The assumption of a collective experience can exclude those living between cultures, specifically in the context of sexuality combined with ethnicity (Womack 1997, Luibhéid and Cantu 2005, Gilley 2006, Andrijasevic 2009); those within idealized sub-cultures of sexuality such as the bear or leather movements, radical faeries, dykes, or lipstick lesbians (Bell et al. 1994, Hennen 2008); or differences that come from the spatial context, as in between urban and rural environments (Kramer 1995, Knopp 2004). Although these differences are critical to dispelling a collective understanding of queer experience, there is evidence that the experiences have some collective similarity in common to a particular queer sub-group; whether it is the Native American two-spirit; the bearded, straight acting bear in Levis or leather; or the gender-bending lesbian driving a truck and working on the farm. Therefore, both these conditions are important to queer studies: overall personal queer experience cannot be negated, and the collective experience of individuals or groups is valuable in understanding one's self in relation to society and culture.

*Queer History*

On understanding queer history, David Halperin (2004) points out that the term queer describes a 'horizon of possibility,' and that by only using the evolution of a queer past can queer studies determine how sexuality and gender identity issues are recognized. Likewise, Jonathan Katz (1992) sees the history of queer America as an evolution of modern culture − a function of

the history of culture that is at once dependent on the society at large and distinctive in the way that critical study has been devoted to it. This queer history then can be viewed as being just as important to the larger culture and, as a specific venue of research in queer studies, it can aid in understanding the history of modern culture as a whole.

Queer studies was given life through studies in feminism and Marxism, stemming from the cultural revolutions within academia during the 1960s and 1970s, only to emerge as an independent entity within the past thirty years. Despite the discipline's relatively young heritage, the history of queer − including collective identities and experiences − can be viewed as being inherent in the history of humanity itself (Browning 1998).

In the historical context, differences between queer studies scholars are based in part on the relationship between the homosexual and heterosexual history. For scholars like Judith Butler (1990) and Doreen Massey (2013), the history of the queer begins with evaluation of gender and power relations. Sexuality − more specifically homosexuality, in this case − is seen as a function of how gender performativity (Butler 1990) and gender relations (Massey 2013) are important to understanding how social power is related to idealization of gender in society. This stems from the development of queer studies from gender and feminism studies of the past century. However, other scholars see queer history as an entity unto itself (Katz 1992, 2001), albeit aided by theoretical foundations of gender and feminism (Sedgwick 1990, Brown and Knopp 2003).

As a foundation of queer studies, queer history benefits from varying methods derived from psychology, sociology, feminism, and geography. A critique of queer history comes in the form of evaluating a history in spatial contexts. Arguably, an overwhelming number of queer history studies have originated in urban spaces. The city is an idealized utopia for queer

individuals: a space where one's sexuality or gender identity and those related experiences can be realized outside of the confines of family or the often limited social networks found in rural environments (Weston 1998, 32). The academic history of queer lives and communities remains deeply seated in this urban framework. The importance of the urban context may in actuality be a reflectance of tendencies in the study of society as a whole and the lack of research in rural queer populations can serve as an injustice to understanding queer history's influence on society (Sinfield 1997, Cloke and Little 1997).

*Queer Studies*

The foundations of queer studies include identity, experience, and history. Identity is essential to the establishment of a queer epistemology; it is a foundation for acknowledgement that an individual or community is in some way alike or different from others in a community. In this case, queer identity is based on the collective formation of a social identity by varying sexualities, genders, and experiences. Experience is crucial to the formation of identity and the foundation of history. Within the queer context, experience can be individualized or be viewed as a commonality between individuals or groups. The acknowledgement of how queer history influences the understanding of the identities and experiences of queer individuals and communities is essential to formulating and examination into how queer may be different from the rest of society. Overwhelmingly, these foundations are intertwined. Queer history is dependent on the queer experience that in turn establishes a queer identity. These foundations are essential to understanding a population that is outside of the mainstream society; queer studies has established itself as a viable means of understanding a part of human culture that is often ignored, shunned, or criminalized and that recognition of and research regarding the queer

population has the opportunity to change societal perceptions of what may be different from what may seem normative.

### *Queering Geography*

The discipline of geography has many differing specializations, most broadly those of the physical and human geography sub-fields and as of more recently the rise of geographic information systems (GIS) and GIScience (Sinton 2009). Yet, even within these aspects of the discipline there are further factions that are often pushed to the fringe or even discredited; such as that of queer studies/theory in the lived experiences of the academic and even queer topics that can influence the understanding of much broader questions of social and political issues (Knopp 1995, Brown and Knopp 2003).

As in other social sciences, the efforts of LGBT scholars has been aimed at drawing attention to the neglect of queer cultures, people and places by geography academics (Bell 1991, Brown 2005, Browne 2006). Within geography, LGBT academics have sought to locate sexuality and gender identity minorities in a spatial context despite the homophobia and heterosexism found within the discipline (Brown and Knopp 2003, Brown 2005, Elder et al. 2003). These efforts were encouraged by the emerging power of geographers working at the time with other somewhat taboo subjects within the discipline, such as feminism, gender, and Marxism (Bell and Valentine 1995a, Aitken and Valentine 2006, Brown and Knopp 2008).

Queer geography gained more acceptance and interest through the 1980s. Yet, it was with the publication of Bell and Valentine's *Mapping Desire* (1995a) that the sub-discipline was truly formulated (Knopp and Brown 2003, Brown 2005). This is not to say that other critical works had not been published with a focus on queer geographies. Previous work had sought to understand how sexuality and gender identity played a role in inter-urban development along

with Barbara Weightman (1981) who explored the importance and role of gay bars and social spaces and Bob McNee (1984a, 1984b) who actively challenged the homophobia and sexism evident within the discipline (Brown and Knopp 2003, Elder et al. 2003). As a result of such pioneering individuals and growing acceptance of queer populations in the US, both in academia and culturally, scholarly work in queer geography became more available. Efforts to include queer studies in academic work led to international journals such as *Antipode*; *Gender, Place, and Culture*; *Social and Cultural Geography*; and *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* being established. Such journals provided an outlet for scholars interested in topics outside of perceived traditional views (Brown 2005).

Within queer geography, there are several themes that are especially important to the study of queer populations and are addressed by queer studies. At their most basic, these themes include the geographic principles of place, space, and mobility. These themes reflect those traditional views of cultural geography, such as those found in Wagner and Mikesell's (1962) traditional structure of cultural inquiry, as well as modern interpretations by Yi Fu Tuan (1977) and Michael Brown and Larry Knopp (2003, 2008).

*Themes within Queer Geography: Place*

For LGBT scholars in geography the themes of place, space, and mobility have been most actively pursued as research interests. The idea of place is most often inclusive of both the physical locality and environment of individuals or populations and of the perception of sexuality and/or gender identity. Places—urban environments researched by McNee (1984), the 'place' of queer within a rural context examined by Paul Cloke and Jo Little (1997), or the individuals from a particular place such as John Howard's (1999) examination of the southern US—have helped to identify a queer identity and culture on both temporal and physical scales.

The research and understanding of queer place has enabled researchers to broaden their inquiries into what is known about the individual and community. For instance, it has clearly been established that minority sexualities and gender identities are not only found in the urban places on the landscape but also in the suburbs and rural places of America. The importance of this lies in the affirmation to LGBT individuals that there are indeed others like themselves that live their lives as neighbors, friends, and family.

*Space*

Inherently tied to the concept of place is the understanding of space. According to Yi Fu Tuan (1977), understanding the concept of both place and space requires the definition of both to understand each singularly. Here, space has the meaning of having presence in both physicality (such as an urban center, or inclusive of a 'place') and existing within the individual's perception (conceptualizing the physical with the sights, sounds, and feelings associated with such a 'place'). For queer geography and individuals alike, the concept of space can provide a greater theoretical understanding of how individuals and communities operate within their surroundings and what their place and function is in those surroundings.

The topic of space within queer geography has led to discussion of how the individual conceptualizes their own space and how this fits their own identity, as well as the construction of group space (Brown and Boyle 2000; Brown and Knopp 2003). This idea of spatial self-identity has led to the further investigation of the queer 'closet.' Partly due to such scholars as Eve Sedgwick's (1990) and Diana Fuss's (2013) approach to the idea of the lived experience inside a self-created space, the queer 'closet' has developed into a spatial construction within queer culture (Brown and Knopp 2003). Michael Brown's *Closet Space* (2005) has perhaps been one

of the most influential works on understanding the queer closet and the concept of queer space (Brown and Knopp 2003, Aitken and Valentine 2006).

Yet, other spaces have also garnered growing attention. The position of the individual and to a greater extent the queer community, within society has also become a subject of scholarly inquiry. Differences in social structures, such as class, gender, and ethnicity, have revealed that there is often divisiveness even within the community. Research and challenges to traditional structures (or space) of the community as a whole have at times become contentious when assessing the power relations and structures of sexuality and gender identity (Badgett and King 1997, Nast 2002, Brown and Knopp 2003).

Understandably, the factors affecting the individual and community are different according to place and space. Those in urban places may view their spaces and situations differently from those in a rural context, whereas a lesbian, single mother may view her situation differently than would a gay, white professional. Differences in agreement about what queer space is, or even differences in how it is perceived by the individual, are important to queer geography research. This is in no small part due to the varied avenues of research that are available, but research on what may be the smaller, individualized distinctions of queer community and culture also can help to develop a better understanding and acceptance within larger social and cultural structures.

*Mobility*

The mobility of the queer community and individual covers the third theme of queer geography. Mobility largely refers to the how individuals operate within their social space and can include migration from place to place, social mobility between classes, and inter-relationships (either within society as a whole or within community itself), all of which have

some relationship to place and space (Brown and Knopp 2003). Mobility's many forms mean that the theme constitutes a wealth of opportunities for geographic research.

Processes of migration have been significant in the research of queer geography. Perhaps most identifiable in this research has been the work on tourism (temporary migration) and gentrification. Research on the queer tourism industry encompasses many different factors. First, the places that are visited have become influential in developing a sense of identity within space, such as San Francisco's Castro district, Chicago's Boys Town, or New York City's Christopher Street (Wait and Markwell 2014). Secondly, the type of tourism that is experienced has been a major topic of inquiry (Nast 1998, Hughes et al 2010).

Gentrification studies are also included within mobility research (Brown and Knopp 2003). The gentrification of place and space by queer-identified communities and individuals has shown that individuals attempt to create a normative space in often non-normative places (Doan 2015). Of consequence here is that most of the research in gentrification has been based upon urban conceptualizations of place and space but there has been a growing movement in research to identify and investigate rural systems of gentrification processes. This research has enabled further investigation into the use of place and space within both queer urban and rural concepts (Shuttleton 2000, Smith and Holt 2005, Gorman-Murray 2009, Gorman-Murray et al 2013).

*Counting Community*

Until the 1990 Census Bureau inclusion of 'unmarried partner' as an option for response to the question of 'relationship to the householder,' there was no quantitative way to measure the existence and location of the unmarried LGBT population.  Not until the inclusion of same-sex couples in the US Census of 2000 were we able to view the queer-identified population at a relatable scale. For example, the 2000 Census lists the census tracts of each U.S. city and the

number of households in which person #1 is a male and another male in the household identifies himself as the unmarried partner of person #1 (Summary File 2, Census Table PCT 22). Similar tabulation is available for female households. Because the 'unmarried partner' response is meant to reflect a 'marriage-like' relationship between two persons of the same sex, researchers assume that the data reflects partnered homosexual couples (Walther and Poston 2004, Gates and Ost 2004, Walther 2013). The 2000 Census found that same-sex unmarried partners were evident in 99.3 percent of all counties in the US.

Using the 2000 data, Gary Gates and John Ost's (2004) created an atlas of same-sex identified couples in the US. *The Gay and Lesbian Atlas* reveals that those identifying outside of heterosexuality are found in every state and nearly every county of the US. Unsurprising to most queer scholars were the clusters of populations in such cities as New York City, San Francisco, and Miami: places that have traditionally been the subject of queer scholarly interest (Ghaziani 2015, Hubbard et al. 2014). However, the extent of the population identifying outside of heterosexuality or in a same-sex relationship was surprising, especially with clusters of such people in such traditionally rural places as parts of Iowa, Mississippi, and Oklahoma (Gates and Ost 2004).

*Urban Community*

A queer community in an urban space can have numerous representations. Some may exist merely as a group that shares common concerns about combating AIDS or discrimination, forming a community center, or developing special interest groups. Within urban space, community members may be, and often are, spread throughout the urban area with no obvious central residential or business area. Where the gay community is clustered or even ghettoized; as in San Francisco's Castro District, New York City's SoHo, and Miami's South Beach, the

identity of such residential areas and community-specific or friendly/allied businesses is obvious (Sinfield 1997). Not surprisingly, states that have the most same-sex couples residing in them also have the largest urban populations in the US. California, New York, and Texas have led the nation in number of same-sex couples, and the leading metropolitan areas have been San Francisco-Oakland, California, and Seattle-Bellevue-Everett, Washington (Gates and Ost 2004).

Research in urban environments suggests that a strong queer community can at times have a substantial impact on the landscape (Easterbrook et al. 2014). The argument can be made that small towns and rural areas can be hostile to queer individuals and couples who often flee to large cities upon reaching adulthood (Weston 1998). It can also be argued that these individuals must congregate and live in places where there is an identified population of like-minded individuals to form a viable dating scene (Lewis 2014). With this, queer communities are often overwhelmingly thought of as existing in only urban spaces, and it can be assumed that the larger the urban area, the greater the number of safe services and facilities (Doan 2015).

This relationship of urban areas and gay services and facilities leads to what Richard Florida has termed the 'Gay Index' (Florida 2002). The Gay Index has been promoted as a predictor of concentrations of high technology industries and growth. The proposed predictive power of this index does not mean that gays are more likely to work in high technology industry. Instead, it indicates that where these high technology industries are, the area is more likely to be more open and tolerant of many different individual identities (Florida 2002).

The work of geography scholars in sexuality and gender identity has helped individuals to obtain an image of a broad community whose power and identity is evident on a national and international scale (Elder et al 2003). This sense of being a community has helped to bring a greater expanse of civil and human rights within American society. Theoretically, it is only

through the individuals who seek out other likeminded individuals, that these communities are created. Often this is how rural queer communities are established, grow, and can become an important part of the social community as a whole.

# Chapter 3 - Rural Places and Queer Folk

## Introduction

The 19th and 20th centuries brought the largest shift of people from small towns and rural areas to sprawling urban centers ever recorded (Ilberry 2014). The shift is continuing globally in the 21st century. Results from the 2000 US Census showed that 21 percent of the US population lived in rural areas; that number had dropped to 19.3 percent in the 2010 Census. The US Census Bureau defines the term rural as representing all population, housing, and/or territory not included in an urban area. These urban areas are further delineated to 'urban core' and 'urban clusters' of population.  Urban areas have core populations of a population of 50,000 or more and urban clusters are defined as areas with a population of at least 25,000 and less than 50,000. Rural America has become the nostalgic 'heartland' of the country, yet statistics show that rural areas have tended to have higher per capita rates of poverty, substandard housing, and fewer resources for health and mental health care (Sheehan et. al 1985, Fitchen 1991, Lindhorst 1998).

### *Defining Rurality*

What is it exactly that makes a particular place on a map determined to be rural? As an identity or particular place, individuals from all walks of life think of and use the word differently. Just as geographers have characterized spaces as political, functional, and perceptual regions, the concept of a rural place can be defined using political, functional, or perceptual standards. It is perhaps most simple for institutions to use population numbers to divide the landscape into rural, non-metro, metropolitan, or urban, depending on the intent of the designation. It is perhaps most difficult to combine the socio-cultural meaning to a landscape based upon individualistic perceptions while using standardized institutional definitions.

Keith Halfacree (1993) asserted that there are four approaches to defining what is rural. These approaches are descriptive definitions, socio-cultural definitions, defining rural as locality, and defining rural as a social representation. Each approach to defining what is rural, and how it is applied, have different strengths and weaknesses. As with Cloke's (2006) perception, the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches are also often dependent on the viewer or one interacting with the landscape and how their perceptions are shaped by their environment of living. The production of an actual designation of rurality (delineated by political boundaries such as county or incorporated limits) can be entirely different than meanings in the hearts and minds of those who live in or imagine the rural space.

The most common means of defining the U.S. rural landscape can be seen in Census Bureau criteria for place designation. The term 'rural' is classified as "a non-urbanized area of less than 2,500 people (low population density); or a county without a city of greater than 50,000 inhabitants, known as a 'non-metropolitan county'" (US Census Bureau 2015; see also Halfacree 1993, Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008). This characterization attempts to capture the idea that "key features of rural life remain space and distance" (Lapping et al. 1989, 4) and can neglect issues of scale and perception based on human experience or livelihood.

Additional definitions of rural can also involve quantified variables, but make an attempt to account for the relationships among settlement, production, and open land (Lapping et al. 1989, 1). The U.S. Department of Agriculture and Office of Management and Budget consider primary resource-based economic activities—such as agriculture, fishing, forestry, and mineral extraction—to distinguish rural areas as separate from "nonmetropolitan" (Cromartie and Bucholtz 2008). Many scholars cite extensive land use and resource dependency as key dimensions of what is rural (Cloke 1985; 2006, Krannich and Luloff 1991, Marshall et al. 2007).

This is even more evident when these characteristics are reflected in behaviors and connections of the individual to the landscape (Cloke 2003, p. 19-20).

Within the dimension of human perceptions in defining rurality, according to socio-cultural definitions and social representations, there is a construction of rurality that "suggests an image of open country, spacious vistas, and quaint villages, with farming the dominant way of life" (Lapping et al. 1989, 1). This conceptualization is more closely tied to Cloke's (1985) themes of rural definition that embraces self-identified "'rural people' following a 'rural way of life'" (see also Halfacree 1993, Woods 2005), although 'rural people' themselves may have more complex (rather than simple idyllic) views of what 'rural' really entails. Simple definitions are often the most meaningful to the individual and are most flexible, but the spatial and temporal inconsistencies of how they are derived make them difficult to gauge, assess, and apply in any consistent manner.

The first approach concerns the descriptive definitions of the landscape, inhabitants, and livelihoods of places. This approach can create distinctions between rural and urban in a statistical manner. Often we see this approach take form in the use of population data to distinguish between urban and rural (Woods 2005, 2010). The strengths of this method are in the creation of distinct classifications based on numerical distinctions and how these classifications can be quantitatively evaluated. Through this method the common definition or distinction can be adopted by multiple users. However, there are evident weaknesses to this approach. The inability of the classifications to fully distinguish a completely accurate account of rural or urban characteristics detracts from defining place and space in accordance with perception.

The implication of a statistical basis for defining an area such as a large urban area could have boundaries that include portions of the population that may otherwise identify as being

inherently rural (Woods 2005). The greatest advantage of this approach can be viewed as being consistent for use by government organizations such as the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Education, and other federal and state agencies that rely on statistical information and differentiation of rural and urban locations. According to this approach, the definition of rural can be different according to the specific agency, and definitions used are selected for their own purposes. The minimum population for classification of a rural place or population can differ greatly between countries and among perceptions of domestic populations within and outside of designated areas (Woods 2005).

A second approach comes from the socio-cultural definitions of how landscape, place, and space are viewed. This approach tends to define rural populations and entities based on the values, behaviors, and characteristics of community residents. Two of the most well-known examples of this approach come from the work of Ferdinand Tonnies and Louis Wirth (Woods 2005). Tonnies' model uses the evaluation of social ties that may be found in a particular area and are contrasted according to the principles that Tonnies associates with the concepts of Gemeinschaft (generally associated with rural societies) and Gesellschaft (urban). Gemeinschaft is a basic representation of rural society that is centered on personal relationships that are defined or regulated on the basis of traditional social construction. Gesellschaft can be thought of as a product of modern urban society where personal relationships are more constructed in the interest of personal gain. Wirth's model views the characteristics of the population and society as being a distinctive component of the creation of what can be determined as urban or rural. With Wirth's urban society conception there are distinctive characteristics that are examined as dynamic, unstable, and impersonal.

Rural communities can therefore demonstrate characteristics of being stable, integrated, and stratified (Woods 2005). Perhaps the largest weakness of these models is that they seemingly overemphasize the contrasts between rural and urban social relationships. In response to this weakness and in order to deemphasize the seeming dichotomy, there is the conceptualization of a rural-urban continuum (Woods 2005). Despite what we may tend to view as an adequate approach in the form of this continuum, R. E. Pahl (1966) determined that the continuum tends to oversimplify the problematics of defining what are truly rural or urban characteristics and asserted that each place and their relative populations can hold both urban and rural characteristics (as described by Woods 2005).

The third approach, rural as locality, has a primary focus on the definitive processes that help to create what can be considered a rural identity. Halfacree (1993) further identifies three ways in which this approach can define what can be deemed rural. The first is that rural place and space should be associated with primary production, most notably in the form of traditional resource extraction. Secondly, what is considered rural can be defined by low population densities that have definitive links between what is a collective conception of landscape use and economy. Third, the rural location has a role in these collective concepts (Woods 2005). A critique of this approach is that there is a failure to adequately define what is distinctively rural because none of the qualities that were evaluated could be determined to be strictly rural in identity (Woods 2005). However, through the lens of sociological migration and population application this approach can indeed be useful in evaluating the involvement and resiliency of a particular community or network of communities (Garkovich 1989).

The fourth and final approach is that of defining rural as a social construction within place and space. Conceptually, this places value on the symbols and imagery that people may

historically and/or currently associate as belonging to what they see and feel as being rural. Woods (2005) noted that a critique of this approach is evident in Mormont's assertion that what are imagined social spaces can actually occupy the same territory. However, the social construction approach to defining rurality has been embraced by some, such as Paul Cloke (2003) who views the social construction pertaining to non-urban landscapes as a rural idyll, where individual and societal impressions of an idealistic landscape can be projected. Other examples of this approach can be found in the different ways individuals see the landscape, such as in evaluation of political/economy policy, agricultural realities of consumption, and utilitarianism (Woods 2005).

Although there are many interpretations that delve into the psychological, sociological, economic, and political determinations of how to define what is rural, it is important that one individually determines what an appropriate definition is for their purposes. The individual can often have differing ideals of what is or can be considered rural and therefore no single definition may truly encompass what the individual or community may consider to be urban or to be rural. For the work presented here, it is best to approach the communities and individuals that are examined within a framework of a rural-urban continuum. This is in acknowledgement of both rural and urban characteristics being evident in nearly all places, only on differing levels of significance within a modern context.

### Spatial and Social Inequalities in Rural America

Only in recent years have studies in inequality begun incorporating what Doreen Massey (2013) calls a society-in-place approach using spatial inequality as a 'power geometry' where the social stratifications of place and space are examined across a range of differing scales. In using

this approach, we gain value as the disproportion of equality becomes increasingly visible between what can be seen as urban and rural divides.

The links between social and spatial inequalities are, in the most simplistic form, individually and socially reactionary. The loss of jobs due to the closure of a steel plant in rural America can result in a poverty multiplier effect when individuals immediately affected cannot find other employment. This can be due to being older, having less education or skills to obtain another job, or simply the unavailability of jobs within the region. The cause and effect implication that this situation assumes can take many forms and include many additional and interacting factors. However, the results of the situation remain the creation of some form of social and spatial inequality. Aspects of rural social systems that can contribute to the inequality include changes in demographics and changes in economic systems that are inclusive of industry and labor.

## The Layers of Identity

Social stratification in the United States has relied on the distinctive socio-cultural and economic characteristics of those that have immigrated to the Americas. Historically this immigration began with and was formulated by a dominant European population and throughout American history there has been a dominance of racially white, Judeo-Christian, male figures that have shaped and expanded an idealized American national culture. With the progression of the Industrial Revolution and instilment of Manifest Destiny in the American psyche, along with periods of open-door national policy towards immigration, the socio-cultural landscape of America has changed in terms of race/ethnicity, class, and gender. These historical occurrences, in part, have shaped a nationalistic ideal of the American Dream—the belief that the individual can transcend traditional class structures of race, gender, and economics. This in turn has

produced the need for a revision of the traditional views of social stratification and the

consideration of factors that lie outside the factors of traditional forces of race, class, and gender

(Bell 1992).

### *Queering Social Stratification*

According to David Grusky (1994), the modern approach to social stratification is in the

intersection of race, class, and gender. Although these factors have traditionally been viewed as

separate entities of classification, modern economic systems and socially responsible policies

have theoretically enabled the development of hybrid stratification types where the individual

intersects with the traditional views of the stratification structure (Grusky 1994). First, post-

industrial economic systems in the US have allowed workers to have seemingly greater mobility

in labor positions in difference to pre-industrial systems (Lipset and Ray 1996). And secondly,

political policy has developed significantly over the decades to help create a more socially

responsible and stable stratification system, theoretically creating a more level playing field for

all individuals.

These ideals of social responsibility and economic mobility have theoretically increased

the freedom to cross the lines of social stratification despite what race/ethnicity, gender, or class

into which the individual was born. However, there is evidence that the American dream may,

despite the public imagination, be more susceptible to stratification structures such as race,

gender and class (Neuman 2013).

*Non-Heterosexual Stratification*

The queer population has become one of the most debated and visible groups within the

arena of recognition of social justice and equity issues in recent decades. Although the queer

rights movement is thought to have officially begun in 1969 with the Stonewall Riots, the

population has always been evident in cultures around the world; indeed, there were groups and individuals working towards social justice and equality since the beginning of the 20th century (d'Emilio 2012). To completely attempt to separate and evaluate this community apart from the larger heterosexual culture would be an injustice to the understanding of how American social stratification works. By not paying attention to the collective and cultural aspects of stratification limits, the ability of researchers—and society as a whole—to recognize the importance of the individual and group in creating change within stratification processes is diminished (Meyer 2007). It is for this reason that the queer community should be evaluated as not only a singular entity but also in relationships to existing and visible lines of social stratification.

According to Alan Sinfield (2004), one of the most ambitious theories of social stratification has combined principles of Freudian psychology and Marxism to attempt to create a theoretical base of sexual repression in the service of domination. This theory of sexual repression as catalyst of power, originally developed by Herbert Marcuse (2015) and more fully explored by Michel Foucault (1990), sought to devise an understanding of how sexuality played into existing social power relations. As a result, same-sex couples develop a stronger sense of perceived struggle within the stratification process because of the identification of the individual with overlapping lines of existing stratification (Sinfield 2004).

In explanation, the non-heteronormative individual may experience multiple lines of social stratification that the heteronormative individual would not normally experience. Often queer communities are seen within a sexual context and yet the sexual act itself is not as important here as is the individual's perception of placement within society and the stratification process through performance of identity. To appear and to act within acceptable heterosexual

parameters is to be more readily accepted into the normal social stratification processes (,

Wilchins 2004, Massey 2013).

It is the action of passing, or to be identified as part of the larger heterosexual society,

that is most compromising to many queer individuals. The more acceptable an individual is to

the larger heterosexual community, the more likely that the paths of mobility will be more fluid

and accessible (Sinfield 2004). Yet, as often occurs, the individual or group will often

compromise their outward identity, internal feelings or outward action of identity as being queer

the more that the power relation systems of the larger society control the view of what is

acceptable (Halberstam 1993, Sinfield 2004). As a consequence of the loss of queer identity due

to the processes of stratification acceptance, the individual is denied a sense of personal and

community identity. This loss of identity presents the problem of becoming a hidden or invisible

component of the social system (Binnie and Valentine 1999). Here, invisible is in the context of

being overlooked or unseen among power relations (Knopp 1995, 159). This idea of being

hidden or invisible is what is especially unique to the queer individuals within social

stratification because, despite a known construction and presence of identity within society, little

attention has been paid to the significance of this community in terms of relationships to other

social lines within that stratification.

As previously stated, hetero-normative behavior allows the individual to pursue more

opportunity within the mobility of stratification. The individual who 'passes' as being part of the

larger society is more accepted within the social structure and has, theoretically, more

advantages than the individual who identifies or is perceived as being gender different than what

is apparent to society. Overall, the same debate of acceptable and non-acceptable interpretations

of gender identity applies to the queer population (Harrison 2013, Pfeffer 2014). Those outside

of the normative—mostly those in gender transition or individuals considered transgender—are

faced with greater obstacles in terms of mobility. However, for the queer population the

disassociation from gender comes in the form of acceptance of personal identification with one's

sexuality (Sinfield 2004). The individual's sexuality is not necessarily a factor in comparison

with gender depending on the understanding of how the individual chooses to express

themselves within the larger social stratification process.

Despite the difficulties and dangers associated with generalization of comparison of

social stratification factors with the queer population, it is evident that the community as a whole

represents a micro-scale version of the larger normative social structure. Within the community,

many facets of stratification exist and are arguably intensified.  Expected contemporary

differentiations of salary, mobility, and acceptance are evident and can be applied to the

perceptions of gay men and lesbian women; bisexual men and women and transgender

individuals all have their distinct differences and obstacles.  This suggests that differences in

gender and sexuality as different from the normative view are affected by the concept of

'passing' in the larger socio-cultural environment (Lewis et. al 2015).

Generational differences are distinctly evident within the queer community, particularly

within the gay male population (Lewis et al. 2015).  The most evident difference generationally

for the queer community is the knowledge and history of queer communities prior to the

HIV/AIDS epidemic beginning in the early 1980s.  The epidemic decimated the communal oral

narrative of generations of the queer community and has left an irreparable gap in communal

knowledge (Lewis et al. 2015).

In the past decade there has been a growth of interest in aging of queer populations (De

Vries and Croghan, 2014).  The earliest research on queer aging engaged primarily "to challenge

the image of the lonely and bitter old queer" (Hughes 2006, 57).  Findings by other researchers,

including studies within a variety of queer spaces, have suggested that older gay men and

lesbians benefit from navigating a stigmatized identity through a sense of "crisis competence"

(Fredriksen-Goldsen and Muraco 2010, 402).  In many ways this also informs us of the resilience

in dealing with inequalities associated with older age particularly within the gay male population

and the crisis of the AIDS epidemic.  More recent research has moved to place the aging of the

queer community into a focus on social support and community based needs (Ward et. al 2011).

Although the power structures within the queer community reflect the greater social

structure, the experience of each group can be magnified by the internal power structure of the

community (Binnie 1995, Wilchins 2004).  The intensity and disparity of power relations is

perhaps one of the community's biggest obstacles in social visibility.  The lack of cohesive unity

is only a starting point for the evaluation of how the population is or is not a part of the larger

social structures.  This disparity can also be seen as being part of the larger problem of not being

an entirely visible entity within society.

The hidden or invisible component of the queer population in social stratification is

significant because the relations of power − race, class, and gender − cannot be entirely

applicable in the examination of how queer structures of identity and power exist in relation to,

and are formed by, these traditional processes of stratification.  By examining the queer

individual and community in relation to the three lines of stratification (according to race, class,

and gender), there are some comparisons that may be drawn to further understand the

significance of the queer population in relation to the larger community or population,

particularly in rural environments (Evan 1999).

*LGBT and Rural Communities*

What we can determine for this work is that the formation of queer communities has, as discussed previously, most often been seen as an urban phenomenon (Weightman 1981; Castells 1983; Knopp 1995, 2004; Abraham 2009). A strong demand for perceived conformity in rural settings can lead to the discouragement of any deviation from the visualized traditional way of living (Weston 1995). Therefore, rural areas may tend to be socially and morally controlled by a conservative majority, and the rural queer community may remain invisible to the mainstream conservative community.

Rural queer community/ies may be only slightly visible, if at all evident to the outside world. Such places in the rural landscape may often only allow for a private world of contacts that surface in a few bars, clubs, and other places, and the knowledge of these places can only be found within the community itself (Hindle 1994, Kramer 1995). While many within the queer community confront non-acceptance from the general population regardless of where they are located, they are perhaps more subject to hostility and reminded more of their differences in rural communities.

Past research has decidedly focused on specific aspects of queer communities, particularly lesbian-relevant issues and life in rural settings (Lord and Reid 1996) or the 'growing up' segment as told by gay men who have left the rural environment for a more successful life in an urban environment (Fellows 1998). Quite a bit of research and literature of rural queer communities focuses on providing services to this community (D'Augelli and Hart 1987, Smith and Mancoske 1997). The overwhelming point these studies make is that most of the research on the queer community has been based on urban samples, and that these individuals and communities living in rural environments have been ignored.

The urban image of the queer community is really only evident when contrasted with the research into the rural queer population and experiences. In *Queer Country*, Bell and Valentine (1995b) outlined the rural existence and experiences of LGBT individuals. By doing so, the authors make a distinction between two groups. First there are those who were brought up in rural environments and who then migrate to the urban to 'escape' the oppressive rural morality and controls. Secondly, there are those individuals who flee the oppressive urban landscape to find refuge in the rural alternative. For the first group, those who leave the rural environment for an urban setting, the city is seen as an opportunity to define one's self as gay or lesbian or to express their true gender identity. For those who choose to live in a rural community, the reason for migrating tends to be less than clear but no less important. Although Bell and Valentine identify and describe a community in the rural sexual landscape, it is important to keep in mind that individuals are at the core of the community. Each individual has a different interpretation of surrounding space. Individuals seek each other out to create a space that has an idealistic quality of community yet remains different for the individual.

The rural construction of gender and sexuality has been explored by academics to create a significant development in the geographic work on sexualities and how the rural context relates to the construction of gender and sexuality in urban communities (Binnie and Valentine 1999). Most significantly, the academic evaluation of rural queer geographies has led to a further understanding of how rural LGBT identity is formed (Kramer 1995, Bell and Valentine 1995b, Valentine 2002). Some argue that the urban and rural dichotomy is both crucial to understanding the formation of, and essential to, fulfilling the individual identity in both the rural and urban (Binnie and Valentine 1999). Kath Weston's (1995) pessimistic view of rural LGBT identity

and portrayal of the rural individual and community as dependent upon the urban communities to reevaluate and reinforce the individual sexual identity is one example.

Weston (1995) relies on the evidence that many rural LGBT individuals migrate from rural areas to urban centers in order to feel more acceptance within community and social structures. It is, indeed, important to assess how much the migration of the community between urban and rural places may influence the rural community. Kramer (1995), Fellows (1996, 2005), and Howard (1999) have conducted research and amassed the stories that delve into the lives of gay men and lesbians living in rural areas of the Great Plains, Midwest, and American South. These studies evaluate the placement of the individual in the social constructs of the rural community and how urban influences on the rural community create a foundation for the formation of an individual rural identity in relationship to sexuality or gender identity.

### Rural Construction of Identity

Kramer (1995) and Fellows (1996) make it evident that the modern creation of an urban LGBT identity has helped to establish and influence queer identities of the rural community. This is through the migration of the individual from rural to urban and back to the rural, and also through the access to media by the rural that is mostly urban in origin. Howard (1999) gives a significantly different aspect of the rural identity through a historical viewpoint of individuals living and growing up in rural Alabama during the earlier part of the twentieth century. This time period is important in assessing how much modern media have enabled the growth of an identifiable rural queer community and individual.

For most of those interviewed in Howard's research, the idea of queer or homosexual was something that was not identifiable during their formative years. It is only the influence of the outside, perhaps urban, construct of the homosexual through politicization or media that

distinguished those individuals in the rural from the heterosexual majority.  This is exclusionary

of the sexual act itself.  As many of Howard's subjects reiterate, the act was only natural.  In

contrast, the stories of rural queer individuals found in *Small Town Gay Bar* (Newman 2004) and

*Country Boys* (Campbell et al. 2006), create a near unified telling of how rural queer life is

different from that of the urban individual and subject to the normative/gendered ideations of the

construction of power (Sinfield 2004).

The creation of a defined LGBT identity has led to an increased realization of the

individual as different from the societal norm (Chauncey 1994, Brown 2005, D'Emilio 1998).

Especially in rural communities of America during the mid-part of the twentieth century, the

queer individual increasingly became the outcast of the rural social framework.  Yet, through

progress in the urban community's fight for human rights protections and growing social

acceptance during the latter part of the century and into the new millennium, the rural landscape

has become less threatening to the existence of the community or individual (Chauncey 2000,

Bell 2003).  The queer individual in the rural landscape can therefore be seen as having an

identity that is both urban and rural in construct.  This is due to the combination of secondary

societal influences that are urban in origin and the primary influences of rural landscape and

society.  The influence of the rural place and community is what can be most important in the

identity of the rural queer (Smith and Mancoske 1997).

The influence of what is considered a hetero-normative masculinity on the rural queer

culture arises from social indoctrination (Ahmed 2006).  This social indoctrination begins at the

earliest stages of development and permeates the growth and understanding of the individual. In

the queer individual, there is a meshing of normative and non-normative behaviors that differ yet

are a reflection of the social framework of the rural space (Campbell et al. 2006).  The hetero-

normative masculinity therefore becomes a part of the rural identity through the individual's emulation of what is observed in the rural community and landscape.

The rural identity of queer communities in this context can be represented as separate from those of those urban counterparts and a construction of a sexual idyll (Bell 2000). This is different than the construction of an individual self-identity because it plays on the urban construct of the rural and the rural homosexual experience. The research of popular media shows that the urban construction of rural identities places the object in the rural landscape as a sexually fetishized occurrence or being (Bell 2000). This can also be said of the use of rural space by the urban queer community as a means of attempting to develop a hetero-masculine image (Weston 1995, Bersani 1995).

There are many LGBT individuals who have embraced rural life, whether out of necessity or choice. Rural space holds for some a sense of safety in family identity, and for others an identity not constructed within an urban context with which they do not connect. Idealism of embodied choice of identity and an acknowledgement of needs for specialized communities has at times led to the establishment of exclusive men's and women's communities (Lord and Reid 1996, McCarthy 2000, Smith and Holt 2005). Gay men in particular have also created a loose network of small groups and sub-identities that have become known as the Radical Faeries or Bear identities that are committed to living in harmony and partnership with the land. The intention of these specialized communities or groups has been confirmation and affirmation of one's identity while living in rural areas. A few such establishments still exist today and have a tangible network of communication and community (Hennen 2008).

The queer and hetero-normative urban perception of the rural can be seen as distinguishable from the actuality of the rural community. Kramer (1995), Fellows (1996), and

Howard's (1999) work on rural communities and individual identity reveal that the rural has always had an existing community and identity for LGBT persons. What separates the rural from the urban in this regard is how the identity of the place, community, and individual are portrayed. Bell (2000) determines in his work on media portrayals of the rural queer that the reality lays beyond the representations presented by the media. Jo Little (2002, 669) felt that until the end of the twentieth century those involved in rural social research had been resistant to the ideas of identifying a rural masculinity or rural femininity, especially in regard to the queer individual and community, and this has led to a progression of resistance to the creation of discourse about rural individuals and communities.

## Exploring the Lived Landscape: Queer Rural Geography

The historic and modern perceptions of rural America have often provided an iconography for the American rural image. Embedded in the often hyper-masculine imagery is also the imagery of an imagery of hardened and masculine actions of the pioneer woman that has arguably shaped the modern American image of women. Little (2002) argued that geographers have only half-heartedly embraced these rural gendered perspectives and that the most glaring oversight in rural research has been the failure to examine gender in rural space. As a result, our understandings of the specifically gendered workings of people in rural space are highly underdeveloped, especially regarding how men and women come to see themselves as masculine or feminine in the first place, and how these categories are contested by the experiences of rural non-normative populations. This is made more interesting because gender and rural space are often intimately linked, especially in Western and American culture.

As with sexuality, geographers are also finally turning their attention to the gendered organization of rural space and, as some of the emerging work in this field shows, gender does

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not operate smoothly in the rural context and is often as complicated as in its urban counterpart (Abraham 2009). Arguably, the 'reality of the rural image' that is found in the American psyche can be a distinctive function of the identity of place. Here, the sky meets the prairies and the farmlands and small communities of the landscape are a part of the rural identity. Even the cities of the Great Plains, such as Wichita, Omaha, and Grand Forks, have a dominant rural identity in their industry and culture. Here, rural places are not just a location or size of population; they are the foundations of individual lifestyle and culture. This lifestyle is a combination of the social constructions of individual identity and the rural landscape into a heterosexually normative identity (Katz 2007). Little (1999) claimed that this hetero-normative identity of the socio-cultural and physical relationship is inherent in nearly all aspects of perceived rural-urban dichotomies such as with types of occupations, social and physical environments, size of communities, density of population, opportunities or barriers to social mobility and direction of migration, social stratification and in systems of social interaction.

The influence of the rural landscape on rural identity is also important to consider. Space and place can be recognized as a socio-cultural construction and applied to the landscape (Pritchard and Morgan 2000). The landscape is the notion of physical place but is also the pictorial representation as comprehended by the individual. The conceptualization of the landscape as a socio-cultural construct leads to the argument that the landscape has a gendered identity (Flora, Flora, and Fey 2004). This identity is a reflection of a normative heterosexual and masculine social and cultural domination (Packard 2005). The construction of gender in rural identity has many different factors. Examples of these factors include familial construction and identity, labor, or socio-political hierarchies that are based in hetero-normative gender roles (Liepens 2000). The rural American Great Plains and more specifically places like Kansas are

viewed as hetero-normative landscapes where those of different sexualities or gender identities conform to or are pressured by hetero-normative constructions of public identity and image.

Academically, geography has feminized space as an object in an obviously masculine gaze that has been 'cast as a seductive but wild place that must be observed, penetrated, and mastered by the geographer' (Sparke 1996, p. 212). The representation of the landscape becomes grounded in powered gender relations that characterize society (Rose 1993). The ties between society and landscape can influence the dominance of the landscape's cultural identity as being one where the norm is of a heterosexual masculinity that permeates all levels of society.

The resistance to the identification of a rural gendered image in queer communities is evident. There has been very little research performed concerning gendered processes in rural queer communities. Some researchers, such as Bell (1991), evaluate the representations of masculinity in the rural context, while others look at how urban and rural individuals and communities are different (Binnie and Valentine 1999). Although these topics are valuable in our understanding of rural communities and individuals, they do not assess how these communities and individuals perceive themselves. In the American rural landscape, there has been little research conducted beyond the basic acknowledgment of a rural queer community let alone the ideation of non-gender binaries. The reality is, although academia realizes that there is a rural queer population, there is not a distinct understanding of how this population may portray itself or the individuals accept or view themselves in the larger rural socio-cultural framework.

# Chapter 4 - Study Area

## Where the Hills Meet the Plains

The Flint Hills of Kansas hold a unique place within the American landscape. Historically, the Flint Hills represented the gateway to the frontier of the Great Plains and the westward migration of the 1800s. This hilly prairie region, sometimes included as a part of the Great Plains region (Shortridge 1980), is the focus of this study.

The Flint Hills also can be viewed as a vernacular region. The vernacular region is determined by the popular spatial perception of inhabitants of a particular place or space (Zelinsky 1980). In essence, the Flint Hills vernacular region is one that is both a physically evident region − in the sense that there are particular physiographic and ecological characteristics − but also a perceived cultural entity. Physiographic regions are determined by their physical features, such as bedrock and homogeneity of surface topography; in the case of the Flint Hills the defining characteristic is the Permian layer of limestone (Fenneman 1916).

The Flint Hills vernacular region consists of a larger space than that of the ecoregion or physiographic region and includes a total of 25 counties with an area of 19,601 square miles (Figure 4.1). This area was determined by including the full county area although the regional boundaries may not be inclusive of the entire county as defined borders of a place may have conflicting meanings to individuals; concepts of proximity, nearness, and inclusion can mean at different times different things to the individual (Tobler 2004). As an attempt to include the multi-dimensional meanings of what the Flint Hills mean as a place to those who live there I have conceptualized the Flint Hills vernacular region. This vernacular region has been envisioned by overlapping two differing data sets provided by the NSF Long Term Ecological Research Program at Konza Prairie Biological Station. This vernacular region of place and

cultural identity is applied to the representation of the Flint Hills: the Flint Hills Ecoregion III (Figure 4.2) and the Flint Hills Physiographic Region (Figure 4.3). In addition, examining James Shortridge's (1980) work on the vernacular regions of Kansas helps to solidify that the vernacular region of the Flint Hills extends beyond portrayals in physiographic or ecological terms (Shortridge 1980, 84).

The ethnic and cultural identities of the historic Flint Hills landscape have a complex origination in the American westward expansion experience. Populations of historical European/ Euro-American migrations mixed with Hispanic and Native American cultures from the west and south helped to develop a diverse population and intermixing of cultures (Shortridge 1988). Distinctive identities related to what one would consider a homeland have helped to form distinctive concentrations of identity in rural communities and sub-regions of the Flint Hills (Conzen 1993). These homelands or hearths have had a lasting impact on the regional and local communities of the Flint Hills (Zelinsky 1980). Locations such as Council Grove, Wamego, and Abilene continue to hold on to their respective cultural identities through festivals, advertising, and a conscious determination to capitalize on their historic nature: Council Grove's Native American/pioneer identity, Wamego's Dutch heritage and building off of popular cultural identifiers such as the *Wizard of Oz* theme, and Abilene's historic connection to cattle and cowboy culture. The determination of the Flint Hills cultural region with the addition of areas outside and from within the defined boundaries of the physiographic and ecological aspects allows for a greater understanding of the cultural aspects that may contribute to LGBT lives, and the queer community's connections in the region.
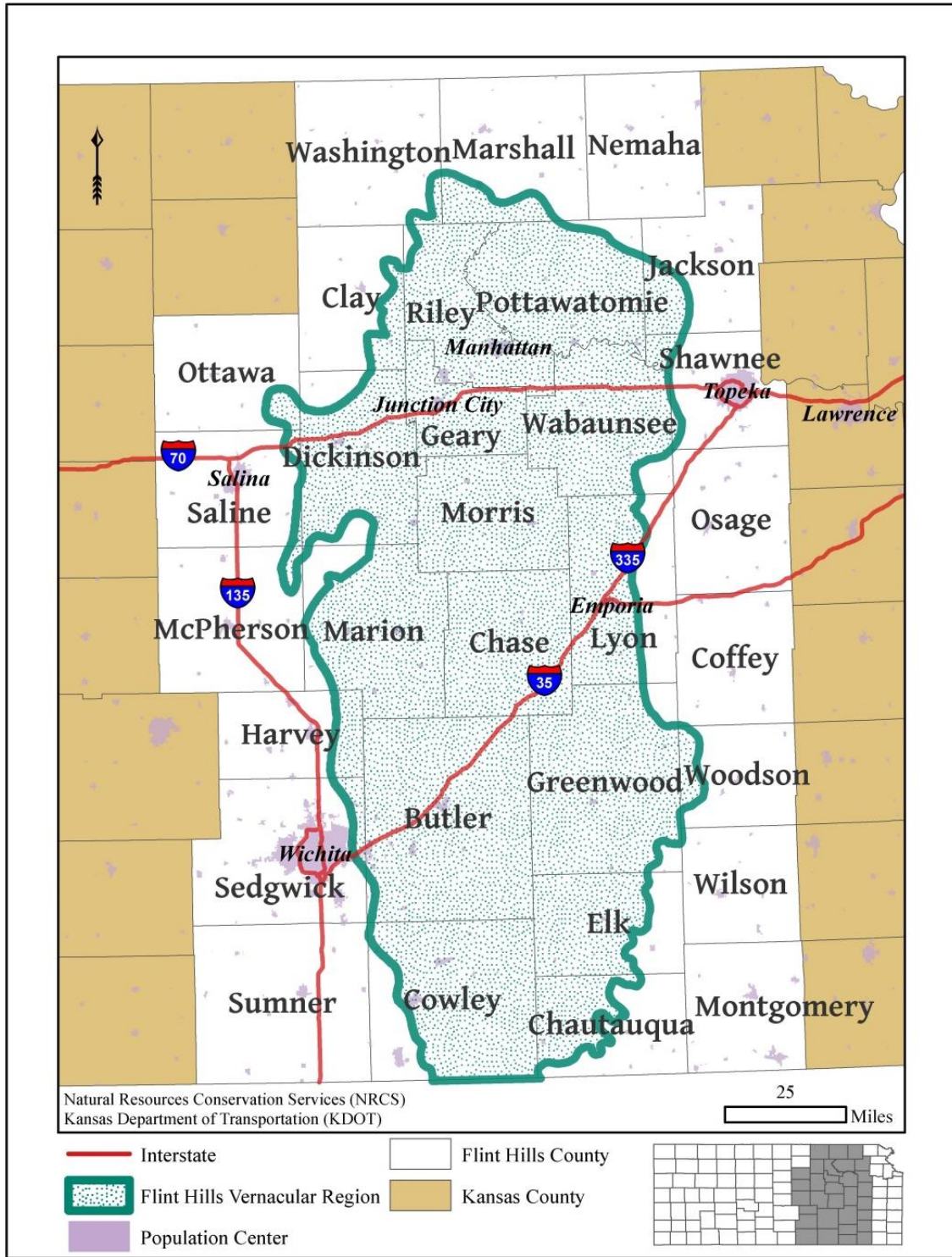
Figure 4.1. Kansas Flint Hills Vernacular Region. Source: Data for Flint Hills Vernacular Region was supported by the NSF Long Term Ecological Research Program at Konza Prairie Biological Station. Map prepared by Brandon Haddock and Thomas Larsen.
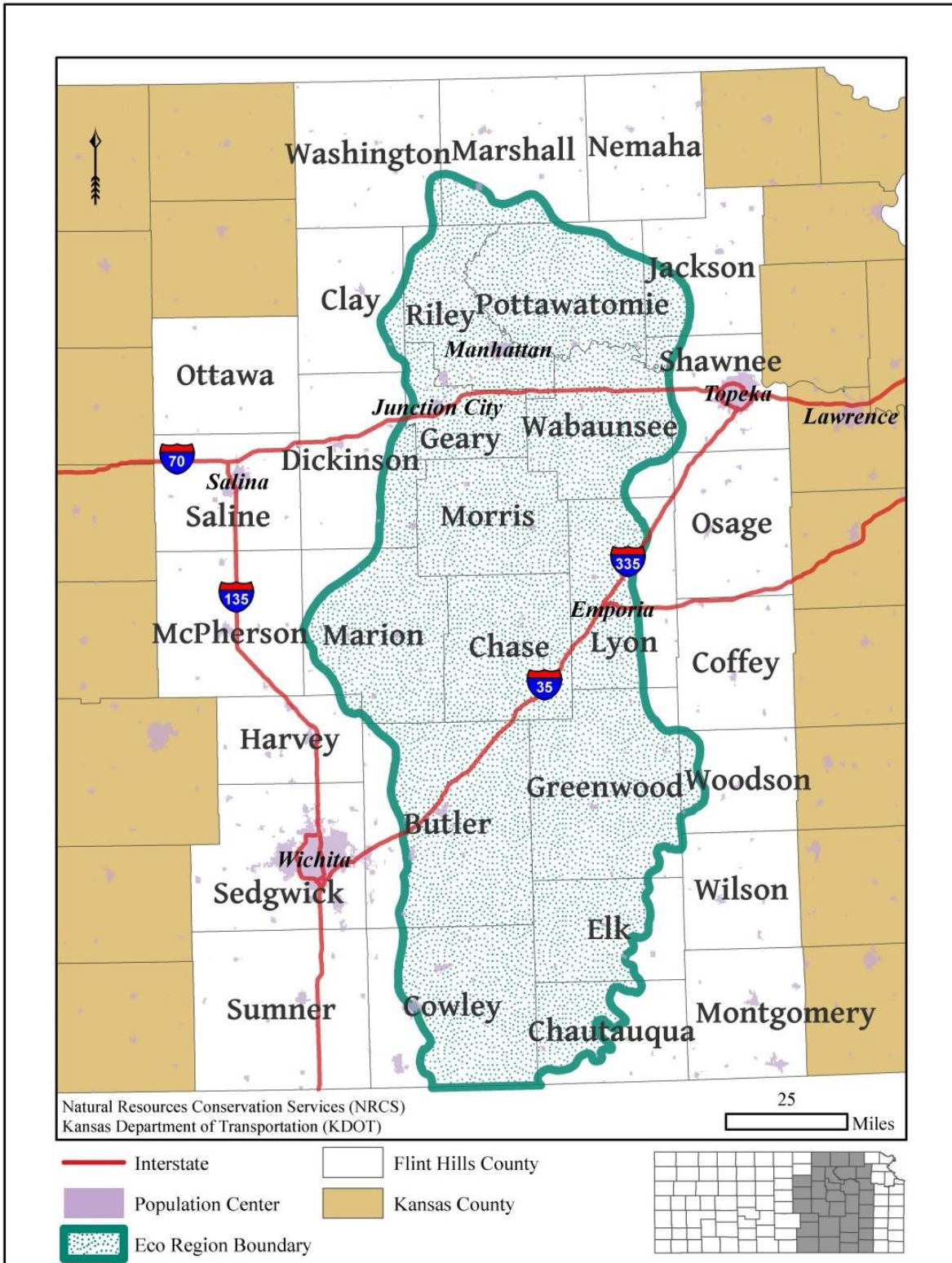
Figure 4.2. Kansas Flint Hills Ecoregion III. Source: Data for Flint Hills Ecoregion III was supported by the NSF Long Term Ecological Research Program at Konza Prairie Biological Station. Map prepared by Brandon Haddock and Thomas Larsen.
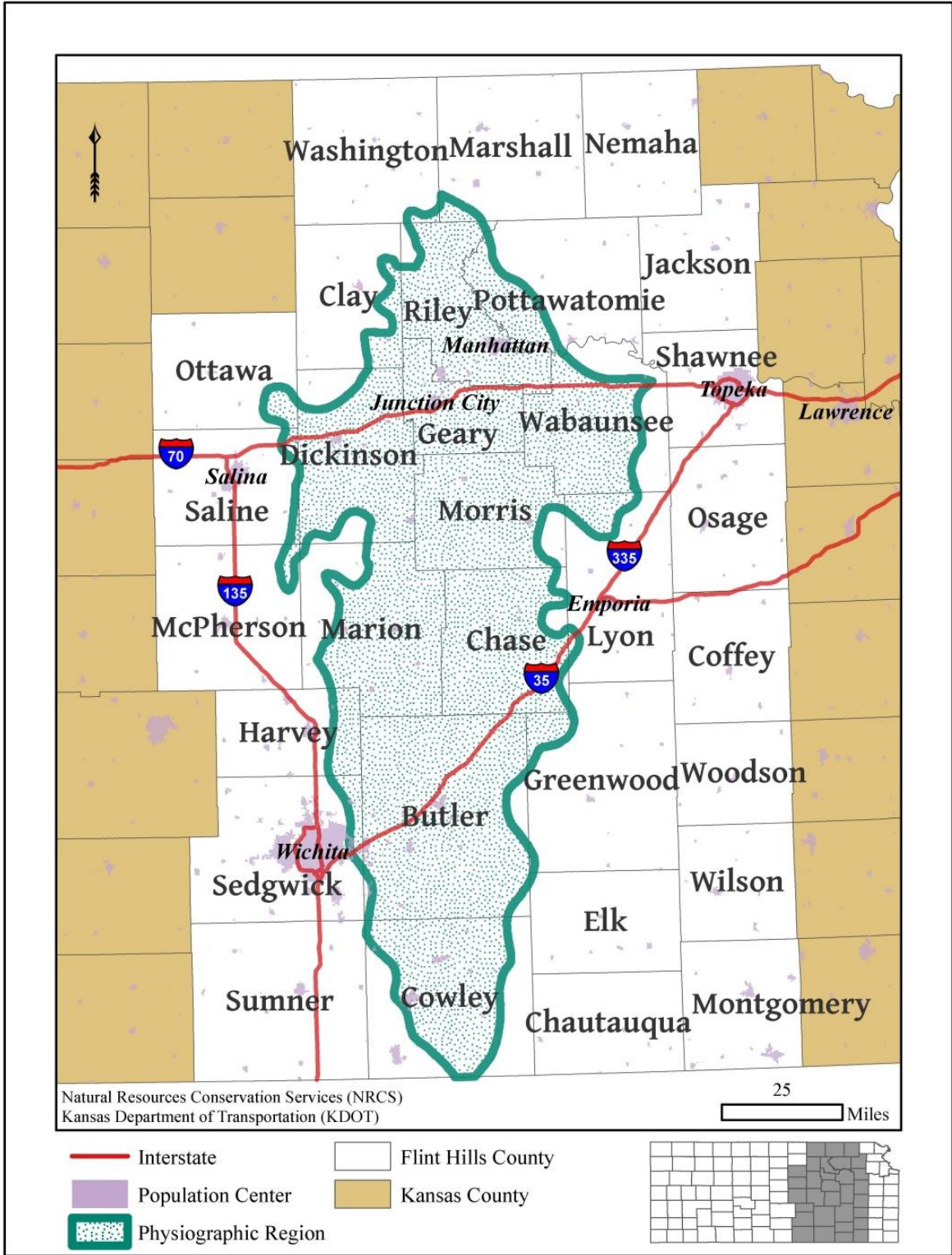
Figure 4.3. Kansas Flint Hills Physiographic Region. Source: Data for the Flint Hills Physiographic region was supported by the NSF Long Term Ecological Research Program at Konza Prairie Biological Station. Map prepared by Brandon Haddock and Thomas Larsen.

The total population of the counties within the study area as determined by the vernacular region is 1,173,151 persons per the 2010 Census (Appendix B). Centers of population within the rural environment of the Flint Hills cultural region are the central loci of queer social networks. The largest centers of population in close proximity are Wichita, Topeka, Manhattan, Salina, and Emporia; only the Manhattan/Fort Riley/Junction City metropolitan area is entirely within the Flint Hills Region. The Manhattan/Fort Riley/Junction City area in particular has long been a representative community of multiple identities due to the Fort Riley military complex and Kansas State University.

Because of higher than average populations and the extent of urbanization of the area associated with Wichita in Sedgwick County and Topeka in Shawnee County, these counties and populations have been removed from the study area of the Flint Hills because of the intent to reflect the characteristics of a mostly rural region. The focus was to remain on the smaller communities that can hold a more rural identity. Much of the area and urban population size of these two counties is not directly attributable to the region of study (Figure 4.3); their exclusion reduces the population to 496,852 persons. However, when the urban areas of Salina and Emporia (smaller regional service centers) are examined they are affected to a larger extent by the vernacular region and have been included in the population size of the region. Access to and subjects' willingness to participate in the study area further concentrated the research to very particular counties of the vernacular region (Figure 4.4). This further decreases the number of counties serving as the core for investigation (through focus groups and interviews) to nine: Chase, Clay, Dickinson, Geary, Lyon, Morris, Pottawatomie, Riley and Wabaunsee (Figure 4.4). This nine county area had a 2010 population of 204,826.

Figure 4.4. Flint Hills Nine County Study Area. Source: Data for the Flint Hills Physiographic region was supported by the NSF Long Term Ecological Research Program at Konza Prairie Biological Station. Map prepared by Brandon Haddock and Thomas Larsen.
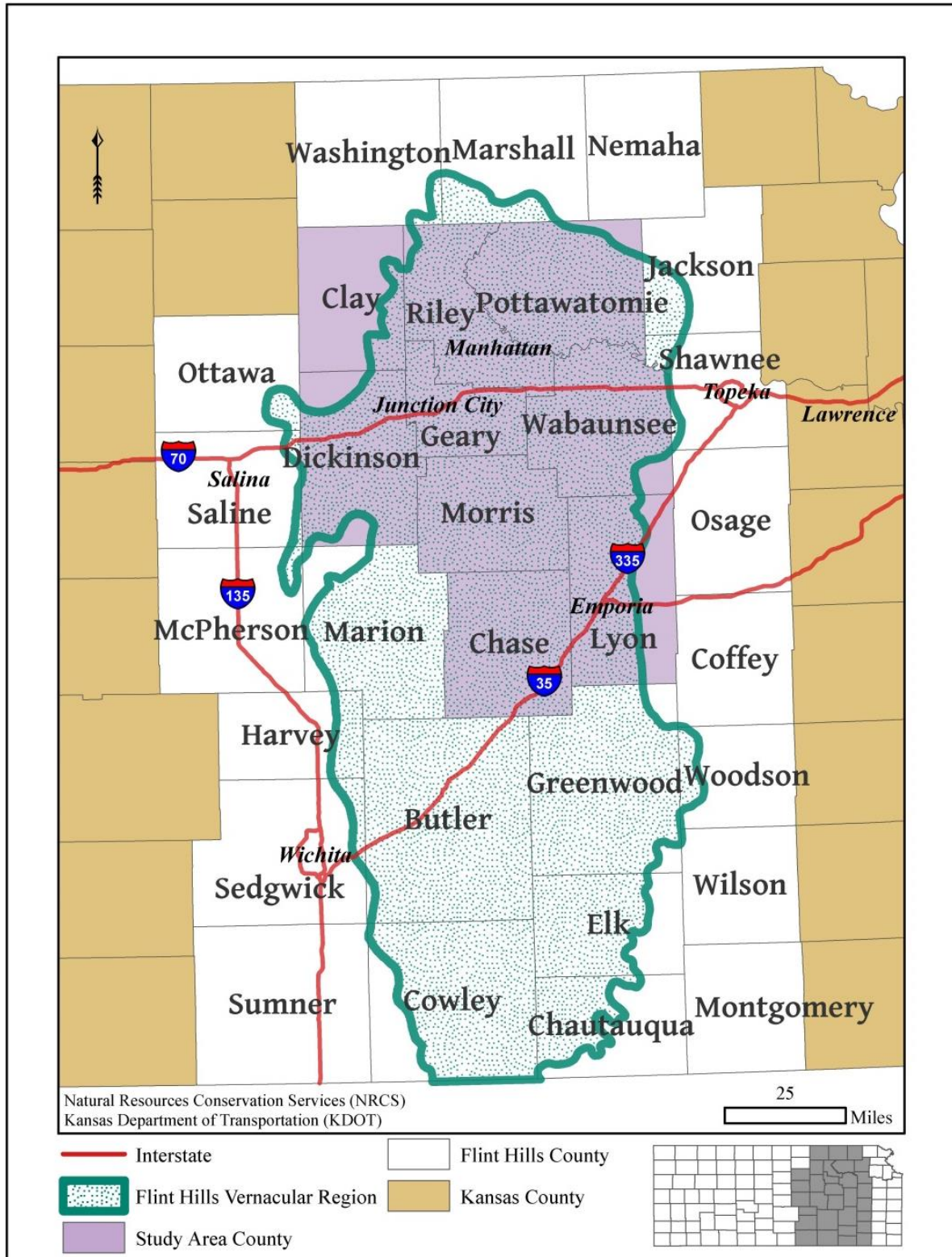
*Population, Migration, and Human and Social Capital*

Net migration can be explained as the difference in the number of people moving to and moving from a given area in a given time period (Johnson and Cromartie 2006). This movement of population has added to the instability of human capital growth of the region in recent years through the out-migration to more populous urban centers within regions (Flora, Flora and Fey 2004). Essentially, what we may define as human capital is the combination of abilities of the members of a particular society; social capital is connectedness and mutual support. Human capital is dependent upon the size and make-up of the population (Purvis and Grainger 2013), as well as the knowledge and abilities held by members of the population and has its basis in the economic structures of place such as employment, production, and infrastructure. Related to these aspects, social capital is dependent on the connections among people, including institutions and a 'sense of' community that help to maintain the well-being of people in a particular area.

Generational concepts of attachment to place and how rural space in particular is identified as being important to one's well-being is also a part of the human capital of rural landscapes. Development of an attachment to a rural place or aesthetics of landscape is influential in the cultural identity of particular generations (Rishbeth and Powell 2013). Yet, this generational 'knowledge' of the landscape and attachment to place is not fully formulated within any particular age group. One may assume that older populations in rural communities have a stronger attachment to place, but multi-generational populations continue to exist in rural locations. Change to location over time appears to affect the individual concept of place attachment more than mobility or make-up of population within a given community (Savage et al. 2005, Degen 2008, Buffel et al. 2013).

The concepts of human capital and social capital as part of the society of a place or space are important to consider: they are linked not only to the overall populations in a particular area, but also to subpopulations including LGBT components. The social structure of the region is affected by the amount and form of human capital present. Within the Great Plains region (and rural America, in general) there have been changes to social structures due to population changes, including outmigration and changes to minority make-up and expression. Connected to the population and economic shifts of the region, changes have also been occurring within the infrastructure of rural counties and communities. With the loss of particular industry or economic mechanisms contributing to the human capital of a place, specific populations (such as those in the work force, those with children, and even the elderly) are able to contribute less to the economic base of a community or region. This has far-reaching impacts on education, healthcare, and other associated infrastructures that help to form a sense of social community and in turn affects the social capital of the communities in these places (Kassel and Carlin 2000, Flora, Flora, and Fey 2004).

### *Queering the Flint Hills*

The queer communities of the Flint Hills are a part of the human and social capital of the region. Although individuals are not at times viewed openly as LGBT they do have a place within the social construction of this regional space. In all aspects of community, as educators, farmers, business owners, students, military personnel, and multitude of other intersecting identities, the queer community members of the rural small towns and communities play a role in the viability of their communities. These are the individuals who may exist in invisibility within their communities, but also have a community identity with a history and a cultural existence. This is a rural landscape that some may ignore as being home to LGBT individuals and

communities.  However, there is a history here for many queer identities: a history of family and of being a part of the Flint Hills, a history of being a part of the queer Flint Hills community. And there are definite glimpses into this history.

There are community members of the Flint Hills who are proud of their lived experiences here, and want to make sure that those identities and stories are not erased by time.  Examples of these can be seen in the mentorship abilities of many queer community members to those just coming out of the closet, the archiving of queer oral histories (Albin 2010), and even in a tabloids of decades ago, when a big city publication took a look at the 'gay' scene in Manhattan, the Little Apple in the Flint Hills (Appendix C).  From speaking with other queer community members, in finding the one or two pieces of literature written about this community, and by living in the community, I know the rural queer communities are a part of the region and that there are LGBT individuals in all walks of life in the Flint Hills.  The question for me is do we know how these communities experience their place in the region? Do we know how they navigate the larger community or how their experiences are affected by those around them that may not see them as equal, or see them at all?

I believe that there are many facets of the places in which we live that we all want to know more about.  But it is those facets that we can relate to that are most often what we want to know more about. The Flint Hills is a big space, with many small rural places within it.  From the northern counties to the southern counties of the region, there are many different community identities that are visible and countless identities when we begin to scratch beneath the surface.

# Chapter 5 - Methods

## Positioning

My position as a gay individual from a rural community provides me with a particular standpoint to view the rural queer community. This identity as part of the community being investigated affords a unique perspective on this particular community. My own experiences have admittedly helped to guide the development of this research, but it has been important for me to remain as objective as possible in conducting the research itself.

The queer standpoint methodology, which connects my identity with the research, has its origins in feminist epistemologies (King 1999, Krane 2001). As part of a much larger theoretical framework of qualitative and lived experiences of marginalized situations, standpoint can be applicable to varied individual and communal identities within society. The standpoint is essentially the descriptor of the relation of the researcher to the subject. We can describe standpoint theory as the allowance of knowledge of identity and culture by those members of society who may be viewed as less powerful or who are marginalized by the larger society (Brooks 2007). It is because of this marginalized position that they [I] can provide a more complete view of their situation (King 1999). The most basic actions of the individual in what can be a perceptually less-than-supportive culture enable the person − with their[3] particular standpoint − to be aware of the dominant perspective in society, as well as their own placement within the overall social perspective.

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[3]They/their is used in the place of gender specific pronouns when the gender identity of the individual or in reference to individuals in the community is not critical to understanding the perspective in which the pronoun is used. Unfortunately, this is the only gender-neutral option in English, although generally not grammatically proper.

For such a marginalized position that the queer community holds within academic research, it is indeed important for queer researchers to position themselves within the context of the community that they are engaged in.  It should be recognized that oftentimes we are researching ourselves.  However, devaluing a queer standpoint because it comes from and intends to represent a marginalized voice is problematic.  The inherent relation of the researcher to the topic and people we are investigating empowers the voice of the subject (Hartsock 1983). We can view queer standpoint in relation to similar criticisms of research within a culture by a member of that identity or culture.  These include critiques on academics of color, gendered voices in feminism, or the cultural assumptions of a subject based on outside perception (Longino et al. 1993, 205; Foley 2003, Kronsell 2005).  These arguments simply represent a reasoning that has been concluded from a dominant perspective (Hurtado 1997).

It can be argued that the use of standpoint methods can actually enhance the researcher's attainment of objectivity.  The premise of the standpoint values the inclusion of the context of individual perception of the researcher and the surroundings and the communities that they may intersect with based on common aspects or shared identity (Harding 1993).  It is further suggested that as the standpoint perspective comes from the lives of marginalized people that they also provide insight to more dominant perspectives, related to the structured positions of race, class, gender, or other privilege (Hurtado 1997, Haraway 2003).

A criticism of all standpoint theory and one that we find within the context of this research is that I cannot fully embody the subject identities of those within the queer community. I am not able to be a lesbian single mother, or a transgender man within the transition experience, or any of the many marginalized situations within the queer community that we could possibly present based on the many differing identities within the community (Haraway

2003).  But the question of this critique leads to the examination of the entitlement of who is providing a space for those marginalized voices and the use of the identified perspective.  Can a cisgender, heterosexual man conduct queer research?  By reframing such a question from whether the researcher can speak for those identities outside of their own to the intent of the researcher and their purpose we can view who is speaking and why while allowing the voices of other identities to be heard and valued.

An additional critique of the use of standpoint theory within research is due to questions of objectivity from the research.  The response to this critique for the research here is that queer academics are indeed researching themselves, just as all other researchers in interpretive or critical inquiry will often do when in relation to their very interest in the research topic (particularly through the form of 'participant observation' research where the researcher is acting as a participant in the activity being studied).  This is due largely to their connection with the subject, not a singular identity but a connection with identity that intersects other aspects of an individual's life such as employment, community involvement, and even religious affiliation (Cantu 2009).  From my perspective, understanding the research and the voices of this community from a standpoint perspective is a purposeful way to envision the community independently of the larger society, and as an integral part of that society.  This is in contrast to methods or intent that may resist, separate, or assimilate the varied identities within the community as apart from my own.  But here I have positioned myself within a strategic place to understand the greater community and to create more options for and a new understanding of the rural queer community.

## Data Collection and Analyses

To approach the research topic it was important to evaluate responses from group cross-sections of the Flint Hills population in terms of sexuality and gender identities that are invisible or visible to the observer.  The goal of this is to have a wide range of responses from various rural identities of those who live in the study area.  Additionally, the responses of these groups are intended to be used as a guide for understanding issues that the queer communities or individuals within this mainly rural region may interpret their living environment, but more importantly how they may view their place in a rural/rural-connected space.

This research was undertaken with a mixed methods approach.  Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to help identify issues or concerns within the queer community of the Flint Hills.  Based on John Creswell's (1994; 2014) methodology of exploratory sequential mixed methods and using a triangulation approach to inform the sequential order of the methods from focus groups to interviews to an on-line survey, the study incorporated a dual phase of design that enabled me to provide a more in-depth view of the study area participants.  The evaluation of this approach can be better understood in relation to five proposed purposes of combining these methods (Creswell 1994, 175):

> 1) Triangulation as a descriptive convergence of the results.
>
> 2) Discovery of complimentary facets of emergent themes.
>
> 3) Development of an informed process between methods.
>
> 4) Initiate perspectives that may not have been originally evident.
>
> 5) Expansion of scope and breadth of the study.

Benefits to triangulation are that it is believed to alleviate bias that may be present in data sources, particular method, or from the researcher (Creswell 1994).  The methods of data

collection included 1) focus groups, 2) interviews, and 3) an internet-based questionnaire. These were sequentially ordered, with development of specific questions used in later methods informed by the earlier data. By developing this order I was able to better distinguish particular issues that were of importance to the community and to dually evaluate responses as to perceptions of the rural communities. Focus groups provided a group discussion on potential issues facing rural queer communities as a whole and were informed by personal experiences and impressions that were discussed as a group. This helped to guide questions that were posed in interviews of individual participants, providing a detailed account of personal experiences in relation to issues identified by groups. The final stage took a quantitative approach using a survey that was intended to provide substantiation of the qualitative experiential data.

### *Focus Groups*

As part of the first and dominant aspect of the methods, qualitative focus groups were formed and allowed me to gain knowledge of what issues were seen as important to LGBT individuals and queer communities in understanding their place(s) within the Flint Hills community/ies as a whole. During the summer and fall of 2011, I began working with individuals who can be considered as gate-keepers of the Flint Hills queer communities. These gate-keepers represent LGBT identities but also leadership within their communities and networks with experience in education and advocacy of sexuality and gender identity minorities, social justice organizations, and members of queer social organizations. With the recommendations of these gate-keepers and their help in contacting individuals for introductions and participation, I was able to form five focus groups. Focus groups were conducted with approval (#5822) of the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The focus groups were small, but were nonetheless helpful in furthering my understanding of concerns and perceptions of individuals in the Flint Hills community, as well as the smaller local communities in the study area. A total of 24 individuals participated in these groups with no individuals participating in more than one group, with the largest attendance in the Manhattan/Junction City area (Table 5.1).

| Focus Group Site | Number of Participants | Male Presenting or identity | Female Presenting or identity |
|---|---|---|---|
| Group 1: Manhattan | 6 | 4 | 2 |
| Group 2: Junction City | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Group 3: Salina | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Group 4: Emporia | 3 | 3 | 0 |
| Group 5: Flint Hills Pride (Junction City) | 8 | 3 | 5 |
| Total Participation | 24 | 15 | 9 |

Table 5.1 Flint Hills Study Area Focus Groups

The focus groups were composed of individuals recommended by queer community gate-keepers or who could attend at the sessions in the particular towns where they were held. These meetings were conducted in personal homes, restaurants, and at a public event (separate from other attendees). Participants were informed prior to the meetings that the study was investigating rural sexuality and gender identity perceptions of community and their environment. The participants were informed of their rights in participation and provided an informed consent statement (Appendix C) prior to their participation. Largely informal, the groups were asked by me about their perceptions of their queer community, the larger communities in which they lived, differences between rural and urban communities, personal and queer community social networks, and concerns about how they experience rural communities and/or are perceived by queer and local communities. The questions were open-ended and

allowed for participants to expand on the generalized topics.  Four questions were used to center

the conversation on topics of interest to the research.  These questions included the following:

> 1) What is your perception of acceptance within the community as a whole?
>
> 2) What is the view of queer social networks where you live?
>
> 3) What are some concerns that you have about living openly as LGBT(+)[4]?
>
> 4) What are your perceptions of similarities or difference between urban and rural queer communities?

The framing of the questions was straightforward in that they were asked in a format that was

representative of the understanding of my role as the researcher (observer) and not as a

contributor beyond asking questions and guiding the conversation.  In each instance, the group

was encouraged to discuss the questions as to their knowledge on both a personal level and as

part of an overall view of the queer community.

Discussions were not recorded but were monitored for key terms or topics that were

noted and described for further analysis.  The information gleaned from focus group discussions

helped to then formulate particular themes to evaluate through in-person interviews in the region.

### *Interviews*

The information gathered from the focus groups was used to determine the scope and

content of questions that were the basis for personal interviews with LGBT individuals in the

study area.  Participants were again recommended by gate-keepers in local communities but also

via recommendation of focus group participants including volunteers for the interview portion of

the research from the focus groups: interviews thus were not of a random sample.  Indeed,

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[4]LGBT(+) represents the many different identities held by individuals about their sexuality or gender identity and their openness about that identity to those within their familial, social, and community networks.

identifying a random sample from a population (or populations) of individuals who often are not

open about their identities, and of whom there is not particular database, was not possible.

Interviews were approved by the IRB (#5998).  These interviews took place between January

and August of 2012.

In consideration of the many identities that are within the queer community as a whole,

the interviews were as inclusive as possible of the multiple queer identities.  Accessing

individuals who are representative of particular sexualities or gender identities was critical, given

the purpose of this research and the nature of the queer community, so that a more

comprehensive understanding of the queer community/ies may be obtained.  There was a

necessity for a range of responses for inclusivity of the perceptions of those distinctive voices

that identify particularly as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, along with other

conceptualizations of individual sexuality or gender identity.  Although I may not have the

specific aspects of particular identities, my standpoint with respect to the queer community gives

me a connection to the variety of identities as part of the queer cultural collective.

Participation in the individual interviews was prefaced by a statement of informed

consent (Appendix D) that the individual was asked to sign (the list of questions that guided

interviews is presented in the next chapter).  Interviews were mostly conducted in the

individuals' homes, but also at local restaurants, bars, and at community events.  The interview

was recorded on a handheld digital recorder with permission of the participant and later

transcribed.  The sample of participants was asked particular open-ended questions informed by

the groups and based on their experiences.  These questions were adapted for more in-depth

exploration of responses from the previous expressions of the focus groups.  Thirty-one personal

interviews were conducted between 2011 and 2013.  Interviews were 30-90 minutes in length.

Transcription of the interviews developed some obstacles early within the process. I attempted to use two different programs for transcription of the digitally recorded data. The first program was included with the Sony digital recorder that was used for focus groups and for interviews, and the second program was Transcribe, Google Chrome based application. I did not feel that either program was useful in the transcription process and so all digitally recorded interviews were transcribed by hand. There are advantages with transcription by hand and not through a technology based program for this type of work. First, by transcribing from the digital recording myself, I can detect tone and emphasis in the subject's speech and am better able to interpret the participant's meaning of words, phrases, or anecdotes. Secondly, I was able to reconnect to themes or codes that I had acknowledged during the initial interview more quickly. This has enabled me to gather what I feel is a more in-depth understanding of each interview.

Coding of the interviews relied on the repetition of thematic ideas or concepts expressed by the participants. Saturation of the codes developed from the focus groups was attained relatively early within the interview process of the research. However, in an attempt to reflect the multiple intersections of identity within the rural queer community I felt that it was necessary to continue to conduct interviews with as many participants as I could in order to provide a much broader perspective of the community. In doing so I was able to attain additional sub-categories built within the themes explored by the focus groups.

These interviews were conducted with the advantage and knowledge of my personal standpoint in the rural community and the queer community in mind, and I attempted to not lead or imply any directive with any of the questions discussed with the participants. The interview narratives were based simply on identity within the rural regional context and focused on perceptions of community and identity.

A more personal and in-depth perception of individuality and community was obtained from the content of the interviews. Importantly, the interviews have helped to place responses from additional sources such as the focus groups and the additional surveys into perspective, clarifying whether particular types of responses are representative of the community.

*Survey*

Lastly, I used an electronic survey tool (Qualtrics) and accessed a large population anonymously through a variety of social networking sites, including Facebook, and e-mail lists of a variety of organizations such as Flint Hills Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, Flint Hills Human Rights Project, Equality Kansas, and personal e-mails sent to known gate-keepers with the request to forward to those who may be interested in participating. The survey was distributed between June and August of 2013, with permission to conduct the survey granted under the IRB (#6701). A statement of informed consent prefaced the electronic survey content (Appendix E).

The electronic survey yielded 119 complete responses that provided basic demographic data such as age, gender identity, biological sex, and sexuality, as well as educational attainment, occupation, and relationship status[5]. The questions used for the electronic survey (Appendix E) were derived from the focus groups and individual interviews according to initial coding of responses and the interpreted importance of topics that would help to substantiate the qualitative aspects of the research. Most importantly, responses to questions that focus directly on the individual's perception of rural environment and the individual's social networks were obtained. These responses provide insights regarding relationships with a larger regional rural environment

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[5]A total of 128 responses were recorded using Qualtrics survey software. Nine responses were mostly incomplete and still considered in progress at the time the survey was closed and were not utilized for evaluation.

as the distribution of e-mail lists and social networks extended outside of the Flint Hills region. The survey was not specific to the Flint Hills region but was utilized to gather a greater amount of participation from those who live in rural communities outside of the study area, have lived in rural communities, or intend to move to or return to a rural community.

Development of the survey document included knowledge of the focus group information as well as interviews that were already in progress. The initial document was tested by release to a select group of respondents within the community as an in-person trial survey (primarily gate-keepers). Feedback from that document revealed that individuals felt that the survey was too lengthy and that some questions were not addressing issues that they felt were necessarily important to the Flint Hills community. This information was utilized to develop a shorter and more precise survey instrument for on-line use that was submitted to review by the Kansas State University Institutional Review Board. Problematic issues with language and content that the IRB would accept further diluted the survey questions to a more general view of the rural queer population.

Throughout the aspects of triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative of the research I feel that my self-acknowledgment of my role as a participant observer was helpful in not only accessing data but also interpreting that data. The many experiences and minute themes that appeared from each focus group or interview are understandable to me in many ways as they reflect my own experiences and many more of the community members that I know. This is not to say that the perspectives of the individual should be generalized but the uniqueness of one's experience can have overlap with that of another in the community. With the methods that I have used, it has been to find the overlap or the commonality of those individual or small group experiences.

# Chapter 6 - We Are Here

Understanding the choice to live in or to leave a rural environment – in terms of how the individual is able to express their sexuality or gender identity, personal involvement within communities, and how they perceive their environment as a whole as hostile or welcoming – can help to empower the LGBT individual and community and ensure that a safe and nurturing environment and identity can be attained within rural space. Using queer standpoint epistemology as the methodological framework for the research, I have enabled the subjects of the rural queer community to establish the path of inquiry into their own community. By enabling the community to express their own questions as to the underpinnings of the community and the relationships with their own concepts of rurality, the results of this research ultimately belong to the rural queer community as an understanding of their individual and collective identities.

## Focus Group Findings

Focus groups helped to establish the underlying and generalized thoughts of the Flint Hills queer community. Similarities were found throughout the five focus groups, with differences noted as to how responses were or were not related to the participants' location in the Flint Hills. These differences in response were recognized as part of the identity approach to the research and so the question of where a person resided within the Flint Hills and how it might affect one's view of community was also posed to the groups as an ending thought to the conversations. All groups agreed that individual and collective thought on experiences within the region were subject to the individuals' perceptions of where they lived and navigated socially

on a daily basis but were applicable to the regional queer community in how the participants developed networks of communication and of identity.

The question of positionality within the study area was evident in the smaller groups, and also was a product of location in relation to what the participants felt was their proximity or identity to the Flint Hills. This was most evident with the groups conducted in Emporia and Salina. The thoughts and concerns of an individual's location within the region or in relation to others in the group did not hinder the participant experience but I do feel that the expression of those thoughts and concerns provide an acknowledgement of one's sense of time and place in the community. Perceptions of location within the community, as being the 'other' or as being physically distant from queer communities could be an underlying stressor on overall community identity in much the same way as Nigel Thrift (1999) views queer 'place' as being one that is evolving within the context of migratory populations or, as with the queer community, evolving in a political and social justice sense.

Interestingly, the groups in Junction City and Manhattan were ones that I would have thought to be most susceptible to 'becoming and disintegrating' of community (Thrift 1999) due to the migrant populations related to Kansas State University and Fort Riley. But if we view Emporia and Salina in regard to proximity or embodiment of the Flint Hills culture there is a distinction by the focus groups and by interview participants that falls between being from the Flint Hills to being a part of the Flint Hills community.

The differences between those individuals identifying as being from the Flint Hills or those identifying as associated with the Flint Hills can also be viewed as a generational concept. Throughout the process of focus groups and interviews, a distinction became clear from older participants of identification as being from the Flint Hills as different from being a part of the

Flint Hills queer community.  Though age was not asked of the focus group participants, there was an apparent lack of younger individuals participating.  Overall this was to be the case with each aspect of the research methods.  This will be discussed further in the conclusions from the research.

Of the five focus groups, the largest group was facilitated by the annual Flint Hills Pride event held at Milford Lake in Geary County.  The event attracts individuals from across the region.  The focus group at this location was held informally with eight individuals from differing locations within the study area.  These individuals were able to offer a depth of communal knowledge as they engaged with the guiding questions that I posed during our meeting.

The Flint Hills Pride focus group was attended by three male-identifying and five female-identifying individuals who represented multiple sexualities.  Although participants were not asked to identify their ages, all were over age eighteen as per the IRB protocol and were visually assessed as being in an age range of early thirties to mid-fifties.  Members of the group were familiar with each other due to prior knowledge and experiences from Flint Hills Pride events, as well as interconnectedness via intimate friendships and communication networks.  Of the focus groups, the Flint Hills Pride group was most representative of what I view as holding community collective knowledge.  This knowledge is a cumulative known history of experiences and identities that is held by individuals and groups of individuals who are lifetime or long-term residents of the region and were representative of gate-keeper roles in their respective location-based communities and within knowledge networks.

There are similarities to other focus groups in how the Flint Hills Pride group spoke about their social and physical communities.  A striking difference is that this group displayed a

deeper breadth of knowledge of the Flint Hills queer community as a whole; members of the group also displayed a greater breadth of interpretations of their individual and communal identities in the Flint Hills region. The communal thoughts and concerns from this group were suggestive of their positionality in the community. This positionality can be viewed in terms of the individuals reserving a sense of responsibility for their community and as an affirmed or assumed recognition of their positions as gate-keepers or role-models within the queer community.

### *Perception of Acceptance*

Focus group discussions of acceptance in their communities covered many different aspects of personal and related experiences. A common theme of discussion was a lack of acceptance from political levels in individual municipal places, Flint Hills regionally, the state of Kansas, and within a greater context the mid-American regions. Instances of queer social communities and their allies attempting to gain legal protections from discrimination, and those attempts not being successful, were discussed most within the groups.

Notably, discrimination in employment and housing were key themes in discussions about acceptance. Nearly all participants in the focus groups had personal experiences of discrimination based on their sexuality. Those who did not have personal experiences with such discrimination could readily refer to a relatable instance happening to a community member, and expressed acknowledgement that such discrimination can and does happen in Flint Hills communities. Furthermore, a lack of political recognition of sexuality and gender identity discrimination was coupled with a lack of recognition of needs of the queer community in health care, relationship rights (marriage equality, partner power of attorney in health situations, child-

care and parental rights), and workplace acknowledgement of relationships (particularly relating to benefits).

The lack of political protection is viewed as being discriminatory connected to a lack of consideration by government and business entities. One participant expressed in regard to their employer having a comprehensive non-discrimination policy: "If they don't even talk about the rights I do have, how am I supposed to even bring up the ones I don't?" Another participant viewed the overall lack of discussion as a dismissal of sexuality and gender identity minorities altogether, equating a lack of discussion of implementation or discussion of protections to daily micro-aggressions of homophobia and transphobia.

The groups who found that the level of acceptance of their sexualities or gender identities most problematic were those that also had a more negative view of their physical/locational communities as a whole. The Emporia group, in particular, agreed that bringing up issues of protection from discrimination only drew more attention to the queer community and that they were better off not having that attention directed at them or the community. Similarly, the Salina group agreed that there was a need for further protections but did not see much comfort or acceptance in the community as a whole when issues of city non-discrimination ordinances were discussed. Interestingly, during the time that the focus groups were being conducted the city of Manhattan had passed − and then within a few months overturned − non-discrimination protections. Salina, Hutchinson, and other communities throughout Kansas would in the subsequent months embark on failed attempts to include sexuality and gender identity in non-discrimination protections.

Of the group discussions there was an overall acknowledgement that individuals did have a (social/queer) community outlet to help them deal with instances of discrimination. All groups

discussed the opportunities within the queer community to gain emotional support or to be able

to discuss frustrations with incidents that may have occurred.  This support most often was

spoken of as coming from LGBT friends, family members, or allies in the community.

Organizational support, such as that coming from national and local groups like Parents and

Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Kansas Equality Coalition (KEC), and Flint Hills

Human Rights Project (FHHRP), were not viewed as being a part of more intimate support

systems, with some members of the focus groups viewing such organizations as being more

intrusive to situations that they had personally experienced, or had been ineffective in helping to

provide protections.

<center>

***Queer Social Networks***

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Queer social networks take many forms in the Flint Hills.  Traditional methods of

meeting other queer community members such as bars, organized social functions, and queer

centered organizations exist to bring a sense of queer community to individuals who have lived

their entire lives in the Flint Hills or those who are living in the community temporarily

connected to the local universities and colleges, employment, and even the US Army at Fort

Riley.  Technological opportunities have risen in prominence in aiding the connections of

community to information and to meeting others in the community.  E-mail lists, websites,

dating websites, and many other aspects of web applications have made it even easier for queer

communities to connect on personal and communal issues.

The focus groups had differing views on networking socially and how it affected them

personally and their communities.  All groups acknowledged that there are queer networks in the

Flint Hills and that those networks have various roles to play for community members.  Dating,

communicating with friends, and organizing events were all viewed as positive aspects of social

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networks.  But most of those participating expressed some trepidation over the popularity of social and dating applications that were viewed as diminishing the effectiveness or sense of community within traditional networks.  One of the biggest observations was that there was a loss of interpersonal relationships within the community networks.  "You don't know who's gay anymore!" was heard from several groups.  The meaning of this was that technological networks were great for helping to connect with others within the community, especially for those not entirely comfortable in being open about their sexuality or gender identity, but that there was now a sense of a 'hidden' community.

This interpretation comes from asking specific members of the community what they meant when they spoke of a "lost" sense of community or what they meant when they said that particular dating phone applications were ruining the community.  In most instances with the focus groups I asked for clarification about what type of social networks were being referenced. Most dating applications were disparaged as allowing one to be too secretive about their sexuality or instilling a sense of cliquishness to the community; this was a sentiment of both female- and male-identifying participants.  However, male-identifying participants continued to clarify: unrealistic standards of masculinity, overt racism, and internalized homophobia were all points that were given as to why those particular networks were viewed negatively. Interestingly, every male-representing member of a focus group readily admitted that they had used such applications.

There is a definite difference in attitudes toward technology based on gender identification.  Female-identifying participants do not have ready access to the same type of web applications for dating and personal meetings as males.  The female participants recognized these applications, but were more likely to talk about technological advances in aiding the community

as a way to help keep in touch with others or to allow access to the community as a whole. Gendered views of technology reappear in the individual interviews and are indicative of other issues between the gay and lesbian communities in general, but can also be applied to differences in the many aspects of identity that exist under the umbrella of "queer" identity. Those differences can be divisive, or can aid the community in developing deeper understanding of the needs that each facet of the queer umbrella may have.

The conversations surrounding the topic of social networks were enlightening in unexpected ways, such as the aforementioned gendered views, but also in terms of how a stratified system of identity was perceived among the differing locations of the focus groups. Emporia and Salina participants gave a more negative view of social networks in their communities as being limited to technological applications while also acknowledging these networks as important for the Flint Hills community at large. Another outcome was that there were definite differences in the value of particular aspects of the social networks.

Generationally, social opportunities with queer social groups or organizations and in specific queer spaces such as bars were a concern. Many participants from the Flint Hills Pride group were very quick to acknowledge a loss of community networking, with fewer people becoming involved in social organizations that they were members of or concern that events such as the Flint Hills Pride event would become obsolete because of an increasing dependence on technology within the younger community members. An organizer of the event and participant in the group felt that "these kids are going to wake up and not know anything about being queer." When I asked for clarification, the participant lamented the loss of an oral history of the queer community. The shared stories and experiences with other community members are a part

of what makes the social networks so important, especially in rural communities where there is not a written historical measure of queer community (Gray 2009).

Overall, the focus groups recognized that a social queer network of communication is available to them and to others who may seek out a queer community within the Flint Hills. The network may be disjointed in some ways, whether by availability of technology enabling access to such networks, lack of interest in social events or involvement in other aspects of community, or by a lack of knowledge that those networks exist. But the fact that they can be recognized as existing in some form and can be acknowledged by rural communities is important in that those networks aid in providing a voice to what can be an invisible community.

### *Living Openly in Rural Communities*

The third question asked of the focus groups was unanimously answered with all five focus groups concluding that the aspect of most concern to an openly LGBT individual in a rural community was their own fears. Homophobia, transphobia, losing one's home or employment, violence, micro-aggressions, loss of family or friends, and even death were a part of the focus group conversations. There is little doubt that the rural LGBT participants in this study were well prepared to answer and discuss such a question. Regardless of their identities, how they may appear to the larger community and even if they were open to all or only a few, this was a question that participants had thought about before.

My remarks to the groups were that it seemed as if it was an easy question for them and in response they questioned me as to how I would feel. Throughout the research process I have attempted to not apply my own experiences to those of others but to simply try and understand their point of view. Yet, in each focus group I was reminded that their answers would be my own if I were to be asked the same. From my own experiences I would agree that the feelings of

being the 'other' in a small town or rural community can make you question how you are received by those who do not see you as an equal, or as one respondent said, "just being viewed as human".

Although there was uniformity in answers and thoughtfulness in the discussions about each participant's personal experiences and feelings on the subject, there was also thoughtfulness from the groups regarding how others are treated. Moving past the immediate group's own experiences, the discussion invariably included acknowledgement of the experiences of other community members. Particularly, gender identity was a common concern of the participants. There was an understanding that sexuality other than heterosexual is definitely something that can instill fear and violence from some rural community members, there was also a particular privilege in what individuals referred to as 'passing,' or the act of being able to blend in with the larger community; in essence being viewed as a part of the larger community by one who did not know one's personal sexual identity.

A person's gender identity was recognized by the participants as being more problematic in living in a rural community or small town. One's presentation of gender is made public due to the very act of presenting authentically in a public setting. All participants discussed knowing community members that identified with transgender, genderqueer, or gender variant identities and addressed the transition period and the difficulties that can be foreseen in that transition. Living authentically in a rural community for someone who identifies as non-binary or transgender involves the participation of each community member that the individual comes into contact with. This is particularly difficult and perhaps more public when the person remains in their community of origin. Not only does the individual transition but the community is a

participant in that transition due to the visible change of how the person looks, acts, and interacts with the community.

For me, this question has also brought about the recognition of complacency within communities. Historically, the queer community has had to address homophobia and transphobia in all aspects of life, whether in urban or rural locales. However, in the past decade significant changes have occurred in the acceptance and acknowledgement of queer communities. There have been more comprehensive non-discrimination policies in cities, businesses, and even states. Along with this, there has been visibility in positive representations in the media and in our communities. Many rural high schools have Gay/Straight Alliance student organizations. Even federal regulations such as serving in the armed forces or limited protections for government workers have become more open and affirming of LGBT individuals. The cost of this is a lack of knowledge of queer history, even complacency that violence will not happen to an individual, that one's parents will embrace their child when they come out to them, or that a transgender person will not be fired when they begin their transition to the appropriate gender. The murders of Matthew Sheppard and Brandon Teena do not resonate today with a young queer person in rural Kansas because they don't know about those lost lives. This was also a fear that the focus groups expressed. There is awareness in the communities - as with urban counterparts - that discrimination and violence do happen, but there is also an acknowledgement of an induced sense of security as public opinion and social justice measures slowly become more affirming of sexuality and gender identity (Halberstam 1993).

### *Perception of Urban and Rural*

The fourth question of the focus groups was about their perceptions of similarities or differences between rural and urban queer communities. The resulting conversations were very

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interesting in that there were very diverse opinions and lengthy discussion on the value of comparing the two. Dependent on location − and often the age and experience of the individual in the group − there were very strong feelings, both negative and positive, about urban and rural communities and their influence on the queer community and image as a whole.

There was a consensus that the queer communities in urban environments are different from their rural counterparts. Many viewed urban communities as having more openness and acceptance by those in their larger community and a sense of anonymity associated with their sexuality or gender identity. For participants, media representations, sense of community, better access to healthcare and financial possibilities, and queer specific protections – via legal comprehensive non-discrimination policy and comprehensive outreach programs such as those for queer youth and HIV/AIDS services – dominated the conversations on urban environments. Those services or protections were seen as being absent from the Flint Hills rural towns and communities.

For the participants, rural communities lacked services that were specifically important to LGBT individuals. These include services for HIV/AIDS clients and testing opportunities for sexual health or sexual health education. Queer youth opportunities were also noted and concern was expressed that bullying, mental health, and suicide of queer youth were not being sufficiently addressed in rural schools or in the family environment. As expressed in response to prior questions, the transgender community was of concern, as well. Particularly with this population, participants expressed frustration that medical services and mental health services and education were severely lacking in rural locations and that the transgender individual is made to feel significantly more isolated due to a lack of understanding and services. Yet, the

thoughtfulness of the cis-gender participants for the transgender community about these services also extended and applied to their experiences in navigating rural services.

Major concerns and fears were expressed by the participants related to affirming their own sexuality or gender identity with their primary care physician or even finding a physician or mental health professional that was open and affirming as an ally to the community or sympathetic to their needs.  Several participants commented that they were not open about their sexuality with their physicians and for sexual health services they would travel to larger urban areas to be tested or to receive appropriate care.  Focus groups felt that medical services in particular were a major concern, and that their urban counterparts had more access to medical care which contributed to a better quality of life.  This difference was seen as a reason for loss of younger community members to more urban locations.

An interesting concept that was presented was that the more urban a queer community is that there is a misrepresentation of the queer community as a whole – both urban and rural in context and attributed to how one is viewed by the larger community.  Focus on urban media representation of Gay/Queer Pride Celebrations or queer communities as being extremely different and more sexualized than they actually are reflects poorly on all LGBT individuals, according to some participants.  Significant quotes from participants reflected on representation:

- That's not how we are.  They [urban queer community] don't show the reality of our lives.

- Why would anyone want to be associated with that type of behavior and why do they (media) focus so much on the nudity and sex in the streets.  [This was a reference to events such as San Francisco's Dore Alley leather/BDSM annual event].

- It doesn't represent us [rural identified LGBT individuals].  We don't act like that but that's what they [peers] see and so they think that's how we all are.  It makes things so much harder when you come out to someone.

In many ways, participants seemed to display a sense of resentment toward their urban counterparts. From my perspective it was not one of jealousy or envy but a sense of embarrassment that urban representations are in many ways applied to the queer community as a whole, regardless of location. This was touched upon particularly by those who had lived in more urban locations during their lives: that those representations from the media and that are a part of the myth of sexualized identities in the queer community does not represent every individual. Interestingly, individuals were also quick to point out that the queer community has a right to represent itself in whatever way that it wants, but that the media and society as a whole should not view all queer identities in the same way.

The thoughts of the focus groups, though they are varied, have a common theme on rural/urban comparisons. Rural communities and individuals have differences from their counterparts in urban environments. Similarities do exist and communication networks extend between urban and rural communities that reflect an individual's or a community's sense of affinity to a particular place or space. Information, friendships, and community organization flow between the rural and urban. As Massey (2013; 169) ascertained, the identity of the place that is being constructed by individuals within their community is created from positive "interrelations with elsewhere." In this instance the sense of place and community is influenced by the historical and prevalent identity of queer spaces as being urban, but among the study participants there is a recognition of affinity to the landscape or lived experiences of what is considered as rural and the identity of the individual and queer community is shaped by a perceived difference from the urban representation of queer experiences.

Recognition that different opportunities and negative issues arise in the contexts of both urban and rural landscapes and communities seemingly helps LGBT individuals develop a sense

of social community not only in the environment in which they may live, but in a community

that is larger than their localized perception.  The intersectionality of community perceptions aids

in developing an open sense of place (Larsen and Johnson 2012).  This recognition helps to

solidify local, regional, or even national identities by taking into account the intersections of

identity existing in and as a part of the queer experience.

The focus groups were able to provide a basis for questions to be asked in interviews of

individual research informants.  The individuals who participated in the focus groups provided

distinctive insight into rural communities in small towns in the Flint Hills, and provided a basis

to the approach to finding the answers to the focus of the research.  Significant in these

approaches was how variances in opinion from different community members from differing

backgrounds and experiences help to create a sense of community for LGBT individuals.  In

addition, there was a definite sense of communication within and amongst differing

environments, from those in more isolated rural areas of the Flint Hills to the small towns and the

adjacent more urban communities to the region.  Insights gained from the five groups were

integral in helping to guide the individual interviews and survey of this research.

## Interview Findings

A total of 31 semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the queer

community in the Flint Hills from January 2012 -August 2014.  The most significant topics of

discussion for the participants are indicated in Table 6.1.  Interviewees included 14 gay, 6

bisexual, 7 lesbian, 1 heterosexual, and 3 pansexual identified persons, and ranged in age from

20 to 63.  Four identified as transgender (including the heterosexual-identifying individual).

Overall, gay respondents were the oldest group, averaging 47 years; lesbians were an average of

Table 6.1. Participants and considerations of the Flint Hills environment.

| Participant Code | Age | Sexuality | Positive Acceptance | Negative Acceptance | Family Ties | Employ-ment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Resource Availability | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AM2 | 42 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| BM2 | 36 | Bisexual | | X | X | X | X | X | | |
| CM3 | 52 | Gay | X | | X | X | X | | X | X |
| DM4 | 38 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| EM4 | 41 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| FM4 | 32 | Bisexual | X | | | | X | X | | |
| GF4 | 41 | Lesbian | X | | | | X | X | X | X |
| HM5 | 50 | Gay | | X | X | X | | X | X | X |
| IM5* | 33 | Hetero- | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| JM5 | 34 | Gay | X | | | | | X | X | X |
| KF5 | 36 | Lesbian | | X | | X | | X | X | X |
| LF5 | 42 | Lesbian | | X | X | | X | | | X |
| MF5 | 28 | Lesbian | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| NM5 | 42 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| OM6 | 51 | Gay | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| PM6 | 63 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | |
| QM7 | 55 | Gay | X | | X | X | | | X | X |
| RF7 | 48 | Bisexual | X | | | | X | | | |
| SF8 | 46 | Pansexual | X | | | | X | X | | |
| TF8 | 41 | Lesbian | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| UM8 | 48 | Gay | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| VM9 | 23 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| WM9 | 56 | Gay | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| XM9 | 58 | Gay | | X | X | | X | | X | X |
| YM9* | 20 | Pansexual | | X | | | X | X | X | X |
| ZM9* | 32 | Bisexual | X | | | | | | X | X |
| AAF9 | 43 | Lesbian | X | | | | | X | X | |
| BBF9 | 50 | Lesbian | X | | X | X | X | X | | |
| CCF9 | 36 | Bisexual | X | | | | | | | |
| DDF9* | 37 | Pansexual | | X | X | | X | X | X | X |
| EEM10 | 22 | Bisexual | | X | X | | | X | X | |
| Number responding with factor | | | 22 | 9 | 21 | 9 | 23 | 24 | 24 | 22 |
| Proportion with factor | | | 71% | 29% | 68% | 29% | 74% | 77% | 77% | 71% |

Participant code first letter/s represent participant, following letter represents gender identified, number represents county of residence, and * indicates transgender participants.

40; both bisexuals and pansexual interviewees averaged 34 years of age, and trans-identified

persons were the youngest, at 31.

The interviews provide an increased understanding of the perceptions, priorities, and

challenges related to queer communities in the region. These interviews addressed key themes

related to the queer community and issues that pertain to queer rural lives. Themes from the

focus group participants were used to provide a broader range of interaction with interviewees.

Participants were encouraged to speak freely about their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings

based on the following questions:

1) What are the most pressing issues when it comes to the rural LGBT community and acceptance?

2) On what topics should rural LGBT research focus within the Flint Hills?

3) What is the size of the LGBT community in the Flint Hills?

4) Why do rural LGBT individuals remain in perceptually hostile environments?

5) What type of social networks are the most 'hidden' within the rural LGBT population?

6) Is there a visible comparison or contrast with more urban LGBT populations?

7) Are there differences between rural LGBT social networks and urban LGBT social networks?

8) Is visibility within the population an issue for LGBT populations? What about rural populations?

9) How do rural LGBT communities work together in the Flint Hills? How do they not work together?

These questions served to guide interviews, but were not necessarily each addressed, nor

addressed in order. They were meant to be interpreted by the participant as they wished, and

interviewees frequently answered additional listed questions in the course of addressing a

specific item, making it unnecessary to explicitly ask each question on the list. In an effort to not

impart my personal experiences or feelings upon the responses, it was explained prior to the

interview that the questions simply served as a guide for understanding the individual and community experiences.  Participants were asked to speak freely, and if there was anything that they felt needed to be discussed that they were free to do so.

One participant was surprised after nearly an hour of speaking about their experiences that they had only been asked one question and that I had not asked any further questions.  My reply was that they had answered all my questions and it is then that they became aware of how long they had been speaking.  This was not an uncommon occurrence with the interviews as I only rarely had to ask more than one or two questions to prompt the participant.  In many ways I perceived that the individual was being asked about something that they could relate to and was important to them, had often thought about privately, but had not been able to share their thoughts and feelings at length with someone.  When given the opportunity, they were able to express more than what the question was asking and helped to provide a faceted view of LGBT experience and life in rural communities.

The results of these interviews and the identified themes or codes that were significant to the participants are discussed below.  The focus is on the concerns of participants, both personal and for the community as a whole. Briefly, the emergent themes from the interviews included the following:

1) Community acceptance with negative and positive connotations and the participants' role in community.
2) Family ties and the impact of experience on participant views on rural life.
3) Employment concerns on both the level of acceptance within their profession but also opportunities for the rural community.
4) Rural ties to lived experiences with the larger regional community.
5) Social networks and their effectiveness in building community.
6) Availability of resources for the queer community in rural communities.

7) Individual and community safety concerns and experiences with homophobia and transphobia.

The seven identified themes were then further evaluated for their connectedness to one another. For example, family ties and rural ties were often mentioned as part of an individual's social network, although they may not have discussed them at length. These intersections of family and place were viewed in importance to the individual. Interpretation of a participant's definition of social network was questioned when I felt that I was not understanding particular aspects of how the 'network' was being framed. An attempt was made to not directly attribute meaning for the participant but to clarify their meaning when discussing what these networks consisted of, for them and their communities. Additionally, issues pertaining to employment intersected with safety and availability of resources in many cases.

Myriad instances of such intersections appeared throughout the interviews and in this discussion I will focus on three themes, although questions addressed several other topics (indicated in tables below). These themes embrace multiple intersections and are important to the understanding of rural queer communities and the LGBT participants. One of the main intersections within these themes is social networks and sense of community. The following themes and their discussion provide further understanding of the networks among the queer rural communities in the Flint Hills:

1) Perception of acceptance of queer minorities within rural communities.
2) Availability of resources to the Flint Hills queer community.
3) Sense of safety in rural communities.

### *Acceptance in the Rural Community*

Community was a major keyword in the participants' descriptions of how they viewed the rural Flint Hills. Participants genuinely enjoyed discussing their roles, constraints,

advantages, and even dislikes within both the queer community and the larger rural community. The topic of community acceptance or non-acceptance at times dominated the entire interview. Inevitably, when transcribing and coding the interviews I became more aware that the question of "What are the most pressing issues when it comes to the rural LGBT community and acceptance?" provided enough inquiry to the individual for them to include information on the subsequent intended questions of size of community, social networks, visibility, and other research points.

The topic of community acceptance held both positive and negative connotations for individuals. Within the interviews, participants made distinctions between acceptance by rural communities in general and their queer communities. Acceptance within one's queer community was positive in all interviews. Anecdotal information did occur in discussions that highlighted individual's feelings pertaining to particular individuals in the queer community or in the larger rural community. This information often was used as emphasis as to how the participant either agreed or disagreed with their community. In coding for this question, I found that 71 percent viewed their communities as being accepting of LGBT individuals. Negative references to acceptance in rural communities occurred in 29 percent of the interviews.

Among gay, lesbian, and bisexual interviewees, more identified positive conditions of acceptance as opposed to negative conditions (Tables 6.2-6.4). Two of the three pansexual participants identified negative conditions (with one identifying positive acceptance) (Table 6.5); the four transsexual interviewees split, with half identifying acceptance as a positive condition and half negative (Table 6.6). There is no discernible pattern of age relationship to views of community acceptance. Yet, relationships to age may be viewed in concerns of employment, family ties, and ties with rural social networks. Most respondents were in their mid-30s to early

50s and may have an established job, family life, and have been in the community for a period of time to establish important networks.

Table 6.2. Considerations in regarding living in rural Flint Hills: gay participants.

| | Age | Acceptance Positive | Acceptance Negative | Family Ties | Employment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Availability of Resources | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AM2 | 42 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| CM3 | 52 | X | | X | X | X | | X | X |
| DM4 | 38 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| EM4 | 41 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| HM5 | 50 | | X | X | X | | X | X | X |
| JM5 | 34 | X | | | | | X | X | X |
| NM5 | 42 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| OM6 | 51 | | X | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| PM6 | 63 | X | | X | | X | X | X | |
| QM7 | 55 | X | | X | X | | | X | X |
| UM8 | 48 | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| VM9 | 23 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| WM9 | 56 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| XM9 | 58 | | X | X | | X | | X | X |
| Proportion noting factor | | 78.6% | 21.4% | 92.9% | 35.7% | 78.6% | 78.6% | 100% | 92.9% |

Table 6.3. Considerations regarding living in a rural area: lesbian participants.

| | Age | Acceptance Positive | Acceptance Negative | Family Ties | Employment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Availability of Resources | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| GF4 | 41 | X | | | | X | X | X | X |
| KF5 | 36 | | X | | X | | X | X | X |
| LF5 | 42 | | X | X | | X | | | X |
| MF5 | 28 | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| TF8 | 41 | X | | X | X | X | X | X | X |
| AAF9 | 43 | X | | | | | X | X | |
| BBF9 | 50 | X | | X | X | X | X | | |
| Proportion noting factor | | 71.4% | 28.6% | 57.1% | 42.9% | 71.4% | 85.7% | 71.4% | 71.4% |

Table 6.4. Considerations regarding living in a rural area: bisexual participants.

| | Age | Acceptance Positive | Acceptance Negative | Family Ties | Employment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Availability of Resources | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| BM2 | 36 | | X | X | X | X | X | | |
| FM4 | 32 | X | | | | X | X | | |
| RF7 | 48 | X | | | | X | | | |
| ZM9* | 32 | X | | | | | | X | X |
| CCF9 | 36 | X | | | | | | | |
| EEM10 | 22 | | X | X | | | X | X | |
| Proportion noting factor | | 67% | 33% | 33% | 17% | 50% | 50% | 33% | 17% |

Table 6.5. Considerations regarding living in a rural area: pansexual participants.

| | Age | Acceptance Positive | Acceptance Negative | Family Ties | Employment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Availability of Resources | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| SF8 | 46 | X | | | | X | X | | |
| YM9* | 20 | | X | | | X | X | X | X |
| DDF9* | 37 | | X | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Proportion noting factor | | 33% | 67% | 33% | - | 100% | 100% | 67% | 67% |

Table 6.6. Considerations regarding living in a rural area: transgender identified participants.

| | Age | Sexuality | Acceptance Positive | Acceptance Negative | Family Ties | Employment | Rural Ties | Social Networks | Availability of Resources | Safety/ Homophobia |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| IM5* | 33 | Hetero- | X | | X | | X | X | X | X |
| YM9* | 20 | Pansexual | | X | | | X | X | X | X |
| ZM9* | 32 | Bisexual | X | | | | | | X | X |
| DDF9* | 37 | Pansexual | | X | X | | X | X | X | X |
| Proportion noting concern | | | 50% | 50% | 50% | - | 75% | 75% | 100% | 100% |

Factors that contributed to feeling (positive) acceptance in the rural community were varied but also helped to describe a diverse community. Age of participants, gender, and their sexuality did not necessarily contribute to particular positive aspects of the acceptance theme. Experiences mattered most, along with an individual's sense of connectedness or involvement with either queer communities or the larger rural community.

For most participants, overall community acceptance was overwhelmingly positive. There were participants who expressed feelings of a lack of acceptance (negative acceptance) by their rural communities and their negative experiences influenced how they felt about their rural Flint Hills communities. The experience of one participant in particular was reflective of the other participant's negative experiences.

The experience of "Harvey"[6] that reflects the negative response regarding rural community acceptance from the gay men was readily offered by him in the very beginning of his interview. He is familiar with rural communities and had lived the majority of his life in rural environments. Harvey noted that although he had enjoyed living in Dallas, Texas, and Kansas City, Missouri, he was a "country-boy" at heart and sought out employment in a rural area where he felt that he would feel more at home. Harvey's experience centered on his lack of public openness about his sexuality and being 'outed' by a female co-worker that he had befriended after moving to the area in the early 1990s. The co-worker had told other people that the two worked with that Harvey was single because he was gay. The other employees at the site where he worked began making crude comments about sexuality in his presence, leaving notes about AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases at his desk, and even commenting to others to not go to the bathroom while Harvey was in the public restroom "because he'll want to see what you got." As Harvey explained, "It just felt like I had a target on my back and I didn't know who I could trust." The co-worker justified her actions by telling Harvey that she had wanted people to stop asking about why he didn't have a girlfriend or wasn't married. She explained to him that she had thought people would be more understanding. But as Harvey said:

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[6]Harvey, age 51, was interviewed in Lyon County and was originally from rural southwestern Kansas. He has lived for brief periods in Dallas, Texas, and Kansas City, Missouri.

> People don't want to understand what they are afraid of.  I was the only
> gay person most of them had ever known.  It was scary not knowing
> who I could trust.  I had thought that if I just looked like everyone else
> and acted straight that no one would question who I slept with.  But all
> the time it seemed to come up because people talked about their
> families, their boyfriends or girlfriends, and brought them to company
> picnics and holidays and stuff.  I usually stuck out like a sore thumb
> 'cause I was always the one alone.  So they questioned me all the time
> and then when they found out I was gay they just stopped inviting me
> to things, you know like they didn't want me around their kids or
> families or something.

His experiences at the job led him to look for other employment in the region, and he soon

moved to another community in order to protect his privacy and to have a deeper sense of safety.

In his interview, Harvey remained focused on issues of safety.  His concerns about being

an out gay man in a small community are still present and he explained that he has a small group

of friends that he is actually open to, and even his family members in the state do not know about

his sexuality.  He also acknowledged that over the years he has seen many changes in the Flint

Hills communities but remains concerned about homophobia, health services as he gets older,

and his sense of loneliness in a community where he wants to live and work.  Social networks,

particularly on-line services such as e-mail lists, Facebook, and dating sites have alleviated some

of his sense of loneliness but he admits that "it's hard to be a part of a community when you live

two lives."  Harvey's experience and sentiments of living dual lives were reflected by several of

the participants.  Some had found that by being selective about those with whom they were open

and affirming helped them to navigate rural communities with a greater sense of safety, but that

the duality of living in and out of the 'closet' was a tenuous position for them.

Opposite of the experiences of Harvey and how he has managed to navigate his living environment is the narrative of William[7].  As with Harvey, William discussed the many changes in acceptance that he has witnessed in the rural Flint Hills, and in the state and country as a whole.  William declared early into his interview that "you have to learn how to be yourself."  To his credit, William acknowledges that his situation is different than so many other LGBT individuals his age and from the Flint Hills.  For him, the question of coming out publicly was made easier by having a supportive family: "My parents were very accepting and encouraged me to just live honestly."  He also said that he grew up in a much more open and affirming community, with family and friends affiliated with Kansas State University, that he credits for providing him a safer environment to be who he is without constant fear.

William addressed similar themes that Harvey had mentioned, such as access to medical care and homophobia, and also a sense of not being able to "settle down."  The latter seemed to be William's biggest concern in living in a rural community: that the chances of having a long-term relationship were less likely for queer residents because of the size of the population.  William discussed that he has had several relationships over the years but that they didn't work out because the other person did not want to stay in a rural area.  However, William's family ties and community ties have kept him in the region.  He proclaimed "I wouldn't want to live anywhere else and if I have to be alone to be happy where I live then I will just be alone."  He also credits his extensive network of friends and family as being a substitute for a romantic relationship.

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[7]William has resided in Riley County for most of his life and lived briefly in Wichita in the mid-1980s.  At 56 years old, William has been open about his sexuality from an early age.

Like Harvey, William has not been completely immune from homophobia or discrimination. Living in a rural community openly as a gay man during the HIV/AIDS epidemic made it difficult to ignore the scrutiny by community members. William's activism and role as an educator and advocate for better health services in the community led some to believe that he was HIV positive and he discussed how some people simply quit speaking to him because they believed he had the "gay disease." In the interview, this topic was one that could be seen as being very hurtful to William. He said that it was one of the loneliest times in his life: "here I was just living my life and trying to help others and then one day someone starts to gossip about you and before you know what's happening you don't have as many friends and you start to be afraid of what your neighbors think." He credits his family and friends for giving him support during that period of time. William's experiences have helped him to have a greater understanding of the needs of the rural queer community and he often initiates events and discussions with his social networks so that he can offer other community members support that they may need.

The experiences of these two men may seem very different but in their interviews and with other interviewees there are similarities among all sexualities and gender identities in their concern about having support networks, a sense of safety, and even acknowledging that romantic relationships may not be in their future. Despite the fears that they may have, they continue to call their rural communities home. A sentiment that occurred in many interviews was a sense of belonging to the rural community and to the rural landscape. These sentiments were similar across the interviews and across gender and sexuality identities. Many credited having a sense of community, of at least knowing other LGBT individuals, as being a support system for them and providing them with the ability to remain in their rural communities.

For the participants, there is a distinction between urban and rural. In speaking of their feelings of acceptance, thoughts of differences about urban communities did appear. The majority felt that urban and rural queer communities are quite different. Comments ranged from observations that urban landscapes provide a sense of anonymity for the queer community but lack the feeling of a sense of comfort to an overall sense of not belonging to what was seen as an urban-dominated portrayal of queer life. Overwhelmingly, an overarching narrative from the interviewees was of a sense of belonging within their rural communities. For many, this belonging was tied to their comfort within the rural communities, but even as we see from Harvey's narrative that is not always the case. His choice to seek out and remain in the rural environment was made clear. William's choice to stay was similar. In William's narrative he acknowledged that he did not have to stay but instead chose to remain in his rural community. One of the major critiques by participants was the access to resources available to rural queer residents. This was described in how they felt that urban communities are able to offer more in terms of employment, healthcare, and safety, but that these opportunities would come with a loss of a rural identity that many hold dear.

### *Resources for Rural Queer Communities*

Resources, particularly the availability of (accepting) medical services, were a concern for respondents. All gay interviewees and all transsexual interviewees cited concerns with the availability of queer resources in rural areas; and a majority of lesbian and pansexual respondents cited this concern (71 percent and 67 percent, respectively) (Tables 6.2, 6.3, 6.5, 5.6). Perhaps reflecting greater overlap with the needs of the heterosexual majority, only one-third of the six bisexual interviewees expressed this concern (Table 6.4). Descriptions of the concern for resources overlapped with concerns regarding safety (described more fully in the next section).

The resources that participants were concerned about were both tangible and intangible in how they described them. These included employment, healthcare, and safety - meaning for many having resources that helped to protect them from violence. Importantly, safety resources were viewed in two distinct ways. First, protective safety measures and a trust in professionals who are available to assist the queer community in times of need were discussed. Secondly, there was discussion about the sense of safety arising from experiential and communal knowledge of homophobia, transphobia, and violence perpetrated against the community and individuals. This second topic I will focus on as the third theme in the interviews, but true to the intersecting nature of the themes I feel that the first distinction of safety resources is important to a discussion on resources available to the community.

For gay men, availability of resources was overwhelmingly a concern by the participants. Commonly, these concerns were based on affirming healthcare professionals and employment opportunities associated with their queer identity. But surprisingly, for the lesbian-identified women, bisexual, and pansexual participants who were interviewed there were significant differences in how resource availability or lack thereof was viewed. As one transgender heterosexual male participant pointed out, "I can live openly and honestly from day to day but what happens when I go to a new doctor? What happens if I get in an accident? I wonder all the time about how I'm going to have to come out as Trans and how I'm going to be treated." There are similarities to the gay male respondents here; however, the added stigma of being transgender creates an entirely different set of issues when it comes to being accepted. Outwardly the participant presents and performs as a heterosexual male, but biological sex differences are 'outed' when seeking services for healthcare.

The lesbian participants revealed a range of issues when discussing resource availability. Healthcare, child care, education, and employment were all touched upon during interviews. But the most interesting underlying intersection for these women was availability or trust in resources concerning their children. Of all the participants, lesbian women were the ones who discussed their children and fears associated with protecting their children from homophobia by association – that their children would be targeted because of their mother's sexuality.

Karmen[8] identifies the most with the sentiment that her biggest fears arise from having children and living in the rural queer community. Karmen spoke at length about how a lack of family ties and not originating from a rural community has indeed caused concern for her and her children. Her insight into differences between rural and urban communities and resources were indicative of the responses received by others, but her circumstances of not being from a rural community and having no definitive grounding in terms of family set her narrative apart from others. Karmen's fears were very tangible in her interview:

> Here I am with two kids and trying to get by with just my girlfriend working. I can't find a job because of her work schedule and the kids' schedules so I have to just make do with what we got. It was different back home because we could count on my parents to help out but here we don't have much of anybody. We have friends, that's not what I'm saying, but most of them have kids too so we try and share some of the responsibilities.

Karmen also recounted a particular instance when she realized that her children and the children of her partner were being affected by the knowledge of community members about the parents' sexualities and relationship:

> One of the girls came home from school one day and said she was sad. I asked her why and she said that the other kids had made fun of her in

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[8]Karmen, age 36, identifies as a lesbian and is from urban Chicago. She moved to Geary County to be with her partner and they have three children together from previous heterosexual relationships.

class and said that her mom was a lesbo [sic]and she said ***** had said that she couldn't come to a party because his parents said they didn't want some lesbo [sic] dykes showing up. My heart just broke. My kids are getting shit on [sic] because of who I am and that's not right. You would think that the damn school teacher would have said to stop teasing her but that didn't happen. When I called the school to talk to them about it they told me that some people just didn't understand my 'lifestyle' and they couldn't stop other parents from talking about us. My lifestyle? What does that even mean? What kind of school tells a parent something like that? I can handle the parents, I can ignore them, but that doesn't mean my kids have to hear all of that crap from their kids.

Karmen and her partner are not alone in fighting homophobic reactions from educators, parents, or even their children's classmates. One gay male participant recounted how his son endured severe bullying at his rural high school because it was known that his father was gay. Even though his son lived with his biological mother and a stepfather, the son was subjected to homophobia and bullying by association with a gay father who did not even live in the same community. From these examples and similar narratives from participants of all sexualities and gender identities, there seems to be a sense of hopelessness in dealing with schools and other parents and children when it comes to homophobia and transphobia.

Medical professionals also presented participants with a lack of resources that many felt were more readily available to those in urban communities. One bisexual male participant described the scrutiny by his primary care physician when he requested an HIV test. He did not return to the doctor that he had been seeing for several years but instead chose to see a doctor recommended by another gay community member. Transgender participants, in particular, spoke at length about their mistrust of rural community hospitals and medical professionals.

Diane[9] spoke at length about her transition experience from male to female gender.  For

Diane, becoming her authentic self was a process of leaving her family, friends, and rural

community behind to enable her to access psychological, medical, and community resources that

were affirming to the transgender community.  Diane lived in urban California during her

transition, attending college and expanding her knowledge as an educator and advocate for the

community.  Diane returned to the Flint Hills to help take care of her aging mother and found

that the community that she had left had not changed as much as she hoped:

> I came home.  And it was bad, there just wasn't any support.  My mom
> and sister accepted me but not many of my other family wanted anything
> to do with me.  I don't think my dad even knows if I'm alive.  I don't
> know where my brother even lives.

Although family acceptance was not available, Diane did slowly find support in the queer

community, "they were just like, okay.  You are who you are and that was it." It was this

community that gave her support, giving her a sense of identity and community, and helping to

connect her with resources for medical professionals.

A major hurdle for Diane was finding employment.  As she put it, "no one wanted to hire

the freak."  Several attempts at working jobs that were well below her experience and education

level led Diane to find employment in sex-work.  This was mostly on-line work that consisted of

pay-per-view websites fetishizing transgender women.  Diane became an escort, as well, and was

at last able to come to a semblance of supporting herself.  Despite her ability to have a supportive

queer network, Diane remains almost reclusive in the rural community.  Her daily routine is

often hampered by anxiety and fear of transphobia and violence.  This is of course similar to

many transgender individuals regardless of their locality.  Yet, the transgender participants all

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[9] Diane is a 37 year old transgender woman from Riley County.  Her experiences span both urban and rural
communities and give voice to the concerns of many trans-identified individuals in rural communities.

spoke of a heightened awareness of drawing attention to themselves.  Being vigilant about

navigating the most mundane of tasks such as going to the grocery store is ever present in their

minds in these rural communities.  However, participants did acknowledge that this feeling of

hyper vigilance of one's surroundings is also evident in their experiences in urban communities

but the danger is more perceptual rather than what they consider a very real threat to their well-

being in rural communities.

Employment as a topic of conversation for the interviews was only present in 29% of the

coded transcriptions.  Many of those who spoke about employment addressed availability of

work and their openness with co-workers about their identity.  As with Harvey's experience of

being outed at his job and the subsequent homophobia directed at him, other participants told of

similar situations.  Some spoke of an inherent fear of coming out or being outed at the

workplace.  All of those who spoke about employment addressed particularly negative

experiences.  From being fired after coming out or being outed to repeated acts of homophobia

or transphobia that made individuals seek other employment were all concerns expressed by

these participants.  Many sought out employment that they felt may be more 'safe' for them,

particularly in higher education and in the medical field.  Some, as was the case with three

participants, started their own businesses; others found employment with family members; and a

small portion was unemployed or retired.

Of the nine participants who spoke about employment, there was a sense that they

expected employment to be difficult for the queer community.  One participant who identified as

bisexual spoke about keeping his sexuality out of public life.  In a polyamorous marriage, the

individual said of his workplace:

> I just don't talk about our other partner.  People refer to me and my
> wife as a heterosexual couple and I don't correct them.  Even when

> they make jokes about fags and lesbians I just don't speak up.  It's
> none of my business.  At least I can pass as normal.  There's a lot of
> people who just get pegged as gay and that's it.

This sentiment is not uncommon among queer communities, both urban and rural.  The ability to pass (appear as heterosexual and/or cisgender) in employment and interacting with others in the grocery store, school, or even at church can provide some with a sense of protection (Butler 1997).

Blending in to the social norms of these particular places alleviates the individual's anxiety in many ways, but even those who spoke of 'passing' were quick to clarify that things would be different for them and how they navigated their communities if they were open and affirming about their identity in particular contexts.  Many cited the workplace, others family and certain friends, while some simply felt that they didn't need to make their identity 'obvious'.  For many individuals there are daily concerns about who knows about their sexuality or gender identity.  Being outed or coming out, whether at work, to family, to friends, or in other ways, increased the chances of becoming a target of discrimination and affects how an individual navigates their landscape.  The feelings of fear of that discrimination were profound in the participants' tones and in their discussions of the topic.

### *Perceptions of Safety in Rural Communities*

Concerns with safety and homophobia also were a concern for a majority of interviewees (Tables 6.2-6.6).  All transgender respondents and nearly all gay respondents (93 percent) cited this concern, while 71 percent of lesbians and 67 percent of pansexual interviewees expressed this concern.  As with concerns about the availability of resources in rural areas, only one-third of the six bisexual interviewees expressed this consideration regarding rural life.

Development of a sense of safety can take many forms. From my perspective the daily routine is often dictated by our comfort level in what we do, where we go, and who we interact with. For queer communities, regardless of location, that sense of safety is a tangible experience. The knowledge that we are somehow different than the majority, most recognizing this from an early age, has an impact on all aspects of our lives. Whether it is a desire to blend in, to not raise suspicion about one's sexuality or gender identity, or to just avoid particular places because of a fear of violence is a part of all aspects of daily life. The question of safety for rural queer communities has many facets. Location, race, ethnicity, religiosity, or familiarity with a community can all affect the LGBT individual's level of comfort.

Most queer communities have their collective experiences to draw upon (Gamson and Moon 2004). Individual experiences become the experience of the community because there is an understanding that if an act of violence or discrimination happens to one person, it can happen to anyone. A sense of safety (or lack of it) can additionally be affected in many ways by events globally, nationally, or by state or region (Halberstam 2005). Media reports of discrimination or support of homophobic policy within certain religious sects can alter how the queer community views the religious community as a whole. When policy is enacted that provides protection from discrimination there is relief from some level of the fears about one's safety. But also, there is continued within rural queer perceptions the sense that urban queer communities dictate policy, direct media coverage, and do not recognize the rural communities and identities (Rasmussen 2006). However, when policy may be repealed or when there is greater scrutiny of sexuality and gender identity by media or by the public that sense of safety can be deeply affected.

For the participants in this study, recounting of homophobic or discriminatory experiences was commonplace. From micro-aggressions (Nadal 2013) to serious acts of

violence (Meyer 2010), anti-queer discrimination has become a part of the queer communal narrative regardless of location, and the Flint Hills participants acknowledge that their experiences are not unique. However, their experiences can have a deeper impact on how the queer community views their positionality within the rural community by creating a narrative that can portray rural communities as uninviting or hostile to those queer identities.

In many ways, several of the participants spoke to these very fears of creating a hostile commentary by prefacing their commentary with "this isn't everyone's experience" or by explaining their own experiences as not "happening to everyone." Yet, contradictory to that were often comments of how queer histories of rural communities and places influence how the rural queer identity is viewed. One particular comment during an interview struck me as being very telling of the duality of recognizing that homophobia and discrimination were issues that needed to be addressed but also of having a sense of protectiveness of these rural identities and communities: "I'm going to tell you what I'm afraid of, but I don't want anyone else to be afraid."

That statement held a lot of power for me; in essence it helped to describe an overall attitude that I recognize in the rural queer narrative. It is a statement based on experience in rural communities but also that they are protective of their rural identity. There is definitely a feeling of protectiveness of their environment associated with the interviews on the subject of safety. Statements that reflect this were made by multiple individuals:

- "Don't get me wrong, not everyone is homophobic."

- "Not everyone causes trouble."

- "Country people are different, you just have to know who's okay with you and who's not."

- "Sometimes you have to just let it roll off your back."

- "If something happens like that you just have to be more careful next time."

Keep in mind that these statements were made prior to or following the telling by the participant of an act of discrimination or violence based in homophobia or transphobia that was part of their experience, whether experienced personally or by their personal involvement with another community member. A protective attitude of rural life is imparted by the participants in how they describe their concerns about safety – a creation of a justifiable narrative used to warn but not to frighten others away (Shuttleton 2000).

Concerns regarding safety extended not only to individual narratives but to the community as a whole. As with the narrative of personal warning and experiences, participants were also quick to point out that the queer community can also be responsible for an internalized sense of homophobia and transphobia. The experience of discrimination through internalized phobia is felt as a lack of acceptance within the queer community. Being accepted by the queer community is important to feeling a sense of safety in the individual's environment and so acceptance and safety were often intertwined in their meaning to the participant. During his interview, Yuma, a transgender man,[10] expressed a feeling that the experiences that most affected his sense of safety were committed by other LGBT individuals:

> When I began my transition people thought I was joking. They thought of me as a lesbian and that is what I had thought I was but then I knew I was kidding myself. My female friends just thought it was crazy that I was trans. They would ask me things like why would I want to be a boy? Or they would just leave me out of things like they felt I had betrayed them in some way. It wasn't any easier with the gay guys either. They didn't treat me like they treated their other friends, they didn't think of me as a guy. I just felt in limbo. Even now the community treats me like an outsider. They ask me if I'm gay

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[10]Yuma identifies as pansexual. His transition from female to male occurred in the rural town where he resides. He has been an active advocate and educator for transgender identities in the region.

or a lesbian and I'm neither. Gender and sexuality aren't the same and they act like I have to make a choice. I can handle getting yelled at or being afraid out in town but I really can't handle it when people I'm supposed to trust and feel safe with don't treat me like a person.

Gay men and lesbian women also commented on worries of being judged as "not being gay enough" when appearing heterosexual and cis-gender. For some men there are worries of being "too effeminate," and for some women there are concerns that other lesbians do not treat them like others in the community if they are too 'femme.' Although they spoke of a need for community and of having a sense of community, an underlying tone of non-acceptance could be discerned from such comments. The internalized question of acceptance seemed to distract from the participants' narratives on the queer community while at the same time speaking to the need to have that community available.

It was interesting to hear this sense of mistrust of the queer community as being a part of their sense of the same mistrust of the larger community in the places they lived. However, even though this mistrust could be detected and was at times discussed, it was evident from the larger narratives of these individuals that they were indeed a part of the queer community and felt that there was a safety net that they could access if they needed to do so. I felt as though the mistrust of queer communities was not in actuality what they were identifying, but that their concerns centered on particular sub-groups of community or with particular individuals.

Overall, safety was a consistent theme in all of the interviews. Although not readily evident in some of the narratives, re-evaluation of particular sub-themes reveals that the issue of safety and the fear involved with that sense of safety related to feelings of acceptance, family ties, employment, rural ties, social networks, and resources was indeed a part of participants' discussions in subtle contexts. For instance, when speaking of family ties there was nearly

unanimously a fear of rejection by family, with their social networks there was fear of not being a part of the group or community, and with the umbrella of rural communities there was fear of discrimination and homophobia. Yet, despite these conversations on fear and safety another consistency among the narratives was one of rural places and spaces as being a major factor in interviewees' lives; their rural environment and communities, whether of choice or circumstance, were ones to which they felt a particular affinity.

### *Additional Indications of Queer-Rural Relationships*

Discussion of the findings from the main three themes provides a basis of support for the research questions on relationships of LGBT residents with rural communities. Yet, when working with differing populations within the queer community it was interesting to find more identity intersections of not only the participant but also their intersections with the rural community as a whole and the local queer community. Some of these unexpected intersections that individuals discussed were themes of family, religion, and politics. These discussions were interesting in how they connected sexuality and gender identity aspects of the individual to my own perceptions of the larger rural Flint Hills communities. These subtle themes were not important within a majority of the conversations but I feel that they are worth addressing here. As Jay Poole and C.P. Gause (2011) observe, there is a curriculum of conservatism and religious fundamentalism that is a part of the learned experiences of rural queer identities. This learned experience can often be something that the LGBT individual rejects and that stifles their sense of security and may even force them from their environment (Kazyak 2011).

First, there was a definite sense from older respondents that they remained connected to familial traditions and influence in matters of politics. Conservative attitudes were particularly evident in interviews of those who lived in smaller communities in the Flint Hills. These

attitudes ranged from political, in the sense of party affiliation (Republican or Democratic), to the belief that queer communities did not need specific rights granted to them. Of the latter, the issue of marriage equality was a fresh and highly contested issue within not only the state of Kansas, but nationally as well. Particularly, it was gay men who were more opposed to ideas or debates of marriage equality. While I found this perplexing, statements such as "making a big deal out of nothing" and "there's nothing we can do about that" were suggestive of a conservatism underlying the individual's interview as a whole.

While the topic did not always come up in the interviews, when it did it was often a part of an interview with someone who was in a long-term relationship. Contrary to gay men's feelings on the subject, lesbian women who mentioned marriage equality were more concerned and expressed that they would like to have the opportunity to marry their partner. This opportunity for marriage equality seemed to be a perceived way to empower and to provide validation to these women's relationships. These differences can be viewed as being part of the development of the relationship to the rural environment and the differences in how those relationships are formed and expressed in terms of masculinity and femininity (Little and Panelli 2003). By validating these women's relationships through legal means, they are further pushing the boundaries on the extent to how relationships have been historically defined through a masculine heterosexually dominated cultural definition of rural life and family.

A second subtly expressed condition that appeared was that of religious adherence and even of a sense of religious fundamentalism that seemed at odds with the queer communities' opportunities to live in an open and affirming environment. As one participant stated, "my religion is a huge part of my life, it provides me a connection to my family and community. I just tune out the sex and sin stuff." I find this interesting on two levels. First, this individual –

not the only one with similar sentiments – seems to imply a necessary religious connection to remain a part of their family and community.  Secondly, the individual offers a degree of separatism from the fundamentalist perspectives of particular religious sects and offers an insight into their own formation of coping mechanisms within their religious environment.

 From personal interactions with the community I feel that there is often a struggle between the individual's intersections of faith/religiosity and sexuality or gender identity, but that these individuals develop intrinsic and extrinsic ways to cope with the intersection of identities (Buchanan et al. 2001).  Those who spoke of religion in the context of importance to their lives often spoke of developing relationships with other denominations that were more open and affirming to sexuality and gender identity minorities in order to feel comfortable within that personal intersection faith and identity.

These subtle findings I find to be indicative of the relationship between the rural Flint Hills community as a whole and the adjustment or integration of one's sexuality or gender identity as a way of overcoming additional stigma or discrimination.  Our understanding of the place that these narratives are coming from helps us to examine the subtleties such as religiosity and even political affiliation that may be opposite of how we picture the queer community as it has been portrayed in the media creation.  And, as Michael Brown (2005; 32) has pointed out, if we don't examine the spatiality of the context of these individuals we cannot understand why they operate in the manner that they do within their landscape.

### *Narratives as a Glimpse into the Closet*

For many LGBT individuals there has always been a 'closet' for them to come out about their sexuality or their gender identity.  There has been much written about the 'closet' and how the secrecy, stigma, and fear that hiding one's identity can be detrimental to an individual not

only in an urban context but particularly in a rural context (Weston 1995, Brown 2005, Hennen 2008, Gray 2009). For most the coming out process is never completed. Each time a person starts a new job, meets new friends, or talks about their personal life there is a moment of reliving the initial admittance of sexuality or gender identity that is not like the majority.

For the participants in the focus groups and interviews there was consensus that the coming out process never ends. Some may continue to hide their identity from family, co-workers and even some friends and so the sense of the 'closet' is always with them. The focus groups and interviews were a moment of coming out for the participants, an experience of talking openly and honestly about their personal lives, experiences, and thoughts. And again, for most of the participants there was a sense of solidarity and refuge in the knowledge that there are queer communities, communication networks, and simply a sense of not being alone in these rural areas that helps them live to some extent, contentedly.

## Survey Results

The survey that was distributed for this research revealed that those of many different sexualities and gender identities and living in a variety of places across urban and rural divides had similar experiences, and similar identities to those with whom I met face-to-face. The survey was anonymous, and the questions asked were influenced by information from the focus groups and in-person interviews. The 22 questions covered several areas of the individual's identity and thoughts on community, communication, and self-identity, as well as basic demographic information.

The survey data represent a larger area than what the study area specific study area of the nine counties of the Flint Hills. Because the survey was sent to particular groups with invitations to share, the sample was self-selected and hence spread beyond the bounds of the Flint Hills

study area that formed the core for focus groups and interviews. The final questions on the survey asked participants to identify their current zip code and the zip code of their longest residence. These data show that many participants involved live in the state of Kansas but the reach of the survey was extended farther than the borders of a singular state or region. Missouri, Arkansas, Nebraska, and Colorado were all represented in current zip codes, both urban and rural. The zip codes relating to individual's longest residence were scattered on a much larger scale and included rural and urban locations across the United States. This suggests that social media and email lists, part of the communication connections within the queer community, can impact the knowledge of those in areas such as the Flint Hills.

The representation of location is difficult with this data. Individuals who responded to the survey acknowledged their rights to privacy before as part of the IRB process of protecting individual's identity through an electronic statement of informed consent. The data concerning an individual's location can be mapped by establishing point locations or even through block data within Geographic Information System software and Census Bureau files. However, I feel that this information and representation may present issues with protection of individual identities, particularly for those who live in or outside rural communities. In the case of the Flint Hills, an individual living in a small community of less than a thousand may be the only openly identified queer community member. By providing that individual's location I feel that their privacy is breached and therefore has been excluded from representation.

Because this research has relied on multiple methods/samples (though not random), it is useful to compare the demographics of participant groups. Next, the most pertinent questions of the survey, with relationships to the focus groups and interviews will be addressed. Lastly, I will

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describe the advantages and the disadvantages that the survey has for interpretation of the qualitative aspects of this research.

The gender identity of respondents is pertinent to understanding the connection of the survey to the focus groups and interviews. Survey respondents reflected similar identification of gender identity as the qualitative participants. A majority of participants – over 50 percent – in all aspects of the research identified as male (Table 6.7). Female-identified participants represented 35 percent of all participants. Transgender-identified survey respondents represented 12 percent of the survey participants and nine percent of interviewees. One survey participant did not provide an identity of their gender; this may be due to not feeling represented by the categories offered as part of the survey (Weeks 2014).

Table 6.7. Gender identity of survey participants.

|  | Response | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| Female | 41 | 34% |
| Male | 66 | 55% |
| Transgender Male | 6 | 5% |
| Transgender Female | 5 | 4% |
| Identity not provided | 1 | 1% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

Much like gender identity, participants responding to the survey reflected similar numbers of those participating in interviews. Forty-five percent of interviewees and 38 percent of survey participants identified as gay (Table 6.8). Lesbian identified numbers of both aspects of the study were nearly the same at just over 28 of participants. Participants identifying as bisexual were similar but had a 10 percent difference: the survey with 29 percent and interviews with 19 percent. With the survey participants there were a lower percentage of those as identifying as a sexuality other than LGB; four percent of surveys and ten percent of interviews. Heterosexual participant percentages are also similar. In interviews one individual discussed

their identity as heterosexual (three percent) and in the survey there were four individuals (three percent). The reason for this could mean that there were heterosexual participants that identify as cisgender or that identify as transgender with a sexuality of heterosexual as in the interview participant's intersecting identities of sexuality and gender identity. The average age of respondents was 38, similar to participants via the other methods.

Table 6.8. Identified sexuality of survey participants.

|  | **Response** | **Proportion** |
|---|---|---|
| Heterosexual | 4 | 3% |
| Lesbian | 31 | 26% |
| Gay | 45 | 38% |
| Bisexual | 34 | 29% |
| Not provided | 5 | 4% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

### *Survey Questions and Discussion*

The first question asked participants what type of community or place that they felt that they were currently residing (Table 6.9). Of 119 responses, fifty percent (60) identified that the respondents were residing in a rural community or place. Twenty-four percent (28) identified their residence as being in an urban location. Twenty-six percent (31) responded that they resided in a location that they felt was neither urban nor rural. Half the respondents felt that they resided in a rural environment, with a minority identifying their residence as urban (the remainder felt that they lived someplace between ['neither']). What is interesting are the 31 respondents who did not feel that they live in either a rural or urban location. As was the case with some focus group participants and interviewees, there was often an exchange between how they determined their location as being one that was rural or urban. For focus groups there was discussion of the ideas between participants about what was rural or urban or what aspects of a

particular place or individual conveyed the sense of what that meant. For interviewees this exchange would take place as a talk-through of a thought, with the individual sometimes saying "that's what I would consider to be rural (or urban)." This seems common within the general population nationally, as well; our defining of rural and urban is one that is both quantifiable to a certain degree but also qualitatively instilled in the community (Isserman 2005).

Table 6.9. In your opinion, in what type of community or place do you currently reside?

|  | **Response** | **Proportion** |
|---|---|---|
| Urban | 28 | 24% |
| Rural | 60 | 50% |
| Not urban or rural | 31 | 26% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

The question of importance of landscape was asked in order to attempt to evaluate the level of importance of rural landscapes to individuals: "How important is the rural landscape to you?" (Table 6.10). This question was influenced by the research question of why individuals stay in areas that they may not feel welcome and was affirmed by the focus groups and interviews. For most of the in-person participation, individuals often cited that the physical landscape was important for them; the rural landscape was a representation of home. For the survey participants a majority identified the rural landscape as being important to them (34 percent), there is an appreciation of rural landscapes and life (23 percent), and that individuals have grown to appreciate rural life and landscape although they may not have always done so (33 percent). The experiential perspective of the landscape provides a sense of place, of belonging to the landscape (Tuan 1977). The survey participants connect to the interviews and focus groups on this subject in that there is a certain degree of topophilia (Tuan 2013) evident in queer communities that is in contrast to the questions and concerns of safety or comfort in these

landscapes. The importance and appreciation of the landscape influences LGBT individuals and shapes how they formulate their identities and communities in regard to safety and retaining a sense of place.

Table 6.10. Responses to the question: How important is the rural landscape to you?

| | Response | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Number** | **Percentage** |
| Has always been important to me. | 40 | 34% |
| I have always appreciated rural landscapes and lifestyle. | 27 | 23% |
| I have grown to appreciate rural life and landscape but have not always done so. | 39 | 33% |
| It is not important to me. | 13 | 11% |
| **Total** | **119** | **100%** |

Importance of communities for queer individuals again reflects that there are a majority of respondents who feel that queer communities and networks are important to them. With forty-two percent responding that items are very important (Table 6.11). What sets this information apart is that there were thirty-five percent of the respondents who recognized that the queer communities and networks were important but 'not for me'. This shows recognition of the importance of these queer communities or networks yet individuals responded that those networks and communities are not relevant to their personal identification within those networks or communities. This was also relevant within the interviews and touched upon by focus groups that there was recognition of what was rural however the knowledge of what constitutes as rural and what is urban can be interchangeable or unknown. This is similar to the respondents in Table 6.9 in the acknowledgement of the type of community in which respondents felt that they lived.

Table 6.11. Importance of rural LGBT communities or networks to participant.

|  | Response | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| Very important for me | 50 | 42% |
| Important but not for me | 42 | 35% |
| Not important at all | 27 | 23% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

The impact of technology on social networks, particularly within queer communities has had an impact on the sense of community that the individual has in their lived experiences (Hearn 2014).  With technology, queer communities can experience a remediation of historical construction of queer identity in that media exposure is not isolated to television, film, or radio and that a connection of multiple identities can occur and build a sense of connection (Gray 2009, 146).  As respondents in the qualitative aspects of this research expressed, technology; particularly social media outlets such as Facebook but also on-line magazines and chat platforms; has enabled rural communities to connect with one another across regions, nationally, and internationally.  From the survey (Table 6.12) there were a majority that viewed technology and the ability to increase social interaction positively.  Respondents acknowledged that their social lives and connections were much better (forty-five percent) or that they were dependent on technology for their access to other LGBT individuals, queer communities, and/or events.

Table 6.12. Participant responses regarding impact of technology on social interaction.

|  | Response | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| No difference/doesn't affect me | 1 | 1% |
| My social life is somewhat better | 18 | 15% |
| My social life is much better | 53 | 45% |
| I depend upon technology for access to communication, friends, and/or dating | 47 | 39% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

The advance in technology applications on social interaction also takes many forms for the queer community. These networks (Table 6.13) include multiple dimensions of social technology and respondents identified the networks that they utilized most. Traditional networks are also represented such as social functions/events and queer oriented bars- and assumedly other queer oriented business establishment. From focus groups and interviews, qualitative perspectives recognize communication networks as being able to also create connectivity within the community about events and establishments where one could meet other LGBT individuals. Leading the networks that are utilized are also dating site/chat rooms/dating applications that have become popular within the queer community for access to inter-personal relationships or sexual activity. This is not necessarily a rural phenomenon but has further advanced the connectivity of those in rural communities as it has with urban communities (Gray 2009; Blackwell et al. 2014; Miller 2015). Surprisingly, e-mail lists were not a communication network that respondents identified as important to them. This is despite the access to the survey was predominantly distributed through such lists. As this question only allowed a singular response, participants may have chosen the network that they considered most important.

Table 6.13. Types of communication networks identified by survey participants.

| | Response | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| E-mail list | 0 | 0% |
| Dating site/chat rooms/Dating Apps | 56 | 47% |
| In-person social functions | 49 | 41% |
| Bars | 14 | 12% |
| Other | 0 | 0% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

Communication networks and importance of rural communities appear to also have an impact on how the communities view their situations within the landscape and regionally. As

discussed previously with the interviews, LGBT individuals in the survey felt strongly that they

viewed urban queer communities as being different from their own.  Participants were asked as

to whether they felt that the rural LGBTQ community is different from urban LGBTQ

communities.  With 48 percent and 43 percent, respectively, identifying urban communities as

very different or mostly different, there is a majority that views these two spaces differently

(Table 6.14).  Details of these differences were not explored in the survey.  However, from the

focus groups and interviews it is likely that the same sense of differences in perceptions of urban

culture as being distinctive due to media, access to community, and political viewpoints can have

influence on those views as urban being different.

Table 6.14. Responses to the question: Do you feel that the rural LGBT community is different
from urban LGBT communities?

|  | Response | Proportion |
|---|---|---|
| There is no difference | 0 | 0% |
| Minimal differences | 11 | 9% |
| Mostly different | 51 | 43% |
| Very different | 57 | 48% |
| **Total** | 119 | 100% |

Identity focus is inherent in the formation of one's comprehension of their personal

sexuality or gender identity (Weeks 2014).  The conceptualization of self-identity has been

debated as being socially constructed (Butler 2002) or biological (Westbrook and Schilt 2013).

For most of those within the sexuality and gender identity spectrums, there is not necessarily a

need to justify their identity but to have their identity recognized as intersectional (Brown 2012).

The openness of the individual about their sexuality or gender identity can have many positive

and negative implications as we have discussed within the qualitative perspectives of the

research participants.  The survey asked individuals to identify their openness about their

sexuality or gender identity.  This question gave individuals the ability to answer more than one

category.  Eighty-two percent of respondents were open to friends, 50 percent to family, and 29 percent to co-workers (Table 6.15).  Twenty-two of the respondents answered that they were not open at all – nearly 19 percent of respondents that completed the survey.  The reason for their lack of openness cannot be determined through the survey, but discussions with the focus groups and with interviewees would often reflect a fear of non-acceptance and remaining closeted about their identity.  Additionally, respondents may feel that the question pertains to heterosexual friends, family, or co-workers.  Often throughout this research I perceived that openness about sexuality and gender identity was presented differently between the queer community and the larger rural community.

Table 6.15. Participant's identification of openness about identity.

|  | **Response** | **Proportion** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Not at all open | 22 | 18% |
| Open to friends | 98 | 82% |
| Open to family | 59 | 50% |
| Open to co-workers | 29 | 24% |

Overall, the survey data do represent valuable insight to the research.  By evaluating the similarity of responses a better view of rural queer communities can be evaluated.  The survey provides a view of similarities between perception of landscape, communication networks, and a view of differences or similarities between rural and urban communities.  The data also show that respondents from the survey have a commonality with those involved in the qualitative aspect of the research in terms of sexuality, gender identity, and even openness about their identity with their community members.

## Summary

The triangulation of the focus groups, interviews, and survey give a qualitative and quantitative view of these rural queer communities that is important in providing individuals in rural communities with a sense that they are not alone.  The lives of the individuals can perhaps be enriched with the knowledge that they are not alone.  These rural individuals and communities can find a common ground in their concerns, perceptions of their landscape and communities, and amongst one another.

With the focus groups and interviews, I gathered a sense of what the community concerns were in the Flint Hills.  Perceptions of acceptance, queer social networks, living openly as themselves, and perceptions of what was defined or applied as rural or urban gave insight into how sexuality and gender identity minorities experience and/or perceive their queer and local community and how they navigate rural space.

From these groups and individuals, discrimination was a concern and sense of community was important.  Fear of discrimination because of one's identity was overwhelmingly discussed in focus groups and in interviews.  Many expressed that they acknowledged a system of navigation of rural environments; where to go, who to speak openly to, or how to blend in to the larger population.  These are mechanisms that have been learned in order to live in a place that they may feel that they are not accepted.  Others are defiantly themselves, living openly as a gay man or a transgender woman despite the fears that they may have.

Despite the fears that were expressed, there was a sense of resilience from participants in their words and in their answers about living in their rural communities.  A sense of queer community and an acknowledgement of a rural community were important to all aspects of the research.  At times, some individuals may not disclose publicly about themselves but have a

community of friends, or a 'family of choice' that they can feel free to be who they are and be comfortable in their environment. This community connection is a major factor contributing to the individual's lived experience and perception of the Flint Hills.

For most of the participants, identity as a rural LGBT person or as part of the rural queer community is important. Apart from the recognition of the intersectionality of creating queer identity or spaces through a communication across rural and urban networks, individuals have developed their own sense of rural place and community and what that means to them individually. There is a strong affinity to what individuals view as rural and they view rural as being different from urban landscapes and communities. This is also internalized as an intersection of identity: being a rural LGBT person is part of who they are.

# Chapter 7 - Summary and Conclusions

Through analysis of focus groups, individual interviews, and an on-line survey, I have attempted to obtain comparative responses from individuals representing the queer community. These responses have given insight as to how the queer community/ies and networks function as well as how the individual may view their rural environment.

It has been a goal of this research to gain a better understanding of the rural queer community. By assessing the perceptions of the LGBT individuals and their communities within the Flint Hills, a perspective of how the individual in a rural environment may choose to live in a place that is not necessarily conducive to their personal well-being in terms of sexual identity or gender identity can be examined. Also, differences in community perceptions that may be based upon sexual identity, such as one identifying as lesbian or gay, or the lack of gender identity with the voices of transgender individuals have not been fully documented or referenced within rural queer research.

The overarching research question posed to improve understanding of rural queer individuals and community was: **How do sexuality or gender-identity minorities living in rural areas experience or perceive the places they live and the community networks that they navigate?** In order to address this, several questions are addressed below.

**Specifically, what are the factors that contribute to an LGBT individual living in the Flint Hills?** Participants in the research identified as being a part of the rural communities in which they live. Most have chosen to remain in these areas despite negative experiences or fears related to their own sexuality or gender identity. There is an acknowledgement of a sense of queer community (social capital) that is used to help navigate the larger communities, not only in terms of social networking or developing a 'family of choice' for themselves out of a need for

comfort but also as a simple recognition that there are those in the larger community with whom they can relate. Yet, there is also acknowledgement that their individual sexuality or gender identity can make them perceived as being the 'other' and marginalized by the larger community. Specifically, factors that contribute to an LGBT individual living in the Flint Hills include the sense of this queer community. Technology is also highly important as it enables individuals to connect over greater distances and to access community connections that otherwise they may not have the ability to reach, enabling individuals and communities to interact. **A sense of relating to a queer community and acknowledgement of the rural community in which they live are important to individuals. Community connections are intersectional for the individual and are a major factor contributing to the queer lived experiences and perceptions of the Flint Hills.**

**Are individual sexual and gender identities and perception factors in their concepts of location and community?** Concepts of location and community are dependent on how the individual perceives them and through what lens location and community are viewed. For LGBT individuals, sexuality or gender identity is a part of who they are, but that aspect of their lives is also a part of a negatively held perception of sexuality and gender identity 'others' by the larger rural community. Inherent to being comfortable with their own identity is the ability of the individual to be open and affirming about the intersections of who they are, in all aspects of their life, with their sexuality or gender identity. And this is not always possible. As we have seen with the participants, there are different degrees of openness or affirmation of their personal identity; the lens that is used to view community or location is dependent on the individual's personal sense of comfort with themselves and feelings of safety in the larger community. **Discrimination related to sexuality or gender identity is a major concern. Many**

**individuals acknowledge that they operate in an often organized system of personal and communal navigation of rural environments:  where to go, to whom to speak openly, how to blend in with the larger population.**

**How does one's sexuality or gender identity contribute or detract from the individual's lived experience, connected to a rural region?**  Sexuality or gender identity can both contribute to and detract from the lived experience.  This is true in the urban context as well as in the rural context, but I believe that it can be more intimately linked with the connection to rural regions.  Someone who is seen as the "other" − as different in some way from the majority − often has a heightened sense of the world around them.  In a location such as the Flint Hills where there may not be very many individuals with whom one can identify, daily life experiences can be reminders that there is in some way a difference in how one is treated, whether implicitly or explicitly.  These differences are celebrated and hidden alike within the Flint Hills queer community, but the underlying contribution to a sense of community and of a personal identity is that we acknowledge that LGBT individuals are a part of our rural communities and a part of the social fabric.  A sense of queer community and an acknowledgement of a rural community were important to LGBT respondents.  **Despite fears of discrimination and harm that can detract from the lived experience, many LGBT individuals are open and affirming about their identities in the rural Flint Hills.  A sense of resilience among those in the queer community and a strong affinity to what individuals view as rural contribute to the overall environment.**

The assessment of this rural queer community has enabled the recognition of individual and community voices.  Within the state of Kansas, sodomy laws remain intact at the state level and currently there are continued legislative attempts to overturn any local or state protections

that have been afforded to LGBT individuals, particularly in reference to discrimination in housing, employment, and access to appropriate restroom facilities. The justification for a lack of protections has often been based on the misperception that queer communities or individuals do not reside in rural areas or that protections are unnecessary due to a lack of discrimination (Gerstmann 1999, Rubenstein 2001, Gray 2009). Unfortunately, this has been untrue. In many ways, the rural individual is more susceptible to discrimination due to a lack of protections and education compared to their urban counterparts (Garasky 2002, Gray 2009).

The choice to live in or to leave a rural environment has been one freedom that LGBT individuals have had. Understanding this choice – in terms of how the individual is able to express their sexuality or gender identity, personal involvement within communities, and how they perceive their environment as a whole as hostile or welcoming – can help to empower the LGBT individual and community and ensure that a safe and nurturing environment and identity can be attained within rural space.

In returning to the directive of this research and the questions that were of initial interest, through this project a better understanding and recognition as to how sexuality and gender identity minorities who live in rural areas experience or perceive where they live and the community networks that they navigate may be achieved. Inclusive of this main focus is that individual identities and perceptions are important factors in evaluating the concepts of location, community, and individual perception of sexuality and gender. And perhaps most importantly, an individual's sexuality or gender identity does have implications for the individual's lived experience.

First, as participants have expressed, there is a comprehension by individuals and queer communities that their sexuality or gender identity is important, not just to the individual, but to

their communities as well - both queer and as part of the larger rural community. The multiple identities of gay men, lesbian women, bisexual or pansexual men and women, and the transgender individuals of this rural community of the Flint Hills are evident; they do exist and they live their lives just as most heterosexual or cisgender individuals do.

The individuals contributing to this research understand their community networks, acknowledging that there are others in their communities to whom they can relate. They have learned to navigate their landscape in ways that are at times discreet or at other times more open. But importantly, they acknowledge their community, whether it is in a micro scale of simply a few friends or in a macro scale of recognizing that there is a wide-ranging and vibrant community of which they are a part. Their location in the sense of region, state, or nation is seen as being a part of who they are as individuals. And their location also is viewed as instrumental in building the queer communities where they live; there is a need for community. The fear of discrimination and violence was palpable in the focus groups and in the interviews. Building safe communities helps individuals to alleviate that fear and to navigate their larger rural community as a part of that community.

The sexuality and gender identity of the participants is acknowledged; these characteristics are integral to this research. However, they do not define the individual. An individual's sense of community and identity are a part of the larger rural community and the lived experience of rural life. And it is important to note that the intersections of such factors that contribute to identity − those of family, co-workers, and friends − are important to the individual. Fear extends to these intersections but there is adaptability to the lived space. Some people may be open and affirming of their sexuality and gender identity to all, and others only open to those with whom they feel a connection of trust. However, there is an overarching sense

of recognition of being a part of rural life and also of that rural life being a part of how LGBT individuals identify.

## Implications

There have been problematic aspects of this research. Constraints on access to the community are evident: not everyone is willing to share their experiences. Compared to those interviewed or that participated in the focus groups, there were more in the communities who did not feel comfortable in participating. Sexuality or gender identity is not always evident to a community or to an individual. A rural 'closet' can exist for someone who feels that they may be the only person who feels the way they do. A lack of representation or knowledge of a rural queer community inhibits an individual's openness about who they are. And perhaps there are others who don't see their own sexuality or gender identity as being a part of their daily lives or affecting their lives. Even more so, there may be those fearing that it will be viewed as defining their overall identity.

Apart from individual concerns of how open and affirming they may be able to present themselves, there are also aspects of identity that are not evident in the results of the study. These facets of individual identity are at once independent factors that would contribute to this research but also are important in understanding the intersectionality of identity within the queer communities. There are three factors that were overlooked or not thoroughly addressed: generational differences, relationships, and education.

Initially, generational differences were overlooked as being pertinent to the research. However, as can be seen among the survey respondents, interviewees, and participants in the focus groups, there is a lack of queer youth that were reached. This is problematic in two ways. First, younger residents within these rural communities have not been given a voice as to their

views of their rural presence.  In comparison, individuals over the age of thirty were dominant in voicing their views of community.  Secondly, generational differences in education, attachment to place, and community building/access should play a role in assessing any community, but differences or similarities between age groups are not strongly evident in this study.  Those respondents who were younger did provide valuable insight into how they viewed and navigated their communities.  However, those voices are not readily identified.  For future research, cross-generational views should be sought out more thoroughly as understanding differences or similarities in experiences of varied ages can help provide insight as to perception of identity and community.

Relationship status of participants was not specifically identified or addressed in the results of the study.  In retrospect, acknowledging an individual's relationship status can greatly increase the understanding of attachment to and perception of place and community.  The ability to share one's lived experiences with a relationship partner can aid in being able to cope with the emotional and psychological strains that may come about due to one's access to community and/or discrimination experienced.  Though I can readily evaluate the results and know individuals who were interviewed along with their partner or who attended focus groups as partners, that information is not apparent.  Future research should also include views of those who are in relationships and how they may be similar or different from their single peers.

Education is also a factor that was not initially addressed with the research.  In an attempt to stay away from a more migrant population, the research was focused outside of student populations.  Assuming mobility attached to educational attainment as detrimental to a sense of community or place inhibits a full understanding of the community in question and the contributions that higher education students, faculty, and staff can make to rural queer life.

Additionally, an individual's educational attainment can help or inhibit how they interact with their larger community and affect how one understands their positionality as well as how they may navigate the landscape.

There were additional issues in developing a holistic view of queer rural community: establishing trust and survey instruments particularly influenced the research. Restrictions appeared as to how individuals interacted with me as the researcher. Some of those interviewed had known me for some time and yet were either unwilling to participate or when they participated appeared to not be as candid as they may be when there isn't a group of others with them as in the focus groups or when the digital recorder was turned on during an interview. I like to think of this as the 'tape-recorder' effect. Openness and candid actions and thoughts were inhibited by the knowledge that their words, thoughts, and perhaps their identity are being scrutinized. Despite this, I know that there was a comfort for the participants in that I was not necessarily a stranger. A trust or bond was created, whether they had been recommended as a participant or if they had known me for some time. This trust was often created by letting the individual know more about me: I am from a rural area, I have experiences similar to theirs, and I have many of the same fears.

The survey instrument presented particular issues for the research. Due to the lack of ability to pose particular questions about sexuality or gender identity that were deemed as intrusive by the Institutional Review Board, a shorter (and unfortunately more vague) survey was distributed. As with my own fear of disclosure of zip code location data, it is understandable and integral that participants be protected. Sexuality and gender identity are topics that can be misunderstood by both participants and by those that do not have knowledge of sexualities or gender identities that have been normalized socially. The purpose of research is to inform and

educate, but protecting the individual and the community comes first.  There is a great deal of room to more thoroughly approach research with sensitive populations, however.

### *Future Research*

Individual aspects of rural communities and queer communities need to be further examined so that we are able to better understand the factors that help to create identity and enable community formation.  We need much more information on gender identity minorities in both the urban and rural communities.  Above all of those represented in this research, transgender individuals are the least represented but the most discriminated against.  We have to acknowledge that our collective views about sexuality and gender identity continue to not be representative of all voices.

For queer communities, we are at a pivotal time in history as so many things change politically and socially to allow us to live more openly and freely.  But we need to understand how that sense of community has been built in times when we did not have protections, when there were more dangers to having a non-binary gender or same-sex attraction.  In looking at queer history, we have come so far in such little time.  Many of those who have not had the challenges of a lack of protections or access to rights do not realize that we have much further to go.

### *Personal Reflections*

As someone who has lived the majority of my life in the rural environment and having an identity with the queer community, I feel that it is important that the voices of rural queer communities and identities are heard.  By enabling the rural LGBT individual to be able to view themselves in order to identify with other rural voices we are able to empower the individual and community.  This empowerment can help to solidify acknowledgement of a cultural construction

of rurality outside of the dominant narrative that has shaped how we view rural life in general, and can hopefully enable the rural queer community to embody an identity that is outside of the dominant urban construction of queer.

Rural queer communities and LGBT individuals have a need to know that they are not alone. Mental health issues, depression, drug and alcohol dependency and violence are all issues that our 'other' community members face each day. Queer kids are still killing themselves. Transgender men and women are still being murdered. And queer people from all walks of life are still being fired from their jobs, kicked out of homes, denied healthcare, and denied a sense of safety. Beginning the conversation on rural queer communities or populations, or contributing to it in any way can help us to have a better understanding of how to help those who need it most.

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# Appendix A: Sexuality and Gender Identity Terminology

Agender –

A person who may appear or not identify with a particular gender. An individual identifying as agender does not necessarily have a physical appearance corresponding with their lack of gender identity.

Ally –

1. Someone who actively confronts heterosexism, anti- sexuality or gender identity biases, heterosexual and/or cisgender privilege in themselves and others.

2. An individual who has concern for the wellbeing of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, intersex, queer, and other similarly identified people

3. The belief that heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are a significant part of modern social justice issues.

Asexual –

A person who does not experience or has a significant lack of sexual attraction regardless of gender. They may or may not experience emotional, physical, or romantic attraction. Asexuality differs from celibacy in that it is often regarded as a part of one's sexuality, not a choice.

Assigned at Birth –

This common and preferred term describes an individual's biological sex (and subsequently gender in early life) assigned without involving the person whose sex was being assigned. Commonly seen as "Female Assigned At Birth" (FAAB or AFAB) and "Male Assigned At Birth" (MAAB or AMAB).BDSM – (Bondage,

Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism)

The subsequent terms of 'submission/sadism' and 'masochism' refer to the deriving of pleasure from the infliction or reception of pain, often in a consensual sexual context. The terms 'bondage' and 'domination' refer to various power roles, in both sexual and social contexts. These practices and concepts are often misunderstood as abusive or non-consensual, but when practiced in a safe, sane, and consensual manner can be a part of healthy sex life. [Related Terms: Kink, Leather]

Bear –

> 1. Historically originating within the gay male culture in response to the ideation and misconceptions of HIV/AIDS during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a bear is often someone who has facial/body hair and a larger body.
>
> 2. An umbrella term that is often defined as more of an attitude and a sense of comfort with natural masculinity and bodies.

Bicurious –

> An individual who shows some curiosity for a relationship or sexual activity with a person of a gender they do not usually engage with.

Bigender –

> A person whose gender identity is viewed as or identifies as a combination of male and female. They may consciously or unconsciously change their gender-role behavior from masculine to feminine, or vice versa.

Binding –

> The process used by Trans* identified men to promote the flattening or hiding of one's breasts to have a more masculine or flat appearing chest.

Biphobia –

> The fear of, discrimination against, or mistrust of those who identify as bisexual which is often times related to current sexual binary standards. Biphobia can be evident in the LGBTQIA community, as well as in general society.

Bisexual –

> Someone who experiences sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to people of their own gender as well as other genders, not necessarily at the same time, in the same way, or to the same degree.

Butch –

> 1. Someone who identifies as masculine, whether physically, mentally or emotionally
>
> 2. Term that is sometimes used as a derogatory reference to lesbians, but it can also be and often is claimed as an affirmative identity label.

Cisgender –

> Identity of an individual who feels comfortable with the gender identity assigned to them based on their sex assigned at birth.

Cisgender Privilege –

Perceived and/or expressed privileges conferred to people who are believed to be Cisgender.

(Examples: having one's personal pronouns correctly used, no harassment in public restrooms, no denial of expected access to health care, etc.)

Cisnormativity –

The assumption, most likely in individuals or in institutions, that everyone is cissexual and/or cisgender and that those identities are more normal, valid, and worthy of respect than those of transgender people's identities.

Cissexism –

Pervasive and institutionalized systems that "other" or marginalize those in the transgender community and perceives or reinforces concepts that their needs and identities are less important than those of cisgender people.

Coming Out –

1. The process of accepting one's own sexuality, gender identity, or status as an intersex person (to "come out" to oneself).

2. The process of sharing one's sexuality, gender identity, or intersex status with others (to "come out" to friends, etc.).

3. A life-long process for individuals in the LGBTQIA community.

Cross-dressing –

The act of occasionally wearing clothes that are traditionally associated with people of the opposite gender. Cross-dressing is viewed as a form of gender expression and is not necessarily tied to erotic activity, and is not indicative of sexual orientation.

Discrimination –

Conceptually described as the combination of prejudice plus power. Discrimination occurs when members of a more powerful social group behave unjustly or cruelly to members of a less powerful social group. Discrimination can take many forms, including both individual acts of hatred or injustice and institutional denials of privilege that is normally accorded to other groups. Ongoing acts of discrimination and institutional acceptance of discrimination creates a climate of oppression for the affected group.

Down Low –

Term originating within communities of color and often used to describe men who identify as heterosexual but who are sexually active with other men. Individuals most often avoid sharing this information even if they are also sexually active with women. [Related terms: Men who sleep with men (MSM)]

Drag –

The performance of one or multiple genders theatrically.

Drag King –

Individual who is most likely biologically identified as female who performs masculinity theatrically.

Drag Queen –

An individual most likely identifying as biologically male who performs femininity theatrically.

Dyke –

1. Term that is often adopted affirmatively by lesbians (not necessarily masculine ones) to refer to themselves.

2. Derogatory term referring to (often masculine) lesbians.

Fag –

1. Derogatory term for a gay or effeminate man.

2. Derogatory term for any individual who does not match their assigned gender role.

3. Sometimes reclaimed by gay men as a self-identifier.

Femme –

An individual of any assigned sex or gender identity who identifies with femininity as dictated by traditional gender roles.

FTM –

The common abbreviation for a female-to-male transgender person. This term reflects the direction of gender transition. Some prefer the term MTM (Male to Male) to underscore the fact that though they were assigned female at birth, they never identified as female. [Related terms: transgender man, trans man]

Gay –

1. Common term in most Euro-centric cultural settings to represent men who are attracted to men in a romantic, erotic and/or emotional sense. Not all men who engage in same gender sexual behavior identify as gay, and as such this label should be used with caution [See: Down Low].

2. An umbrella term for sexual orientations that fall outside of straight/heterosexual.

Gender –

1. A socially constructed system of classifications that assigns qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender characteristic can change over time and vary between cultures.

2. A complex system of roles, expressions, identities, performances, and more that are given gendered meaning by a society and usually assigned to people based on the appearance of their sex characteristics at birth. How gender is embodied and defined varies from culture to culture and from person to person.

Gender Binary –

The idea that there are only two genders – man or woman –and that a person must be identified as being either/or gender.

Gender Confirming Surgery –

Medical surgeries used to modify one's body to be more congruent with one's gender identity. Previously referred to and known as 'Sex Reassignment Surgery,' especially within the medical community. In most states, one or multiple surgeries are required to achieve legal recognition of change of gender status.

Gender Dysphoria –

Discomfort or distress caused by one's assigned sex and the desire to change the characteristics that are the source.

Gender Expression –

How one presents oneself and gender to the world via method of dress, mannerisms, hairstyle, facial hair etc. This may or may not coincide with or indicate one's gender identity. Many utilize gender expression in an attempt to determine the gender/sex of another individual. However, a person's gender expression may not always match their gender identity.

Gender Identity –

A person's sense of self as masculine, feminine, both, or neither regardless of external genitalia.

Gender Non-Conforming –

A person who either by nature or by choice does not conform to gender-based expectations of society (e.g. transgender, transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, butch, cross-dresser,etc.). Also known as or referred to as being 'Gender Variant.'

Gender Normative –

A person who by nature or by choice conforms to the gender based socio-cultural expectations of the biological sex that they were born with.

Gender Oppression –

The societal, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that are inherent within cisgender privilege.

Genderqueer –

An individual whose gender identity is neither male nor female, is viewed as being between or beyond genders, or is some combination of gender identities. This can include a political agenda that challenges gender stereotypes and the gender binary system. Genderqueer individuals may or may not pursue physical changes, such as hormonal or surgical intervention, and may not identify as trans*.

Heteronormativity –

The assumption of individuals or institutions that everyone is heterosexual and that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality, bisexuality, and other sexual orientations.

Heterosexual –

Biological males who experience sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to biological females, and vice versa. Also known as 'straight.'

Heterosexism –

Prejudice against individuals and groups who display non-heterosexual behaviors or identities, combined with the majority power to impose such prejudice. Usually used to the advantage of the group in power. Any attitude, action, or practice – backed by institutional power – that subordinates people because of their sexual orientation.

Heterosexual Privilege –

>Those benefits derived automatically by being heterosexual or being perceived as heterosexual that are denied to homosexual and bisexual people. Also, the benefits homosexual and bisexual people receive as a result of claiming heterosexual identity or denying homosexual or bisexual identity.

HIV-phobia –

>The irrational fear or hatred of persons living with HIV/AIDS.

Homophobia –

>The irrational fear, hatred, or intolerance of people who identify or are perceived as non-heterosexual, including the fear of being read as part of the "gay" community. Homophobic behavior can range from telling gay jokes, to verbal abuse, to acts of physical violence.

Homosexual –

>An out of date term for a person who is primarily emotionally, physically, and/or sexually attracted to members of the same sex. Many people view this term as offensive in that it is excessively clinical and sexualizes members of the LGBTQIA community.

Identity Sphere –

>The idea that gender identities and expressions do not fit on a linear scale, but rather on a sphere or within a spectrum that allows room for all expression without weighting any one expression as better than another.

In the Closet –

>1. Refers to a non-heterosexual, bisexual, trans person or intersex person who will not or cannot disclose their sex, sexuality, sexual orientation or gender identity to their friends, family, co-workers, or society.

>2. An intersex person may be closeted due to ignorance about their status since standard medical practice is to "correct," whenever  possible, intersex conditions early in childhood and to hide the medical history from the patient.

>3. There are varying degrees of being "in the closet." For example, a person can be out in their social  life, but in the closet at work, or with their family.

Institutional Oppression –

> Systemic actions of a society used to benefit one group at the expense of another through the use of language, media, education, religion, economics, etc.

Internalized Oppression –

> The process by which a member of an oppressed group comes to accept and live out the inaccurate stereotypes applied to the oppressed group.

Intersex Person(s) –

> Individual(s) born with the condition of having physical sex markers (genitals, hormones, gonads, or chromosomes) that are neither clearly male nor female. Intersex people are sometimes defined as having "ambiguous" genitalia.

Leather Community –

> A community which encompasses those who are into leather, sado-masochism, bondage and domination, uniform, cowboys, rubber, and other fetishes. Although the leather community is often associated with the queer community, it is not a "gay-only" community.

Lesbian –

> Women who experience sexual, romantic, physical, and/or spiritual attraction to other women.

LGBTQIA –

> A common abbreviation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual community. The acronym is used as an umbrella term when talking about non heterosexual and non-cisgender identities, and does not always reflect members of the community. Sometimes the "A" is used to reference Allies and the "Q" is used to reference Questioning people.

Lipstick Lesbian –

> Usually refers to a lesbian with a feminine gender expression. Can be used in a positive or a derogatory way, depending on who is using it. Is sometimes also used to refer to a lesbian who is seen as automatically passing for heterosexual.

MTF –

Abbreviation for a male-to-female transgender person. This term reflects the direction of gender transition. Some people prefer the term FTF (female to female) to underscore the fact that though they were assigned male at birth, they never identified as male.

[Related terms: transgender woman, trans woman]

Oppression –

The systematic subjugation of a group of people by another group with access to social power, the result of which benefits one group over the other and is maintained by social beliefs and practices.

Outing –

When someone discloses information about another's sexual orientation or gender identity without their knowledge and/or consent.

Pansexual –

A person who has the potential to be attracted to all or many gender identities and expressions.

Passing –

Describes a person's ability to be accepted as their preferred gender/sex or to be seen as heterosexual.

Polyamory –

Refers to having honest, non-monogamous relationships with multiple partners and can include: open relationships, polyfidelity (which involves multiple romantic relationships with sexual contact restricted to those), and sub-relationships (which denote distinguishing between a 'primary' relationship or relationships and various 'secondary' relationships).

Prejudice –

A conscious or unconscious negative belief about a whole group of people and its individual members. Anyone can be prejudiced toward another individual or group.

Queer –

1. An umbrella term which includes lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, trans* people, intersex persons, radical sex communities, and many other sexually transgressive communities.

2. This term is sometimes used as a sexual orientation label or gender identity label used
to denote a non-heterosexual or cisgender identity without have to define specifics.

3. A reclaimed word that was formerly used solely as a slur but that has been reclaimed
by some folks in the LGBTQIA community. Nevertheless, a sizable percentage of people
to whom this term might apply still hold 'queer' to be a hateful insult, and its use by
heterosexual people is often considered offensive.

Questioning –

An individual who is unsure of and/or exploring their gender identity and/or sexual
orientation.

Sex –

A medical term designating a certain combination of gonads, chromosomes, external
gender organs, secondary sex characteristics and hormonal balances. Because 'sex' is
usually subdivided into the binary of 'male' and 'female' based on genitalia, this category
does not recognize the existence of intersex bodies.

Sexual Orientation –

The desire for intimate emotional and/or sexual relationships with people of the same
gender, another gender, or multiple genders.

Sexuality –

Refers to a person's exploration of sexual behaviors, practices and identities in the social
world.

Stealth –

This term refers to when a person chooses to be secretive in the public sphere about their
gender history, either after transitioning or while successful passing. Also referred to as
'going stealth' or 'living in stealth mode.'

Stereotype –

A preconceived or oversimplified generalization about an entire group of people without
regard for their individual differences. Some stereotypes can be positive. However, they
can have a negative impact, simply because they involve broad generalizations that
ignore individual realities.

Stonewall Riots –

On June 28th, 1969, New York City Police attempted a routine raid on the Stonewall Inn, a working-class gay and lesbian bar in New York's Greenwich Village. Unexpectedly, the patrons resisted, and the incident escalated into a riot that continued for several days. Many people attribute this event as the catalyst for the American Gay Liberation Movement. It is often left out that the more frequent patrons of this bar were trans* women, drag queens and butch lesbians.

Straight –

Another term for heterosexual.

Straight-Acting –

A term usually applied to gay men who readily pass as heterosexual. The term implies that there is a certain way that gay men should act that is significantly different from heterosexual men. Straight-acting gay men may be critiqued by members of the LGBTQIA community for seemingly accessing heterosexual privilege.

Top Surgery –

This term usually refers to surgery for the construction of a male-type chest, but may also refer to breast augmentation.

Trans* –

An abbreviation that is used to refer to a transgender/gender queer/ gender non-conforming person. This use allows a person to state a gender variant identity without having to disclose hormonal or surgical status/intentions.  This term is sometimes used to refer to the whole gender non-conforming community that might include (but is not limited to) transgender, genderqueer, genderfluid, non-binary, genderf*ck, transsexual, agender, third gender, two-spirit, bigender, trans man, trans woman, gender non-conforming, masculine of center, and gender questioning.

Transfeminine –

1. A term used to describe those who were assigned male at birth, but identify as more female than male.

2. Those who identify as transfeminine, as opposed to simply as MTF or a woman, trans* or otherwise, often place themselves feminine of center. That is, they identify more closely with femaleness than maleness, and generally desire a physical appearance that

reflects this identification, but do not identify as wholly female or as a woman. It should be noted that transfeminine is not a descriptor of gender expression but of identity.

3. Transfeminine people do not necessarily have to be stereotypically feminine in their interests or even presentation.

Transgender –

A person who lives as a member of a gender other than that expected based on sex or gender assigned at birth. Sexual orientation varies and is not dependent on gender identity.

Transition –

This term is primarily used to refer to the process a gender variant person undergoes when changing their bodily appearance either to be more congruent with the gender/sex with which they identify and/or to be in harmony with their preferred gender expression.

Transmasculine –

1. A term used to describe those who were assigned female at birth, but identify as more male than female.

2. Those who identify as transmasculine, as opposed to simply as FTM or a man identify more closely with maleness than femaleness, and generally desire a physical appearance that reflects this identification, but do not identify as wholly male or as a man. It should be noted that transmasculine is not a descriptor of gender expression but of identity. Transmasculine people do not necessarily have to be stereotypically masculine in their interests or even presentation.

Trans Man –

An identity label sometimes adopted by female to male trans* people to signify that they are men while still affirming their transgender history.

Trans Woman –

An identity label sometimes adopted by male to female trans* people to signify that they are women while still affirming their transgender history.

Transphobia –

The irrational hatred of those who are transgender or gender non-conforming, sometimes expressed through violent and sometimes deadly means.

Two-Spirit –

A Native American term for people who blend the masculine and the feminine. It is commonly used to describe individuals who historically crossed gender. It is often used by contemporary LGBTQIA Native American people to describe themselves. The term and meaning are strictly in reference to those who identify as Indigenous.

Versatile –

A person who is both a 'Top' and a 'Bottom;' there may or may not be a preference for one or the other. Also known as 'Switch.'

Source Information: This terminology was originally created by Eli R. Green and Erica Peterson of the LGBT Resource Center at the University of California, Riverside, 2003-2004 and has been revised using resources from the following organizations: University of California, Riverside; MIT; University of California, Berkeley; George Washington University; California State University, San Marco; University of California, San Diego; Bowling Green State University; The Asexuality Visibility and Education Network (AVEN),Vanderbilt University and the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals.

# Appendix B: Population Table and Graphs

| Census Year Vernacular Region | 1900 | 1910 | 1920 | 1930 | 1940 | 1950 | 1960 | 1970 | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2010 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Butler | 23363 | 23059 | 43842 | 35904 | 32013 | 31001 | 38395 | 38658 | 44782 | 50580 | 59482 | 65880 |
| Chase* | 8246 | 7527 | 7144 | 6952 | 6345 | 4831 | 3921 | 3408 | 3309 | 3021 | 3030 | 2790 |
| Chatauqua | 11804 | 11429 | 11598 | 10352 | 9233 | 7376 | 5956 | 4642 | 5016 | 4407 | 4359 | 3669 |
| Clay* | 15833 | 15251 | 14365 | 14556 | 13281 | 11697 | 10675 | 9890 | 9802 | 9158 | 8822 | 8535 |
| Dickinson* | 21816 | 24361 | 25777 | 25870 | 22929 | 21190 | 21572 | 19993 | 20175 | 18958 | 19344 | 19754 |
| Geary* | 10744 | 12681 | 13452 | 14366 | 15222 | 21671 | 28779 | 28111 | 29852 | 30453 | 27947 | 34362 |
| Greenwood | 16196 | 16060 | 14715 | 19235 | 16495 | 13574 | 11253 | 9141 | 8764 | 7847 | 7673 | 6689 |
| Harvey | 17591 | 19200 | 20744 | 22120 | 21712 | 21698 | 25865 | 27236 | 30531 | 31028 | 32869 | 34684 |
| Jackson | 17117 | 16861 | 15495 | 14776 | 13382 | 11098 | 10309 | 10342 | 11644 | 11525 | 12657 | 13462 |
| Lyon* | 25074 | 24927 | 26145 | 29240 | 26424 | 26576 | 26928 | 32071 | 35108 | 34732 | 35935 | 33690 |
| Marion | 20676 | 22415 | 22923 | 20739 | 18951 | 16307 | 15143 | 13935 | 13522 | 12888 | 13361 | 12660 |
| Marshall | 24355 | 23880 | 22730 | 23056 | 20986 | 17926 | 15598 | 13139 | 12787 | 11705 | 10965 | 10117 |
| McPherson | 21421 | 21521 | 21845 | 23588 | 24152 | 23670 | 24285 | 24778 | 26855 | 27268 | 29554 | 29180 |
| Montgomery | 29039 | 49474 | 49645 | 51411 | 49729 | 46487 | 45007 | 39949 | 42281 | 38816 | 36252 | 35471 |
| Morris* | 11967 | 12397 | 12005 | 11859 | 10363 | 8485 | 7392 | 6432 | 6419 | 6198 | 6104 | 5923 |
| Ottawa | 11182 | 11811 | 10714 | 9819 | 9224 | 7265 | 6779 | 6183 | 5971 | 5634 | 6163 | 6091 |
| Pottawatomie* | 18470 | 17522 | 16154 | 15862 | 14015 | 12344 | 11957 | 11755 | 14782 | 16128 | 18209 | 21604 |
| Riley* | 13828 | 15783 | 20650 | 19882 | 20617 | 33504 | 41914 | 56788 | 63505 | 67139 | 62843 | 71115 |
| Saline | 17076 | 20338 | 25103 | 29337 | 29535 | 33409 | 54715 | 46592 | 48905 | 49301 | 53597 | 55606 |
| Wabaunsee* | 12813 | 12721 | 11424 | 10830 | 9219 | 7212 | 6648 | 6397 | 6867 | 6603 | 6885 | 7053 |
| Washington | 21963 | 20229 | 17984 | 17112 | 15921 | 12977 | 10739 | 9249 | 8543 | 7073 | 6483 | 5799 |
| Wilson | 15621 | 19810 | 21157 | 18646 | 17723 | 14815 | 13077 | 11317 | 12128 | 10289 | 10332 | 9409 |
| Woodson | 10022 | 9450 | 8984 | 8526 | 8014 | 6711 | 5423 | 4789 | 4600 | 4116 | 3788 | 3309 |
| Total Population | 396217 | 428707 | 454595 | 454038 | 425485 | 411824 | 442330 | 434795 | 466148 | 464867 | 476654 | 496852 |

*Denotes county included in nine county study area.

# Chase



# Clay



# Dickinson

**Geary**



**Lyon**



**Morris**

**Pottawatomie**

**Riley**

**Wabaunsee**
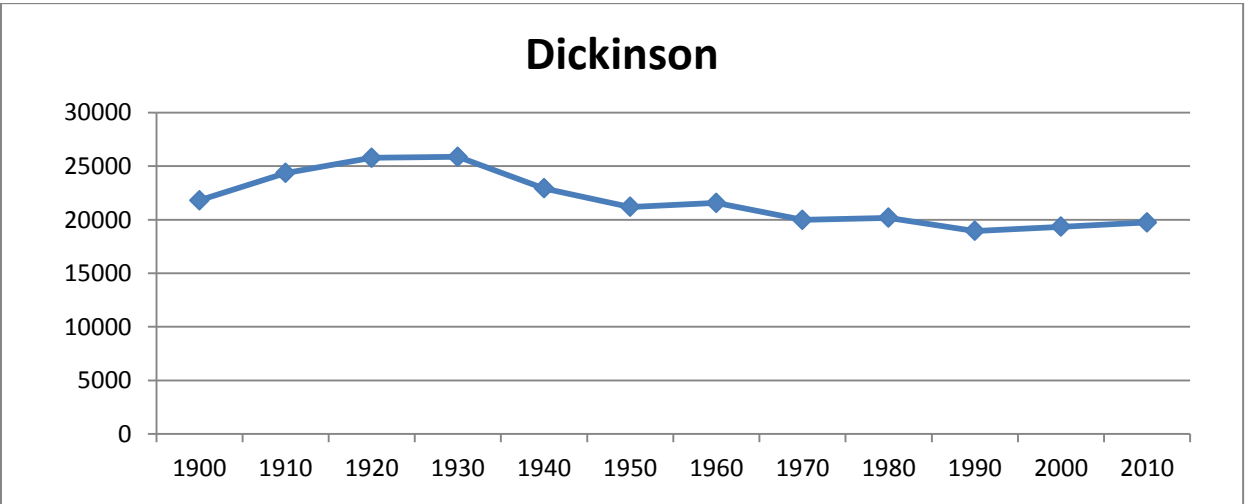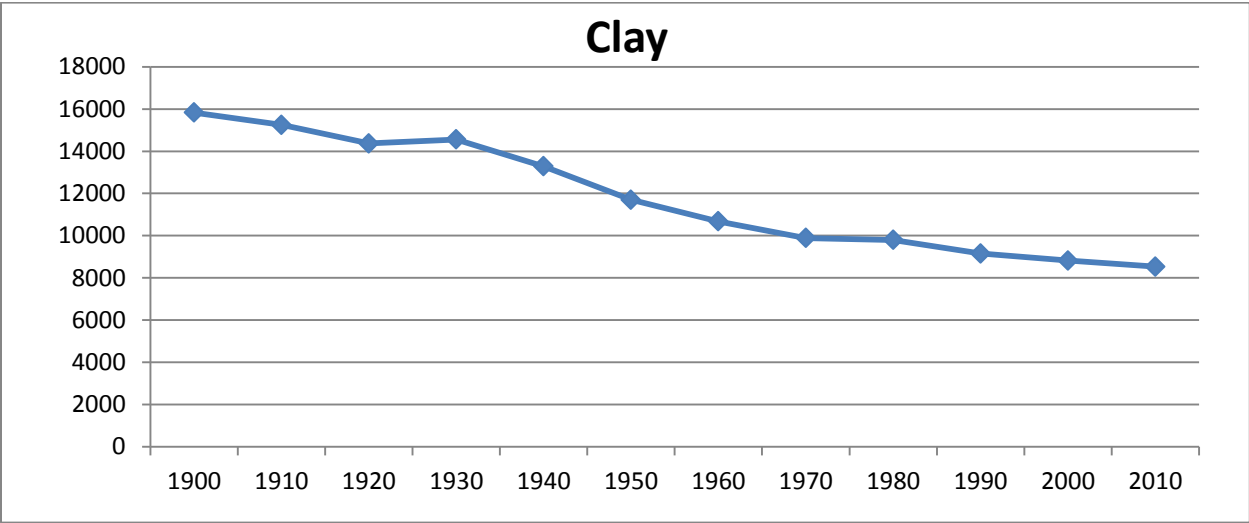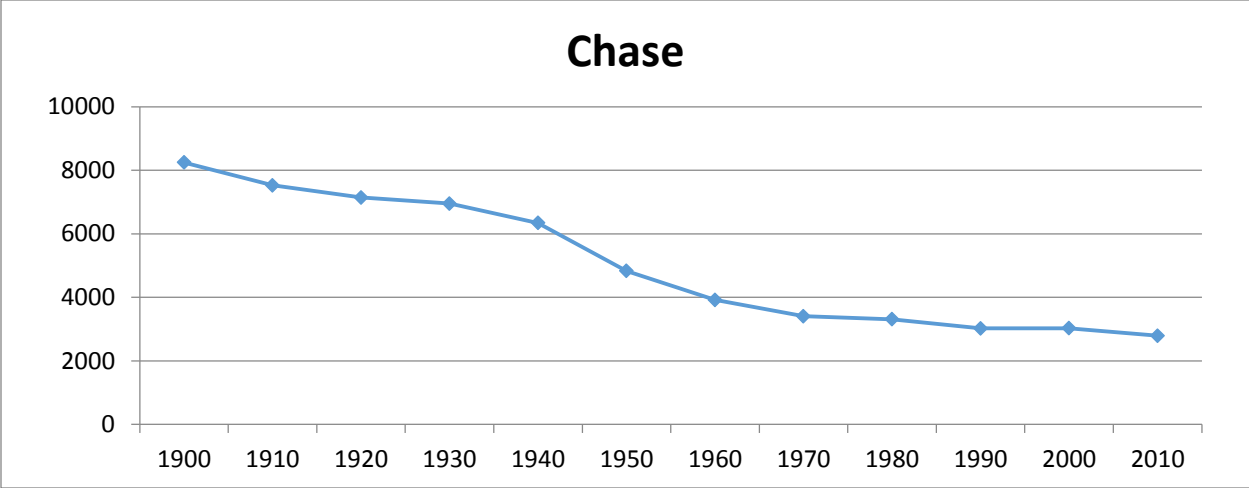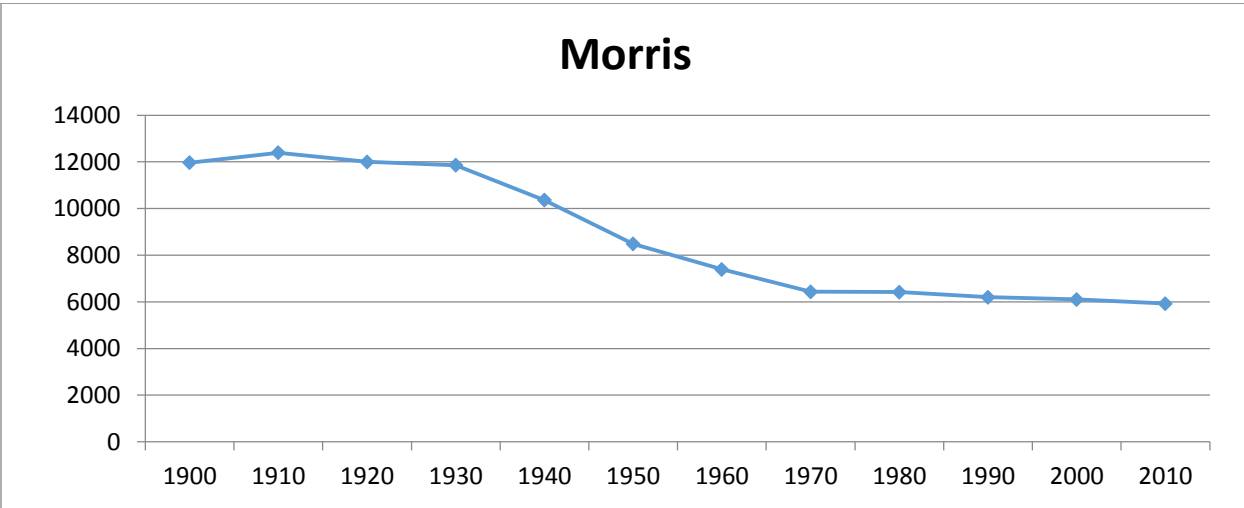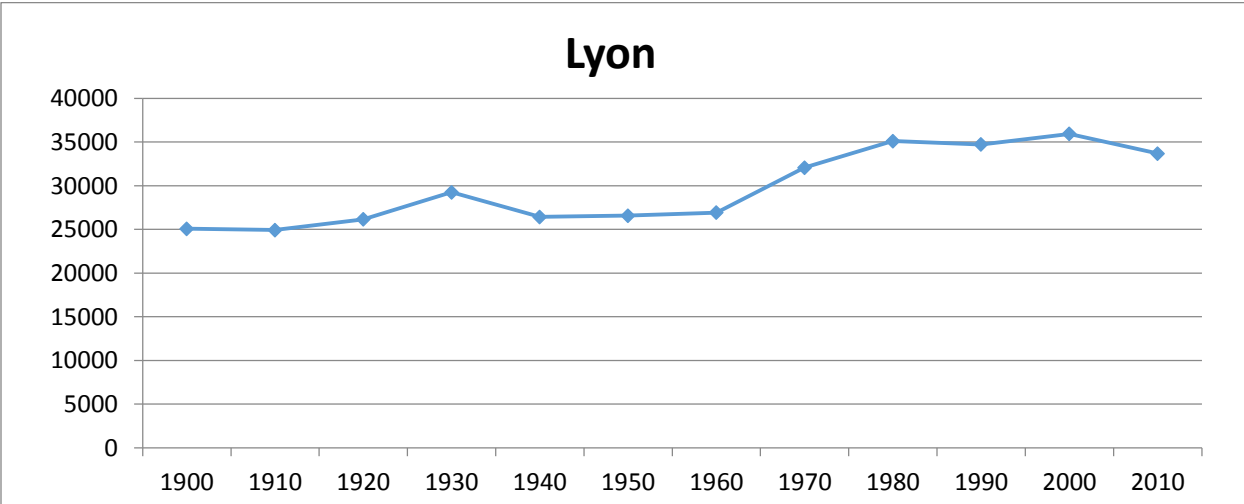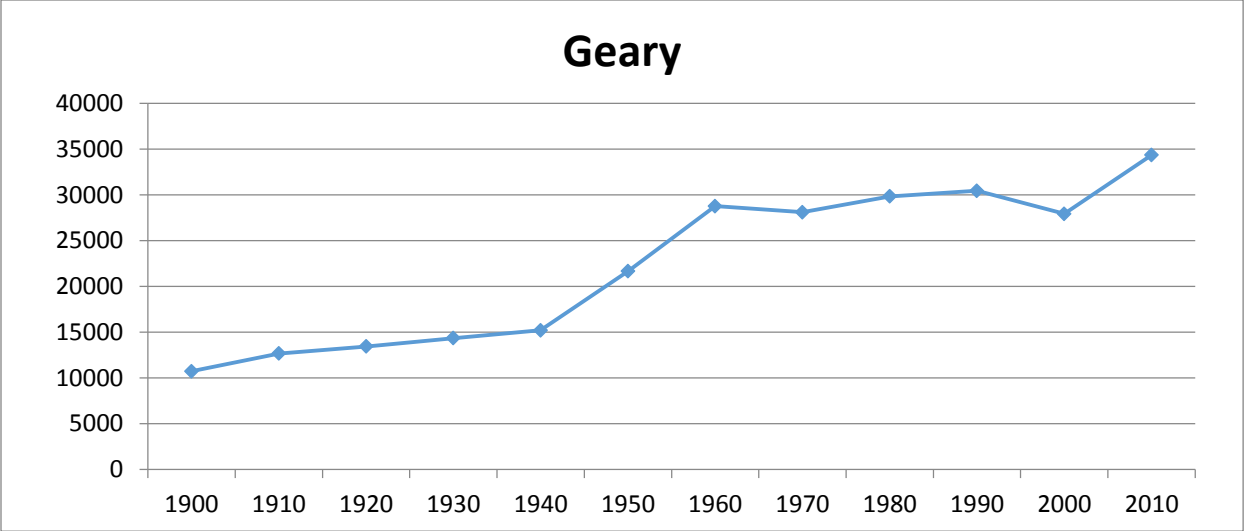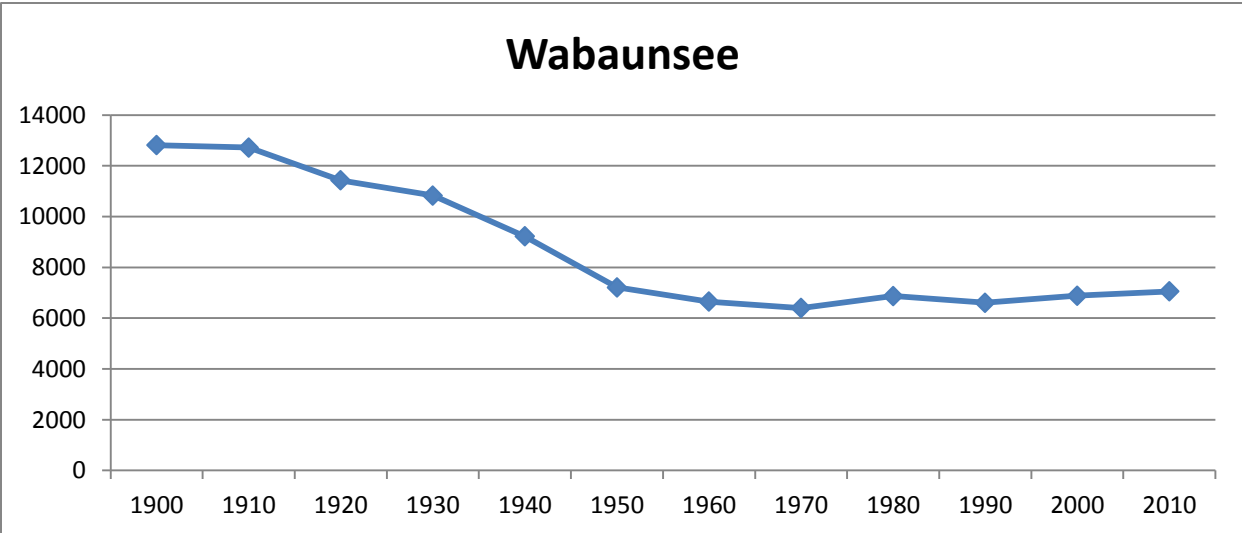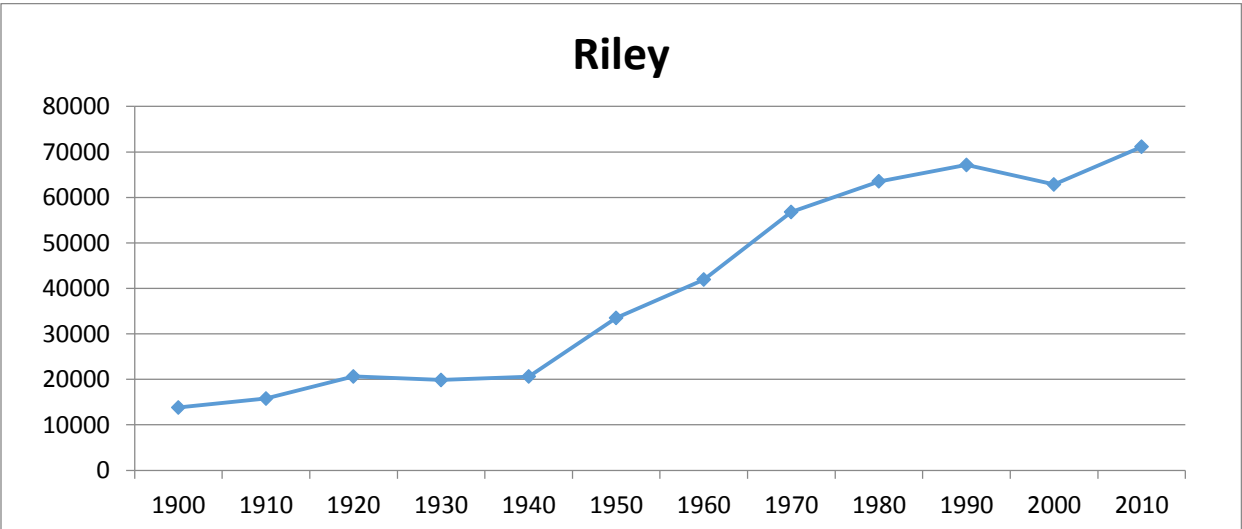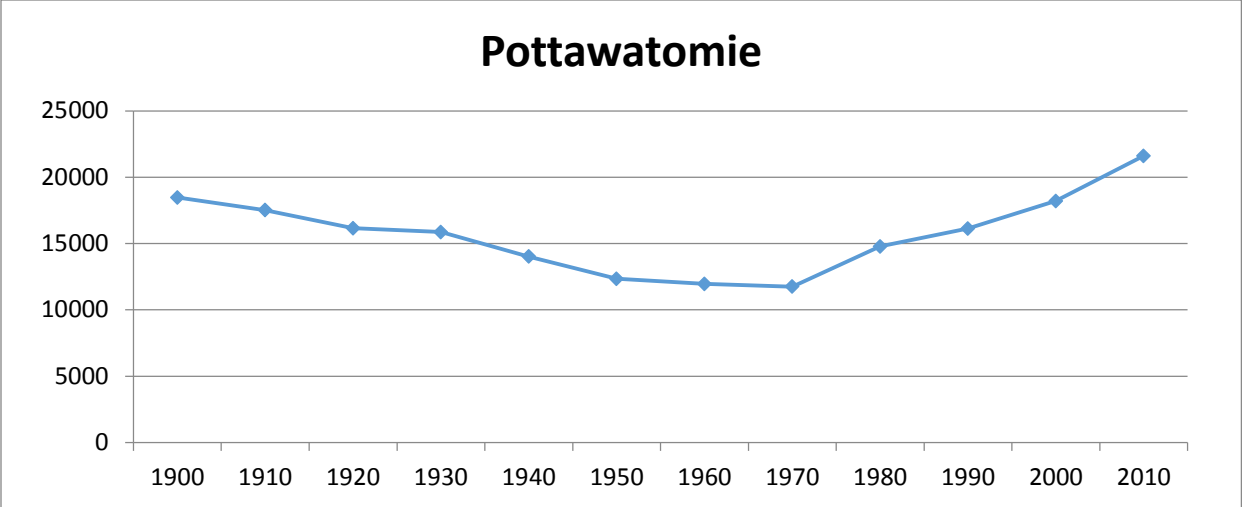
# Appendix C: Whisper: Gay Little Manhattan



JAMES DEAN Vs. ELVIS PRESLEY

PDC

# WHISPER

Dec. 25c

FROM HERE TO MATERNITY
Starring: **GRACE KELLY**
(Assistant Producer: PRINCE RAINIER)

PEPSI GIRL'S OVERNIGHT POP • DANA ANDREWS: 100 PROOF LOVER •
• RICHARD CARLSON'S "THRILL-A-MINUTE" PARTY • TV WRECKS •
HARRY JAMES' HOT SOLO • PILLS MAKE COLORED PERSONS WHITE •

# WHISPER

## THE STORIES BEHIND THE HEADLINES

### Volume 11, Number 2 — December 1956

# GAY LITTLE

When Horace Greeley said "Go West Young Man," a lot of guys went — but the half-men must have gone only halfway because today Manhattan (Kansas, that is) is a gay fairy land!

# MANHATTAN

### By WALLY LEVINE

**M**ANHATTAN ISLAND, commonly called New York City, is notorious as a home for homos. Due largely to a section called Greenwich Village, O. Henry's Bagdad-on-the-Subway has indeed become the Fairyland of the Modern World.

But there's another town that, for its size, does equally well by the limp wrist set. Strangely, its name is also Manhattan.

Manhattan, Kansas.

The home of Kansas State College, this lively little spot out in the corn belt draws much of its weird vitality from nearby Fort Riley, the army cavalry post.

Having heard rumors that Manhattan, Kansas, was strictly for the birds, *Whisper* asked me to investigate. Why it's always picking *me* for this sort of assignment, I guess I'll just never know. Anyway, I minced into the town in question one recent evening and checked my toothbrush at the Wareham Hotel.

Feeling a need for liquid refreshment, I headed for a bar. At least five were within spitting distance of the hotel.

The one I chose was like thousands of others in thousands of other towns. Same faces hanging over the same glasses, and down on the corner stool the same old pro.

#### Loaded With Oddballs

I tried sounding out the bartender on the queer side of this Manhattan, but he wasn't having any. So I moved to the gal in the corner. After she got over being miffed at learning I seemed more interested in twilight men than in a lady of the evening, she finally suggested a little beer joint down near the college campus.

She knew her city.

Even as I neared the place, I discovered the section was loaded with oddballs.

I've seen butch boys (pickups for fairies) in every town from Scollay Square, Boston, to Pershing Square, L. A., and their uniform is always the same. Tight fitting, revealing blue jeans *(Continued on page 46)*

## Gay Little Manhattan (*Continued from page 19*)

topped by a white shirt open almost
to the belt buckle to show off their
chests.

Most cities have more butch boys
than fairies. Not gay little Manhat-
tan. There the "Marys" outnumber
the "Butches" almost three to one.

Soldiers from Fort Riley cruise
this area when they get yearnings for
queer mates. The gimmick is to pre-
tend they're hitching a ride back to
the Fort. They soon get picked up
and, natch, the ride back is via a
lonely country road. Sometimes you
have to be real early to get a parking
place at one of the secluded "Inspira-
tion Points" along this road.

When I reached the joint I'd been
directed to, I found it packed with
soldiers, fairies, coeds and crewcuts.
Nobody seemed to worry about ages
here. If you were old enough to stag-
ger thru the door and lean on the bar,
you were old enough to be served.

The queens loved this whoopsie
atmosphere. I spent about an hour
brushing hands off my thighs before
I headed for another tavern.

This turned out to be the favorite
spot of the college crowd. It poured
crewcuts and coeds in and out as fast
as they could swig beer and empty
their pockets. Youthfulness seemed
no hindrance here, either. Some of
the sorority girls got so fried they
had to be smuggled into the college
behind the housemothers' backs.
Then the frat boys went home to-
gether!

Further investigations during suc-

ceeding days and nights proved to
me that the life of a Greek-letter guy
at dear old Kansas State can be real
gay indeed. In fact, there are times
when—to keep roommates in some
frat houses from becoming *too* frat-
ernizing — the students are moved
to different rooms every few weeks.

There's a saying about the boys
in one frat house: "They don't need
stairs to get from one floor to an-
other—they fly!"

### Switch Hitters Too

Seems quite a few of the sorority
gals are switch hitters, too. I met one
blonde coed who told me she'd been
having such a *mad* affair with her
roommate that it was decided she
should move out of the sorority house
for everyone's good, including her
own.

She moved, and just to prove to
everybody that she was "normal," she
became engaged to a real boy. He
was very understanding and she was
actually becoming happy with her
common lot until one night when,
happening by a tavern, she saw her
fiancé walk out, locked arm-in-arm
with one of Manhattan's most no-
torious fairies.

"That," as she put it, "really killed
me where men are concerned!"

Yes, indeedy, there's nothing like
a little college education to make one
really ambisextrous!

The nephew of one of our highest
government officials used to go to
Kansas State and, according to an

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old friend of his, whom I talked to, was "gay as a goose." This friend, whom we'll call "Bobby," is no lily himself, and was kicked out of K.S. for his "many mad affairs" with the boys — including some with the aforementioned nephew. Bobby went to work in Kansas City as a policeman, but was booted off the force when cops learned he was a him/her. He's back in gay little Manhattan now, living it up in a swank apartment conveniently located near the campus and frat houses. Just to prove his heart's in the right place, on Sundays he sings in a church choir.

I've known some real wild people and times in Manhattan, New York. But after a couple of weeks in Manhattan, Kansas, I was only too glad to hurry back to Bagdad-on-the-Subway—for a little peace and quiet!

▲▲▲

## Presley

this kid's been havin' one wild time smooching teenage gals from this end of the country to that.

Whenever one of his bobbysox brigade puckers up and asks to be kissed—Elvis puckers up and obliges.

This uninspiring bit got started when a gal, after getting Elvis' autograph, asked for a kiss, too. So Elvis kissed her — in a way any self-respecting parents would hope their daughter was never kissed before.

Hearing about this, femme fans everywhere began asking for like treatment. And Presley hardly acts like the bashful type, does he?

Then there was the Charleston newspaper gal who was sent to interview the sexy shrieker. At one point in the interview, Presley up and bit the babe's hand. When asked why, he said: "I was only trying to be friendly, like a little puppy dog. If you want to get ahead—y'gotta be different!"

Actually, to anybody but his most fervent fans, Presley is more dull than different.

When a reporter asked what his favorite classics in music were, Elvis' classic answer was, "Well, I like Kathryn Grayson and Mario Lanza."

The reporter explained he'd meant what were his favorite operatic works? Elvis, ever quick on the pickup, replied, "Oh, well, *Only Make Believe!*"

Elvis, today, is making more money than the President of the

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# Appendix D: Informed Consent - Focus Groups

**In Plain Sight: The LGBT Community in the Kansas Flint Hills**

IRB Application Materials

**Verbal Informed Consent Statement:**

I am conducting a focus group interview for the purpose of Doctoral research. The purpose of this focus group is to gain an understanding of place attachment and social networks among rural gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. The focus group meeting will only take about an hour and is completely confidential. No questions will be asked that may identify you or could be traced back to you specifically. All materials collected will be retained by myself and presented as research findings in a Doctoral dissertation. If you have any questions you may contact Dr. Lisa Harrington with the Department of Geography at Kansas State University or Brandon H Haddock, Doctoral Candidate with the Department of Geography at Kansas State University. Participation is voluntary and there are no penalties or negative consequences of refusal to participate. Would you like to participate in this research?

**Additional Materials Offered:**

Participants will each receive a business card with contact information of the researchers.

# Appendix E: Informed Consent Form - Interviews

**PROJECT TITLE:** In Plain Sight: The LGBT Community in the Kansas Flint Hills

**APPROVAL DATE OF PROJECT:**     **EXPIRATION DATE OF PROJECT:**

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. Lisa Harrington
**CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** Brandon Harley Haddock

**CONTACT NAME AND PHONE FOR ANY PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:**
- Dr. Lisa Harrington: lbutlerh@k-state.edu

**IRB CHAIR CONTACT/PHONE INFORMATION:**
- Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
- Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:** This research will help to further the understanding of rural place attachment and social networks of some marginalized groups or communities despite experiences, laws, or stigma that may be associated with such groups.

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:** This is an audio-taped interview. Several questions will be asked pertaining to your understanding of rural place, attachment to rural place, and experience within the social networks of the community in rural places.

**LENGTH OF STUDY:** 45 - 60 minutes estimated

**BENEFITS ANTICIPATED:** This research will help to promote awareness and acceptance of the marginalized individual or community within the rural American environment.

**EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY:** All information will remain confidential to the study. Names and information will not be distributed unless in the context of this research (i.e. dissertation, academic articles, etc.). If you would like to remain anonymous within the context of this research please initial. (____)

**TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.**

**I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.**

**(Remember that it is a requirement for the P.I. to maintain a signed and dated copy of the same consent form signed and kept by the participant**

**Participant Name:** _____

**Participant Signature:** _____ **Date:** _____

**Witness to Signature: (project staff)** _____ **Date:** _____

# Appendix F: Informed Consent - Survey

**Survey Informed Consent Statement:**

I am conducting an on-line survey for the purpose of Doctoral research. The purpose of this survey is to gain an understanding of place attachment and social networks among rural gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. The survey will only take about ten minutes and is completely confidential. No questions will be asked that may identify you or could be traced back to you specifically. All information collected will be retained by myself and presented as research findings in a Doctoral dissertation. If you have any questions you may contact:

- Dr. Lisa Harrington with the Department of Geography at Kansas State University (785-532-3410; lbutlerh@k-state.edu)
- Brandon H Haddock, Doctoral Candidate with the Department of Geography at Kansas State University (785-532-5299; bhaddock@k-state.edu).

Additionally, you may contact the following individuals for information regarding University research and compliance:

- Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.
- Jerry Jaax, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance and University Veterinarian, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is completely voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

By remaining as a participant I indicate that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my presence and participation with the research activities acknowledges that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participation is voluntary and there are no penalties or negative consequences of refusal to participate. If you would like to participate in this research please follow the link below:

Survey on Rural Sexuality and Gender Identity

# Appendix F: Survey Items

Q1 In your opinion, what type of community or place do you currently reside?

○ Urban
○ Rural
○ Not urban or rural

Q2 How important is the rural landscape to you? Please pick the best answer that applies to how you perceive the rural landscape and lifestyle.

○ Has always been important to me.
○ I have always appreciated rural landscapes and lifestyle.
○ I have grown to appreciate rural life and landscape but have not always done so.
○ It is not important to me.

Q3 Considering where you live at this time, how do you feel about your future in your area of residence?

○ Plan on leaving this area.
○ Would leave to live in a different type of community (rural to urban; urban to rural).
○ Would leave for similar type of community (urban to urban; rural to rural).
○ I have no plans to leave my current area.

Q4 What type of communication networks do you most participate in? (check the one you feel is most important to you)

○ E-mail list
○ Dating site/chat rooms/Dating Apps
○ In-person social functions
○ Bars
○ Other _____

Q5 What impact has recent technology (cell phones, wifi, internet, etc.) had on your access to social communication, meeting new friends, or dating?

○ No difference/doesn't affect me
○ My social life is somewhat better
○ My social life is much better
○ I depend upon technology for access to communication, friends, and/or dating

Q8 What is your perception of the rural lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer community?

○ I consider myself to be a part of the LGBTQ rural community.
○ I recognize that there is a rural LGBTQ community but am not a part of that community.
○ I do not know of a rural LGBTQ community.
○ I am not part of a LGBTQ community.

Q7 The most significant reason for your current living location:

○ Family connection is near
○ Career/employment
○ Chose to live in location for other reasons
○ College/University

Q9 How important are rural LGBT communities or networks?

○ Very important for me
○ Important but not for me
○ Not important at all

Q10 In your opinion, is the rural LGBTQ community different from urban LGBTQ communities?

○ There is no difference
○ Minimal differences
○ Mostly different
○ Very different

Q11 Please rate the following in their importance to you. (1 = important; 2 = Does not apply to me; 3 = Not important)

○ Legally recognized same-sex marriage or civil unions
○ Equal opportunity for housing based on sexuality or gender identity
○ Equal opportunity for employment based on sexuality or gender identity
○ Protection from physical hate crimes or discrimination based on sexuality or gender identity

Q13 Age

○ Current age _____

Q15 Assigned / Biological Sex

- ○ Intersex
- ○ Male
- ○ Female

Q16 Gender Identity

- ○ Female
- ○ Male
- ○ Transgender Male
- ○ Transgender Female
- ○ Identity not provided? _____

Q17 Sexuality

- ○ Heterosexual
- ○ Lesbian
- ○ Gay
- ○ Bisexual
- ○ Not provided? _____

Q18 Education level attained?

- ○ No HS diploma or GED
- ○ GED
- ○ HS Diploma
- ○ Associate Degree
- ○ Some College/University level courses
- ○ College/University Degree
- ○ Graduate level certification or degree

Q19 Current individual annual income level ? (in dollars)

- ○ Under 20,000
- ○ 20,000 - 45,000
- ○ 45,000 - 75,000
- ○ Over 75,000

Q20 Current Occupation?

- ○ Unemployed
- ○ Student
- ○ Business Owner
- ○ Sales or Retail
- ○ Banking/RealEstate
- ○ Manufacturing/Warehouse/Factory
- ○ Education
- ○ Government
- ○ Farming/ranching
- ○ Other _____

Q21 Relationship Status? (all that apply)

- ○ Single
- ○ Legally married (to same-sex or opposite-sex partner)
- ○ Divorced
- ○ Widowed
- ○ In committed relationship

Q22 6 Digit Zip Code

- ○ Current residence _____
- ○ Longest lived residence _____