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Things CIS People Say: Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Justification of Anti-Queer Communication

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THINGS CIS PEOPLE SAY: MECHANISMS OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN
THE JUSTIFICATION OF ANTI-QUEER COMMUNICATION

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Communication
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In partial Fulfillment
Of Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By
Jon M. Sahlman

August 2019

THINGS CIS PEOPLE SAY: MECHANISMS OF MORAL DISENGAGEMENT IN
THE JUSTIFICATION OF ANTI-QUEER COMMUNICATION

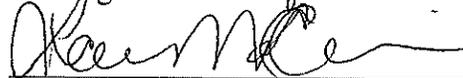
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Dedicated to all of the participants. Thank you.

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Literature Review	4
LGBTQIA+ rights and criminalization: Past and present.....	4
Moral disengagement theory.....	9
Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement.....	11
Moral Justification.....	11
Euphemistic Labeling.....	13
Advantageous Comparison.....	14
Displacement of Responsibility.....	15
Diffusion of Responsibility.....	17
Disregard or distortion of consequences.....	18
Attribution of Blame.....	19
Dehumanization.....	20
Moral Disengagement and communication.....	21
Moral disengagement and queer bodies.....	24
Theoretical justification.....	25
Research question 1(a).....	25
Research question 1(b).....	26
Research question 2.....	26
Chapter 3: Method	27
Sampling and data collection.....	27
Table 1.....	28
Data analysis.....	29
Verification strategies.....	30
Chapter 4: Findings	32
Research question 1(a) & (b).....	32
Table 2.....	33
Research question 2.....	48
Mental/emotional.....	49
Academic.....	50
Societal.....	52
Chapter 5: Discussion	54
Moral disengagement and anti queer communication.....	54
Where do the queer students go?.....	60
Strengths, limitations, and future research.....	61
Conclusion.....	63
References.....	64
Appendix A.....	70
Appendix B.....	72

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Despite advances gained by LGBTQIA+ people the issue of discrimination against the queer population continues. Recent events surrounding comments made by alt-right leaders have continued the conversation regarding homophobia and transphobia. The followed study built on previous understandings of moral disengagement theory and communication. 15 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with queer students were conducted in order to explore the role of self-cognitive mechanisms and their potential justifications for anti-queer communication. Findings suggested that not only were mechanisms of moral disengagement present in incidents surrounding anti-queer communication, but the carried with them a range of personal and societal implications. This study offered new understandings in moral disengagement theory, its application to interpersonal communication and its possible explanation for discriminatory behavior.

“The only thing that I’ve really done as a queer person, around non-queer people...is exist” – Participant 1

Chapter 1: Introduction

In 2018, alt-right leader and commentator, Gavin McInnes, called for conservatives and Trump supporters alike to use violence when sticking up for their values. McInnes proudly stated, “Trump supporters: Choke a mother fucker. Choke a bitch. Choke a tranny. Get your fingers around the windpipe” (Molloy, 2018). With surprise to no one, McInnes quickly came under scrutiny for his use of violent rhetoric, especially against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other identity (LGBTQIA+) community. Queer people around the world called McInnes’s rhetoric ‘disgusting’ and a blatant case of transphobia.

While rhetoric calling for the death of LGBTQIA+ peoples seems like an obvious case of transphobia, other comments promoting a similar ideology are commonly brushed off as difference of opinion. For example, one responder to McInnes’s commentary on Trump’s ban of transgender individuals stated:

Plastic surgery isn't covered under health insurance. It's called HEALTH INSURANCE. Not cosmetic insurance. So changing your perfectly functioning privates to another 'look' is and should be classified under cosmetic. Not covered. Period. (RebelMedia, 2017, np)

This comment highlights some of the more difficult issues of fighting homophobia and transphobia. While this comment does not call for violence, it is supportive of an ideology that does. Casual justifications of homophobia and transphobia contribute to a larger understanding of violent behavior. These types of statements are often clouded in entertainment, differing viewpoints, and humor. Cayleff and Sakai (2012) explained, “We

often overlook these more subtle actions and exclusion because they seem so insignificant by comparison but they are not” (p. 19). Casual comments experienced by queer individuals, such as the one above, have detrimental effects on their well-being. Despite this fact, social acceptance of homophobia and transphobia continues.

One of the sparsely understood sites of discrimination faced by queer peoples is the college campus. Queer students routinely face instances of harassment and bigotry (Dowd, 2018; Iconis, 2010). This study sought to understand how anti-LGBTQIA+ communication is justified and maintained on college campuses. Using the theory of moral disengagement, I identified which self-cognitive mechanisms are being utilized in order to allow harmful behavior.

The theory of moral disengagement argues that individuals have self-regulatory mechanisms that prevent them from committing harmful actions. In order to commit harmful actions individuals must disengage from self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura, 1999, 2002, 2016). While ample work has been done on mechanisms of moral disengagement, little work has applied the theory to the field of communication. Recent research has started to investigate how harmful communication is justified through mechanisms of moral disengagement (D’Errico & Paciello, 2018; Faulkner & Bluic, 2016; Runions & Bak, 2015; Sahlman 2018; Shafer, 2009). While these studies have provided valuable understanding of cognitive mechanisms and communication, no study has explored the role of moral disengagement in the justification of anti-queer communication. This study offers a new perspective in a sparsely understood theoretical area.

This thesis reviewed previous understanding of the construction of queer identity. Discussion of current rights extended to LGBTQIA+ people follows. Current understandings of moral disengagement theory and communication are reviewed. Chapter 3 will identify mechanisms of moral disengagement through the use of semi-structured interviews. Fifteen queer students were selected, and their experiences involving problematic anti-LGBTQIA+ communication were recorded. The findings identify what, if any, mechanisms of moral disengagement are apparent in the justification of anti-queer communication, and what implications they have on queer students. Potential future studies are discussed, and theoretical possibilities analyzed. The purpose of this study was to offer a new understanding of the lives of queer students, and the justifications for the harms they experience.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Despite advances in LGBTQIA+ rights in the United States, there are significant ways in which queer peoples face discrimination. Tillery (2018) argued, within the past year hate crimes against the queer community have been on the rise. This has been coupled with the lack of initiative by the federal government to curb this violence. In 2017 alone, over 120 pieces of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation was introduced (Moreau, 2018). The following sections detail the evolving state of queer rights in the United States, current discrimination, and queer moral disengagement scholarship.

LGBTQIA+ rights and criminalization: Past and present

The history of discrimination against non-normative sexual bodies extends to the European model of colonial expansion. Traditionally, white-western nations favored a heteronormative cis-gender society (Mogul, Ritchie, & Whitlock, 2011). Integral to the expansion of Christianity to the undiscovered Americas was the idea of civilization.

Mogul et al. (2011) explained:

Instrumental to the rape of the North American continent and the peoples indigenous to it was the notion that indigenous peoples were “polluted with sexual sin.” In fact, religious authorities – essential partners in the colonization of the Americas and the genocide of Indigenous peoples - -promoted “queering of Native Americans throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries...This queering of Native peoples was not limited to the allegorical; deviant sexualities were projected wholesale onto Indigenous peoples.” (p. 2)

European ideas of ‘sodomy’ allowed for justifications of conquering indigenous land.

Native peoples became criminalized based on their non-European practices of sexuality

and gender. This called for colonial imposition of the gender binary. Indigenous societies allowed for the practice of multiple genders and sexualities. This lack of a hierarchy would prove an obstacle to colonial expansionism: “colonialization required the violent suppression of gender fluidity in order to facilitate the establishment of hierarchal relations between two rigidly defined gender, and, by extension, between colonizer and colonized” (p. 3). Missionaries became promoters of the roles assigned to ‘men’ and ‘women.’ People who engaged in behavior that was contrary to their ‘appropriate sex’ were demonized as betrayers to their ‘true nature.’ Deviating from the newly established European notions of sexual behavior and gender often resulted in severe punishment of death.

Similar colonization of gender and sexuality was forced upon Africans. This manifested in the imperial expansion of Africa, the transatlantic slave trade, and chattel slavery (Mogul et al., 2011). Many African cultures were deemed to be ‘promoters of sodomy’ by white Europeans. Even the scientific community during these times, focused on the physical differences of African peoples as a method of separation between the ‘civilized and savage.’ This separation included the notions of proper and improper forms of sexual and gender expressions. The European population would utilize the physical differences (genitalia) between non-African and African women as an example of deviant sexual behavior.

After the successful colonization of what is now the United States, Christian-European notions of acceptable gender and sexual identity became codified into immigration laws. As the United States began to formulate a national identity, there was a desire to separate the desirables from the undesirables (Mogul et. al, 2011). Migrants

became viewed as an unwanted group of people and threat to national identity. The national push for exclusion offered an opportunity to inscribe heterosexuality and gender conformity as necessary to American life. Homosexuality became viewed as a foreign threat. This fear of deviant behavior became integral to the exclusion of non-white peoples from the U.S. Because non-western societies were commonly known to practice homosexuality and identify with non-binary genders, the colonization of these people brought with it western-standards of gender and sexuality. One publication in nineteenth century New York, highlights this ideology: “These horrible offences [are] foreign to our shores – to our nature they certainly are – yet they are growing apace in New York” (p. 9). This type of popular ideal became codified in sodomy laws. These laws explicitly criminalized the behavior of homosexuality. While these laws were selectively enforced in the United States, they maintained a hierarchy “based on race, gender, and class” (p. 9). Because racial and gender minorities were commonly thought to be associated homosexuality, these laws offered another avenue of maintaining the statuses of these populations. In 2003, the Supreme Court ruled these laws unconstitutional. Despite this ruling, it is important to note that the criminalization of queer identity and behavior is rooted in colonial ideology. Although sodomy laws are product of this ideology, the social policing of queer bodies did not and does not need legal authority.

In the 1960s the queer community began to see a rise in brutality. Police started to raid establishments known to welcome LGBTQIA+ peoples. In 1969 police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City. What was called a crackdown on liquor law abuse, was in reality an attack on the queer community. Police arrested and abused queer civilians at the private establishment, while shouting homophobic slurs (Mogul et. al., 2011). This

event spurred what is now known as the Stonewall riots; one of the many catalysts to the modern LGBTQIA+ rights movements. Despite modest advancement of LGBTQIA+ rights, police have continued to be perpetrators of abuse: “According to reports made to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs (NCAVP) in 2008, law enforcement officers were the third-largest category of perpetrators of anti-LGBT violence. The past decade has not been any more favorable to certain queer groups. The ACLU reported in 2018 that one in every four transgender people were victims of assault” (Strangio, 2018).

The most powerful form of policing is manifested in the social order. Although some tactics may be technically illegal, the acceptable majority and police maintain control over what behavior is deemed acceptable. Even if individual officers do not hold prejudice against LGBTQIA+ peoples, they are a part of a hierarchical institution that maintains the dominance of queer bodies. Mogul, (2011) argued:

In some cases police appear to act on their own notions of ordered society. In others, they are, or claim to be, responding to public complaints and enforcing community standards, which are in turn often driven by the notion of gays and sex workers as disease spreaders, precursors of violence, and polluters of the nation’s morality. (p. 53)

Because the United States established itself early on as promoters of Euro-Christian morality, any act that may be outside this framework becomes a threat. This means the public becomes the judges of what sexual and gender identities are acceptable, and the police the enforcers.

After the 1960s, the United States started to see a growing acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people. Civil rights leaders like Harvey Milk placed the issue of queer

discrimination in the national spotlight. However, despite these advances, public approval for same-sex marriage was a mere 11% (Harms, 2011). By the 1990s, laws like ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell,’ seemed to provide a middle ground for LGBTQIA+ rights. Despite these laws’ intentions, discrimination against the queer community continued. These piecemeal reforms offered little protections against discrimination and were widely criticized by the queer community. Nonetheless, social acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community continued to increase over the early years of the 21st Century (Dowd, 2018).

In 2015, the United States Supreme Court finally recognized the right of homosexuals to marry. Unfortunately, this action has been viewed by many to be the end-all-be-all of rights for LGBTQIA+ peoples (Raifman, 2018). LGBTQIA+ discrimination only continued since the historic ruling. This is especially true in terms of discrimination within the community itself. Desires to be accepted by mainstream society have led towards intra-group fighting. Wilkinson (2017) elaborated on the issue of legality and societal expectations:

Even in places with the best legislation and the most progressive societies, to be queer is still to be, different from the norm... These societal terms and conditions for being a winner or a loser mean that the gains won by LGBT activists have not benefitted everyone in the LGBTQ community equally... the LGBT community is not immune from dividing people into ‘good gays’ and ‘bad queers’. The incentive to gain greater acceptance and respectability through greater conformity with societal norms creates a risk of ‘friendly fire’ as solidarity gives way to a politics not just of recognition, but of respectability: gay men should be straight-acting; lesbians should be feminine; bisexuals should decide whether they are gay

or straight; trans people should aim to pass; genderqueer people should accept that gender is determined by the sex assigned at birth. (p. 2-3)

Regardless of the rights extended to LGBTQIA+ peoples, social norms and expectations continue to be a driving part of discrimination against and within the community. These types of social hierarchies' place LGBTQIA+ peoples within a unique situation. Violence experienced by queer bodies is intersectional in nature (Meyer, 2015). Some violence against certain members of the community may benefit other members of the community. This is especially true in the case of violence against racial and gender minorities. For example, a white gay man would still benefit from the subjugation of a black gay man. Even though they share a similar sexual identity, the white man maintains a status of racial privilege not shared by people of color. These understandings of the construction of queer identity calls for new investigations of the impact of colonial thought.

Moral disengagement theory

The theory of moral disengagement developed by Bandura (1999, 2002) argues that individuals have the ability to avoid self-condemnation and distress after committing immoral actions against other people. During adolescent socialization, standards of morality are constructed from the information that is given directly, evaluated by others, and exposure to the self-evaluative standards modeled by others (Bandura, Barbarelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). Once these standards of morality are formed, they serve as a guide and deterrent for various actions. Moral reasoning is translated into action through self-regulatory mechanisms where proper moral agency is exercised (Bandura, 1986, 1991). People use these mechanisms based on the consequences their actions may apply to themselves. By doing so, people commit actions which will give them satisfaction and

self-worth. In contrast, people avoid behaviors that violate their moral standards. When situations arise that afford the opportunity to behave in inhumane ways, people have the ability to behave contrary to moral standards by exerting counteracting self-influence (Bandura, et al. 1996). Thus, self-sanctions seek to keep people in line with proper conduct determined by moral standards.

The self-regulatory systems developed maintain moral agency. Bandura and colleagues (1996) explained, that the self-regulatory system operates through three major subfunctions:

Self-monitoring, judgmental, and self-reactive subfunctions. Self-monitoring of one's conduct is the first step toward exercising control over it. Action gives rise to self-reactions through a judgmental function in which conduct is evaluated against internal standards and situational circumstances. Moral judgment sets the occasion for self-reactive influence. People get themselves to behave in accordance with their moral standards through anticipatory positive and negative self-reactions for different courses of action. (p. 364)

Although self-regulatory functions are inherent within a person, their functions do not form a constant control system; “Self-reactive influences do not operate unless they are activated” (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 364). There are various processes by which disengagement from self-sanctions is possible. Selective activation and disengagement of self-regulatory control can be a method of avoiding the consequences of detrimental actions. However, people are not impervious to social realities that surround them. Moral actions are the result of the interplay of cognitive, affective and social influences (Bandura, 2002). Because of these influences, understanding how harmful

communication can and is justified provides a unique insight on what might create these problematic influences in the first place. In the context on anti-queer communication, moral disengagement theory offers a possible explanation for the justification of harmful behavior.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

As stated above, a person's moral standards do not stay fixed in their internal regulation of conduct (Bandura, 2002). Self-regulatory mechanisms must be activated in order to perform. This makes the commencement of harmful behavior possible. There are various ways in which moral self-sanctions can be disengaged. The following sections analyze each type of mechanism of moral disengagement identified by Bandura (2002).

Moral Justification

One mechanism of moral disengagement is the idea of justification. This operates on the very cognitive level of behavior (Bandura, 2002). Reconstruction of cognitive behavior is necessary for an individual to behave inhumanely (Bandura, 1999). In this process, inhumane action is deemed personally and socially acceptable. Moral justification allows people to act on a "moral imperative" to commit harm to others, while preserving the self. Judges (2004) explored the use of moral justification in the American capital punishment system. He argued, killing is the ultimate form of state-sanctioned individual aggression; however, in order to avoid direct responsibility, physicians and actors who perform executions must justify their acts as morally upholding (Judges, 2004). People sentenced to execution are socially deemed morally wrong. Because of this it becomes a morally righteous act when the execution takes place. This justification in the act of capital punishment helps physicians avoid self-

condemnation. Detert, Treviño and Sweitzer (2008) provided another example of the mechanism of moral justification arguing that the use of child-labor may be justified by contending that without employment, they would have to engage in alternative more dangerous forms of work to support their families.

The ability to justify one's actions makes almost any harmful conduct possible. Bandura (2002) argued that the most obvious forms of moral justification to pursue harmful behavior are in military conquests:

The conversion of socialised people into dedicated fighters is achieved not by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives or moral standards. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censure. Through moral justification of violent means, people see themselves as fighting ruthless oppressors, protecting their cherished values, preserving world peace, saving humanity from subjugation or honouring their country's commitments. (p. 103)

Through the reconstruction of one's cognitive behavior, individuals are able to justify their aggressive actions, while simultaneously condemning the actions of their enemies.

While there are various ways a person might, utilize the mechanism of moral justification, Bandura (2002) identified religion as a prime tool to commit violent acts. He argued that when religion becomes politicized any action could be deemed morally worthy, "Pope Urban launched the Crusades with the moral proclaim[ing] Christ commands it... Bin Laden enabled his global terrorism as serving a holy imperative" (p. 103-104). Religion becomes a tool utilized to discriminate and commit harm. In one's mind if their supreme authority (God, higher power, etc.) is approving of their behavior,

then not only is it acceptable, but the actions are imperative to preserve moral righteousness. Sahlman (2018) found that racist behavior and communication were occasionally justified morally by perpetrators. Because of this, it is possible that anti-queer sentiment might be a result of internal justification of morality. It is important to explore this through research because it offers an opportunity to unveil how cognitive behavior influences justifications for communicative choices.

Euphemistic Labeling

Language shapes the thought patterns and actions (Bandura, 1999). Activities that would be viewed as horrendous can seem acceptable if they take on a different appearance. Actions can be sanitized to be viewed in a way that is deemed morally acceptable. Euphemistic language is a popular way to make destructive behavior seem respectable, while reducing personal responsibility for the implications of such behavior. Bandura (2002) stresses the power of *sanitized language* as he argued:

Through the power of sanitised language, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnancy. Soldiers “waste” people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as “servicing the target,” in the likeness of a public utility. The attacks become “clean, surgical strikes,” arousing imagery of curative activities. The civilians the bombs kill are linguistically converted to “collateral damage.” (p. 104)

Another example of the uses of euphemisms is when a U.S. senator proclaimed that, “Capital punishment is our society’s recognition of the sanctity of human life” (Bandura, 2002, p. 104).

Sanitizing language allows ones-self the opportunity to perform normally unpleasant

activities while distancing from the outcomes. For example, certain government agencies use “career alternative enhancement” as a verbal alternative to “getting fired.”

Another form of euphemistic labeling is known as the *agentless passive voice* (Bandura, 2002). This use of language creates the perception that destructive acts are the responsibility of nameless forces, rather than people. People become mechanical objects and lack the ability to be agents of their own actions. For example, certain members of the Nixon administration used the term, “game plan” when referencing illegal actions. Fellow conspirators were called “team players” rather than criminals. The *agentless passive voice* can even extend to inanimate objects. Another example of this is when people blame alcohol for some erratic behavior, they might have done the night before, instead of putting the responsibility on themselves. By changing the very nature in which we talk about inhumane acts we are able to disassociate ourselves from the consequences of such actions. Analyzing euphemisms in ‘this’ context is particularly important because it starts a new discussion regarding the use of labels and their implications on minority communities.

Advantageous Comparison

The ability to make harmful actions seem appealing or morally just, can span beyond the use of euphemisms. *Advantageous comparison* allows a problematic action to be portrayed as the lesser of two evils (Bandura, 2016). For example, politicians often cite the actions of their opponents when trying to justify their own injurious actions. If one’s actions are seen to be less harmful than a previous event or adversary, they are portrayed to an appropriate compromise for the situation.

This type of comparison relies heavily on the justification through the lens of

utilitarian standards (Bandura, 2002). Utilitarian standards would suggest that one's harmful behavior is not only acceptable but necessary in order to prevent a larger, worse form of suffering. The cost-benefit calculus utilized by utilitarian standards, is prone to extreme bias (Bandura, 2016). The future suffering of humans is beholden to many ambiguities and uncertainties. An example of this type of calculus used to justify violent behavior is the decision to drop an atomic bomb on Japan during WWII. President Truman used utilitarian calculus to justify the mass killings of civilians. Truman claimed that absent the use of the bomb on Japan, millions of Americans would have been killed (Pizzi, 2015). By painting the use of the atomic bomb as necessary to protect American lives, Truman is able to make the action become a moral imperative. Despite the hundreds of thousands that were killed in the bombings, Truman was able to reduce personal responsibility for the deaths via utilitarian standards. In the present context, exploring the use of advantageous comparison creates an understanding of how harmful actions can be politicized. Faulkner and Bluic (2016) found that advantageous comparison was utilized in the justifications of online racist communication. Because of this, it is possible that anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiment is justified by presenting it as a necessary harm for the public good.

Displacement of Responsibility

One of the strongest forms of moral control is when people accept the responsibility for committing harms to others (Bandura, 1999). However, if people are able to displace that responsibility onto another person, entity, or authority, these actions now become easier to commit and justify. *Displacing responsibility* minimizes the role the perpetrator had on harmful actions they may have caused. When a legitimate

authority accepts the responsibility of the outcomes, people will behave in ways they normally would view as reprehensible (Milgram, 1974; Bandura, 2002). Instead of viewing themselves as agents of their own actions, people will view their actions as an extension of an authority. Because they are no longer the agents of their actions, there is no need to accept blame for the harm they have caused.

This type of mechanism of moral disengagement can be identified most gruesomely in mass killings (Bandura, 2002). For example, Nazi prison commandants argued they were simply following orders when perpetuating inhumanities. Bandura (2002) explained the linkage between authority and aggressive action:

In psychological studies of disengagement of moral control by displacement of responsibility, authorities explicitly authorize injurious actions and hold themselves responsible for the harm caused by their followers. For example, Milgram (1974) induced people to escalate their level of punitiveness by commanding them to do so and telling them that he took full responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The greater the legitimization and closeness of authority issuing injurious commands, the higher the obedient aggression. (p. 106)

Authorities typically legitimize harmful behavior in insidious ways. Rarely will an authority openly call for actions which may leave them prone to backlash. Instead, authorities find social guards to protect themselves should things take a turn for the worst. By doing so, their self-respect is maintained and safe from social assassination.

Authority figures purposefully maintain a level of ignorance of potential wrong doing (Bandura, 2002). Authorities do not go looking for evidence that would incriminate them or their interests. If there is no known wrong doing, then there can be no

responsibility. Questions or actions that would reveal information contrary to their interests goes unasked or untaken. While authorities are able to maintain this ignorant echo chamber harmful action is allowed to go unnoticed and therefore permissible. Responsibility in this context is a potential explanation for how discriminatory communication becomes justified.

Diffusion of Responsibility

Moral control can be weakened at the point in which responsibility is diffused (Bandura, 2002). People shift their attention away from the consequences of their actions because responsibility is now not solely on them. Group decisions are a prime example of diffusion of responsibility. Bandura (2016) explained:

The faceless group becomes the agent that does the deciding and the authorizing. Members can discount their contribution to the policies and practices arrived at collectively so they are not really responsible. When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible. Napoleon put it well when he noted that, ‘collective crimes incriminate no one.’ (p. 62-63)

The ability to mitigate individual responsibility by diffusing it to a group, operates as an opportunity to justify harmful behavior. An example of this type of group mentality given by Bandura is the process of administering lethal injections. This process involves a multitude of people. Some insert the needle or hook up the electrocardiogram, while others strap the person into a chair. By including multiple people in the process, the responsibility cannot be laid at one person’s feet.

Collective action affords the opportunity to bypass cognitive functions that would normally prevent someone from committing harm (Bandura, 2016). When people operate

as a collective, they garner legitimacy for their actions. This offers the opportunity to act impulsively, while being afforded some anonymity. The anonymity granted by being a part of a collective shields one from social repercussions. For example, the now infamous Charlottesville riots was the largest meeting of white nationalists in over a decade (Reilly, Campbell, & Mathias, 2018). This was due in part to individual's ability to be viewed as a collective instead of solo white nationalists. Federal charges for violence did not occur until photographic and video evidence identified individual people. In a communicative context, understanding how group mentality may influence problematic behavior is necessary to understanding harmful communication.

Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

One of the common ways in which people are able to perpetrate inhumanities is by mitigating the implications of their actions (Bandura, 2002). Self-censure is unlikely to occur if the harms for one's actions are distorted, ignored, minimized, or disregarded. It is easier to commit injurious actions against someone if their suffering is not known or seen. "When people can see and hear the suffering they cause, vicariously arouse distress and self-censure become self-restraining influences" (Bandura, 2016, p. 64).

Society has technologically progressed to an era where people have become faceless. This ability has offered a new way of distancing oneself from the suffering of others. Numerous studies have shown that authority figures are less likely to be obeyed and harmful actions committed when the suffering of the person is visible (Bandura, 2002). Bandura explained one such scenario when the visibility of suffering reduced violent ideology:

A Pulitzer Prize was awarded for a powerful photograph that captured the

anguished cries of a little girl whose clothes were burned off by the napalm bombing of her village in Vietnam. This single humanisation of inflicted destruction probably did more to turn the American public against the war than the countless reports filed by journalists. The military now bans cameras and journalists from battlefield areas to block disturbing images of death and destruction that can erode public support for resolving international disputes by military means. (p. 108)

Something as simple as a photograph of someone's suffering changed the complicit nature of the American public.

Beyond physical inattention to harmful behavior, people have the ability to bring in intrapsychic processes, "to diminish the perceived extent and severity of the harm done" (Bandura, 2016, p. 65-66). These processes involve a cognitive reconstruction of the suffering done to others. This includes making the situation less harmful, memorable, and selective inattention. The ability to cognitively reconstruct the suffering of other people allows one to remain complicit without accepting any responsibility. Researching this process helps to illuminate how communication contributes to the distortion of harmful consequences.

Attribution of Blame

Individuals are able to disengage from self-regulatory mechanisms if they are able to place the blame of the circumstance on the victim themselves (Bandura, 1999). People become able to view themselves as "faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation" (Bandura, 2002, p. 110). The actions taken by individuals who use *attribution of blame* become framed as methods of self-defense. Victims become solely

responsible for bringing the harmful behavior on themselves (Bandura, 2016). The implications for this kind of mechanism can be devastating. Victims who are blamed for their circumstances or harm done to them, may begin to start believing they are truly responsible.

Unfortunately, the usual target of this type of behavior is already marginalized populations (Bandura, 2016). According to Bandura, “All too often, marginalized and negatively stereotyped groups are viewed as inherently deficient and flawed human being” (p. 90). Because the social identity of an individual is additionally tied to a group, stereotyping functions as a method of attributing characteristics of the group to the individual. Negative stereotyping functions as a method of attributing certain characteristics as inherent to the individual. Because of this, the perpetrator of harmful behavior becomes exonerated of any responsibility if they are able to tie the negative behavior as an inherent flaw.

Dehumanization

In order to treat another human in a morally upright way, one must first view the other as human (Bandura, 2002). Seeing another as human activates empathetic reactions based on perceived similarities (Bandura, 1992). When people are viewed as less than human, inhumane actions are then justified. Bandura (2002) illuminated this mechanism:

...Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes and concerns but as sub-human objects. They are portrayed as mindless ‘savages’, ‘gooks’ and other despicable wretches (Ivie, 1980; Keen, 1986). If dispossessing one’s foes of humanness does not weaken self-censure, it can be eliminated by attributing demonic or bestial qualities to them... (p. 109)

Dehumanization is essential to the committing gross inhumanities. For example, genocides cannot be accomplished unless the perpetrators view their victims as not worthy of living. Steizinger (2018) argued that dehumanization is a critical component to Nazi ideology. This ideology can only be developed by the foundational belief that the victim is not worthy to be human.

Moral Disengagement and Communication

Although mechanisms of moral disengagement have been thoroughly examined, little is known about the role of moral disengagement in communicative settings. The following section reviews how mechanisms of moral disengagement have been previously investigated in various environments.

Initial understanding of cognitive mechanisms and communication analyzed the social diffusion of behavioral factors. Bandura (2001) investigated social cognitive theory and mass communication. He argued human nature requires people to interact with symbols as a medium to create understanding. This interaction between communication and cognitive mechanisms manifests in various capabilities.

Social cognitive theory focuses primarily on cognitive, self-regulatory, and self-reflective processes (Bandura, 2001). Generative symbolization is a normal part of the human experience. As people grow capacities of understanding, external stimuli formulate meaning. Bandura (2001) explained the importance of symbols and their impact on human behavior:

It is with symbols that people process and transform transient experiences into cognitive models that serve as guides for judgment and action. Through symbols, people give meaning, form, and continuity to their experiences. People gain

understanding of causal relationships and expand their knowledge by operating symbolically on the wealth of information derived from personal and vicarious experiences. They generate solutions to problems, evaluate their likely outcomes, and pick suitable options without having to go through a laborious behavioral search. Through the medium of symbols people can communicate with others at any distance in time and space. (p. 267)

Although there are other capabilities humans possess, these capabilities are only possible through the advancement of symbolization. People utilize symbolic meaning beyond knowing and doing, “they are also self-reactors with a capacity for self-direction” (p. 267). As individuals continue to construct meaning, they become self-regulatory based on their actions. Self-regulation of one’s behavior relies on both negative feedback and proactive motivation. These cognitive regulators become the foundation of one’s view of morality.

Since Bandura (2001) set the ground work for conversation on moral disengagement and communication, multiple scholars have expanded these preliminary explorations to various communication situations. Shafer (2009) investigated the role of moral disengagement in the judgement of characters and the enjoyment of violent film. He found moral disengagement plays a role in the judgement of virtual characters and in the enjoyment of violent film. Additionally, “the presence or absence of an explicit moral disengagement cue has a measurable impact on how fictional characters’ actions are judged” (p. 72). Shafer (2009) concluded that explicit moral disengagement cues had the power to override one’s own habits of engaging or disengaging regulatory mechanisms against harmful behavior. However, Shafer’s argued that these actions were not

particularly worrisome. The concern is whether or not this behavior could be learned and then carried into real-world situations.

Shafer's (2009) findings provided a new understanding for moral disengagement and communication. However, he acknowledged the shortcomings of his study. There is a need to understand virtual enjoyment/behavior and real-world application. Runions and Bak (2015) explored the use of moral disengagement in cyberbullying and cyber-aggression. They found the online space offered unique ways on disengaging from self-regulatory mechanisms. This work was expanded in multiple ways. First, Faulkner and Bluic (2016) explored the mechanisms of moral disengagement in online discussions of various racist incidents. They found the rhetoric of supporters of racism was commonly filled with mechanisms of moral disengagement. Roughly 90 percent of supporters of racist comments used at least one form of moral disengagement strategy. The online platform by which the discussions were taking place offered multiple opportunities to justify harmful communication. This included *euphemistic labeling*, *displacement of responsibility*, and *blaming the victim*. In contrast, people in opposition of racist behavior rarely utilized mechanisms of moral disengagement. Second, D'Errico and Paciello (2018) explored the used of online moral disengagement when discussing the hosting of immigrants. They found social media provided a platform to not only verbally express problematic communication but support it virtually (via "likes"). The anti-immigrant rhetoric on these social media platforms utilized moral disengagement. More importantly, people were able to utilize their support non-verbally as well. By "liking" a post that used mechanisms of moral disengagement, people contributed to problematic ideology even absent words.

Minimal research to date has explored mechanisms of moral disengagement within a solely interpersonal communicative setting. In one recent study addressing this context, Sahlman (2018) investigated the used of moral disengagement in the justification of racist communication. Sahlman found not only were mechanisms utilized, but they had severe implications on students of color:

Minority students are left with two options: either a) engage fully in academic settings and risk experiencing attacks on their identity or b) refuse to fully engage as a safety mechanism but experience the implications of isolation from and within academic settings. (p. 17-18)

Students who experienced racist events that were justified via mechanisms of moral disengagement felt little to no support from the institution they attended. Each participant acknowledged that increasing diversity and cultural understanding could be a positive step towards eliminating these problematic interactions.

Moral disengagement and queer bodies

Scant research, to date, has investigated the explicit role of moral disengagement and anti-queer discrimination. Further, no study to date has explored the role of moral disengagement and anti-queer communication in interpersonal settings. Previous research has focused solely on how mechanisms of moral disengagement influence homophobic bullying (Carrera-Fernandez, Cid-Fernandez, Almeida, Gonzalez-Fernandez, & Lameiras-Fernandez, 2018). Carrera-Fernandez and colleagues (2018) found levels of moral disengagement predicted the general attitudes of racist and homophobic bullying. Heteronormativity amongst children influenced how and why self-cognitive mechanisms were not activated; justifying harmful behavior. Additionally, previous research found

children with positive views of homosexuals were more likely to be harassed because of their assumed sexual orientation (Camodeca, Baiocco, & Posa, 2018).

Theoretical Justification

Minimal work has explored the role of moral disengagement in the justification of anti-queer violence. The previous section highlighted studies which have taken upon this task. While they are valuable to the field and understandings of moral disengagement, there are still gaps that need to be filled. This study helps widen the understanding of moral disengagement, communication, and LGBTQIA+ discrimination. Bandura (2001) provided a foundation for the understanding of cognitive behavior and symbolization. However, Bandura focuses primarily on mass communication. He argued, media has the power to cause individuals to act in ways they normally would not. While this is true, Bandura does little to explain how people would further justify harmful behavior in everyday interactions. Even his recent work does not focus in-depth on interpersonal contexts (Bandura, 2016). Other research on moral disengagement and communication have focused solely on computer-mediated communication (Runions & Bak, 2015; Faulkner & Bluic, 2016; D'Errico & Paciello, 2018). The following study sought to expand the understanding of moral disengagement and interpersonal communication. While previous work has investigated this (Sahlman, 2018), no study to date has explored how mechanisms of moral disengagement may promote anti-queer communication. This study offers a starting point for interpersonal communication research, a new avenue for queer understanding, and adds to the depth of knowledge of moral disengagement theory. Based on these premises, the following research questions guided this thesis:

RQ1(a): What anti-queer communication have LGBTQIA+ students experienced

on or around college campuses?

RQ 1(b): Which mechanisms of moral disengagement seem to be at play in those communications?

RQ 2: What are the implications of the mechanisms on LGBTQIA+ students?

Chapter 3: Method

Most studies measuring mechanisms of moral disengagement to date employ quantitative analysis. Only recently have scholars begun to utilize qualitative methods to explore the complexities of disengaging from self-regulatory mechanisms (Faulkner, & Bliuc, 2016; Hartmann, Krakowiak, & Tsay-Vogel, 2014; Weill, & Haney, 2017). One study that has explored moral disengagement in interpersonal communication settings came from Sahlman (2018) in which he studied the role of moral disengagement and the justification of racist communication in the college environment. No study has sought to understand the implications of moral disengagement on queer students in face-to-face settings. This study helped to fill these gaps.

Sampling and Data Collection

The thesis built on previous qualitative work that utilized similar investigatory strategies (Sahlman, 2018). In order to understand the use and implications of mechanisms of moral disengagement and how they are justified, I used open-ended, semi-structured interviews. This method is preferable because semi-structured interviews, "...are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues and enable probing for more information and clarification of answers" (Barriball & While, 1994, p. 330). A victim-center approach is necessary in understanding the implications of mechanisms of moral disengagement. Previous work has been successful in discussing macro-level results (Bandura, 2002, 2016; Shafer, 2009). However, this study sought to observe micro-level interactions. Because of this, exploring the situations from those who experience the

direct (potential) harms offers a more complete understanding, and offers the opportunity for solutions (Holt, 2018).

Fifteen queer participants, recruited via advertising through email and Facebook, were selected. IRB approval [See Appendix A] was obtained before any interviews took place. Interviews lasted an average of 30-60 min. Participants chose the location of the interview in order to ensure comfortability unless geographical location required the use of computer-mediated-communication (phone call, skype, etc.). The use of calling and skype as a tool in qualitative research has previously been observed as a valuable method (Lo Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016). After interviewing took place, audio recordings were transcribed. Once returned completely transcribed, each recording was listened to while reading the transcription to verify accuracy (Creswell, 1998).

Table 1

Participant	Age	Race	Self-Identified Gender	Self-Identified Sexuality
1	21	White	Nonbinary-transfeminine	Pansexual
2	21	Asian/White	Woman	Bisexual
3	18	Black	Man	Pansexual
4	19	White	Woman	Pansexual
5	23	White	Man	Queer
6	22	White	Woman	Bisexual
7	22	Black	Woman	Pansexual
8	21	White	Nonbinary	Gay/Asexual
9	20	White	Man	Gay
10	22	White	Nonbinary	Queer
11	28	White	Man	Gay
12	20	Latinx/White	Man-Nonbinary	Gay
13	21	White	Man	Gay
14	23	White	Woman	Lesbian
15	28	Latinx	Woman	Lesbian

Interview questions involved asking participants about experiences in which anti-queer communication was directed towards them [See Appendix B]. For example, one question asked, “Can you describe an experience in which you corrected a friend’s use of homophobic or transphobic language that you felt to be inappropriate?” Based on the participant’s response, prompting questions were asked in order to receive a holistic understanding of the experience. Questions were formulated using a phenomenological approach. This process is meant to understand the lived-experience of others, from a genuine place of curiosity (Finlay, 2014). More importantly, this process seeks to understand the participant’s experience through more than verbal components:

As researchers immerse themselves in written protocols and interview transcripts, their attention remains focused on words. By restricting themselves to the analysis of decontextualized words, such researchers run the risk of missing something important...the body needs to be reflexively acknowledged by the researcher... (Finlay, 2006, p. 19-20)

Taking into account nonverbal messages offers a more complete picture of the participant’s lived-experience. Genuine curiosity is essential in the construction of a phenomenological approach. For example, one question asked: Please describe an experience in which an individual used labels or euphemisms when referring to LGBTQIA+ peoples? Researchers must have a reflexive desire to stay open and present to the descriptions provided by participants.

Data Analysis

Interview transcriptions, totaling 108 pages, were analyzed using the constant

comparative method of open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While the process of analysis in qualitative research is not a “structured, static, or rigid process” and is instead a “free-flowing and creative one,” the analysis followed the structure of microanalysis (p. 58). Once open coding was completed, axial coding followed. Two rounds of axial coding occurred. Three categories emerged, in addition to ten sub-categories. This process, “...focuses on the relationships between categories and subcategories, including conditions, cause-and-effect relationships, and interactions” (Bitsch, 2005, p. 79). A word document was be created, listing each mechanism of moral disengagement as a category. Data was then arranged into each category of moral disengagement, as interpreted by the researcher. Subthemes emerged from the understanding of the data. These subthemes were how each mechanism was utilized, as identified by participants.

Verification Strategies

Due to scrutiny related to perceived lack of reliable data and analysis, qualitative researchers work to verify their analytic procedures (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Baxter & Babbie, 2004). In this study, I provided two verification methods. First, I conducted “research reflexivity” by self-disclosing my biases to this study from the very beginning. This form of disclosure is a responsibility of a researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). This was accomplished in two ways. First, I acknowledge that I am a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Because of this, my perception and understanding of potentially sensitive events, is clouded based on my own experiences of anti-LGBTQIA+ communication. Second, I admit that although I am a member of the community, each person has their own experiences. Being a white straight-passing man, offers some

privilege that others do not experience. This means while I can empathize with some experiences of anti-queer communication, others I will not be able to do so.

Second, I conducted negative case analysis to find disconfirming or contradictory evidence within the themes to increase validity (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell & Miller, 2000). This analysis provided negative or contradictory evidence to the prescribed themes (Bulmer, 1979). This aided in providing a holistic view of the issue of anti-queer communication in collegiate settings. For example, I provide direct quotations from participants that express their lack of experience with anti-queer communication.

Chapter 4: Findings

The following chapter provides detailed accounts of anti-LGBTQIA+ communication experienced by students. This is accomplished by presenting different accounts of anti-queer communication in order to satisfy RQ1(a) and, describing how each account fit into different mechanisms of moral disengagement to answer RQ 1(b). The findings were organized this way in order to avoid redundancy. Each mechanism was identified as the culprit for perpetrator-justified harmful communication based on being the emerging theme. Direct quotations from participants in this section will be identified by the number by which they were interviewed (P1, P2, P3, etc.). In order to provide a clear understanding of the backgrounds of the participants, demographic information is provided [See Table 1 above]. RQ 2 is answered through descriptions of common themes and quotations from participants regarding their mental and emotional states both during and after incidents of anti-queer communication. Societal implications are also identified.

Research Question 1 (a) & (b)

Research question one (a) simply asked to identify what anti-queer communication have LGBTQIA+ students experienced. All fifteen participants were able to pinpoint at least one specific negative interaction regarding their identity on or around their college campus. These experiences ranged in severity from simple disagreements regarding the validity of their identity to threats of physical violence. Research question one (b) asked, which mechanisms of moral disengagement seem to be at play in the identified anti-queer communication. Identifying each mechanism was accomplished through axial coding. As common themes emerged from the participants' experiences, they were grouped based on the mechanism that fit the justification. After this was

completed it is important to note that all of the mechanisms described in the literature review were apparent in at least one or more of the instances of anti-queer communication: *Moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, attribution of blame, and dehumanization*. Some incidents described had more than one identified mechanism. These were placed under the mechanism most primary in the incident, while still identifying secondary mechanisms [See Table 2 below]. In the following sections incidents of anti-queer communication will be provided, and the mechanism(s) identified.

Table 2

Primary Mechanism	Sub mechanism(s)
Moral Justification	<i>displacement of responsibility</i>
Euphemistic Labeling	<i>N/A</i>
Advantageous Comparison	<i>disregard or distortion of consequences, attribution of blame</i>
Displacement of Responsibility	<i>moral justification, attribution of blame, dehumanization</i>
Diffusion of Responsibility	<i>moral justification, dehumanization</i>
Disregard or Distortion of Consequences	<i>N/A</i>
Attribution of Blame	<i>euphemistic labeling</i>
Dehumanization	<i>euphemistic labeling, moral justification</i>

Moral justification

Moral justification emerged as a theme in multiple descriptions of anti-queer communication. This mechanism was identified in incidents regarding advocacy, religion, and preferred pronoun/name usage that emerged in the interview data. In addition to experiencing anti-queer rhetoric on campus, some participants described

multiple incidents that occurred in the local community. For example, participant five was speaking in favor of an anti-discrimination ordinance in the community when he experienced anti-queer backlash. He elaborated:

I've been called a pedophile... I had given a speech in favor of the...ordinance and I was discussing about how people are just asking for basic protections and then one of the people, who was obviously opposing the ordinance, said that I was a threat to children. (P5)

This situation was coded as *moral justification* because the belief that someone is a threat to members of the population, creates a moral necessity to take action against that person. In this case, if the participant is believed to be a pedophile and threat to children, then discrimination against them is not only justifiable but potentially necessary to protect others.

Religion was not an uncommon motivator for *moral justification*. As one participant described an encounter:

I've been to...Pride twice now, and both years there were people who had signs that said, "God hates fags," and then things like that, and they just were preaching how everyone's going to Hell and saying things like that. (P7)

The experience of this participant was a common one among participants. As with other participants' experience with religious groups, this was coded as *moral justification* and *displacement of responsibility*. This overlap of these two mechanisms emerged as a common theme surrounding experiences with religious groups. This was not surprising. Religion by nature, functions highly on standards of morality.

Finally, incidents involving preferred pronoun/name usage, commonly involved

moral justification. This is understandable. If people believe gender is a strict man/woman binary, then any deviance would go against their values. Participant five provided an example of this logic. The interaction surrounded the topic of Caitlyn Jenner and the use of preferred pronouns. He stated:

...when the Caitlyn Jenner stuff came out, people kept saying Bruce Jenner and 'he.' Not in like a form of general confusion, they were saying that as a political statement. They knew that Caitlyn Jenner had legally changed her name to Caitlyn... I [had] explained that to this one person and they told me, "well he's Bruce Jenner to me, I don't care what you say." (P5)

While the participant acknowledged that he understood how some people could be confused by the issue of being transgender, the deliberate act of mis-gendering someone was something he found very anti queer. This purposeful disregard for someone's identity was not an uncommon occurrence. Another participant provided a detailed exchange of similar disregard:

a couple weeks ago...we were having an argument and he kept using he/him pronouns for this trans woman on the news and I was like, "No, it's she/her."... He's like, "Oh, but he's not actually a woman because he has a penis." I'm like, "That's none of your business. She identifies as a woman so you need to listen to her because I wouldn't just start calling you, she/her for no reason because you don't identify that way." (P8)

The participant described this conversation as extremely contentious because the interaction happened with someone of great importance to them. The use of pronouns was not the only form of identity being disregarded. One participant has changed their

name after also coming to terms with their identity. Because of this, they are the only participant to identify as having personal experience with the issue of ‘dead-naming.’ This term refers to calling someone by a name they no longer identify with because it does not align with their current identity. They described their experience with ‘dead-naming’ further:

... there's a big difference between a slip... If somebody hasn't seen me since the fall of [year,] and they come in and they're like, “hey deadname,” I will politely be like, “that is no longer my name.” But when somebody like [a] professor that dead-named me was professor I trusted very much... it was just this shock of like, I thought that you respected me. (P10)

Because the issues of ‘dead-naming’ and deliberate pronoun misuse require the conscious effort to disregard someone’s identity based on personal morals/understandings being the motivator, these incidents were all coded as *moral justification*.

Euphemistic labeling

Euphemistic labeling emerged as a common theme regarding the term “gay.”

While the term alone does not hold a negative connotation, participants described its usage as a synonym for something being stupid or dumb. Situations using the term were similar to, “one of my friends said, ‘that's so gay’ as a reference to something being bad.” (P5). The casual nature of the euphemism offered an opportunity to substitute more overt language. This emerged in similar experiences, “On campus...It's mostly like frat guys honestly that will make passing comments like, ‘Oh that's gay’” (P8). Another participant described a more detailed reoccurring usage of a similar euphemism:

I had these three roommates, all fraternity brothers, and when they didn't know

that I was home, they would often use racist or homophobic language to refer to one another or make fun of someone while they were gaming in their own rooms. Sometimes someone would mess up in the game and while they were playing co-op... they would shout across the apartment, "You're a fucking faggot. Why are you fucking up like this?" And then they would just shout slurs back and forth.

(P12)

Although in this situation the perpetrators were unaware of the presence of an LBGTQIA+ member, the participant identified the use of homophobic slurs, such as 'faggot,' a direct form of anti-queer communication. The usage of 'faggot' in this context is not directly targeted at the participant, but instead uses a homophobic slur to be synonymous with someone messing up.

Advantageous comparison

Advantageous comparison was identified in only two incidents. This mechanism was used in discussions regarding transgender bathroom rights and homosexual marriage, both occurred in the classroom. The first occurrence is as follows:

I was in a [class]... And then the topic of gender came up and there was this woman in there... So, we were talking one time about bathrooms... And she was making comments about how she thought that transgender individuals should not be allowed to go in to the bathroom they identify because they would be raping [women]... I told her, "that's a very common argument, but that argument is, factually inaccurate..." Her response was to say that not only did violence against transgender people not happen, but that because she's a woman I would never understand the type of fear she lives in everyday, of being sexually assaulted...I

pulled up the statistic of how many transgender people have reported being assaulted in a restroom and [the class] were like, “that’s just not true.”... And then at the end the course... [the teacher] wrote on my paper that I was victimizing the woman who had said the transphobic stuff. So, it was my fault for saying that she had said things that were bad (P5).

The incident described by this participant was coded as *advantageous comparison*, *disregard or distortion of consequences*, and *attribution of blame*. While it contained multiple mechanisms, *advantageous comparison*, emerged as the primary because it underlined the usage of the subthemes. When describing his experience in this course, the participant expressed further that he eventually just refused to participate in the class due to the anti-queer rhetoric.

The second occurrence offers a clearly look into the use of *advantageous comparison*. The incident involved a classroom debate regarding the legitimacy of LGBTQIA+ marriage. He explained:

It was more of discussions on a lot of people passionate about why there shouldn't be gay marriage... They saw a big issue was procreation. There was a big debate about whether procreation should be the main point of marriage and why these unions should be held between a cisgendered male and a cisgendered female rather than a trans male or a trans female... (P12).

This incident is classified as anti-queer because peers are directly classifying procreation, or heterosexual relationships, as the only form of proper or legitimate marriage for advancing society. Because of this, it was coded as *advantageous comparison*.

Displacement of responsibility

Displacement of responsibility emerged as a common emerging theme in discussions involving stereotypes, religion, and appeals to authority. First, stereotyping was a common utilization of *displacement of responsibility*. One participant described the mannerisms, tone, and dialect commonly associated with gay men being a tactic used to discriminate. He elaborated on the situation stating:

My brother and I were walking to a McDonald's because that's where I work... and then this dude came up to my brother, probably was one of my brother's friends, but...he was like, "oh, is that your boyfriend" and stuff. My brother didn't like it, and I was like, no, I'm not his boyfriend, I'm his brother. And he was like, "why do you sound like that? You sound gay." And I was like, what is gay supposed to sound like? And he was like, "it's supposed to sound like you." (P3)

The participant expressed that this specific experience was a form of homophobic communication, because he was being targeted based on stereotypical nonverbal/verbal mannerisms associated with gay men. This example was coded as *displacement of responsibility* and *moral justification*. The perpetrator in this instance relies on the stereotype of gay men to justify his use of harmful language. The participant identified another incident of stereotyping being utilized. He explained:

I did a pageant called...for the [Greek organization] on campus, and there was a lot of dudes in it. It was just like a dude pageant, and I'm fem and I have anxiety towards masculinity because I'm the type of person who doesn't want to hurt nobody's feelings... we were about to get on the stage, and one of the contestants said to me, "...I'm really proud of you for doing this because no gay person is going to win this, so you're still trying, but I'm proud of you."... it was very

sarcastic, and you could tell by his facial expressions and his hand gestures. But he really made me feel bad about myself because he pointed out the fact that no gay person would win a pageant because they're all masculine and stuff. (P3)

This exchange was also coded as *displacement of responsibility*. When describing this incident, the participant further explained that his lack of maintaining normative masculine traits was the primary issue of excluded. The contestant who made the sarcastic comment to him was eluding to the overwhelming expressions of masculinity being displayed at this Greek function (the participant did not fit into this).

Religion was a common subtheme for *displacement of responsibility*. This was not surprising because diverting responsibility to a deity has been a common finding in previous studies regarding moral disengagement (Bandura 2002; Sahlman 2018). One participant provided an example of this:

We have street preachers that will come out all the time and they will literally just yell at all of us and basically tell us that all gay people are going to hell...I definitely try to block them out but they use a lot of specific bible verses and they use the analogy of "God created Adam and Eve not Adam and Steve..." (P14).

This was coded as *displacement of responsibility* and *moral justification*. The specific usage of bible verses made the primary theme clear. Another participant provided a description of similar ideology being utilized in student government. This offered an interesting look into potential anti-queer communication occurring within an organization whose sole purpose is to represent the students. She described the encounter saying:

A student said that being queer was a choice and it was an option. And that we could essentially just not be queer... when I explained that, that's not how

sexuality operates, they continued to explain that they believed it was a sin, and that we were going to hell...we were trying to get lavender stools for [an LGBT ceremony], for the seniors graduating. And he was specifically speaking against funding [the event], even though we have previously (P4)

This situation was coded as *displacement of responsibility*, *attribution of blame* and *moral justification*. The participant continued to explain that despite her best effort to reach out to the student government member that made these comments, the conversation was unsuccessful and unproductive.

While religion was a common emerging subtheme for the use of *displacement of responsibility*, an appeal to authority was also present among some participants. One participant described an experience that occurred in his apartment complex in the aftermath of the 2016 election. He explained:

When Trump was elected, I was living in an apartment complex across from the basketball stadium and there was someone in my building who was very openly LGBT and woke up to a note taped on their door that said, "Trump is President, the purge is coming, we're going to kill you fags." (P5).

While this participant explained that he had never had an overt threat of violence given to him, the fact that these threats were occurring in spaces close to him made him feel uncomfortable and unsafe. This threat of violence, using Trump as a catalyst, and the usage of a slur caused this incident to be coded as *displacement of responsibility* and *dehumanization*.

Diffusion of responsibility

Diffusion of responsibility was primarily identified in incidents involving groups.

One participant described an incident following the 2016 election of Donald Trump, where multiple students were peacefully protesting in the center of campus near a set of dorms. He explained the in detail:

I was involved with the protest...that happened that semester. It started off as a peaceful protest with us holding signs that said, "Build Bridges Not Walls,"... It ended with, surprisingly enough, the conservative crowd burning American flags, and burning pieces of crumpled up paper, and throwing it at us... There were so many hate slurs that were being thrown, calling us 'faggots,' and other things... (P9).

The act of throwing objects on fire and using slurs were both coded as *diffusion of responsibility*, *moral justification*, and *dehumanization*. The participant explained further that while the slurs utilized by opposition parties were more than just homophobic, he felt the choice to use the term 'faggot' was clearly direct at LGBTQIA+ people. Although this situation involved multiple mechanisms, *diffusion of responsibility* was identified as the primary because the other overt acts of aggression would be less likely to occur had other participants not be involved. This direct act of violence was not uncommon:

There was one time, I think it was my sophomore year, I was walking with the guy I was dating at the time. We were walking on campus, and it was at night. Then there was a group of people behind us at a distance, but they started throwing rocks, and yelling stuff. (P13)

When prompted further to explain why he felt the group throwing rocks at him and his current boyfriend he elaborated, "I think we were holding hands. Yeah. If I can remember correctly, I'm pretty sure we were." Based on his description of the incident, it was coded

as *diffusion of responsibility*, *moral justification*, and *dehumanization*.

Similar to previously described incidents, the use of slurs while in a group was coded as *diffusion of responsibility* and *dehumanization*. Another participant described experiencing a similar occurrence stating:

Half my head is sometimes completely bald and basically people were just calling me fag and stuff...It was like cat-calling but negative. I mean cat-calling's bad too but like instead of complimenting, insulting as they drove past (P10).

This incident was coded as both *diffusion of responsibility* and *dehumanization*. This participant explained that these types of incidents usually occur when walking around areas that surround the campus.

Disregard or distortion of consequences

Disregard or distortion of consequences was utilized in incidents involving outright denial of discrimination. Participant four was the only participant to openly mention their involvement in a local pro-LGBTQIA+ campaign, which focuses on advocating for anti-discrimination laws in the local area. When describing common arguments made by opposition groups an example of this mechanism emerged:

So, a lot of people think that by not being allowed to discriminate against people, it is infringing upon their religious beliefs... rights somehow... Some people have said, it's not an issue... and discrimination doesn't happen... Some people have specifically talked about transgender people and have said that it is wrong... They've had queer people speak to their faces... They've talked about how they've been discriminated against, like specific acts. Some of them could be considered hate crimes. And they still openly reject that it happens, like to their

face. (P4)

Because of the outright rejection of anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination, this example was coded as *disregard or distortion of consequences*. Participant four described these repeated incidents as deliberate acts of homophobia and transphobia. Another participant described a similar scenario with this mechanism being utilized. She provided more detail of the account stating:

I was in a class, where someone was telling us, about how gender and sexuality discrimination was not a thing and was not real... I did challenge him after the fact and then he immediately dismissed my thoughts and feelings as irrelevant and unfounded. (P6)

Similar to the previous example, this situation was coded as *disregard or distortion of consequences* because of the outright denial of both the reality of discrimination and feelings of the participant.

Attribution of blame

Attribution of blame emerged as a primary theme in instances of blaming the victim. Although these instances usually involved the use of multiple mechanisms, blaming the victim served as the main perceived motivator of the perpetrator. One example of this scenario involves the usage of ‘jokes’:

I definitely still hear people say, ‘That's gay,’... when I do try to correct people in saying that a lot of them will be like, ‘Well I was just joking,’ or, "It's a meme. They'll justify as a cultural thing that's not a serious thing and they'll say, ‘I support gays, you just need to learn to take a joke.’ (P14)

This example was coded as *attribution of blame* because they clearly paint the victim as

the problem. The use of 'that's gay' and the following defense was coded as *euphemistic labeling, moral justification*. When providing more detail as to how these situations occur, the participant said that it is a fairly common occurrence within the classroom and around campus. The use of 'jokes' as a catalyst for blaming the victim was a common subtheme that emerged. Participants identified friendship as the possible reason people felt these 'jokes' were acceptable. One participant elaborated on this complexity:

...my best friend, he's black...So like out of ignorance, he would call me N-I-G-G-A and I would say it back to him...Was it right? No, and now I don't say that, and I think it's wrong. But because of that, when I came out as queer, he started calling me 'fag' a lot. In the same way that he perceived it to be saying the N-word to him when we were younger. I had to explain to him, that not only was it not okay then but the language you're using now was not okay. His response was to say was that I was getting too sensitive and basically that words only have the power we give them. (P5)

Similar to the previous example, this perpetrator blames the offensive language on the victim being too sensitive. Other participants has similar experiences with correcting a friend's use of problematic language:

I was like, "Hey we don't have to do that. You can make fun of other stuff. You can joke around about other things." [They] immediately snapped out of it and immediately went to, "Well, what you think that's okay? Why are you defending him? Why is it that big of a deal? It's just a joke. You don't have to be so sensitive." (P6)

While 'jokes' were a common situation where *attribution of blame* was identified, other

incidents involved blaming the victim for their own sexuality or gender identity. One participant provided an example on this use of blame:

I've had a lot of people comment on how I look and say that I don't look like I'm into girls... I've had a number of people tell me that I am just going through a phrase or that it's a choice... they [say], "You're too pretty to be a lesbian." Like this backhanded comment, that if you're pretty and feminine, then you must be into men. (P15)

This description was coded primarily as *attribution of blame* because it clearly places the participant's looks as the central focus. Additionally, the use of stereotyping was coded as *moral justification*. Other participants experienced this blame for their own sexuality, even after confiding with people regarding traumatic experiences:

...I was sexually assaulted at gunpoint... That was something that I suppressed for two years, and didn't speak up to anybody, but that instance whenever I finally spoke about it, one [person] decided to ask if that's when I thought it was okay to be a fag. (P9)

This situation involves directly pointing at the participant and blaming them for their sexuality, even in the wake of a traumatic experience.

Dehumanization

Dehumanization was utilized as a mechanism in incidents involving slurs, threats or acts of violence, and direct rejection. First, the use of slurs emerged as a common subtheme. Participants described an overt usage of slurs, "I've been called a fag multiple times..." (P3). Other participants went into detail regarding the use of slurs on campus:

In my freshman year English class, I was the only queer person, and there were

also very few minority students of other demographics. And this one guy literally ... We were talking about something political...I was voicing my opinion, and he turned to me and said, 'Fucking dyke,' to my face, in class. It was crazy. (P2)

Participant two identified this incident as the most blatant form of anti-queer communication she had experienced. However, she also expressed the term 'dyke' not being the only slur she has experienced on campus: "I mean people say 'faggot' all the time." Both slurs mentioned by this participant were coded as examples of *dehumanization* and *euphemistic labeling* being utilized by the perpetrator.

Second, direct acts or threats of violence were subthemes of *dehumanization*.

While they were not the most common, these incidents did occur:

... there was a party going on in my dorm...I was walking down the hall, two girls came out of the room, they looked like they were going to throw up and I was like, "Hey, do you need any help?" One of the girls looked at me and she's like, "fuck off." [Then] one of the guys came out and he was like, "We don't do that here." I'm like, "I'm gay, I'm just trying to help," and then his other friend came out and said that he curb-stomps gay people (P11).

Because this incident involved physical threat of violence, it was coded as

dehumanization.

Finally, direct rejection was a common subtheme of *dehumanization*. This occurred primarily in incidents regarding potential friendship, "One of my former roommates said that he could never really be too good of friends with a gay guy" (P11). This was coded as both *dehumanization* and *moral justification*. A similar justification occurred when a participant was sitting next to a group of students in the student union. He explained:

They were talking about how... there's these two dudes on campus that are gay... and then they were talking about how they don't like gay people, and they don't want to be around gay people. And I was like...what if your girlfriend has a friend that's gay?... [They were] like, "Well, we're going to have to break up then, or she can't be friends with that person." It was just very discomforting. (P3)

The comments identified by this participant regarding not being friends with a gay person were also coded as *dehumanization* and *moral justification*.

Direct rejection did not only occur in conversations regarding friendship. Some examples of this subtheme emerged when being removed from local establishments:

I was at a bar with somebody and we were the only two people in the bar. We were just sitting there and talking, we had... Maybe two drinks maybe each. The bartender came over and he was like, "You need to leave." We were like, "Why?" He was like, "This is for paying customers only. You can't be here anymore."
(P13)

When asked to explain the situation further and to why he felt he had been targeted based on his sexual identity he expressed, "The drinks were paid for. We were not intoxicated... We were sitting close to each other. It was a little flirtatious, but nothing more than what another couple was probably doing." This situation was also coded as *dehumanization* and *moral justification*. Although the participant explained that there were no direct homophobic remarks made, he and his friend felt discriminated against for being two gay men being physically and verbally flirtatious.

Research Question 2

Research question two asked what implications mechanisms of moral

disengagement have on queer students. After separating the effects identified by participants, three major themes emerged: mental/emotional, academic, and societal. The following section provides descriptions and quotations of the effects these experiences have had on the participants.

Mental/emotional

Most of the participants identified experiencing at least some degree of emotional or mental turmoil as a direct result of anti-queer communication. The most common subthemes that emerged from the interviews, regarding mental/emotional implications involved feelings of sadness, anxiety, and anger. One participant provided in detail the physiological reactions he had during his experiences:

I would get anxiety. I would get anger to the point where my ears are hot... I don't want to say I would lose conscience, but it's... like an out of the body moment when somebody's talking bad about you and you don't know what to do, because you don't want to cause a scene and you don't also want to get in a fight with somebody... it makes me feel really, really low... like I'm not accepted. I'm not even a human being at all... That's what it makes me feel like, because I'm just like leaving my body. (P3)

This description provides the most detailed account of what most of the participants indicated; the feelings of anxiety, anger, and depression. Another participant elaborated on his similar feelings:

I mean anxiety but, also just sadness. It's not really sad for myself, I'm more just like it's sad that we're still here. It's sad that this shit's still happening in 2019. And I don't see a lot of progression happening in this community... it's sometimes

draining to want to leave your house. There's been definitely a lot of days where I just haven't left because I don't want to have to listen to this kind of crap. (P5)

Other participants identified having similar feelings of isolation and not wanting to leave their home because of previous experiences with anti-queer communication. Some participants described this internal sadness as a severe form of depression that affected their feelings of self-worth.

Academic

In addition to emotional/mental implications, some participants identified their academic or campus experience as being negatively affected by anti-queer experiences. It is important to note that although participants identified negative academic implications, a majority of these experiences also involved emotional/mental factors. However, in order to provide a thorough answer to research question two, academic-specific implications were placed as their own theme. Within this theme, two subthemes emerged: *self-selected experiences* and *class participation*.

The most common and obvious academic implication is *self-selected experiences*. All fifteen participants made at least one comment expressing how they specifically chose to identify and associate with like-minded individuals, while simultaneously avoiding places or groups that they perceived to be anti-queer. For example, the previous quotation from participant one stated their lack of incidents with anti-queer communication to be directly related to their conscious decision to maintain only certain campus and group experiences. Another participant provided an additional example of her self-selection:

... I'm a theater major so most of my interactions are with, people who constantly

interact with LGBT students...They are constantly around people who are gay or bi or queer or gender queer, nonconforming whatever. So, they don't treat me any differently. I have two very close straight female friends who have never treated me any differently... But I'm sure that's a unique experience and not everybody has that (P6).

This participant makes a note of her major selection being a huge part of her overall positive experiences. However, similar to other participants, she notes that this is a unique situation. While this participant does provide an example of *self-selected experiences*, her major selection is the primary reason. Other participants however, described self-selection in average everyday campus activities. They explained:

Especially with the people on campus. I will physically make a conscious effort to walk on the other side because there's sometimes two sidewalks. I'll go to the farthest sidewalk just to avoid it entirely. I won't make eye contact with anybody that's involved in [certain] groups. If I start hearing those comments, I'll just kind of turn away, shove the headphones in, pretend I didn't hear it. (P8)

This participant provides an example of making a conscious effort on a daily basis to avoid previous experiences of anti-queer communication.

The other main negative academic implication described by participants involved *class participation*. Most of the participants described not wanting to either participate in course discussions or feared being identified as a LGBTQIA+ student while in the classroom. Recall the comment from above in which the participant made clear points to a classmate only to be reprimanded by the professor for doing so. One participant described almost dropping out of his program altogether:

I responded, by... refus[ing] to participate in the class anymore... After that situation, in my, class... I was so mad at all of the students, I was so mad at my professor, I was mad at everything. I didn't function well as a student, I struggled in one of my classes, I almost moved home prematurely... And I think now, I don't really want to disclose my identity... there's always this feeling of having to pretend and that gets kind of old after a while, of having to keep that mask on.

(P5)

This example provided the most detail regarding the effect of a negative classroom experience. Other participants mentioned feelings of not wanting to be discovered or feeling unsafe within the classroom environment.

Societal

Although the participants primarily focus on micro-interactions, some provided context for how these interactions influenced a broader Institutional issue. In conversations regarding the lack of protections against discrimination, participants identified their everyday interactions and influencers to a larger problem. Because people carry with them their prejudices, they also impact the broader attitude on LGBTQIA+ issues. The association of individuals to larger anti-queer organizations is evident of this implication:

Well, you see people that have Turning Point USA pins on their backpacks or their shirts, says something about being a snowflake. Or they're going to the point of actually out- and-out advertising that they consume, probably subscribe to individuals whose purpose is to try to marginalize and convince other people, that people like me don't exist. (P1)

This example provides an understanding of grassroots organizing and its link to personal ideology. As people identify with certain organizations, they carry with them the organizational message. This can both help and hinder positive activism. For example, queer participation in pro-civil rights activism has been negatively affected by the fear of discrimination:

Well, I have presented the way I want to present and carried myself the way I want to carry myself... a lot of instances in which you see people getting yelled the F slur, the T slur at them, or physically attacked or whatever, a lot of these things happen in the context of activism... So if you are in a space and you are there for the sole purpose of standing up for LGBT rights, or you're there for some kind of cause... then the likelihood of something hostile happening, I think is greatly elevated. (P1)

This example directly shows the macro-level implication of these use of mechanisms. Even if they are utilized only in micro-transactions they contribute to a larger sentiment of queer discrimination. And because of this, the participation in the democratic process integral to the United States' functioning becomes mitigated.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This study provided new insight on the justifications of anti-LGTBQIA+ communication, as well as new theoretical observation for moral disengagement theory. While previous studies regarding mechanisms of moral disengagement and communication were primary quantitative (Camodeca, Baiocco, & Posa, 2018; Carrera-Fernández, Cid-Fernández, Almeida, A., González-Fernández, & Lameiras-Fernández, 2018; Jackson, & Gaertner, 2010; Shafer, 2009; Zapolski, Banks, Lau, & Aalsma, 2018), this study helped fill the gaps utilizing qualitative methods. Using the constant comparative method in the aftermath of interviewing offers new insights on this theory. To date only one previous study using qualitative methods to examine mechanisms of moral disengagement and interpersonal communication (Sahlman, 2018). Previous qualitative research focused primarily on online content analysis (Faulkner, & Bliuc, 2016). This study's findings also highlight the implications of face-to-face discrimination on macro-level decision making. The following chapter discusses the findings of this study, as well as the strengths, limitations, and areas of future research.

Moral disengagement and anti-queer communication

The findings of this study demonstrate the use of mechanisms of moral disengagement in the justification of anti-queer communication. At least one of the mechanisms described in the literature review were identified in each incident described by participants. It is important to note that mechanisms can and do overlap. The following sections discuss each of the mechanisms and how they operated as forms of anti-queer communication.

Moral justification

Moral justification was identified in a significant number of participants' experiences. The most common being religious groups indicating that LGBTQIA+ people will be sent to hell. As previously described, *moral justification* operates when an individual personally justifies a harmful act. When the justification occurs, the perpetrator is able to avoid self-condemnation for their actions (Bandura, 1999, 2002, & 2016; Sahlman, 2018). When religious groups are spreading the message that LGBTQIA+ students are committing sinful acts and therefore will be damned to hell, they are overtly describing the supposedly worst fate that could happen to someone. Because of this, it is logical to conclude that these messages are thought to be morally justifiable.

In addition to harmful messages being *morally justified* by religious groups, other incidents were examples of this mechanism. Bandura (2002) explained that through this mechanism, violent behavior becomes acceptable or even righteous. The situations from participants regarding overt threats or acts of violence are examples of this mechanism. People would normally not attack or threaten another human being. To do so would cause self-regulatory mechanisms to activate, preventing harmful behavior from occurring (Bandura, 2016). However, the perpetrators described by participants, were clearly able to justify their violent rhetoric and actions. If they did not justify it to themselves first, then they would not have committed these actions.

Next, *moral justification* was utilized in incidents involving jokes. Each interaction in which the perpetrator justified their anti-queer communication by indicating it was a 'joke,' utilized this mechanism. Making homophobic or transphobic comments under the guise of 'joking' requires an internal justification. If language no longer carries

it harmful meaning because joking was the intention, then any form of problematic rhetoric can be spoken. Because of this, people making these ‘jokes’ appear to find the act of joking *morally justifiable* regardless of the content. By doing this, they are able to alleviate themselves from any negative implications the ‘joke’ may have on the victim. This supports previous research regarding joking and *moral justification* (Sahlman, 2018).

Finally, *moral justification* was utilized when perpetrators deliberately refused to acknowledge preferred pronouns or name-changes associated with transgender and non-binary individuals. This was a new and important finding regarding the use of this mechanism. In all of the incidents that involved the conscious refusal of proper pronoun or name usage, this mechanism appears to occur. Knowingly understanding what pronouns or name a transgender or non-binary individual prefers, yet refusing to acknowledge this, alludes that these perpetrators feel justified in their use of rhetoric. By utilizing this mechanism, people are able to disregard a person’s identity and use the language they feel is more appropriate.

Euphemistic labeling

Euphemistic labeling was identified in situations where anti-queer communication became synonymous with negative language. The most common term was, “that’s so gay” being used to describe something that is dumb or stupid. By replacing negative language or insults with more accepting terms, the words being sanitized, and their implications mitigated (Bandura, 2002 & 2016). Perpetrators mentioned by participants as using terminology like, “that’s so gay” or “you’re a faggot” to friends, are able to disengage from negative associations with calling someone stupid or dumb. The findings

of this study regarding the use of *euphemistic labeling* supports previous communication research regarding messages and euphemisms (Faulkner, & Bliuc, 2016; Sahlman, 2018; Shafer, 2009).

Advantageous comparison

Advantageous comparison was sparsely identified. However, two incidents provided prime examples of this mechanism being utilized in interpersonal communication. First, participant five's description of a peer using fear mongering to justify non-integrated gendered restrooms demonstrates this mechanism. The perpetrator argued that men would pretend to be trans-women in order to sexually assault cis-women in their restrooms. The perpetrator also disregarded any violence being faced by transgender individuals in the status quo. By making these arguments, they are able to make their anti-queer rhetoric seem beneficial. Participant twelve identified an incident in which students claimed that homosexual marriage was not legitimate because the purpose of marriage is procreation. This is another example of *advantageous comparison* being used to present harmful rhetoric as a necessary scenario. The examples in this study support previous research regarding the usage of utilitarian standards as a justification for harmful behavior (Bandura, 2002 & 2016).

Displacement of responsibility

Displacement of responsibility was identified in multiple situations discussed by participants. First, all of the incidents involving religious groups who justified their rhetoric by using the bible or God utilized this mechanism. Bandura (2002) explained that shifting the blame of one's actions onto someone else or another entity, allows the individual to avoid self-condemnation. By using the bible or God to justify anti-queer

messages, perpetrators are removing their agency in the exchanges, and placing the sole responsibility on other entities. This offers the opportunity for people to blame the bible for the implications of the harmful messages, rather than the individual who spoke the messages.

Second, multiple participants described situations in which stereotyping was utilized. All of these incidents are additional examples of *displacement of responsibility*. Numerous participants recalled accounts of being told, “this is how gays are supposed to sound” or “you are too pretty to be a lesbian.” Each of these phrases, and similar phrases like them, place the responsibility on the stereotype of being queer. For example, in the phrase, “this is how gays are supposed to sound,” the perpetrator devoids themselves of responsibility by using a stereotype as a form of evidence.

Finally, Trump was a common justification utilized by perpetrators. In the message, “Trump is President, the purge is coming, we're going to kill you fags” (P5), The harmful message begins by acknowledging an event that justifies the action; the election of Trump. By doing this, perpetrators are able to relieve themselves of the self-condemnation by placing the election of Trump as the justification. This study’s findings regarding the use of *displacement of responsibility* support previous research about this mechanism (Bandura, 2002; Sahlman, 2018; Shafer, 2009).

Diffusion of responsibility

Diffusion of responsibility was identified as a mechanism in multiple incidents. The violent behavior that involved throwing rocks and burning material all occurred while in a group. Bandura (2002) explained that group mentality allows no single individual to claim responsibility. Where everyone is responsible, no one becomes

responsible. It is logical to assume that these overt acts of violence would not have occurred, if a single perpetrator was present at the events. Additionally, the shouting of slurs while in groups supports this notion of group mentality being utilized. Sahlman (2018) argued that derogatory terms became easily justified when like-minded people were also using them. An individual can justify their harmful rhetoric or behavior by diffusing responsibility to the group. Simply put, if everyone is doing it, what makes it so wrong? This study's findings support previous work regarding harmful slurs and language being justified through *diffusion of responsibility* (Sahlman, 2018).

Disregard or distortion of consequences

Disregard or distortion of consequences was most apparent in situations of outright denial. Bandura (2016) explained, minimizing the consequences or impact of one's actions make harmful behavior seem irrelevant. This study supports Bandura's notions. Multiple examples describe perpetrators of anti-queer communication simply deny the existence of discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people. If these parties were to recognize that discrimination is occurring, the ability to empathize with others would prevent them from spreading harmful messages. However, by simply denying the reality that queer people face discrimination, they are offered the opportunity to justify any message. The examples provided in this study support previous research regarding the utilization of this mechanism in interpersonal settings (Sahlman, 2018).

Attribution of blame

Blaming the victim was a common tactic identified by participants. Examples that stressed the perpetrator's ability to shift the burden onto the participant demonstrates this. Shafer (2009) explained, attributing the blame of harmful behavior onto that of their

victim, allows the perpetrator to relinquish responsibility of said behavior. This study supports the findings of attributing the blame to the victim in previous studies (Bandura, 2002; Faulkner, & Bliuc, 2016; Sahlman, 2018; Shafer, 2009). Examples where perpetrators used phrases similar to, “why are you so mad?” “you’re too sensitive” or “you bring up the issue,” place the blame for the impact of the harmful messages solely on the person affected.

Dehumanization

Finally, *dehumanization* was utilized in every example involving threats of violence or slurs. Bandura (2016) explained that the ability to see someone as less than human, makes almost any form of inhumanity possible. Sahlman (2018) demonstrated how racist language and slurs functioned as a form of dehumanization. This study supports these notions. The ability for perpetrators to call someone a ‘fag’ or ‘dyke’ creates a scenario where the victim is no longer a person with thoughts and feelings, but a static body. It is logical to assume that if the perpetrators’ thought of LGBTQIA+ students as people with similar experiences, they would be less likely to threaten violence or use slurs.

Where do the queer students go?

The findings of this study offered new understandings of the implications of moral disengagement. In addition to experiencing emotional and academic stressors, there are societal implications. Like other marginalized groups that have encountered these mechanisms, queer students are essentially left with two options: a) retreat from academic and community spaces while suffering the costs of internal dismay or b) engage in these spaces and risk discrimination, harassment, and potentially violence. This

supports previous research regarding heterosexism and cissexism within academia (Asquith, Ferfolia, Brady, & Hanckel, 2018). It is important to note that every participant identified the need for institutional and personal change. Institutions both in the community and on campus need to make it clear that anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination will not be tolerated. While organizations might believe they are making progress, without tangible consequences for perpetrators of these actions, there is little deterrent. Queer students should not have to fear walking on their own campus.

In addition to institutional changes personal reflexivity is imperative. While it is easy to believe your personal actions have no consequences, this study rejects that notion. Even allies, LGBTQIA+ members, and educators can unknowingly be perpetrators of this form of communication. Practicing self-reflexivity offers the opportunity to morally engage with self-regulatory mechanisms (Bandura 2002). This prevents harmful actions from occurring. Every participant identified the need for sincere conversation regarding these issues. Although complete agreement on LGBTQIA+ issues may not be possible, creating a focal point for dialogue provides the opportunity to foster transformative change.

Strengths, limitations, and future research

This study provided new understandings of the justification of anti-queer communication. To date, no study has examined mechanisms of moral disengagement being utilized in interpersonal settings for the purpose of anti-LGBTQIA+ messages. This research provides a starting point for a potentially fruitful new avenue of social cognitive behavior, queer identity, and communication. Additionally, this study offered another insight on how qualitative methods can be used to understand moral

disengagement. Few studies to date have used qualitative methods in the exploration of moral disengagement. Only one other study to date has explored moral disengagement and interpersonal communication via qualitative methods (Sahlman, 2018). Future studies should expand the use of interviewing to explore interpersonal communication and social-cognitive behavior. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of sensitivity training or institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students and their effects on anti-queer communication.

As with all studies, this study was not without limitations. First, all of the data collected was interpreted by the author. The author's understanding of mechanisms of moral disengagement and what constituted anti-queer communication functioned as the sole interpretation. Future studies should employ multiple coders and authors to ensure that mechanisms are being accurately identified. Second, the identity of the author is both a strength and limitation of this study. While being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community brings with it an easier understanding of the participants' experiences, it carries with it the biases associated with having experiences anti-queer communication. Future studies should explore how being a member of a targeted population might influence the recognition of mechanisms of moral disengagement. Third, the population make-up and sample size of the participants does not accurately represent the entire LGBTQIA+ community. A majority of the participants in this study were white and cis-gendered. As previously stated, violence and discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ community is intersectional. It should be noted that queer people of color are likely to experience not only the anti-queer communication but racist communication as well.

Future studies should focus solely of specific categories of members within the LGBTQIA+ community, in order to receive a holistic understanding.

Conclusion

When alt-right leader, Gavin McInnes, made calls for conservatives to commit violence against trans-gender individuals, he was met with a lot of backlash. He was also met with significant support. This study sought to understand potential explanations for forms of anti-LGBTQIA+ communication. Using moral disengagement theory and qualitative methods, socio-cognitive mechanisms were identified to be present in at least some justifications of harmful communication. Queer students not only experienced forms of anti-LGBTQIA+ messages, but faced emotional, mental, and academic challenges as a result. While this study offered new insights into moral disengagement theory, anti-queer communication, and qualitative methods, it should be treated as a preliminary analysis. Future research is needed to gain a holistic understanding of the intersectional implications on queer people. While this study in no way provides a solution to the issue of anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination, it provides an interesting look into things cis-people say.

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Appendix A



INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: Things cis people say: Mechanisms of moral disengagement in the justification of anti-queer communication

Investigator: Jon Sahlman, Communication Dept., Jonathan.sahlman325@topper.wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project.

You must be 18 years old or older to participate in this research study.

The investigator will explain to you in detail the purpose of the project, the procedures to be used, and the potential benefits and possible risks of participation. You may ask any questions you have to help you understand the project. A basic explanation of the project is written below. Please read this explanation and discuss with the researcher any questions you may have. If you then decide to participate in the project, please sign this form in the presence of the person who explained the project to you. You should be given a copy of this form to keep.

- Nature and Purpose of the Project:** This project seeks to investigate how anti-LGBTQIA+ communication is justified. Using previous work on self-cognitive mechanisms and harmful actions as a framework, students will be asked about their experiences regarding anti-LGBTQIA+ communication on and around the college environment
- Explanation of Procedures:** Each interview will last roughly 30-60min. You will be asked questions regarding your experiences or lack thereof regarding anti-LGBTQIA+ communication.
- Discomfort and Risks:** There are no perceived risks. Speaking about these incidents may be provoke feelings of discomfort or anxiety. If this occurs you are permitted to end the interview at any time. Please contact the WKU counseling center if these unwanted feelings persist.

Western Kentucky University Counseling

Phone: 270-745-3159

The WKU counseling center is staffed with full-time clinicians, pre-doctoral students, and graduate students. They provide a range of counseling services and offer presentations for off and on-campus organizations for a variety of topics, including depression, stress management, sexual assault awareness, and psychological wellness.

- Benefits:** Your participation will contribute to the scholarship and understand of queer subjects and communication. Additionally, your participation enters you in a drawing for a \$25 Amazon gift card.

WKU IRB# 19-216
Approved: 1/22/2019
End Date: 1/01/2020
EXPEDITED
Original: 1/22/2019

5. **Confidentiality:** Your name will not be published, make public, or discussed. Only your age, gender, race, and classification in the LGBTQIA+ community will be available. No contact information will be shared. At ANY point in the project process if you wish to end your participation you are free to do so and the recording of your interview will be deleted.

6. **Refusal/Withdrawal:** Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

Signature of Participant

Date

Witness

Date

- I agree to the audio/video recording of the research. **(Initial here)** _____

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Robin Pyles, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-3360



WKU IRB# 19-216
Approved: 1/22/2019
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EXPEDITED
Original: 1/22/2019

Appendix B

Interview Script

1. Please state your race, self-identified gender, self-identified sexuality, and age
2. Think back on your experiences as a college student. Have you ever had a negative conversation with a non-queer individual on or around your college campus?
3. If so, can you describe this experience?
4. Can you recall an experience where an individual used homophobic or transphobic terms which made you angry and/or uncomfortable? Please share about this experience
5. Please describe an experience in where you tried to correct a person's use of language you felt to be inappropriate? How did this situation unfold?
6. Please describe an experience in which you correct a friend's use of homophobic or transphobic language that you felt to be inappropriate? How did this situation unfold?
7. Please describe an experience in which an individual used labels or euphemisms when referring to LGBTQIA+ peoples?
8. Please describe an experience in which an individual shifted the blame of their use of harmful communication onto you, someone else, or another entity?
9. Please describe an experience in which a person made you feel inferior during a conversation because of your identity?
10. What feelings are coming up for you as you are thinking and talking about these experiences?
11. What bodily changes or states were you aware of at the time of these experiences?
12. Tell me more about how these experiences made you feel – what were the challenges and/or benefits of these experiences?

13. Overall, on average how would you describe your interactions with your non-LGBTQIA+ peers on or around campus?
14. What concerns do you have about interacting with your non-LGBTQIA+ peers on or around campus?
15. What would help address these concerns?
16. Is there anything else you would like to add about your experiences interacting with non-LGBTQIA+ peers on or around campus?