

UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF LGBTQ+  
COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN  
THE SOUTH

by

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## ABSTRACT

BRYNTON JARRETT LETT. Understanding the Career Decision-Making Process of LGBTQ+ College Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions in the South. (Under the direction of DR. TARYNE MINGO)

Many college students experience career indecision. College students that identify as LGBTQ+ and students of color may experience greater difficulty in the career decision-making process as they often deal with the additional stress of managing multiple marginalized identities. The additional stress can have an impact on their career choice and development. A sample of seven participants was selected for the study. Participants completed a semi-structured interview sharing experiences navigating their racial, sexual, and gender identities and detailing their influence on their career decision-making process as LGBTQ+ students of color at a predominantly white institution in the south. Given the unique personal and contextual factors, Social Cognitive Career Theory was used to better understand the experiences of the selected participants. The findings support existing themes that have emerged from looking at the experiences of other marginalized groups and should provide additional insight to inform more multiculturally competent career counseling.

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## DEDICATION

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	x
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
Theoretical Framework	3
Introduction of Constructs	4
Significance of the Study	7
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Questions	7
Assumptions	7
Delimitations	8
Research Design	9
Operational Definitions	9
Summary	9
Organization of Study	10
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	12
Theoretical Framework	12
Social Cognitive Career Theory	12
Interest Model	15
Choice Model	16
Performance Model	17
SCCT with College Students	18
LGBTQ+ Persons in the Workplace	18
Historical Context	18

Current Trends and Concerns	19
LGBTQ+ College Students of Color	20
Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions	20
Attending Colleges and Universities in the South	20
Summary	21
Identity Negotiation	22
Helm's People of Color Identity Model	22
Cass's Homosexual Identity Model	22
Minority Stress	22
Intersectionality	23
Identity Negotiation for LGBTQ + College Students of Color	23
Summary	24
Career Decision-Making Process	25
LGBTQ+ College Students of Color	25
Summary	26
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	28
Research Question	28
Subjectivity Statement	29
Research Design	29
Phenomenology Overview	30
Social Cognitive Career Theory	31
Sampling and Recruitment	32
Participants	34

Data Collection	36
Data Analysis	39
Role of the Researcher	42
Trustworthiness	43
Summary	44
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS	45
Theme One: Identity Negotiation	45
Outness	46
Intersectionality	48
Cultural Influences	52
Findings Summary: Identity Negotiation	55
Theme Two: Minority Stress (Externalized)	56
Discrimination	56
Finding Community	59
Lack of Cultural Competence	61
Findings Summary: Minority Stress (Externalized)	64
Theme Three: Minority Stress (Internalized)	65
Family Pressure	65
Inclusiveness	66
Mentorship and Visibility	69
Security	71
Findings Summary: Minority Stress (Externalized)	72
Theme Four: Forced Assimilation	72



Professionalism	73
Adhering to Gender Norms	74
Pronouns	76
Findings Summary: Forced Assimilation	77
Chapter Summary	77
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	79
Connecting Findings to Existing Literature on SCCT	79
Future Research	83
Implications for Counselors	84
Limitations	86
Contributions of the Study	87
Conclusion	87
REFERENCES	90
APPENDIX A: MODEL OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE INFLUENCES ON CAREER CHOICE BEHAVIOR (ADAPTED)	99
APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT EMAIL	100
APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER	102
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE	103

**LIST OF TABLES**

TABLE 1: Demographic and Identities of the Seven Participants	35
TABLE 2: Pseudonyms and Meanings	41

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Freedom for All Americans (2021), there are currently 27 states in which there are no explicit statewide laws that protect LGBTQ-identified people from discrimination on the basis of their gender identity or sexual orientation. The majority of states without protections are located in the south including South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, and Mississippi. Therefore, those individuals entering the career decision-making process in the south may face the added stressors of discrimination based on their identities.

During the 2020-21 academic year, there will be an expected 1.998 million bachelor's degrees conferred (US Department of Education, 2019). Students of color account for 36.8% of college graduates based on data from 2017-18 (US Department of Education, 2019). According to Best Colleges (2020), approximately 10% of all college graduates identify as gay, trans, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, or questioning. Many of these college students struggle with career indecision; in particular, marginalized student populations often face additional stressors related to their identities which impact their career development. According to the Center for American Progress, approximately 1 in 10 LGBTQ+ persons have reported having to remove items from their resume to cover their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) (Mirza et al., 2018). This problem is compounded for LGBTQ+ people of color that have reported editing out their identities at even higher rates.

Much of the research to date has focused on the experiences of LGBTQ+ students or students of color, with little research examining the intersections of race and SOGI. Budge et al. (2010) examined the experiences of transgender individuals in the career decision-making process and identified occupational barriers as a major theme that emerged. Barriers included discrimination, gender stereotypes, and difficulty gaining employment. The experiences of

transgender individuals are unique but share similarities with other sexual minorities. Research suggests a relationship between minority stressors and the career decision-making process (Winderman et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ college students who have dealt with discrimination have learned to build coping skills and resilience. However, these students are also more likely to report that their identity plays a significant role in their career decision-making process (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Additional research is needed to see how the added minority stress of race factors into the career decision-making process of LGBTQ+ college students of color.

When choosing a career, sexual minorities must engage in a thought process that includes considering the obstacles and barriers that stand between them and their goals. Additionally, they manage their impressions in response to the perceived barriers they may encounter in the workplace. Sexual minority students feel compounded stress socially and professionally from their racial and sexual minority identities (Datti, 2009; Harris, 2014). This study will fill the gap in the research to understand how the compounding minority stress experienced by these students graduating from institutions in the south influences their process of deciding on a career.

Identity negotiation draws its roots from Holland et al.'s (1998) contextual identity theory which argued that individuals exist within a set of worlds that are governed by social norms, expectations, and accountability. At the intersection of those worlds, individuals must author a sense of self that reconciles contradictions that exist within those worlds by negotiating their identities. This study also looks at identity negotiation at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual orientation for college students. These students must constantly shuffle their racial and sexual identities in order to maintain their support systems and succeed in their collegiate careers (Pena-Talamantes, 2013).

This study will explore how identity negotiation, specific to college students' racial, sexual, and gender identities, informs their career decision-making process. In particular, the researcher is interested in understanding how participants' identities contribute to their career development, choices made around self-disclosure and career path, as well as perceived barriers to success. Moreover, the researcher is interested in understanding the potential compounding impacts of attending a predominantly white institution in the south as members of marginalized and minoritized groups. Minoritization, a term popularized by William Connolly (2010), refers to the act of making a person or group subordinate in status to the dominant group. Hall et al. (1994) defined marginalization as the process by which persons or groups are peripheralized on the basis of their associations, social identities, and environment. Social cognitive career theory posits that proximal contextual factors, such as the minoritization and marginalization that these students often experience, can directly impact students' career choice behavior (Lent et al., 2000).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Few career development theories adequately address the nuance of the career decision-making process for individuals with multiple marginalized identities. However, Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) incorporates elements of personal identity and career choice. SCCT emerged from Bandura's widely used Social Cognitive Theory. Developed by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (1994), the SCCT sought to explain how career choices are made by linking self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals. Bandura's Triadic Reciprocal Model of Causality, a central component of his theory, acknowledged the complex relationship between personal attributes, contextual factors, and behaviors. Therefore, self-efficacy and outcome

beliefs are influenced by personal inputs (e.g., race, gender) and contextual factors (e.g., family, culture, location). Self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations inform a person's career goals and interests. However, an individual's environment or context impacts their access to career opportunities (Bandura, 1986).

## **Introduction of Constructs**

### **Minority Stress**

This study will seek to understand the impacts of minority stress on the career decision-making process. Minority stress theory captures the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination and their role in creating an unfavorable social environment which can lead to mental health concerns for those in a minority position (Meyer, 2003). The concept of minority stress also underscores the idea that this stress is unique and is compounded by the general stressors experienced by all people. Minority stress takes on a specific presentation among LGBTQ+ identified people which includes expectations of rejection, concealment or hiding of their identity, and internalized homophobia (Meyer, 2003). Participants in this study will share their experiences of minority stress sharing at least two minoritized identities.

### **Identity Negotiation**

Identity negotiation refers to a set of processes through which individuals attempt to find a balance between interaction goals and those related to their identity, such as agency and communion (Swann & Bossan, 2008). The formulation of identity negotiation has its roots in symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934) which posited that individuals create their knowledge of self through social interactions. As such, individuals are constantly engaged in a process of evaluating how they are perceived by those around them. The flow of influence, between an individual (or "perceiver") and self ("target"), is bidirectional in a way in which the target

internalizes the expectations of the perceiver in terms of how one should act (Miller & Turnbull, 1986). The result is an exchange in which the perceiver begins to “act the part” in response to the expectancies of the perceivers. However, if those expectations do not align with the target’s self-views, then incongruence may occur. This incongruence results in a “battle of the walls” in which each party may attempt to persuade the other to see things their way (Swann & Ely, 1984).

The focus of this study will examine the ways in which research participants negotiate their racial, sexual, and gender identities throughout the career decision-making process. Students engaged in this process must navigate their self-perceptions in contrast to how they are perceived as they engage in the process. Swann et al. (2009) found that identity congruence between parties can reduce anxiety and foster feelings of connectedness.

### **Impression Management**

The study is also concerned with how LGBTQ+ students of color manage their impressions through their decisions regarding which aspects of their identity they are willing to disclose and which parts they choose to conceal -- a process called impression management. Leary (2001) defined impression management (IM) as the process by which people control how they are perceived by others. Individuals are motivated to control how they are perceived when they hold a belief that their public image impacts their ability to attain their desired goals. LGBTQ+ persons of color often engage in IM tactics in pursuit of a career or employment goals. Those tactics might include altering or editing information on application materials, dressing in traditional or gender-conforming attire, and engaging in cis-gendered performance.

### **Career Decision-Making Process**

Yale (2021) outlined a five-step model of the career decision-making process: (a) self-assessment, (b) identify and research options, (c) evaluate and prioritize, (d) take action and try

options, (e) reflect and re-evaluate. Critical to the process is a deep and intimate self-awareness and knowledge of self. As one engages in the process, it is necessary that individuals be able to ask themselves the question, “who am I?” and “what is important to me?” It is important to note that the answers to these questions can shift and evolve over time as the process is interactive and ongoing throughout one’s professional life. As one engages in the first step of self-assessment, it is important to consider personality and values. Personality in this context embodies the unique characteristics that inform a person’s thoughts, behaviors, and decisions. Values refer to those things that are important for career satisfaction. It is important that within the process an individual identifies what those values are and seek to find congruence. For LGBTQ+ students of color, the process of self-evaluation is critical to ensuring that career choices are congruent with one’s personality and value system.

This study seeks to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students as they engage in the career decision-making process. The researcher is seeking to understand how the constructs of minority stress, identity negotiation and impression management influence the ways in which these students move through the five steps outlined above. Emphasis will be placed on the self-assessment and evaluation as students decipher how to manage and incorporate their identities as they move through the process.

### **Significance of the Study**

Counselor educators are required to take a career counseling course as part of the core curriculum (CACREP, 2016). Existing career counseling course content does not adequately address career counseling theory applied to diverse populations. Counselors must be sensitive to the needs of all students. As such, additional training is needed to better understand the unique needs of LGBTQ+ students of color and provide suitable career development support. This study



fills the gap in the research which addresses the negotiation of identities that racial and SOGI minority students in the south must engage in as they enter the career decision-making process. The outcome of this study could inform career counseling course development, the work of college/university career centers, and career counselors working with this population. It may also be used to develop career development training and interventions for LGBTQ+ students of color.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the phenomenological experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color at predominantly white institutions in the south with identity negotiation during the career decision-making process through the framework of SCCT.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research question for this study was: What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color engaged in the career decision-making process? There are also four sub-research questions:

- 1) What role do social identities (race, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and identity negotiation play in career development and career decision-making?
- 2) How do students experience minority stress within the context of attending PWI in the south and how does it influence career choice?
- 3) What factors are considered when making career decisions?
- 4) What role does impression management play within the career decision-making process?

### **Assumptions**

There were several assumptions made in this study which included:

- LGBTQ+ students of color experience racial-, sexual-, and gender-related challenges during the career decision-making process.

- There is a shared experience of identity negotiation among LGBTQ+ students of color.
- LGBTQ+ students of color will be able to articulate their experiences of identity negotiation within the career decision-making process.
- Participants will answer all items on the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions honestly.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the items or choices within a study that are made or controlled by the researcher. The study was delimited by the following:

- Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants for the study.
- Data was collected via semi-structured interviews.
- Participation was limited to students of color willing to self-identify as LGBTQ+ and students of color who met the inclusion criteria for the study.

The inclusion criteria for this study included:

- Self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community
- Self-identify as a person of color
- An undergraduate student attending a predominantly white institution in the south
- Enrolled as a college senior within six months of graduating

### **Research Design**

A qualitative phenomenological semi-structured interview was used to understand the lived experiences of participants with their race, SOGI and identity negotiation as it relates to the career decision-making process. The purpose of phenomenological research is to gain an

understanding of a phenomenon through the perception of those in the situation or setting. The focus is on the shared experience of a phenomenon (Ravitch & Carl, 2020).

### **Operational Definitions**

Operational definitions used for this study included:

#### **LGBTQ+**

This acronym referred to individuals who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, intersexed, etc. This was a part of the inclusion criteria and was verified with students prior to them being included as research participants.

#### **Student of Color**

A student of color was defined as one who self-identified as non-White or belonging to a historically underrepresented or marginalized racial or ethnic group.

#### **Predominantly White Institution**

A predominantly white institution was qualified as a 4-year college or university in which the student population consists of more than 50% White student enrollment.

#### **The South**

For the purpose of this study, “the South” referred to the southern region of the United States which included: Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee, Virginia, and Arkansas. Student participants self-reported attending an institution in one of the locations.

### **Summary**

Chapter one introduced the unique factors that impact the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ students of color at predominantly white institutions in the south. Existing literature examines the discrimination faced by transgender adults in the career decision-making

process and career indecision among LGBTQ+ college students. LGBTQ+ students of color deal with discrimination and other systemic barriers to accessing certain career opportunities (Winderman et al., 2018). These individuals experience immense stress from their racial and sexual minority identities (Datti, 2009). As a result of the stress, these students must develop a form of resilience in the form of identity negotiation to navigate the career decision-making process (Pena-Talamantes, 2013). However, the existing literature highlights limitations to fully understanding this phenomenon: (a) a lack of research that centers the voices of those at the intersections of race and sexual identity/orientation and (b) the unique challenges faced by those college students at predominantly white institutions seeking career opportunities in the south. This study sought to fill a void in the literature to better understand the process by which these individuals must negotiate their identities as they transition from college into the career decision-making process.

### **Organization of Study**

Chapter one included the overview and purpose of the study, the significance of the study, research questions guiding the study, SCCT as the theoretical framework, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, research design, and operational definitions. Chapter two provides a comprehensive literature review. The chapter is organized into the following key sections: (a) overview of the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color, (b) career development for these students, (c) identity negotiation, and (d) career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ students of color. Chapter three outlines the methods and procedures used in this study. This section is organized into the following sections: (a) subjectivity statement, (b) research questions, (c) research design, (d) methods, and (e) summary. The fourth chapter reports the findings of the study through the presentation of emergent themes from participants' interviews. The fifth and

final chapter summarized the study's overall findings, contributions to the counseling field, and areas for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The purpose of this study is to understand the phenomenological experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions in the South with identity negotiation during the career decision-making process. This study seeks to answer the research question: What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color engaged in the career decision-making process? The following chapter provides a review of the existing literature associated with the significant constructs of this study. The chapter will be organized into the following main sections: (a) theoretical framework, (b) LGBTQ+ persons in the workplace, (c) experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color, (d) identity negotiation, and (e) the career decision-making process.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Traditional career theories have failed to adequately address the impacts of broader systemic and environmental variables combined with individual factors that influence career development. To date, most career counseling approaches utilize a trait and factor approach, which focuses on individual problem-solving. Given the increasing complexity of career-related concerns in contemporary society, many have advocated for the need for more effective practices (Savickas, 2000). Social Cognitive Career Theory was developed as a framework to build on the limitations of previous theories by bridging personal attributes, experiences, and context into individual career development (Lent et al., 1994).

### **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides a theoretical framework for understanding career choice and development within the context of individual and environmental factors. The SCCT model is organized by five core constructs which include: self-efficacy,

outcome expectations, personal goals, career interests, and contextual supports and barriers. The model considers the experiential, personal, cognitive, and contextual factors related to career choice behavior (Medugorac et al., 2020). According to Lent et al. (2002), experiential factors refer to learning experiences. These experiences can be observed from a young age and include vicarious learning, verbal persuasion from others and successfully performing tasks. The experiential factors help to form the person and cognitive pieces. The personal factors related to an individual's personal attributes such as age, gender, race, or ethnicity. These factors are related to one's social identities and form a personal lens and worldview. Cognitive factors include self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and career choice. The theoretical model supports a relationship between each of these variables, such that self-efficacy fosters desired outcome expectations, and self-efficacy and outcome expectations directly influence career goals and interests (Lent et al, 1994). Contextual factors include variables related to our environment and background. The SCCT model breaks these factors into distal and proximal influences which can take the form of supports or barriers. Distal or background influences include things like geographic location, socioeconomic status, and family or social support. According to Lent et al. (2000), *proximal* contextual influences refer to factors that an individual may face while in the process of career decision-making. These include experiences such as discrimination or harassment, which can have a mediating effect on the decision-making process. Contextual supports and barriers, both distal and proximal, can also influence career interests (Lent et al, 2006). The following section will examine in depth the five core constructs: self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, personal goals, career interest, and contextual supports and barriers.

### ***Self-Efficacy***

Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as an individual's beliefs around their ability to perform specific tasks related to attaining a certain level of performance. Rather than a fixed state, SCCT regards self-efficacy as a evolving set of beliefs that interact with behavioral, personal, and contextual factors (Lent et al., 1994). According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is composed of cognitive, affective, and social sources. The cognitive refers to feelings in response to successfully completing tasks and mastering certain experiences. Affective sources can include personal beliefs about an individual's ability to perform a particular task. Social sources include the reactions to the appraisal of others. This can come in the form of encouragement or critical feedback. There is limited research examining self-efficacy among LGBTQ+ identified college students of color. However, research examining self-efficacy among college students of color (SOC) has shown that SOC are not only likely to perceive more educational barriers than their white peers, but also report lower levels of self-efficacy globally related to coping with educational and occupational barriers (Luzzo & McWirtter, 2001).

### ***Outcome Expectations***

The concept of outcome expectations refers to the "imagined consequences of performing particular behaviors" (Lent et al., 1994, p. 83). This notion is closely linked with self-efficacy as a predictor of engaging in certain career-related behaviors. Bandura (1986) classified outcome expectations into three distinct categories affecting career behavior: physical, social, and self-evaluative. Physical expectations include factors such as money and engaging in activities with the expectation of compensation. Social expectations are concerned with the approval or disapproval of others. Lastly, self-evaluative expectations relate to the assessment of self or level of personal satisfaction. Specifically related to career, SCCT posits that individuals are likely to engage in behaviors where they anticipate favorable outcomes (Lent et al., 1994).



### ***Career Interests***

Lent et al. (1994) conceptualized career interests as the cognitive appraisal of perceived activities, the success of expected outcomes, and the anticipated satisfaction resulting from performing career-related activities. According to Lent's model (1994), career interests are influenced by personal inputs as well as contextual factors. Therefore, an individual's personal interests may also be influenced by factors outside of their control.

### ***Career Goals***

Career goals related to career choice are defined as occupational aspirations (Lent et al., 2000). Goals are informed by career interests and shaped by an individual's previous learning experiences. Career goals within SCCT serve the role of regulating career choice behavior (Lent et al., 1994). The act of setting goals allows individuals to organize behaviors in a manner that orients them towards desired career outcomes.

### ***Perceived Barriers and Supports***

Contextual factors include variables and other determinants that might affect personal agency (Lent et al., 2002). Perceived barriers might include lack of family support, social pressures, limited access or exposure to career opportunities, and insufficient financial resources. Conversely, perceived support might include social acceptance, career guidance, and family assistance. The SCCT model proposes that contextual factors of supports, and barriers directly influence career goals (Medugorac, 2020). These factors are often outside of the control of the individual. As such, individuals may be forced to make certain compromises or concessions in response.

### ***SCCT Interest Model***

The SCCT framework provides a model of how career-related interests are developed over time. Throughout one's lifespan, particularly childhood and adolescence, an individual is exposed to a wide range of vocation-related activities at home, school, and in the greater community (Lent et al., 1994). Individuals are constantly exposed to activities and messaging around careers which is differently reinforced based on a variety of contextual factors. During the continued cycle of exposure, practice, and feedback, one begins to define individual performance standards and self-efficacy around a set of tasks as well as expectations around engaging in the activity. As practice increases, so does one's beliefs around competence and efficacy. In turn, individual interests tend to align with those activities in which there is a high degree of perceived effectiveness and positive expectations around outcomes.

### ***SCCT Choice Model***

Building on the interest model, SCCT's model of career choice follows a process whereby self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence career interests, and inform educational and occupational choices (Lent et al., 1994). Individuals are thereby inclined to choose educational and career goals based on areas in which positive feedback has been reinforced. Subsequent choices are made based on fluctuations in perceived self-efficacy and outcome expectations.

The SCCT model also illustrates the ways in which choice may also be influenced by factors outside of interests. The choice model acknowledges contextual and environmental factors that may also impact choice goals (Lent et al., 1994). The factors may include variables such as lack of support from valued others, economic or educational limitations, available opportunities, and family pressures. Moreover, personal interests may also be influenced by cultural values. Therefore, while the SCCT choice model posits that interests are the greatest

predictor of career choice, it also recognizes the presumption of that holding true under supportive and unrestricted conditions. Individuals who may encounter a lack of support or other contextual barriers may need to find compromises in favor of more practical or culturally appropriate considerations.

### ***SCCT Performance Model***

The SCCT performance model is primarily concerned with two key aspects of performance: educational and occupational success and persistence in the face of barriers (Lent et al., 1994). Therefore, performance includes factors related to ability and motivation. The SCCT model proposes a positive correlation based on inputs where higher self-efficacy along with positive outcome expectations, promote higher performance goals and greater resilience to overcoming obstacles (Lent et al., 1994). This in turn leads to individuals maximizing the use of their abilities. Conversely, those with lower self-efficacy and outcome expectations tend to have lower performance and therefore experience greater difficulty persisting beyond setbacks.

### ***Personal, Contextual, and Experiential Inputs***

The SCCT model provides a structured way of looking at the cognitive and behavioral factors related to career development. However, SCCT also acknowledges the influence of personal inputs (e.g., age, sexual or gender identity, race), contextual factors (social capital, SES, first-generation status), and learning and development experiences (internships, mentoring, college, and career counseling) can have on career self-efficacy, goals, interests, and outcome expectations (Lent et al., 2000). Lent et al. (1994) noted that personal factors such as race/ethnicity and sex, not only serve physical importance but also derive import from the “characteristic reactions they may evoke from the social/cultural environment” (Lent et al., 1994,

p. 104). As socially constructed statuses, the ways in which an individual's race and sex are perceived may have direct impacts on their career-relevant experiences.

### **SCCT with College Students and Career Choice**

In a qualitative study of 21 college students aimed at understanding career choice barriers, supports, and ways of coping, it was found that contextual factors (e.g., role conflicts, social influences, and finances) and personal factors (e.g., race, ability, and personal adjustment difficulties) were the primary influencers on the choice process as both barriers and support (Lent et al., 2002). Social support was reported as one of the greatest positive influences on career efforts. In the same study, participants noted perceived ability, negative social and family support, and "life events" as significant barriers (Lent et al, 2002, p. 67). As with much of the research on the topic of career choice using SCCT, the sample was not racially diverse and there was no data gathered on sexual or gender identity. The authors of the study noted the limitations in the study findings due to the lack of diversity in the participants. Additional research is needed that emphasizes personal factors such as race, sexual, and gender identity as they are likely to affect perceived barriers and support to career choice.

## **LGBTQ+ Employees in the Workplace**

### **Historical Context**

The experiences of LGBTQ+ workers in the workplace have a long and complex history. One of the earliest milestones occurred in 1953 when then-President Eisenhower created a ban on *homosexuals* from working in the federal government (CNN, 2021). In 1973, Lambda Legal was formed, an organization committed to advancing the civil rights of the LGBTQ+ community. Subsequently, there were several years of anti-discrimination cases based on sexual orientation. In 1993, another milestone was reached when President Clinton signed the "Don't

Ask, Don't Tell" policy. A controversial piece of legislation at the time, the policy allowed same-sex loving individuals to serve in the military with the caveat that they could not be open about their sexual orientation. That legislation would not be repealed until several years later, in 2011. Shortly after, in 2012 the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was formed. The formation of the EEOC federally outlawed the discrimination of employees based on their gender identity. As recently as 2017, former President Trump's administration embarked on a concerted effort to roll back some of the existing protections for LGBTQ+ people by enabling an order that would allow the government to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals in the name of religious freedom. In 2018, a landmark ruling by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals equated discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation to discrimination based on sex. To date, there are still 28 states in which an individual can be terminated for merely identifying as gay. Protections are even more limited for trans-identified employees, as there are currently 30 states where there is no law protecting their employment rights.

### **Current Trends and Concerns**

In 2018, the Human Resource Campaign (HRC) Foundation's Workplace Equality Program conducted a study of the experiences of LGBTQ+ workers across the country. The national study included a sample of over 800 self-identified LGBTQ+ people. In their most recent study, they found among LGBTQ+ workers, over 46% remain closeted at work (HRC, 2018). The top reported reason for concealing their sexual orientation or gender identity was related to fears of being stereotyped. In the same study, 1 in 5 LGBTQ+ respondents reported being told by coworkers they should dress more feminine or masculine. Additionally, 31% of workers in unwelcoming or non-affirming workplaces reported feeling unhappy or depressed at work. While there has been some movement in general attitudes around SOGI, the current

numbers suggest there is still a great deal more that needs to be done to bridge the gaps between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ identified persons in the workplace.

### **LGBTQ+ College Students of Color**

#### **Experiences at Predominantly White Institutions**

The experiences of students of color (SOC) at predominantly white institutions (PWI) have been studied extensively in recent years. Qualitative studies have examined the lived experiences of these students and their feelings related to attending a PWI. Distrust in the dominant racial identity was a theme that emerged from a recent study by Pulliam et al. (2019). The students in the study reported feeling unsafe and misunderstood. As a result of feeling marginalized on campus, many students begin to seek out relationships with those that can relate to their experiences. Thelamour et al. (2019) found in their study of Black students at a PWI, that having other friends that identified as Black was critical for “survival”. Therefore, a desired sense of connectedness is needed for these students to buffer the negative impacts of their campus environment. Findings from these studies advocate the need for universities to implement incentivized university-wide training to educate and increase the awareness and sensitivity of all faculty and staff.

Miller (2018) found that LGBTQ+ college students often face mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, fueled by the systemic oppression present at some institutions of higher learning. Like those marginalized by race or ethnic group identification, LGBTQ+ students often seek out others who share their identities to buffer the stresses related to being excluded (Miller, 2018).

#### **Attending Colleges and Universities in the South**

The United States has a longstanding history of racial injustice and oppression. The American South has a unique past of anti-Black racism often viewed as distinct from the rest of the country. Colleges and universities are widely regarded as institutions that foster structural and interactional diversity. However, many marginalized students from various racial and sexual backgrounds report social experiences characterized by hostility, racism, and segregation (Walker-Devose et al., 2019). Hinrichs (2015) found that Southern US colleges remain more segregated than others in any other region of the country. Further research is needed to uncover how the lingering effects of the legacy of Jim Crow and segregation have on today's "post-racial" college campuses.

A study by Walker-Devose et. al (2019) looked at the experiences of 18 African American and White students at a PWI in the Southern US. The results of their study highlighted the entrenchment of racism within the fabric of southern institutions. The authors argue that universities within conservative southern communities must do more than just open their doors to diversity, they must foster an environment that does not just engage in the rhetoric around racial progress but recognizes and addresses racial inequality.

## **Summary**

Students of color at predominantly white institutions encounter unwelcoming campus environments which can affect their social status and sense of connectedness to the campus. The feelings of marginalization are amplified at college campuses in the South. Due to the region's long-standing history of racism, SOC at these institutions often encounter hostility and even segregation. LGBTQ+ students report facing similar exclusion and social isolation on college campuses.

## **Identity Negotiation**

### **Helm's People of Color Identity Model**

Helm's (1995) people of color identity model provided a framework for cultural identity development for people of color (POC). The model outlines five statuses: conformity, dissonance, immersion/emersion, internalization, and integrative awareness. Within each of the statuses, an individual negotiates the salience and understanding of their racial/ethnic identity. An individual may go through periods of confusion and lack of awareness, from blaming and repressing feelings and beliefs about self to resisting, and finally accepting and valuing their collective identities (Hays & Erford, 2014). This model provides a guide to understanding the experiences of people of color through the process of identity development.

### **Cass's Homosexual Identity Model**

Cass's homosexual identity model (1979) outlines stages in which sexual minorities navigate heterosexist and heteronormative spaces. The model can be used to explain the process by which LGBTQ+ identified persons exercise their comfort with their sexual identity around others in the workplace. The six stages of the Cass (1979) model are (a) identity confusion, (b) identity comparison, (c) identity tolerance, (d) identity acceptance, and (e) identity pride. Lasser et al. (2010) posited that the stage in which an individual is in determines the degree to which they are comfortable allowing their career decisions to be influenced by their comfort in disclosing their sexual identity.

### **Minority Stress**

The marginalization of LGBTQ+ individuals and people of color may be directly linked to more pervasive and oppressive forces (e.g., racism, genderism, heterosexism) referred to as minority stress (Chan, 2019). Bostwick et. al (2014) found in a study of over 6200 diverse sexual



minority adolescents, that minority stress can have harmful effects on LGBTQ+ individuals, including suicidal ideation and mental health issues. Participants of this study will share two minoritized identities. It is expected that they will be experiencing minority stress in addition to the general life stressors of other college students. Through the framework of SCCT, this added stress may function as a proximal barrier affecting career choice behaviors.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality refers to a framework that centers on the experiences of those marginalized by their race, gender, sexual orientation, and other social identities. Originally coined by Crenshaw (1989), the term has its roots in conceptualizing the erasure of the Black woman's experience in the feminist movement. The concept has since been broadened to consider the encapsulation of various individual and group levels of identity (Jones & Abes, 2013). Recently, more research has emerged looking at the intersectionality of college student identities. A study by Miller (2019) found that those with intersecting marginalized identities described their identities as interactive, overlapping, oppositional, intersectional, and/or parallel. The findings suggested that their identities are not mutually exclusive, rather they are dynamic and integrated into the individual's lived experience. As this study seeks to elucidate the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color, it will be important to recognize how these identities operate individually and

### **Identity Negotiation for LGBTQ+ / College Students of Color**

Identity negotiation for LGBTQ+ individuals includes managing a public and personal identity (Berry, 2012). Identity negotiation for LGBTQ+ students of color requires that individuals balance two intersecting social identities as a part of themselves. Those identities may also have varying degrees of saliency depending on the context or environment. A study by

Pena-Talamantes (2013) explored the experiences of lesbian and gay Latinx college students and found that the students in the study had to filter out external forces while simultaneously reconstructing and repositioning their sense of self in response to their social context. As such, these students experienced the added task of authoring a sense of self outside of the forces around them in order to navigate identity negotiation between their racial and sexual identities as a part of their collegiate experience. For those students, the decision to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI) identity may be associated with the risk of a marginalized social status. As a result, decisions of whom to disclose identities were generally relegated to close trustworthy friends, and conversely guarded around others to protect against possible complications associated with perceptions around their sexual orientation (Taylor, 2011). Graham-Bailey et al. (2019) in a study of 887 diverse college students found that identity salience for college students can manifest in a variety of ways. In some, it may exist in a hierarchical fashion where one's identity has more dominance over another. Conversely, for other students, their social identities may present in a more interconnected fashion. Given the diversity in how identity salience might manifest, it is important to understand the complexity involved in identity negotiation for these individuals.

## **Summary**

Much of the research on college student identity development has focused on individual social identities, rather than looking at them from an intersectional lens. Previous studies have shown that an individual's social identities can play different roles in their lives. The process of identity negotiation is nuanced and can vary greatly by individual. The decisions around disclosing certain aspects of one's identity can come at great risk socially and professionally.

## **Career Decision-Making Process**

### **Career Decision-Making Process for LGBTQ+ College Students of Color**

Recent literature has supported the notion that the unique experiences of LGBT college students play a critical role in their career development -- including negative attitudes from peers and discrimination (Schmidt et al., 2011). In a study looking at the career decision-making self-efficacy of 264 diverse undergraduate college students, it was found that family of origin, socioeconomic status, and perceived family support have an influence on career development outcomes (Metheny & McWhirter, 2013). This supports the notion that family and social interactions play a role in shaping an individual's career-related decision-making and outcomes.

Budge et. Al (2010) identified six major themes that emerged during the career decision-making process working with transgender persons: barriers to access, fewer occupational prospects, lowered career aspirations, diminished occupational gratification, and the influence of contextual factors. Harris (2014) found that college students in the career decision-making process were hyper-aware of their racial identity more than any other stressor (e.g., sexual identity) and felt that by sharing multiple minority identities they could face compounded discrimination from employers. For college students to be successful in the career decision-making process, they must identify tools and systems to help overcome those barriers. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual college students with greater social support reported lower interpersonal conflict in career decisions -- where support systems also provide a buffer to minority stress (Winderman et al., 2018). Career decision-making for college students of color also presents unique challenges. A study by Storlie et al. (2018) looked at the experiences of African American women at a PWI and found that career interventions for these students allowed them to access their resiliency, fostered a sense of hope, and equipped them to leverage the support of

family and friends to shape their career journey. In addition to social support, higher levels of perceived discrimination were also found to be negatively correlated to career indecision (Schmidt et al, 2011). This finding suggests that LGBTQ+ individuals who have had experiences with discrimination have been able to channel that into resilience to incorporate into the career decision-making process. Duffy & Klingaman (2009) found a bivariate link between ethnic identity and career decidedness. Particularly, amongst Black and Asian American students, those reporting higher levels of ethnic/racial identity development often experienced firmer career decidedness.

In a study looking at the career decision-making self-efficacy of African American college students, it was determined that negative career thoughts and cultural mistrust were significant influences on career decision-making (Bullock-Yowell et al., 2011). Cultural mistrust refers to the generalized suspicion or mistrust of White people by African Americans because of historical race-related mistreatment (Terrell and Terrell, 1981). The results of this study highlight the importance of bringing a multicultural approach to career development, as some students of color may feel limited in their career outcomes based on social and cultural factors.

In a study looking at 163 African American college students at a PWI, it was found that racism-related stress had a negative correlation with career aspirations and development (Tovar-Murray et al., 2011). This study supports that racial and ethnic identity are determinants of career outlook and impact the career decision-making process. The authors found that individuals who embraced their identities served as a buffer to the stressors related to their identities.

## **Summary**

There are several factors that influence the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ students of color. Previous research has identified family and social support as critical elements

to help mitigate some of the challenges and barriers faced by this population. As seen in some of the identity development models, it was also found in the research that integration of identities also helped to minimize the effects of stress related to identities which might impact career decision-making. However, much of the existing research has only examined the career decision-making process from individual college student identities. There is limited research that examines the career decision-making process of those holding multiple marginalized identities. This study will add to the limited research that explored the intersections of race and SOGI minoritized college students. Additionally, this study will examine how that process is further influenced by attending a PWI in the south. The review of the literature suggests that LGBTQ+ students of color attending such institutions may encounter additional challenges. This study will examine the individual narratives of those navigating the process.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the methods and procedures used to examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ identified college students of color as they navigate the career decision-making process within the context of minoritization based on their racial, sexual orientation, and gender identities. In this chapter the researcher provides the subjectivity statement, guiding research questions, research design, data collection procedures, the role of the researcher, data analysis, and assurances of trustworthy research practices used in this study.

#### **Research Question**

This study explored the research question: What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color engaged in the career decision-making process? There were also four sub-research questions:

1. What role do social identities (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and identity negotiation play in career development and career decision-making?
2. How do students experience minority stress within the context of attending a PWI in the south and how does that influence career choice?
3. What factors are considered when making career decisions?
4. What role does impression management play within career decision-making?

#### **Subjectivity Statement**

LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions (PWI) encounter experiences of marginalization and minoritization based on their identities (Linder et. al, 2019). These experiences often extend beyond campus and show up while engaging in the career decision-making process. This may be experienced as discrimination and exploitation. As

a result of these experiences, individuals are often led to conceal parts of their identity, internalize negative self-beliefs, and even perceive limitations on their career trajectory.

As a Black, gay man that attended a predominantly white institution in the south, I have personally engaged in identity negotiation as I moved through the career decision-making process. My multiple intersecting identities influenced the information I felt comfortable sharing on application materials, my consideration of certain career paths, as well my perception of how I was being treated throughout the process. Through my experiences navigating the career decision-making process, I developed an acute self-awareness and resilience connected to my experiences of marginalization and discrimination. As a member of the group that I am studying, I engaged in this study with the express interest of providing a voice to those who are actively going through this process to help counselor educators and other college or university staff better understand how to support minoritized students. I have a personal membership to and shared experiences with the participants that are the focus of this study, and I have been able to attain advanced degrees and multiple positions across industries despite the challenges experienced. These factors might influence the research process and interpretation of the results. To address this, several data verification measures were employed to minimize researcher bias. Those measures are outlined later in this chapter.

### **Research Design**

This study examined the career decision-making process of seven LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions located in the southern United States. Selected participants were required to be actively enrolled at a four-year institution within six months of graduating – scheduled on or before August 2022. A qualitative approach was employed in order to gain a deeper understanding of the selected participants' experiences.

According to Ravitch and Carl (2018), qualitative research contextualizes the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experiences and the world around them by using a set of tools and methods to understand an individual, group, or phenomenon. Rooted in an epistemological approach, I chose to conduct a qualitative study to understand the nuanced career decision-making phenomenon as experienced by the LGBTQ+ student of color participants in this study. Using thick description, qualitative research provides insight into a deeper level of understanding of a phenomenon or experience -- complete with a story that includes affective, psychosocial, and cultural factors (Hays & Singh, 2012). The approach to this study was structured in its detailed analysis and reporting, yet flexible in providing space for participants to authentically share their lived experiences.

### **Phenomenology Overview**

Phenomenology refers to the belief that knowledge and meaning are embedded within our day-to-day world (Byrne, 2001). The purpose of phenomenological research is to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences and describe how that knowledge informs their consciousness (Hays & Singh, 2012). Semi-structured phenomenological interviews were used to capture the experiences of the participants as they are engaged in the career decision-making process. Their shared experiences shape a narrative that provides an in-depth understanding of the decisions and choices that these individuals must make as they embark on this process. Employing a phenomenological approach facilitates a better understanding of how their multiple intersecting identities inform the way in which the participants approach the career decision process and similarly how it informs the choices they make regarding career path, location, perceived limitations, etc. Additionally, it helps to shed light on how their previous experiences and social support systems factor into their identity integration, negotiation, and concealment.



## **Social Cognitive Career Theory**

Lent, Brown, and Hackett's social cognitive career theory (SCCT) provided a useful framework through which to analyze the career development and career decision-making process of LGBTQ+ students of color. The theory was developed to explain how academic and career interests are formed, career choices are made, and relatedly how success is achieved (Lent et al., 1994). Building on the foundation of Bandura's (1986) general social cognitive theory, which examines the interplay between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, SCCT addresses the ways in which individuals invoke personal agency in the pursuit of their careers amidst contextual factors. The tenets within SCCT also borrow from social cognitive theory's triadic reciprocity, in which personal attributes, behaviors, and environmental factors all influence one another.

The focus of this study examines the ways in which students' personal attributes, inclusive of their sexual, gender, and racial identities, interact with their overt behaviors. The behaviors of interest refer to the decisions being made regarding whether to disclose sexual or gender identity to employers, changing or altering gender expression or presentation, as well as other choices related to career. The environmental factors such as the influence of attending a predominantly white institution, the regionality of being situated within the south, the setting of the career (urban or rural), as well as the specific career industry itself. By examining the career development narratives of each participant through semi-structured interviews, the researcher can better understand the ways and degree to which these factors influence their overall experience. Therefore, SCCT provided a useful framework for this study to contextualize the selected participants' nuanced experiences.

## **Sampling and Recruitment**

The eligibility criteria were developed to explore the complex interplay between individual social identities related to career choice and development within the context of a setting that might provide additional challenges. Participants were required to be within six months of graduating because the researcher felt this was important to control to provide some baseline for where a participant might be in their career decision-making process. The setting of a PWI in the south was decided based on the minoritization and marginalization experienced by students of color in this setting. The selected participants provided rich data to help better understand their experience of the career decision-making phenomenon within this population.

Purposive or purposeful sampling refers to the method of purposefully choosing research participants on the basis of ensuring certain experiences are represented (Ravitch & Carl, 2018). In phenomenological research, participants should be selected based on having lived an experience consistent with the focus of the study, those willing to discuss their experience, and who also differ enough from one another to provide individual accounts (van Manen, 1997). The targeted recruitment efforts resulted in ten potential participants confirming eligibility and scheduling an interview. Of those scheduled interviews, two potential participants did not show up for their interview and failed to respond to subsequent attempts to reschedule. It was determined that a third participant volunteered for the study under false pretenses, believed to be motivated by the provided incentive.

Using snowball sampling, each participant was also encouraged to recommend additional participants for the study. One of the seven total participants was gained through this snowball method. Snowball sampling involves a process whereby initial contacts who fit the eligibility criteria are asked to suggest or recommend other potential participants who also meet the criteria

and would be willing to participate in the study (Parker et al., 2019). This sampling method was used to identify participants who otherwise may not want to be found. Given the specificity of the eligibility criteria and the discomfort that some students face disclosing their sexual and/or gender identities, snowball sampling was determined to be a necessary strategy.

Participants were recruited using targeted email outreach. The process began by creating a list of qualifying institutions located in the south. Qualifying institutions included colleges and universities in the south, predominantly white, and had an LGBTQ+ resource or multicultural center. The list included 30+ schools. Each school was sent the IRB-approved recruitment email (Appendix B) and flier (Appendix C) explaining the study and eligibility criteria to the appropriate director or coordinator for each respective college's identity-based office. Total email outreach efforts included sending over 55 individual staff emails for initial contact and follow-up attempts.

Social media was also used to share information about the study. The approved research flier was shared with 15 colleges via their LGBT-focused Instagram accounts. Colleges were found using a combination of Google searches, scouring university websites, and CampusPrideIndex.com. The outreach efforts resulted in five schools agreeing to share the study details with their followers via a post or 24-hour story.

Details of the study were shared via several higher education-specific forums and listservs. Two separate research announcements were shared respectively through the American College Counseling Association (ACCA) and Counselor Education and Supervision Network (CESNET) listservs. These two listservs have a combined audience of 10,000+ counseling and higher ed professionals. Additionally, the research announcement was shared on the Black Student Affairs Professional (BLSAP) Facebook group and the QTBIPOC Higher Education

professionals' group on LinkedIn. The research announcement was also posted on the primary investigator's personal LinkedIn page, including their 1,500 connections, and garnered 323 impressions.

Recruitment for the study resulted in seven selected participants who completed the interview process. Participants confirmed interest by replying to an email confirming they met the criteria, reviewed the informed consent document, and then scheduled an interview time via a provided Calendly link. All participants self-identified that they met all research requirements: 1) LGBTQ+; defined as being a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or other queer identities community; (2) person of color; defined as a race/ethnicity that is non-white; (3) attending a 4-year college predominantly white institution in the South defined as Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Florida; and (4) enrolled as a graduating senior; defined as an enrolled college student within 6 months of receiving an undergraduate degree by August 2022. I sought to have a diverse sample of various racial/ethnic, sexual, and gender identities, specific to persons of color. Interviews were conducted during spring 2022, and each participant received a \$25 Amazon e-gift card as an incentive for participation. Participants also agreed to help with any additional information needed, such as reviewing interview transcripts through the primary investigator's member-checking process.

### **Participants**

A total of seven LGBTQ+ college students of color were recruited to participate in the study. Participants were required to self-identify as LGBTQ+ and a person of color. Selected participants also had to be enrolled as undergraduate students at a four-year college or university at the time of participation. The participants' college had to be a predominantly white institution

located in the southern region of the United States (Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Florida, or Tennessee). Each participant also had to be classified as a senior within 6 months of graduating and actively engaged in the career decision-making process.

The participants in this study represented a wide spectrum of gender and sexual identities. As previously noted, they were all at different levels of self-described outness. Most of the participants were age 21 (n=6), apart from one age 27 (n=1). The majority of the participants identified racially as Asian (n=5); Black (n=1); and biracial (n=1). Participants represented a range of gender identities: (n=2) cisgendered man, (n=1) cisgendered woman, gender apathetic (n=1), gender-questioning (n=1), and gender-fluid/non-binary (n=1). The sexual identity of the 7 participants included: lesbian (n=2), gay (n=2), bisexual (n=1), pansexual (n=1), and heteroromantic asexual (n=1). Student participants attended schools across four states: Georgia (n=2), Virginia (n=2), Florida (n=1), and North Carolina (n=1).

A summary of the demographic and identity-related information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographic and Identities of the Seven Selected Participants*

<b>Demographic and Identities of the Seven Student Participants</b>					
<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Sexual Identity/Orientation</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>
Sean	21	Black/AA	Non-binary/Gender fluid	Lesbian	They/them
Zhu	21	Asian/ Southeast Asian-American	Transgender	Lesbian	Them/theirs

Sol	21	Asian / Southeast Asian	Cis man	Gay	He/him
Morgan	21	Asian / Bengali American	Gender questioning	Bisexual	She/her
Nalo	21	Asian / South Asian	Gender apathetic	Gay / Queer	She/he/they
Blair	27	Bi/Multiracial	Cis man	Pansexual / Queer	He/him
Harley	21	Asian / Vietnamese	Cis woman	Heteroromantic Asexual	She/her

### **Data Collection**

This section outlines the data collection methods and procedures utilized during the study. This also includes steps and protocols enacted to minimize any investigator's personal bias as the research instrument. The data collection and related processes were designed to create a comfortable environment for the participants to share their experiences.

The goal of this study was to highlight the unique experiences of each participant, while also capturing the universal essence of the experience across all participants (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell et. al (2007) stated phenomenologists work from specific statements and experiences of participants to describe a common or shared experience. It is important to note that the individuals in this study represent a wide spectrum of beliefs, backgrounds, and experiences. Since all participants possess diverse intersecting identities, the researcher was careful to point out that their experiences are not monolithic. Moreover, Bowleg (2012) posits that the individual experiences of those from multiple marginalized identities are often a reflection of social-structural systems of inequality, privilege, and power. It is the assertion that the experience of attending a PWI in the south represents a microcosm of the socio-political structural inequities experienced broadly by LGBTQ+ people of color.

To learn more about their experiences, in-depth one-on-one interviews were conducted with each participant. The interviews were semi-structured utilizing an interview protocol (Appendix D). The semi-structured interview served as a guide; however, follow-up questions were inserted as needed to encourage participants to expound or elaborate on relevant details. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to organize and guide the interview, while also allowing the researcher to pose tailored follow-up questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2018). The semi-structured interview also provides a conversational and open dialogue in which the interviewee can fully describe their experience (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Participants were encouraged to share only to the extent to which they felt comfortable. All interviews were conducted electronically via Zoom. Each participant was given the option of turning their camera on or off during the interview. The option was given to make sure each participant felt fully comfortable sharing their experience. However, all participants elected to keep their cameras on, allowing the researcher to capture verbal and non-verbal responses. Participants had the ability to schedule their interview at a time that was convenient for their schedule. This included providing times throughout the day and availability on the weekends. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. No two interviewees were scheduled on the same day to minimize the potential for interviewer fatigue.

To encourage a candid dialogue, each interview was started with the researcher sharing with participants their interest in the study topic and their personal background as a Black gay male that attended a predominantly white institution in the south. The investigator also shared with them their educational background, including their current doctoral pursuit and how the study fits within their overall degree program. It was believed that disclosing personal details at the start of the interview, served to help establish rapport and foster an environment in which

participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences. As a result, participants may have been more inclined to provide rich data.

As the researcher conducted interviews, they carefully attended to the participants' responses. The researcher modeled active listening and maintained a judgment-free environment to promote a comfortable space for authentic sharing. Interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom's recording and live transcription software. In line with the university's data security and management protocols, recorded interviews were stored on the University's password-protected cloud.

Each interview commenced by asking the participant for basic demographic information. Since the research question is largely shaped by understanding each participant's race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, it was important to capture that information before getting into specific career-related questions. Also, given the variance in gender expression, the researcher also wanted to make sure that participants were able to share their preferred pronouns to avoid potential misgendering throughout the interview. Participants were also asked a question related to "outness", as defined by the participant. It was believed that this might also factor into some of the career decision-making. Lastly, the researcher wanted to capture details regarding where participants grew up and where their preferred work environment would be post-graduation. This also proved to be insightful in understanding whether there were certain locales preferred over others on the basis of being more accepting of their social identities.

Career-related interview questions were scaffolded such that they encouraged participants to recount their career development experiences starting from childhood and into adulthood. The questions were structured in accordance with the Lent et. al (1994) SCCT model which included: personal inputs, contextual factors, career interests, career goals, and career decisions. Personal



inputs are related to understanding where participants first received messages regarding careers and how the role, they believe their social identities play in their career choice. Contextual factors included questions aimed at understanding the role of their college or university and being in the south might have played in their career decision-making. The questions related to career interests challenged the participant to think about previous career experiences and identify any supports and barriers that might have shaped those interests. Career goals questions prompted participants to consider whether they believed they would be able to reach their career goals with respect to their marginalized identities. Lastly, career decision questions focused on understanding the difficulties of navigating the workplace, choosing which aspects of their personal identity they would feel comfortable disclosing or concealing, and envisioning what it would feel like to be able to show up authentically. Throughout the interview protocol, participants were invited to reflect on their childhood and other formative experiences that may have informed their career development and decision-making.

Each interview was transcribed live using Zoom's built-in software, however, the transcriptions contained numerous errors. For each interview transcript, the primary investigator went through line-by-line to correct any typos and grammatical and spelling errors. After the initial review, transcripts were reviewed again along with the recorded video of the interview to make any additional required edits. This process was repeated for each transcript.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with Moustakas (1994) phenomenological reduction process, the following data analysis techniques were employed: a) bracketing of researcher's biases and assumptions, (b) horizontalization, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis of meaning. In qualitative research, the researcher functions as the research instrument exploring the phenomenon. As such,

the researcher recognizes that they bring their own personal biases and assumptions into this study. To minimize the influence of my personal thoughts and perspectives, several bracketing measures were employed. Throughout the process, the researcher acknowledged and shared their background with the participants. After each interview, the reactions and reflections of the researcher were captured in a journal as part of the reflexive journaling process of qualitative research. They regularly evaluated their relationship with the subject matter by discussing it with peers and colleagues. They also included a subjectivity statement to address their positionality. According to Lavery (2003), these steps provide a critical point of reflection to ensure the phenomenologist does not engage in the process with preconceived notions.

After reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, the primary investigator then began the process of horizontalization. Horizontalization refers to the process of extracting significant statements that have a direct connection to the topic being investigated (Knack, 1984). Highlighted statements, quotes, and sentences that provided insight into how participants experienced career decision-making. Using inductive coding, each statement was then coded with a word or phrase that captured its general meaning.

Once the coding was done, the individual codes were grouped together based on emerging themes through a process called imaginative variation. Imaginative variation refers to a process whereby the researcher derives structural themes from the textual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). After grouping the codes into themes, the investigator began synthesizing the meaning of the individual responses to distill the participants' overall experiences of navigating the career decision-making process. As Lavery (2003) noted, this structured analysis aims to get to a level of understanding that allows the researcher to formulate an integrated statement that describes the experience.

Creswell (2013) posited, that researchers should ensure participant identity protection throughout every stage of the research process -- from recruitment to data analysis and publishing. To protect the privacy of the research participants, each was assigned a culturally diverse and gender-neutral pseudonym. This was an intentional step done to counter the dehumanization and erasure often experienced by minoritized individuals. A list of the pseudonyms and pseudonym meanings for the seven selected participants in this study can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. *Pseudonyms and Meanings*

<b>Pseudonyms and Meanings</b>	
<b>Pseudonyms</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
Sean	<i>God is gracious</i>
Zhu	<i>Warm-hearted</i>
Sol	<i>Sun</i>
Morgan	<i>Sea-born</i>
Nalo	<i>Lovable</i>
Blair	<i>Plain or meadow</i>
Huan	<i>Happiness</i>

The analysis of the data took on several iterations. The researcher spent several days reviewing transcripts and video recordings to capture the words, emotions, and expressions of each participant. Each transcript was analyzed for keywords, phrases, and statements. That review led to the formation of a list of codes which were revisited several times and eventually whittled down to the final list of codes and themes to be presented in Chapters 4 and 5. The constructs within SCCT were also used to inform the codes. Lastly, empirical data and research

referenced in Chapters 1 and 2 were used to help deepen the understanding of the career decision-making process of the participants in this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Reflecting on my own positionality, my personal and professional experiences have all centered on helping those from marginalized communities to excel beyond academic, professional, and personal barriers. I understand first-hand the complexities of navigating college and a career at the intersection of minoritized identities. As I look back at my experience transitioning from college to my career, I recall the challenges of struggling with my own identity development as a Black gay man. Although I grew up in a home that celebrated my Blackness, all my peers and classmates from K-12 were predominantly white. That circumstance extended into my college experience at a predominantly white institution. Growing up in the south, which is traditionally religious and conservative, my sexual identity was neither celebrated nor acknowledged.

My initial career interests included teaching. Subconsciously, perhaps, I decided on this career path because of the perception that it would be more inclusive of those that shared my identity. Although I did not have many Black male teachers growing up, somewhere along the way I received the message that it was a career path that was more accepting of Black gay men. However, eventually, I made the choice to switch to a business major. At the time, I was motivated by the prospect of earning more money. I ultimately completed my undergraduate degree in business administration, but along the way, I internalized certain outcome expectations for what my career trajectory would be as a Black gay male. Subsequently, my experiences supported the notion that my upward mobility would be curtailed in the corporate world based on

my identity. This realization, in part, led to me going back to school to transition into higher education and college counseling, and eventually counselor education.

Throughout my career, I recall having to make calculated decisions around my racial and sexual identities. When asked questions about my personal life by colleagues and coworkers, I would often redirect, deflect, or outright change the topic of conversation. This was particularly true when I worked in a corporate environment. As I began to get more comfortable with my sexual identity, I would use coded language like “partner” or ambiguous pronouns like “them” or “they”. Similarly, racialized experiences in the workplace prompted the use of code-switching as a coping mechanism against microaggressions. As I have shared details of my experiences with others who share the same identities, I have learned that others have had similar experiences.

I firmly believe that culturally competent and informed career counseling and support at the college level can have a profound impact on the subsequent development and career outcomes of racial, sexual, and gender-minoritized student populations. The current career counseling curriculum fails to address the nuance involved in the career development of diverse populations. The shift begins with counselor education. Career counseling class, often taken by students begrudgingly, provides the only real opportunity for future counselors to learn about career theory and development, and more emphasis must be placed on learning more about culturally sensitive and responsive approaches.

### **Trustworthiness**

There were several methods used to increase the overall trustworthiness of this study. Bracketing was utilized to address any personal assumptions and biases. The researcher’s background and experience were outlined through the subjectivity statement. The researcher maintained a journal throughout the data collection process to capture their personal response to

the gathered data. The journal was referenced throughout the data analysis to ensure personal thoughts and reactions did not influence the findings. Triangulation was used to ensure the accuracy of the data. This was done by comparing the transcriptions from the interview with reflective journal entries and interview notes. This was done as an effort to minimize researcher bias in the analysis of the data. Lastly, I conducted member checks with each participant by emailing them a copy of their interview transcript and allowing them the opportunity to make any edits they desired. It is believed that these verification procedures have aided in the overall trustworthiness of the study results.

### **Summary**

Guided by the social cognitive career theory (SCCT), this study sought to unpack the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color engaged in the career decision-making process. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to provide insight into the unique and nuanced experiences of the selected participants. Participant responses were analyzed for themes to address the four research questions: 1) What role do social identities (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and identity negotiation play in career development and career decision-making? (2) How do students experience minority stress within the context of attending a PWI in the south and how does that influence career choice? (3) What factors are considered when making career decisions? (4) What role does impression management play in career decision-making?

The findings from this research study can be used to inform counselor educators and career counseling curricula to address the needs of LGBTQ+ college students of color. Additionally, the findings can be used to help on-campus career counselors and student affairs professionals to be better equipped to serve the needs of these students. While qualitative research does not provide for the generalizability of its results, it can offer meaningful insight to guide programming, best practices, and approaches.

## **Chapter 4: Findings**

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews of seven LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions in the south. All participants were enrolled as graduating seniors and actively engaged in the career decision-making process at the time of data collection. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. The selected participants in this study shared their experiences including supports, barriers, and influences on their career decision-making.

To examine the career decision-making experiences of the selected participants in this study, the research was framed by the question: What are the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color engaged in the career decision-making process? This inquiry was guided by four sub-research questions: 1) What role do social identities (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity) and identity negotiation play in career development and career decision-making? (2) How do students experience minority stress within the context of attending a PWI in the south and how does that influence career choice? (3) What factors are considered when making career decisions? (4) What role does impression management play in career decision-making? Data resulting from the primary research question and four sub-questions emerged the following four themes which will be detailed below: 1) Identity negotiation, (2) minority stress (externalized), (3) minority stress (internalized), and (4) forced assimilation.

### **Theme One: Identity Negotiation**

The first theme of identity negotiation emerged as participants were asked to discuss how they feel their social identities have informed their career development. Identity negotiation refers to the process of finding a balance in self-expression that achieves interpersonal and intrapersonal harmony (Swann & Bosson, 2008). Participants were explicitly asked to discuss

how their respective gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual identity impact their choices related to starting their careers. The common threads of those experiences are described as subthemes in the following sections, including “outness”, “intersectionality”, and “cultural influences”.

### ***Outness***

Each of the seven participants in the study was asked to describe their level of “outness” as they define the term. All the participants, except one, reported that they were “out” to close friends but not to their families. For those participants that were not “out” to their families, they shared similar concerns around shame and embarrassment about coming out to the family. Sol, a 21-year-old cis-gendered gay male, commented,

I feel like society is accepting [of LGBTQ individuals], but it’s still looked down upon [by my parents]. Like I tell other people this a lot. In terms of your parents, they’re fine when other people’s kids are LGBTQ, but they’re not when it’s their own.

Sol’s experience, like most of the participants (n=6), suggested a fear in coming out to family. For many, their reticence to coming out to family was rooted in being financially dependent on their parents. Therefore, coming out might mean that they were no longer supported by family, as Sol also shared,

I want to be a lot more financially independent from my parents, and so I want my first career to like to be relatively high paying...I don’t plan on staying closeted forever... but [in coming out] there is a chance that they might disown me, and so I am planning ahead.

Nalo, a 21-year-old, who identifies as queer and gender apathetic, shared that they are out to “anyone that is not within my immediate family.” When asked how they felt



their queer identity might impact their ability to reach their career goals, he responded, “I think I’ll be able to reach my career goals perfectly fine, but I think that part of the reason I can reach my goals is because I’m very much not outwardly stereotypically gay.” Nalo believed that not presenting outwardly as stereotypically gay enabled them to meet their career goals. It was believed by Nalo that they were able to achieve career their goals because they were not perceived as gay, which could serve as a barrier or limiting factor.

Morgan, a 21-year-old bisexual and gender questioning student, when asked about their outness, responded

This one’s kind of interesting. I don’t think I would say that I’m out, but there are people in my close community who know that I’m actively questioning, but I’m not out in the sense that, like publicly people know or it’s like in my bio or anything like that.

It is believed that for most participants, the choice to disclose their outness, or sexual or gender identity, is reserved for those that deem worthy of knowing. This is gatekeeping around their identities is done to ensure that only those capable of seeing them as a full person are privy to their identities.

Blair, a 27-year-old non-traditional college student, also stressed the importance of independence. Unlike the other 6 participants, he was slightly older and felt that his age allowed him the time and experience to not feel restrained by the opinions of his family related to sexual identity and career choice. He stated,

I’m a non-trad student right at age 27, so I’ve had a lot of time to grow beyond the constraints of family influence in that way... as I get older, I care less about what

others think, including family... I love them. I appreciate their support, but at the end of the day, this is my journey.

The process of coming out can look different for each person. The participants in this study overwhelmingly felt that coming out was easier to do with close friends than it was to do with family. The process of coming out was also believed to impact career decision-making as well, as noted by Morgan who stated, "... my queer identity is something that I, unfortunately, am having to consider as a barrier."

### ***Intersectionality***

All participants reported the complexity of navigating their intersecting identities as they engage in the career decision-making process. Participants shared their unique challenges related to the interplay of their race, gender, and sexuality – highlighting how inextricably linked each identity is to the other. Zhu, a 21-year-old transgender lesbian, commented, "I think definitely my gender and sexuality like I've started realizing that I can't really separate them... maybe some people can but like for me not as much because I identify as trans." Sol described his experience growing up in Thailand. As a gay man in Thailand, he perceived his identity as a "limiting factor". As a male, in a male-dominated field, he felt confident that he would be able to excel. However, he expressed concerns that within the Asian community, his sexuality would present an obstacle. Blair described the "stigma" he has encountered as a queer Arab male. In his intended field of medicine, he worries that stigmas about queer men of color may negatively impact him. When asked how he would respond to those stigmas, he replied, "I hope I can be a changemaker and like really break down some of those old stigmas of old stereotypes and molds."

Race and gender were often grouped in responses from the participants. Participants shared their experiences of being prejudged based on their race and gender and not feeling fully seen or understood. Sean shared this about their experience being Black and gender fluid, “I feel like Black, nonbinary people who are assigned female at birth like we have that Black woman experience from growing up. So, can we identify as a Black woman? Yes, but that’s not like our *true* identity.” When discussing their experience with gender and race, Zhu commented, “It’s kind of hard to be heard in certain spaces... I think for me, like [there is] no space being made for like my voice in the conversation... I never feel [my voice] has the same impact.” Morgan, an Asian-American and gender-questioning person, described her experience with gender and race like this, “... I don’t think I’ve ever felt fully accepted in any space... because of all these layered identities, like POC, and like maybe woman, and then like a queer person of color, it’s like all these tiers or like a hierarchy.” Nalo described his experience navigating race and gender within the context of their intended field of biological engineering. They shared, “I feel like there just isn’t always people like me in those fields... if I walk into an engineering class it’s mostly cishet white men...” Nalo shared their frustrations with the lack of acknowledgment of larger systemic by those in the field. He felt that as a South Asian gender apathetic male, it was his job to “force the status quo.”

Participants also shared experiences of feeling like they had to choose between certain identities, in terms of which they felt more comfortable disclosing or concealing. All participants acknowledged that their race was not something they had the luxury of hiding, however, as it related to their sexual and gender identities, they often engaged in identity negotiation to determine which identities they felt more comfortable sharing than others. This practice of identity negotiation and the related challenges are described by Sean,

I feel like the thing about being Black is like it's very much you know typical you're gonna see that I'm Black. So, I feel like automatically, out the bat, they're gonna categorize me into that like box. But I feel like it's easier to disclose sometimes your gender identity rather than your sexual identity because not everyone has the like mindset to understand all the intersectionalities within like the Black person's identity like we're not just Black, we have to tack on too many other things... it's like you have to choose, oh, which depression do I want to like face today?

It is the assertion that identifying as Black presented its own set of unique struggles. While not addressed in this study, it was believed that Sean's experience as the only Black participant, was unique with respect to their experience of anti-Blackness. Different from other participants, Sean also encountered prejudice based on her Black identity.

Harley, who identifies as an asexual cis-gendered woman, described her experience navigating identities by sharing,

As an Asian-American woman... if I want to like move higher, you know, for people to take me more seriously and to get those higher-paying jobs I'm going to have to like work harder and like work twice as hard than maybe a white male might and like my salary might look different because again, I'm an Asian woman and that's just the unfortunate reality I suppose. Then me being asexual hasn't really like impacted me on a day to day at least when it comes to like career just because it's asexuality so it... easier to hide. So, I guess that [sexual] identity

doesn't really play much of an impact, I guess. But definitely, my race and my being a woman would make it harder for me to advance.

For Harley, it was believed that her gender and race were interconnected and inseparable. Based on her experiences, she felt that she had to be twice as good and work twice as hard in order to accomplish the same things as her White counterparts.

Conversely, Morgan, who identifies as bisexual and gender questioning, felt disclosing their sexual identity was easier than sharing their gender identity as they explained,

But if someone asked about it, I would be more comfortable disclosing my sexual identity as opposed to my gender identity because I feel like sexuality is something that's like you know personal like who you are attracted to and who you like and your relationships and other people don't have any business in that, and like you can draw a boundary or line. But gender is completely different because when you come on as a specific gender, you're inviting other people into like perceiving you and just having to walk through every day of my work, having people perceive me either correctly or incorrectly or like not being able to make sense of me that's something that the potential of that stresses me out a lot.

For Morgan, it was easier to share their sexual identity than their gender identity. This was because sexuality is easier for people to conceptualize and easier to draw boundaries. For most people, they would not ask probing questions around sexuality, as societal norms would prevent most from asking those kinds of questions out of fear or being too intrusive. However, gender as a newly more fluid concept, there are not the same boundaries in place. As such, people feel more entitled to asking additional questions to

aid in their understanding. As Morgan points out, the need to explain or worry about how others are perceiving you is stressful. To cope with that, they would rather not discuss at gender at all.

Blair, who wants to enter the field of psychology, shared his thought process as he considers how his intersecting identities might be perceived in his desired field,

I think my sexuality has some relation to the mental health field in general... I would love to work with the LGBT community in the field of psychiatry... being someone that's of that community that's like traditionally thought to be to make for a better doctor to be of the people.... For my ethnicity as a Palestinian and as a Jew, there's a lot of Jews in medicine, and there's kind of a lot of Arabs too, but not as much. But I think that I might be up against more stigma if I come out saying, 'Hey, I'm queer' as opposed to coming out and saying like, 'Hey, I'm Arab.' People are gonna be like, oh okay that's fine.

The responses here showcase the complex thought processes that LGBTQ+ students of color must engage in as they consider how to navigate their intersecting identities. The data shows that for these participants, their identities are indistinguishably linked. Because their identities are interconnected, at times they must negotiate how to move through career decision-making in a way that mitigates the impact of those identities which might serve as a barrier to their career progression.

### ***Cultural Influences***

For each of the 7 participants, their culture was noted as a significant input informing their career decision-making process. Each student referenced how respective cultural norms were part of their calculus in deciding on their career. Cultural norms can

dictate which career paths are deemed appropriate based on gender as Sol, whose family is from Thailand, explains,

So, like in where I come from, there is definitely like a connection between you know if you're a male, you need to be in a male-dominated field. So, like doctor, lawyer, or engineer and if you're female you like the social sciences, languages, political science, international affairs – that kind of stuff... I kind of internalize that.

Sol's experience highlights the idea that certain cultures believe that gender informs certain career paths. For men, as providers, they should seek out higher paying roles that would allow them to support their families. Meanwhile, women are encouraged to pursue softer sciences where the need to make money is of less importance.

Participants also shared how cultural norms, particularly coming from backgrounds as first-generation Americans, influenced their career decision-making. Growing up, they witnessed their parents struggle to create a life and foundation for their families here in this country. As a result, it's often been instilled in them and expected that they would choose career paths that provide financial security and stability. Nalo remarked, "... my parents would consistently joke about how you can be anything you want to be, just be a doctor." The cultural norms people of color, particularly those born to immigrant parents, emphasize the importance finding a career that provides stability. Morgan, a Bengali American, explained,

Yeah, I think more from a lens of like a person of color and also like as an immigrant family coming here, so my parents immigrated here and were naturalized citizens. But me and my sisters were born here, and so having an

ensured occupation as a person of color is very important, especially because we don't have any generational kind of safety net or wealth or anything. So going into a career like engineering or medicine is the most insured in their eyes.

Morgan's experience showcases the mindset shared by many families of color and first-generation families, in which career choice also represents an opportunity to create a new legacy for the family. Choosing an 'ensured' occupation creates the opportunity to create generational wealth and shift family circumstances.

Zhu shared a similar perspective and also the importance of being able to give back to their parents who helped her, as they shared,

My parents are both like refugees from Vietnam so like they kind of started with nothing, and then like were able to like you know attain education. But I guess for me early on it was like oh, you're gonna find success to be like a doctor, or at least you know an engineer or lawyer, or something that could like financially sustain ourselves. Like with the background my parents came from, I just want to like help them out.

The emphasis on finding employment that provides financial stability was not exclusive to non-native students, rather it was shared across the participants. Sean, a Black gender fluid person originally from Houston, shared how their cultural norms influenced their career decision-making,

I will say it was very clear to just like [sic] growing up with a single Black mother, but she was trying to emphasize to have a career rather than a job. So I think my main thing is stability was like an important thing that she tried to instill into me based on like our family history and I know that was due to her like being



a Black woman growing up in the late 90's - early 2000's... so then she's like instilling into me like as a Black woman you need to understand like you're not gonna get handouts in this world – like knowing how to navigate that.

Sean's experience also shines a light on how Black cultural norms also informed their experience. Stability and finding a something that offered longevity was important because of the historical trauma around having to forge your own path and expect help from anyone.

### ***Findings Summary: Identity Negotiation***

This section examined the research question of the role of social identities and personal inputs on the career decision-making process. Outness, as a theme among participants, was something that they found difficult to share with family. The fear of coming out to family pushed participants to make career decisions that would allow them financial independence. The independence they sought out of concerns that disclosing their sexuality might lead to them being financially cut off or even disowned. Intersectionality was another theme discussed in this section. All participants reported how inseparable their identities were. Their intersecting identities impact how they are perceived, valued, and treated. Participants shared how they engage in identity negotiation as they determine which of their identities, they feel comfortable disclosing or concealing. Lastly, the theme of cultural influence emerged. Cultural influences provide a unique personal input as it is shaped by ethnicity, race, family, and other cultural norms. Several of the participants (n=4) come from immigrant or first-generation American families and talked about wanting to have a career that allowed them to honor the sacrifices that their families had made. All participants shared the importance, as persons of color, to choose careers that were stable, sustainable, and financially secure.

## **Theme Two: Minority Stress (Externalized)**

Externalized minority stress surfaced as a theme while participants reflected on how contextual factors, like attending a predominantly white institution and being in the south, have impacted their career decision-making process. Participants were asked how they felt their experience at their respective institutions influenced their career choice. The following section explores the subthemes that emerged across participant experiences. This section details their experiences of “discrimination”, “difficulty finding community”, and “encountering a lack of cultural competence”.

### ***Discrimination***

The experiences of discrimination for students sharing multiple marginalized identities can be nuanced and complicated. For LGBTQ+ students of color attending PWIs in the south, experiences with discrimination can be common. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt fully accepted in any space...” shared Morgan as she reflected on her experiences navigating predominantly White spaces. Experiences of discrimination can be perpetrated as intentional or unintentional acts. For non-binary individuals, it can manifest as misgendering. Sean described their experience coming from Texas and attending school in Virginia,

I realized this is kind of still the south, so I didn’t really escape that [feeling discriminated against]. I will say like I’m used to being called ma’am because it’s just very much a southern greeting to like tell someone who you physically like perceive as a woman or as a man to call them ma’am or sir.

Discrimination can also begin to impact mental health. In chapter one, the concept of minority stress was introduced. Participants’ experiences of being marginalized can also take a toll on their overall mental well-being. When asked how they have navigated that minority stress,

Morgan responded by saying she asks herself, “Oh, what depression do I want to like face today?” Later, she added,

I think the stress of having to reconcile your identity and the career and path you want to go into does take a toll on mental health, and sometimes it’s just on the surface level – like you might feel stressed or anxious. But then other times, like I know there’s a lot of queer students of color who like struggle a lot with their mental health, and it was influenced by their identities and going into like careers and stuff.

As a way of managing minority stress related to discrimination, some participants have adapted ways of coping by pre-empting potential discrimination. Morgan shared her decision-making process when applying for jobs when she noted

When I’m writing cover letters and when I’m writing applications, I don’t like to mention my queer identity. So, I always think of it as something that I don’t want to mention in order to not be like discriminated against. And so, once people have gone through the application process and then they see me or meet me, then I’ll tell them and then they’ll know.

Morgan’s experience captures the unfortunate reality of many LGBTQ+ persons of color, the fear of being judged before you are even able to enter the room. This is particularly challenging for LGBTQ+ college students of color whose only leadership experiences may be in identity-based groups. Since most employer look for leadership experience, the choice to leave those experiences from a resume or application can have negative effects. However, there is also risk associated with leaving them on the application because leave the applicant open to discrimination based on their social identities.

Sean talked about their experience in the interview process,

I've gotten to the state of mind where I'm gonna like try to introduce myself first in interviews and like explicitly say my pronouns so like people who are interviewing me as well as for like other people they come in and you can potentially work with. This is the environment I'm trying to set up for us.

Their response highlights how some LGBTQ+ students of color have taken on the responsibility of charting a path that makes room for those coming after them. Morgan noted, "... [I'm] kind of just trying to be a pioneer in this small area that I'm in my community." Nalo echoes this sentiment as he remarked, "I guess my race and like identities have informed that [career decisions] because it makes me want to like force the status quo to acknowledge that like they [White people] are, the status quo exists, you know." In the face of that discrimination, LGBTQ+ students have also developed resilience, as Morgan shared,

In the past, my ethnicity or my race was something that may be influenced me a little bit. I was like, well I'd be discriminated against but through a lot of hard work, I was like, I deserve to be here. I deserve to be at this PWI. At this particular PWI and whatever career, I go into.

This section examined how experiences of discrimination can add to minority stress. Each participant in this study was able to speak to an experience of discrimination based on one or more of their identities. Several of them shared how experiencing discrimination left an indelible mark. Some participants learned to respond to discrimination by taking proactive steps to get ahead of it, like omitting certain information from their applications or in the interview process. Other participants leveraged those experiences and turned them into opportunities to reaffirm their value and worthiness.

### *Finding Community*

The need for community was a shared experience among participants. For LGBTQ+ students of color, who also share other marginalized identities, it can be difficult to navigate that experience alone. The need to find others who share similar identities and can relate to their experience can be critical in ensuring that students feel supported. The lack of community can lead to feelings of isolation and in turn, contribute to mental health struggles. These feelings can be exacerbated when attending an institution in the south, as Zhu highlighted, “Coming from the South versus like the north really kind of shapes like I guess, I don’t know, how I see myself, like, and then in terms of like other people in predominantly white spaces.”

Blair talks about his experience relocating from Chicago to a small, predominantly white liberal arts college in North Carolina,

I’m coming from a place where it’s like I was accepted in the community, but here because of the strong racial like disparities and like separation that I experience, especially at a primarily white institution, now I have to like question my own identity and like where do I fit in that whole thing?

He later went on to add,

“I think the mental health toll has been strong over these last 3 years at [institution name] ... it made me really not know where I fit in from an identity perspective and it’s kind of a theme that I’ve had to deal with a lot in my life.”

On college campuses, even when there are centers or offices set up to support students from marginalized identities, students can still experience not feeling fully seen. This is demonstrated in the experience Zhu shared,

We have our LGBTQ center and like there's a majority of like white folks in there who's taking up space.... It kind of like deters me from like joining the experience... we also have like a little multicultural student center, so it's like you know we're split between the two...

For LGBTQ students of color, a community or a support system can also provide solace and a reprieve from stresses related to college and career decision-making. Harley summarized this idea as she talked about her community,

When it comes to relieving myself from the stress of thinking about my career, I have a lot of friends who like support me, and like want what's best for me, and are here to support me when I feel like very stressed about it. And I try not to define, I've sort of like when I look at the future of my life, I try not to define myself by, like you know, success or being in a high paying career, or like being super famous or whatever. I think of I want to be a good person. I want to be a good friend to my friends. I guess and I want to be able to be open and kind of honest. And my friends remind me that there's so much more to life than a career.... That's helped me. I'll leave some of the stress and remind myself that I am not just my career. I am a whole being who deserves love and compassion, no matter what I decide to try and do.

Harley's experience shows the immense power in finding a community and support system. For Harley, not only were they an outlet, but they also helped to ground them in a way that they served as a reminder of how deserving they were to be treated compassionately as a whole person.

This section emphasized the importance of LGBTQ+ students of color finding a community. Participant responses underscored how the absence of community can have profound impacts on mental health. The data also showed that students can sometimes feel not fully part of any community, forced to choose between identifying with communities of color or communities in which they share sexual or gender identities. Lastly, this section captured the experience of participants utilizing the community to ground themselves. In that way, their community or support system of friends becomes a respite from the otherwise stressful experience at their institution.

### ***Lack of Cultural Competence***

A lack of cultural competence was a motif shared across participants' experiences. The lack of cultural competence was felt primarily as it related to participants' experiences with their respective campus career centers. While most described their centers as helpful, there was a shared belief that the staff lacked the knowledge and sensitivity to understanding how the needs of LGBTQ+ students of color and the skills necessary to help guide them through some of their unique challenges. When asked how his campus career center could better support LGBTQ+ students of color, Nalo remarked, "Acknowledge that they [LGBTQ students of color] exist... like they have to struggle in different ways than other people might not." He added,

[Career] people do not understand LGBT or non-white individuals' lives, or poverty, or things like that. You [career counselors] don't understand the immigrant experience, and if they do, they can understand one kind or like a few kinds, but it's very hard to conceptualize the nuance of every marginalized identity, and especially how they intersect. But it's still something that should be

attempted, you know... they should be ready and willing to hear other points of view.

The lack of cultural competence can discount or ignore individual personal attributes, often employing a prescribed generic approach to career development. The shortcomings of that approach are in the way that it presupposes certain aspects of how an individual might move through their career development. Zhu addressed this as they stated,

[Career counselors] not taking a one size fits all approach, and that can be in terms of like, you know, assuming right? What kind of field maybe people going into? How they'll present themselves? And like maybe anticipating challenges they might face right doing so... And then I think also like when delving deeper into like questions about like career choice and things like that like maybe consider other maybe unknown pressures like from family, or cultural or their background as well.

Morgan shared similar thoughts as she described her career center experience, "I felt supported by them like career-wise, [but] like practically in terms of navigating a career as a queer person of color, I wouldn't say they addressed it"

For several participants, the lack of cultural competence they have experienced, either directly or vicariously through their peers, has influenced their career decision-making. Harley described how a lack of cultural competence fueled her interest in psychology,

So, the reason why I wanted to be in psychology in the first place is that I've always had a passion for mental health. I guess it sometimes stems from the fact that a lot of my friends, who are LGBTQ like as you may be already aware, like a lot of LGBTQ youth have mental health problems and stuff like that. So, hearing



their stories of like, oh my therapists like I talked to them and the like really don't understand. They don't understand my identity, or they don't accept my identity, and like that, that's hurtful, you know... they're not accepting of all of you and then not being able to treat you like fairly and justly. And so that's why I wanted to go into this field in the first place, is to like be that person to be more conscious and more understanding and have a more like diverse mindset.

The lack of cultural competence can also lead to feelings of frustration and resentment. This can be particularly true at PWIs where students can feel excluded or invisible. For the researcher, this was why it was important to examine this process within the context of a PWI. For all non-white students, this becomes a space where they experience marginalization. Sean, with some indignation, described their experience with the career center and how they feel it can better serve LGBTQ+ students of color, "Hmm... definitely not treating us like a pride month advertisement." They went on to describe an event their career center held for queer students,

There's this one event on like queer people in the workplace. It's literally one industry. It's one person and sometimes they're not even like a person of color. They're like a white gay person coming to talk to us, and I feel like they're [career center] like, oh yes, we did it! We present them with the representation they needed.... They need to understand it's a predominantly white institution, you have to cater to all students you're going to see, as well as [those] you're not going to see because of your lack of research to understand it. They need to understand if you're not, you're not doing your job correctly. We're [career centers] supposed to help all students, not just a specific student.

As a recommendation for how career centers can improve, Blair offered,

Just [have] someone who identifies as BIPOC [Black/indigenous person of color] and queer and I think he would be a good liaison... that particular intersectionality could kind of help guide them and just open their minds to explore their options and help them navigate the career center that we already have that is predominantly white... someone they [LGBTQ students of color] can relate to, someone that cared about them... good-hearted people. Knowledgeable people. Boundaried people. People that can help BIPOC like navigate this crazy world... a wiser figure to help you navigate, just as an individual emotionally. I think that inevitably helps the career piece because I think that the student life and the social life aspect of things gets in the way of academics so much, and the academics leads to the career.

Cultural competence is an important component in ensuring that students feel seen and heard. University staff and personnel have a responsibility to educate themselves on the best ways to support all students. The lack of perceived competence can lead to students feeling unseen and unsupported. Professionals working with these students should refrain from making assumptions that lead them to employ a one-size-fits-all approach. Those serving marginalized students, particularly those in contexts where they experience minoritization and oppression, have a duty to demonstrate care and empathy.

### **Findings Summary: Minority Stress (Externalized)**

This section examined the impact of external forces that contribute to minority stress in the career decision-making process. Experiences of discrimination was reported as a critical influence on minority stress. Participants shared instances of being prejudged based on their identities. The need for community was also discussed. For the

participants, finding others that looked like them was an important aspect of their college and career experience. The absence of community impacted their sense of belonging and added to feelings of minority stress. Lastly, the lack of cultural competence from employers and career counseling professionals, was shared as a contributor to external minority stress. All participants expressed a desire for the acknowledgement of their individual identities and an understanding of how they impacted their experience.

### **Theme Three: Minority Stress (Internalized)**

The third theme to arise was internalized minority stress related to the role of external factors that influence career decision-making. The primary investigator was interested in understanding where participants first received career messages, what have been sources of support, and what have been perceived as barriers. There were three subthemes that arose: family pressures, inclusion, and mentorship. This section details each of those subthemes.

#### ***Family Pressure***

Participants were asked to identify the factors that influenced their career choice. Each participant discussed family as a significant factor in their career decision-making process. The influence of family was sometimes seen as a support, yet in some instances, it was also noted as an impairment. Family pressure served as a source of motivation and a constraint. That tension and conflict were described by Blair who shared the conflicting messages he received from his family. His father, a Palestinian immigrant encouraged him to “do something practical” like becoming a doctor or lawyer. Whereas his mother encouraged him to “follow your heart” and “do what you want.” Harley, when asked about figuring out what she wants to do for her career, noted “familial pressures are also pulling me 5 million directions.” She goes on to describe her experience with her parents growing up,

Growing up in an Asian household like success is a very important thing, and it's like success and like making sure we do well. My parents are immigrants, so we have that pressure. I feel well at least I have the pressure at least to do well and to make the most out of the opportunity of being here in America.

Sol shared a similar experience growing up receiving conflicting messages from parents. His mother would tell him, "do something that you like", while his father would harp on the importance of family and carrying on the family business. At the same time, they both stressed the importance of securing a "high-paying career". Sol talked about internalizing both messages as he thought about a career. Although he is interested in international affairs and social sciences, he did not choose to study them in school because of a lack of family support. Instead, he chose to major in engineering, a career he knew would appease his family.

The participant's experiences with family pressure demonstrate how it can have a profound impact on career decision-making. As people of color, there is a tendency towards collectivist thinking, which promotes making choices for the welfare of the whole family. As such, LGBTQ+ students of color may make decisions that compromise their self-interests for the sake of honoring the wishes of their parents.

### ***Inclusion***

The theme of inclusion also emerged among the selected participants. Inclusion referred to the specific practices adopted by the workplace to ensure that LGBTQ+ staff of color felt included. Participants shared experiences of when they felt included and other experiences where they felt excluded. Overall, there was a shared value placed on feeling a sense of inclusiveness at their workplace.

Practicing inclusion can begin before a person is even hired. Sean describes their experience going through the application and interview process. When completing an application they noted, I'd say I'm more comfortable when they actually have the selection when you're applying of gender." They added, "It's interesting when you see 'other' because immediately I feel like I'm not gonna feel like I fit in at this company." Conversely, they explained that if a company included the option of "non-binary" or "transgender" on the application, then it would make them feel more comfortable. Sean noted that an inclusive application also sets the tone for an interview, creating a space where it feels comfortable to share pronouns.

Blair described his experience,

Most of my experiences in the professional realm have been accepting of my sexuality. If anything, they might try to tokenize me as like yeah, you go be our queer-like speaker, you know, 'cause we're so liberal with it. And I don't get offended per se because it's cool to just kind of come out and be who I am too.

Inclusive spaces allow individuals to be their authentic selves, as Nalo pointed out, "I personally believe that assuming the environment feels comfortable and safe, then I have no reason to conceal aspects of my identity." Morgan used feelings of "happiness" and "peace to describe an environment that allowed her to be her authentic self. When describing how it would feel to work in an inclusive work environment she noted, "I would even be more driven or ambitious because I wouldn't think that my potential has like a limit or cap, and I would seek out more experiences."

The lack of inclusion extends to experiences in the classroom as well. When asked how their college experience influenced their career choice, Zhu responded,

Yeah, I think it definitely has because I changed my major and kind of career turn because of it. Like I used to be in our engineering school studying mechanical engineering, but the classes were kind of hard for me and the atmosphere and the classrooms weren't very open. Like I could never really feel there was an opportunity to like share pronouns, or you take it seriously. And so, I eventually kind of switched gears like wanting to like take classes that kind of talk more about my identities.

Zhu added that they eventually switched to a computer science major and got connected with the “Out in STEM” club. There they were able to find the community that they had been seeking.

Morgan shared how the fear of corporate America not being inclusive influenced her choice to pursue a career in academia. She stated,

But as a queer person, another reason why I'm drawn to academia is because a lot of these topics and just the awareness of queer existence is more well known. And when I think of myself in like a corporate job, if I decided to change my pronouns, or you know come out or something, how would that influence my position in corporate America? It's something that it limits the scope of my career possibilities.

Participants also shared feelings related to working in environments they perceived as not inclusive. Harley commented, “It'd feel very stressful and restricting and I like it would get to a point where it was impacting my work.” Other participants described the experience as “restricting” and creating a sense of “fear”.

Inclusion is an important factor in the career decision-making process. This is particularly true for LGBTQ+ students of color and extends to the classroom and workplace. An inclusive

space fosters an atmosphere wherein individuals feel comfortable being their authentic selves. As the participants shared, a perceived lack of inclusion can inhibit performance, create negative feelings, and lead to individuals feeling undervalued.

### ***Mentorship and Visibility***

Mentorship surfaced as a theme among participants as a factor influencing career decision-making. Participants shared the importance of seeing someone in the field or at the company that also shared their identities. Visibility and representation of other queer people of color allowed them to know it was possible to work within a company or reach a certain level. Moreover, having a mentor provided an example and a guide on how to navigate the world.

Zhu talked about their experience at an internship where they were matched with a mentor who was a queer person of color. The mentor used “different pronouns” and proudly displayed rainbows around their office and on their Zoom background. Zhu explained the relief they felt in seeing this, saying “okay, you know, I can be real with you.” The mentor provided a reflection of Zhu that allowed them to feel at ease. Zhu later added, “... seeing my mentor, who is out, and then also has like a partner and everything, like I feel I do a little bit better.” For Zhu, having someone that they could relate to allowed them to feel much more at ease.

Morgan shared a different experience with mentorship. At her institution, she struggled to find anyone that looked like her or shared her identities. It was the lack of mentorship she received that informed her decision to study anthropology and go into journalism. She shared, “I wanted to be in a career where I was able to somehow be in a mentoring position just that I can be able to provide a safe space for people my age who look the same way that I wasn’t able to have growing up.” She also shared how her experience at a predominantly white institution further fueled her desire to be in a career where she could be a mentor. Morgan noted,

When I came to [institution name], I essentially realized like actually, the majority of the world may look like this what I'm experiencing at [institution name], and so that really pushed me to or solidified my desire to be in a mentoring position for my career because I don't want other students or other young people to feel the same way that I did here at the university.

Mentorship also provides visibility. It allows a person to see someone that shares their identities in a position that they might aspire to hold. Harley stated, "... hearing about their [other LGBTQ people of color] experiences and like perhaps seeing like oh this person is successful. Therefore, if this person is successful, I could probably be successful in this field as well." Sol shared a similar outlook when describing his recent internship experience,

I'm actually not the only gay person on the team as well. There's another one and he's like a senior engineer and gets paid stupid well. And it seems like you know he's happy with the company, happy with the progress he's made and so I feel like you know looking at it from that lens, I do see you know the potential for growth... seeing them [LGBT coworker] in higher up positions you'll be a lot more comfortable with your trajectory.

He later adds, "I know if there wasn't another gay co-worker in the team, I would be a lot less comfortable."

Visibility is an important factor for LGBTQ students of color (Unsay, 2020). For them to envision themselves in the careers that they want, it is critical that they see representations of themselves. Mentorship also serves an important role for these students as well. A mentor that shares their identities can be a crucial resource in guiding them through navigating college and career as a marginalized person.



## *Security*

Security, as a theme in this context, refers to financial security as well as job security. For some participants, it was important to find a high-paying job, and for others, it was more important to find a job that merely offered stability. However, the shared concept of security was related to the importance of being independent. The need for stability is uniquely important for LGBTQ+ students of color because those that are not out to their families live with the perpetual fear of possibly being disowned or cut off from family. The need for financial independence was touched on earlier in the chapter, but this section will highlight security as a factor in the career decision-making process.

Sol, an electrical engineering and computer science major, shared that his decision to go into that career field was to make enough money to be financially independent of his family. He stated, “I want to be a lot more financially independent from my parents and so I want the first career to be like relatively high paying.” He explained that he was fearful that if he came out, his family might disown him. Therefore, financial security was vitally important.

Sean and Morgan also shared the importance of having security in their careers. When asked what important factors were in choosing a career, Sean responded, “... my main thing is stability.” In Morgan’s case, it was also less about financial security, but rather it was important for her that she felt secure that she might not lose her job based on her identities. She shared,

In corporate America, industry can sometimes, like it fluctuates, you know.

Sometimes they fire people. Sometimes things are changing and then with the current politics of our current political climate. I guess it’s just like I don’t know how insured that is for me, but academia seems, it seems, at the moment, more safe.

Zhu explained just how complex choosing a career can be. From an early age, they were groomed to become a doctor. While Zhu liked the idea of helping others, they did not feel like going into medicine aligned with their interests. Zhu wanted to do something artistic but was told by their family that art is a hobby and does not make money. In explaining the thought process of choosing a career, Zhu shared, “[thinking about] family pressure, so like financially to support them, or do a job that they would respect I guess and then there are the ones that I could live with, and right like also be open to my identity.” Zhu demonstrated the calculus that LGBTQ+ students of color must do when making career decisions. They must consider a career that their family will respect, something that provides financially, a career that aligns with their interests, and a career that allows them to be true to their identities.

***Findings Summary: Minority Stress (Internalized)***

This section outlined the key factors that influence the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ students of color. Family pressure served as both a support and a barrier. The participants shared experiences of hearing messages from parents regarding careers from a young age. Those messages were internalized along with the pressure that came from setting high expectations. Visibility and mentorship were also important factor in career decisions. Participants noted the significance of seeing individuals that share their identity in their desired career field. Inclusiveness was another important component. The participants spoke about the magnitude of classrooms and workspaces that allowed them to be their authentic selves. Finally, security was also shared as a critical factor in choosing a career path. It was important that a career offered financial security and security from facing discrimination.

**Theme Four: Forced Assimilation**

In chapter one, the concept of impression management was introduced. Leary (2001) described it as the process by which people control how they are perceived by others. Impression management can manifest as forced assimilation, whereby LGBTQ+ students of color feel pressure to conform to hetero norms. This section examines the subthemes of professionalism, gender norms, and the use of pronouns in relation to impression management. In addressing this question, participants were asked which aspects of their identity they would conceal and which aspects they would feel comfortable disclosing. They were also asked to reflect on if they thought they would be able to reach their career goals with their marginalized identities.

### ***Professionalism***

Professionalism is a term commonly used in the workplace. Generally, it refers to a set of euro-centric ideas about what is and is not acceptable in a certain environment. The term is also coded language that perpetuates cis-gendered and heteronormative standards. The concept of professionalism, as it is commonly used, is antithetical to the idea of LGBTQ+ people of color existing in the workplace as their authentic selves. As a result, oftentimes LGBTQ+ people of color are forced to conceal or alter aspects of themselves in order to fit in, or in some instances to even get hired. Morgan captured this concern as she shared,

I am still worried about how professional I'm gonna appear in my job just knowing that like I look different, or I identify differently than most people there. And like even now, in a lot of my classroom communities and like during discussion, I'll be one of the few POC in the room, and like I know that's very much a likelihood in my workplace as well, and do I just worry about like, how should I act? How should I dress? You know, in order to like fit in – which sucks. But that's a big challenge I think about, professionalism.

The concept of professionalism also connotes a white-centric gaze. Therefore, people of color are often more scrutinized and held to a different standard than their white counterparts.

Morgan explained,

The idea of professionalism, like if you are white, for example, you can, you know, show up in any type of clothing or uniform and you won't be considered like messy or like it's just a casual day. Versus, if I do it, as like a South Asian person, I might be considered unprofessional.

Blair, who admits to often passing for white, talked about the societal pressures of conforming to a certain standard of professionalism. As a native of Chicago, Blair talked about his diverse linguistic background. He grew up in a home with a father who spoke Palestinian and attended schools with mostly Black and Puerto Rican communities. He shared how that all strongly influenced the way he 'speaks English. So, when he encounters new people at work, who perceive him as white, but he talks differently, he explained, "I might feel tempted to suppress that because of the pressure of speaking white." He referred to this as "automatic code-switching". As he talked about it, he seemed deflated, adding, "I would rather really just be like 100% how I wanna speak and express myself all the time."

The idea of professionalism is too often used as a way of policing individual actions and presentations. The term is often coded and misused in a way that negatively impacts those from marginalized identities. Participants shared their experiences navigating the pressure of fitting into the definition of professionalism. While others shared ways in which they are redefining professionalism in a way that allows them to fully be themselves.

### ***Adhering to Gender Norms***

Gender expression for the LGBTQ+ community exists on a spectrum. Within the study sample, there are cis-gendered, gender-fluid, transgender, gender questioning, and gender apathetic identified participants. The shift away from looking at gender as a binary is still a relatively new concept within the workplace. As gender nonconforming, several of the participants shared the difficulties they face in managing how they are perceived by others. Morgan, who identifies as gender questioning, described how they engage in impression management,

My queer or gender-nonconforming presentation is also something that I like filter. I think, even now, when I show up for like interviews, or if I'm going to like job fairs, I always make sure to like have my hair perfectly done and like my hair is short and it's like curly so sometimes I straighten it. I have a lot of ear piercings, so I'll change it for like more subtle ear piercings and I'm actually, I think I'm kind of self-conscious about my appearance most of all because I already present a lot out of the gender norms. So, my outfit and my like hair has to be immaculate in order for me to feel comfortable in that kind of setting.

Harley, who identifies as a cisgender woman, described the difficulty she has as a woman in the male-dominated STEM field. As a woman, she noted there is a lot of attention placed on what she wears. She noted a double standard that she feels exists, "for women oftentimes they have to straddle the line between looking nice but not looking too nice because then if you look too nice, then you look like you're just trying to turn people on." Harley expressed frustration with the double standard that exists for women. She stated

I can't control that I'm a cis woman. I can't control that I'm Asian. And I can't control that I'm asexual.... I like we should all be judged by our merits instead of

things we can't control. I can work harder. I can learn more things, but I can't really change all of this [gesturing to her body]. I am who I am and you're just gonna have to deal with it.

Gender norms also impact career fields. Several participants who plan to enter the STEM field described it as “cis het white male-dominated.” However, they intend to challenge that gender norm. They expressed a desire to challenge the “status quo” and “pioneer” a lane for LGBTQ+ people of color.

### ***Pronouns***

Pronouns in the LGBTQ+ community are about more than just a preference; they are also a way of affirming a person's identity (Sevelius et. al, 2020). Misgendering or using the wrong pronoun to refer to someone is implicitly signaling that you are not seeing the individual in the way that they want to be seen. Increasingly, more and more workplaces are adopting the use of preferred pronouns. However, for LGBTQ+ people of color, it may not always feel safe to share your pronouns. As a result, sometimes they may allow themselves to be misgendered out of fear that correcting someone might result in consequences or backlash. Zhu shared their experience during a recent internship,

I chose not to share [my] pronouns or anything just because I was like you know, I don't know how it'll affect me like this is just like my internship... I don't want anything to harm me... I did see like one of the returning interns along with me like they used they/them, but they are also white so I'm like I don't know.

Zhu's experience highlights not only the fear of disclosing pronouns but also the perceived double standard as a person of color.

Sean, who identifies as gender fluid, has adopted a different approach. They described their experience at their job on campus where they were constantly being misgendered by their supervisor. Sean noted, that initially, they wanted to “spiral out” on their coworker but did not feel they could do that as a Black person. Instead, Sean decided to advocate for themselves by retorting, “I’m going to ask you to like not misgender me.” This demonstration of self-advocacy can be difficult, particularly as a member of a minoritized community. This example illustrates the process of impression management that LGBTQ+ people of color must employ.

### ***Findings Summary: Forced Assimilation***

This section outlined the impact of forced assimilation on the career decision-making process. Professionalism was reported as a barrier for the participants. For most of them, they shared experiences of feeling pressures to compromise aspects of their identity to conform to arbitrary standards of professionalism. Participants also shared experiences of impression management related to adhering to gender norms. This included altering aspects of their appearance to fit certain gender expectations. Lastly, participants talked about experiences with their preferred pronouns. Some felt comfortable advocating for themselves, and others felt that advocating for the use of their preferred pronouns came at too great a risk.

### **Summary**

This chapter examined the key themes related to the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color with the phenomenon of the career decision-making process. The first theme examined the role of identities and how participants engaged in identity negotiation. The data pointed to outness, intersectionality, and cultural influences as the primary sources of navigating identity. The second theme examined the contextual factors of attending a PWI in the south and their impact on externalized minority stress. Participants shared experiences of discrimination,

challenges related to finding community on campus, and a lack of multicultural competence as the contributors to their experiences of minority stress on their campuses. The third theme dealt with the internalized factors that contribute to minority stress in career decision-making. Family pressure, visibility, mentorship, inclusive practices, and security were shared as critical factors in supporting career decisions. Lastly, the fourth theme examined the ways in which LGBTQ+ students of color engage in forced assimilation as a form of impression management in career decision-making. Participants discussed being pressured to fit the standard of professionalism by adhering to gender norms, and the use of pronouns are ways in which they must be mindful of how they are perceived by others in the workplace. LGBTQ+ students of color attending PWIs in the south face a unique set of challenges while making career-related decisions. Their nuanced and complex identities warrant a degree of care and empathy.



## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

In this final chapter, the findings and their connection to the research, implications for future research, and the conclusion drawn from the interviews of the seven LGBTQ+ students of color attending predominantly white institutions in the south experiencing the phenomenon of the career decision-making process are discussed. The selected participants in this study navigated the career decision-making process despite challenging contextual factors, lack of support, and outside pressures. They used experiences of discrimination and marginalization to fuel their passions and desire to make a change. Additionally, the four emergent themes of identity negotiation, internalized minority stress, externalized minority stress, and forced assimilation, both positively and negatively, influenced their career decision-making.

The seven selected participants in this study were enrolled in PWIs across the southern United States. As queer students of color, they experienced marginalization based on their race, sexual, and gender identities. As noted by Schmidt et. al (2011) in a study of LGBTQ+ college students' experiences of perceived discrimination and social support in career development, "social context is not only an influence but the adaptation to one's environment is what drives career development". Therefore, the experiences of queer students of color in spaces where they experience minimization, discrimination, and other forms of bias, may potentially influence how their career development unfolds. Despite those challenges, the participants persevered and remained optimistic that they would be able to reach their career goals.

### **Connecting Findings to Existing Literature on SCCT**

In many ways, the selected LGBTQ+ students of color in this study are like other queer students in their career development. Their experiences of discrimination had an impact on their career development, which impacted their needs for social support. LGBTQ+ individuals experience relatively more discrimination than their heterosexual counterparts and have in turn

developed a form of resiliency to help adjust to developmental changes such as career development (Schmidt et al., 2011). The locus of this study being situated in the south was also shown to be a factor in participants' experiences of career decision-making. Rotosky and Riggle (2002) found that geographical location plays important role in career decision-making for LGBTQ individuals. In areas in which there is less visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ+ culture and less stigma, individuals may limit career decisions based on accepted norms and gender roles. For participants in this study, their proximity to the south, which is traditionally more conservative, was shown to be a contributing factor to their career development.

The intersectionality of racial, sexual, and gender identities also presented a unique challenge for the participants in this study. The participants reported that their sexual and gender identities were inextricably linked to their race. College students of color often experience a hyperawareness around race before other stressors and feel a compounding sense of awareness of the prejudice they could encounter related to their other minoritized identities (Harris, 2014). Several participants highlighted this in their experiences navigating their racial identity connected to their sexual orientation and gender identities. Chan (2019) pointed out that the experiences of LGBTQ+ with other marginalized identities may face overlapping forms of oppression which can impact workplace and career satisfaction.

The participants in this study reported the drive and need to be successful in their career was tied to the desire to give back to their families which supported them. Consistent with the SCCT model, external factors like family and social networks have a significant influence on career exploration and choice (Lent et. al, 1994). Strong social support systems can have a positive effect on career-related decisions (Winderman et al., 2018). Tate et al (2015) found that first-generation students are motivated to succeed in college and beyond based on their

experiences witnessing their families' careers and financial struggles. Participants in this study were also motivated to succeed to ensure that they were able to be financially independent. This was due in part to the fear that in coming out they may be disowned by their families.

Research has also found a link between ethnic identity and career decisions. Duffy and Klingman (2009) found a positive correlation between ethnic identity achievement and firmness in career choice. Similarly, participants in the study expressed high levels of ethnic identity and were also relatively clear in their decision-making. This suggests that for students of color, increased levels of self-awareness and self-clarity correspond with clearer career aspirations.

Decisions around disclosure and concealment were another major theme that emerged from the findings. Several participants noted that they were not comfortable being out to family but would consider disclosing aspects of their identity in the workplace if the environment felt safe to do so. Critical support in making the space feel safe to disclose their gender or sexual identity was the presence of a mentor. Mentors are highly beneficial for LGBTQ+ individuals in navigating their career success (Taylor, 2011). More recent studies looking at career decision-making among LGBTQ+ students found a positive relationship between career decision-making self-efficacy and self-compassion (Hansori et al., 2021). Thereby, suggesting a link between self-acceptance and understanding of self, perceived social support, and positive career development. This was also observed in the selected study participants who reported congruence between how they felt about themselves and how they were perceived. When they felt an environment that allowed them to authentically be themselves, they experienced greater self-acceptance and satisfaction.

Guided by the SCCT framework, four themes emerged as influencing the career decision-making process: identity negotiation, internalized minority stress, externalized minority stress,

and forced acculturation. According to Lent (2000), personal inputs and contextual environmental factors influence career decision-making. For the participants in this study, their gender, sexual identity, and racial/ethnic identity were all personal inputs that factored into their career choices. Environmental influences such as family pressures, college or university, and social support, also played a critical role in career development. For participants in the study, the impact of attending a university in the south, combined with pressures from family to choose certain majors, and the importance of finding community were all reported by study participants as integral in their career decision-making process.

In a study by NACE, Greathouse (2019) documented some of the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ college students. Consistent with the findings from this study, NACE found a need for career service professionals to offer more affirming support and guidance for queer students. In the study, they cited the challenge that LGBTQ+ students face related to disclosing their sexual identity during the job search process. For LGBTQ+ students with leadership roles in queer-serving organizations or students conducting LGBTQ+ focused research, disclosing those activities on a resume may come with the risk of being discriminated against by an employer. However, omitting those experiences from a resume can work to the student's detriment. That calculation of risk is particular to LGBTQ+ students and their experience of navigating career decision-making. Also consistent with recommendations shared by the research participants, the article outlined several key ways in which career service offices can better support LGBTQ+ students, including training career staff, staying up to date on employment discrimination laws, giving space for students to share their identities, support a student's autonomy in making career-related decisions, offer targeted programming, share guidance and feedback with employers.

Many of those steps were echoed by participants in the study regarding how campus career centers can better support their needs.

Overall, the findings in this study support the concept that certain choice barriers and supports may be generic, whereas others may differ as a function of the career decision maker's background, environment, and other life circumstances (Lent et. al, 2002). The participants in this study shared certain aspects of their experience with the phenomenon of career decision-making. However, each participant's experience was different based on their unique set of personal inputs and life experiences. The findings from this study give a glimpse into the complex and nuanced processes that inform the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ persons of color.

### **Future Research**

This study examined the experiences of seven LGBTQ+ college students of color and shed a light on the forces that influenced their career decision-making. There is limited research looking at their unique challenges, particularly within the context of a southern PWI. Utilizing a qualitative approach, this study explored the experiences of the participants to better understand the common themes across their experiences to help inform the delivery of support services and strategies to create inclusive workplaces.

The seven participants in this study all identified as LGBTQ+ and a person of color. Additionally, most of the participants also identified as first-generation American or an immigrant. Future research should explore the experiences of queer students of color with different immigration statuses. This could provide insight into the influence of acculturation on career decision-making. Additionally, as with the experience of Sean, future research could examine the role of anti-Blackness related to the experiences of Black students at PWIs.

This study highlighted the impact of minority stress on career decision-making. Future research could focus specifically on understanding the coping skills and strategies employed by queer students of color to mitigate the impact of minority stress. Strategies used to navigate all phases of the career decision-making process. The study could provide valuable insights for career service professionals working with LGBTQ+ populations.

Most of the participants in this study were entering STEM-related fields. An opportunity for further study might be to compare different fields to determine if student experiences differ based on students' intended field of study and career. The results of that study could shed light on which career areas might be perceived by students to be welcoming and affirming for queer identities. That data could be shared with academic departments and university staff to best serve students.

Lastly, a future study might examine the experiences of queer people of color in the workplace longitudinally. A study that captures their experiences navigating their identities, outcome expectations, and perceptions of self-efficacy related to their career over time. This could provide additional insight into how to create more inclusive workplaces. The findings from that study could also be used to inform college career development to preempt some challenges queer students of color might encounter later in their career journeys.

### **Implications for Counselors**

The seven participants in the study cited cultural competency, the need for inclusive and affirming spaces, and finding community as critical factors in their career decision-making process. Findings from this study may elucidate various ways in which career counselors at university career centers approach career preparation and development. Several participants commented on their career centers adopting a "one-size-fits-all" approach to career development.

Instead, career counselors should seek to understand and be more sensitive to the unique needs of their marginalized student populations. For example, creating programming that addresses topics of interest for them, such as redefining professionalism, self-advocacy in the workplace, finding community through affinity spaces, etc. Additionally, career centers could be sure that LGBTQ+ staff and employers of color are represented at career-related events. As noted in the findings, this can have a profound impact on queer students of color feeling represented and signal inclusion.

Findings from this study may also help inform curriculum development for career counselors. Career counseling is a required course for most graduate counseling programs and required for all CACREP-accredited programs. Counseling programs often look at career development as a monolith. However, findings from this study suggest the need for an expanded career counseling curriculum that includes a focus on special populations. In addition to LGBTQ+ people of color, the special population content might include topics such as career counseling for older populations, individuals with disabilities, and military veterans.

Additionally, considering the discrimination that members of racial, sexual, and gender identity minorities face, like the experience reported by the LGBTQ+ participants in this study, it may be worthwhile for university career centers and employers to offer training specifically designed to help support LGBTQ+ folks of color navigate their identities in the career decision-making process. Training in this area might provide benefits for those both in minority and majority positions. Many of the participants shared experiences of bias and discrimination, but not all of them felt equipped with the tools to cope with minority stress and advocate for themselves. For those in the majority, training could help uncover implicit biases, deepen

understanding of gender variance, create inclusive spaces, and increase interpersonal sensitivities.

LGBTQ+ people of color represent a growing population in this country (Jones, 2021). Several participants highlighted the importance of feeling a sense of welcome and belonging as important in their career decision-making. It is incumbent upon employers to promote a workplace culture that celebrates diversity and inclusion for all employees. Similarly, colleges and universities, specifically predominantly white institutions in the south, should also take the steps necessary to fulfill their obligation to make culturally informed and affirming career development available to all students. The participants in this study overcame significant challenges in pursuit of their postsecondary education in pursuit of their careers. The participants in this study represent the workforce of tomorrow and deserve to be able to thrive in a career that celebrates them as their most authentic selves.

### **Limitations**

There were five limitations identified in this study. The first is the lack of racial/ethnic diversity among the participants. Most of the participants (n=5) identified as Asian or Southeast-Asian. This occurred despite several targeted attempts to find other participants, specifically queer Black cis-gendered male students. Second, the student participants only represented a small number of schools and did not represent each of the states included in the South. Thirdly, the study does not account for anti-Blackness, particularly as experienced by participant Sean. It was believed that their experience as a Black gender-fluid woman, was at least in part, shaped by anti-Blackness. Fourth, several of the participants identified as immigrants. While this did not preclude them from being eligible for the study, it was believed that their immigrant status presented another personal input informing their career decision-making experiences. Lastly, it is



important to note that career development is a lifelong process. Participants in this study were asked to describe their career decision-making process at this current, fixed state of their career journey. However, it is important to note that this will most likely change and evolve over the span of their lives.

### **Contributions of the Study**

This study is the first of its kind to examine the phenomenon of the career decision-making process among LGBTQ+ students of color within the context of a predominantly white institution in the south. The findings from this study contribute to the existing literature by providing a voice to this marginalized group, highlighting their unique struggles and their resilience. It is the hope that results from this study will be used to educate counselors and counselor educators on the importance supporting minoritized students through a multicultural lens. This contributes to field of counseling by underscoring the need for increased advocacy, modified, and tailored interventions, and increased more intentionality within the field of counselor education.

### **Conclusion**

This dissertation examined the career decision-making process of LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions in the south, seeking to understand the factors that contribute to their career choice and development. This study examined this process as a phenomenon given the uniqueness of the experience for queer students of color. It is imperative that there is a greater understanding of the special set of challenges, barriers, and supports that influence the success of this growing population. There is a need for greater cultural competence to help counselors, higher ed professionals, and workplaces counteract the negative impacts of discrimination and bias that affect the career success of these students.

This dissertation shed light on the role that intersectionality and identity negotiation, minority stress (internal and external), and forced assimilation played in the career decision-making of the seven participants in this study. Although generalizability is not a goal of qualitative research, the findings from this study may prove insightful for counselor educators, career counselors, student affairs professionals, college administrators, families of LGBTQ+ individuals, employers, faculty members, career centers, and other stakeholders involved in the career development and success of LGBTQ+ students of color.

The seven queer students of color that participated in this study envisioned themselves in meaningful careers after graduation. They endured the challenges of marginalization and minoritization at their respective campuses in pursuit of careers that would allow them to be successful. Their career decision-making was heavily influenced by input from their families and other external factors. They also saw their careers as an opportunity to give back to the families that supported them. Several participants talked about their experiences changing major or intended career fields from engineering or STEM-related fields to more helping professions, like teaching or psychology. The shift was due, in part, to the perception of STEM being largely white cis-gendered heterosexual male-dominated, and not inclusive of gender and racial variance.

The participants worked diligently in pursuit of their career goals, overcoming experiences of discrimination in and outside of the classroom. They confronted bias and assumptions concerning their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identities. Perhaps, in understanding the factors that influence the career decision-making process of the LGBTQ+ student of color participants in this study, colleges and employers can engender environments

that allow all students and employees to be their authentic selves and unleash their fullest potential.

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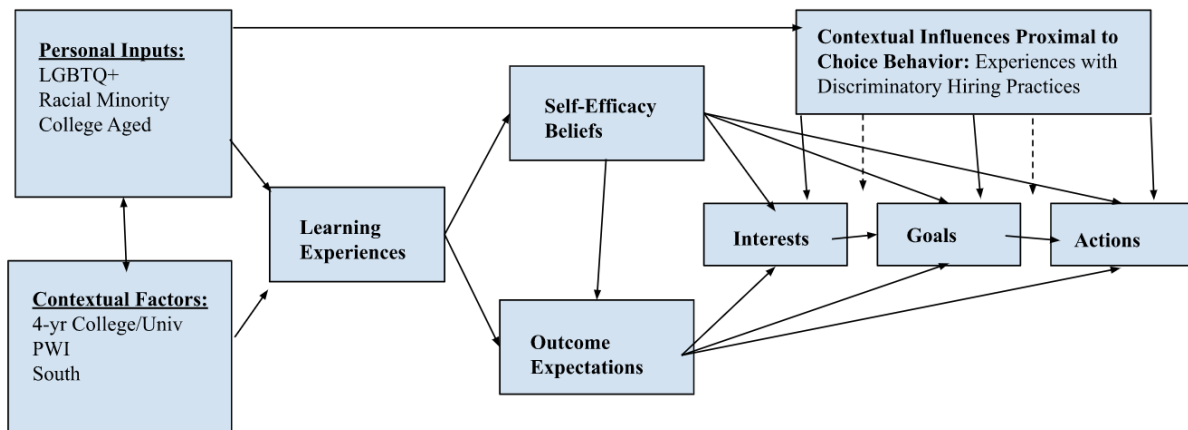
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## APPENDIX A: MODEL OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE INFLUENCES ON CAREER CHOICE BEHAVIOR (ADAPTED)



\*Adapted from the model of social cognitive influences:

Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., Hackett, G. (1994). Toward unifying social cognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice and performance [monograph]. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 45, 93.

## APPENDIX B: EMAIL RECRUITMENT LETTER



College of Education  
9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223-0001

### **UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF LGBTQ+ COLLEGE STUDENTS OF COLOR AT PREDOMINANTLY WHITE INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOUTH**

Hello --

My name is Brynton Lett, and I am currently a third-year doctoral student in the Counselor Education and Supervision Program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I am preparing to begin my doctoral dissertation on understanding the career decision-making process for LGBTQ+ students of color attending a PWI in the South. I am specifically interested in understanding the role that racial, sexual, and gender identities play in making career-related choices. The goal of this study is to highlight the nuanced and complex decisions that these students must make in navigating this process. The findings will be used to inform counselor educators and college and career counselors.

Participants will engage in individual interviews, via Zoom, to discuss their experiences navigating the career decision-making process through the lens of their intersecting identities. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded. Research participants will receive a \$25 gift card in appreciation of their time. Only non-identifiable data will be considered for use in research or publication.

I am seeking participants who:

- Currently enrolled at a 4-year college/university; must be a predominantly white institution (PWI) located in the south (Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Virginia, or Florida)
- Graduating senior within one year of graduating and seeking full-time employment
- Self-identify as LGBTQ+
- Identity as a person of color

If you are someone you know meets the criteria for participation, please contact me at [blett2@uncc.edu](mailto:blett2@uncc.edu).

Thank you for considering participating in this study. Any questions regarding the study or eligibility can be directed to the investigator using the contact information above.

Brynton Lett  
Doctoral Student | Counselor Education and Supervision  
University of North Carolina at Charlotte  
[blett2@uncc.edu](mailto:blett2@uncc.edu)

Faculty Advisor & Dissertation Chair:  
Taryne M. Mingo, Ph.D.  
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[tmingo@uncc.edu](mailto:tmingo@uncc.edu)

**UNCC IRB Approval Number: 22-0868**

## APPENDIX C: RECRUITMENT FLYER

# LGBTQ+ STUDENTS OF COLOR & CAREER DECISION MAKING



## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED!!!

The focus of this study is to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ college students of color attending predominantly white institutions in the south and their experience navigating their racial, sexual and gender identities during the career decision-making process.

## WHY PARTICIPATE?

The information from this study will help future counselors and college personnel understand how career decision-making is impacted by intersecting marginalized identities.

- Interviews will last approximately 1 hour.
- Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card for their participation.

## WHO IS ELIGIBLE?

- Identify as LGBTQ+
- Identify as a person of color
- Current college senior (within 6 months of graduating)
- Attend a 4-year PWI in the south (GA, NC, SC, VA, FL, TN, AL, MS)

## CONTACT:

For more information or if you have questions, please contact Brynton Lett via email at [blett2@uncc.edu](mailto:blett2@uncc.edu).





## **APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW GUIDE**

### **Demographics**

- Please tell me your name and age.
- How do you identify racially?
- How would you define your sexual and gender identity?
- What are your pronouns?
- Are you “out”, in whatever way you define out? To whom?
- What is your major and what field are planning to enter?
- How would you describe the primary community in which you were raised? (Urban, suburban, rural? Preferred workplace setting after graduation? (Urban, suburban, rural)?

### **Interview Questions**

- Personal Inputs
  - What are your earliest recollections of any messages you received about your career? From where/whom?
  - What role do you think your identities (race, sexual orientation, gender identity) play in your career choice?
- Contextual Factors
  - How has your college/university experience influenced your career choice?
  - Do you believe being in the south affects your career decision-making process?
- Career Interests
  - What has been your experience exploring different career options?
  - What supports have been helpful during the process?
  - What barriers have you encountered during this process?
  - Do you feel your career center has adequately prepared you for your career?
- Career Goals
  - Do you believe you will be able to reach your career goals?
    - What makes you believe you will or will not reach them?
  - What do you think will be challenging making the transition from college to career?
- Career Decision
  - What does professionalism in the workplace mean to you as you think about your identities?
  - What aspects of your identity will you share or disclose with your employer?
  - What aspects will you conceal?
  - What feelings do you associate with showing up in your work authentically?
  - Do you anticipate having to change or alter any aspects of yourself or how you present at your place of employment?

### **Closing Questions**

- What do you believe can be done to better support LGBTQ+ students of color in their career development?
- Is there anything that I haven't asked about today that you feel would be helpful to know for this study?