Empowering Students via Autoethnography Assignment: Fostering Inclusive Communities for Gender and Sexuality in Social Inequality Class

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Abstract: Discrimination is still a prominent and widely faced issue on college campuses across the United States, especially regarding gender and sexuality. In this research, we utilized autoethnography as a pedagogical methodology to illustrate and understand students' experiences in the college environment, such as feelings of invisibility, isolation, being unsafe, danger, and unaccepted. This study explores the use of autoethnography to improve campus environments and analyzes perception changes within autoethnography as they relate to gender and sexuality. Data were collected from 146 students in SOC 3010 Social Inequality in the Fall of 2019 and Spring of 2020 courses at Utah State University. Participants were asked to write a term paper in which the provided topics included gender, sexuality, religion, race, and mental health. We used content analysis to evaluate the students' submissions, which included themes such as exposure to people of different genders, limited perspective, learning about others' experiences, and having someone important in life that belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community". This study finds a positive change in perspective regarding gender and sexuality when autoethnographies are employed in the classroom.
Keywords: autoethnography, campus climate, content analysis, LGBTQIA+ community, safe spaces.

The LGBTQIA+ community has been experiencing a lack of acceptance from peers throughout students' school life (California Healthy Kids Survey, 2021, The National School Climate Survey, 2021). However, the campus climate can be positive or negative, depending upon the community's acceptance of LGBTQIA+ students (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002; Russel et al., 2021;). For example, the 2022 National Survey on LGBTQIA Youth Mental Health reflects that 36% of LGBTQIA+ youth indicated that they had experienced physical threats or harm linked to their gender identity. On the other hand, 73% of LGBTQIA+ youth specified that they have been observing anxiety, and 58% of LGBTQIA indicated having depression (The National Survey, 2022). In addition, the 2021 National School Climate Survey shows that LGBTQIA+ students have high rates of abuse in the classroom, which influences social acceptance, self-esteem, and educational aspirations.

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There needs to be action taken to improve the campus climate so that queer students can have a fair college experience similar to their straight and cisgender peers. A recent Campus Climate (2019) survey at Utah State University indicates that many college environments and classrooms are unsafe spaces for those whose identity may fall outside the socially accepted and reinforced cis- and heteronormativity, and this, in turn, can lead to dangerous isolation and feelings of invisibility. Many college campuses across the United States pose several obstacles to the safety and comfort of the LGBTQIA+ community (Coleman, 2016). College campuses may create clubs, workshops, inclusion and diversity activities, and use Safe Zones to be able to bring people from the university together.

The purpose of the research is to explore autoethnography as a pedagogical methodology to build safe and empowered spaces on college campuses. An autoethnography focuses on exploring one's own identities and experiences and how they relate to greater issues in society. Autoethnography as an evocative method creates safe zones (Ellis, 2004), "students can consider and modify attitudes they hold about disenfranchised groups, including those to which they belong. Through critical self-reflection, students can work through their attitudes about social (in)justice" (M. Soyer & Martinez-Cola, 2020, p. 266).

Understanding how discrimination can appear within the school system is vital to developing methods of decreasing it. Through understanding one's own experiences, the theory and purpose behind autoethnography are to gain awareness of a societal issue. This aligns with one of the first steps toward a safer campus. As such, autoethnographies are being explored as a tool to decrease discrimination against the community on campus by developing a greater shared understanding of people and the problems each individual faces. The general principle is that an individual's positive perceptions of gender and sexuality variance and diversity expand as they learn to begin to understand the experiences of others.

The data has been thoroughly analyzed and reviewed by the collective group of authors to identify any similarities or differences in the findings. Throughout this paper, we use the term LGBTQIA+ to address the LGBTQIA+ community broadly. However, we kept the other terms, such as LGBT, LGBTQ, and queer, as cited in the existing literature.

Literature Review

The Campus Pride Index has been used to create a standard for college policies, programs, and practices so that college campuses can be more inclusive. There are about 235 colleges that utilize The Campus Pride Index in some form and to varying degrees. This tool helps campuses learn how to improve LGBTQIA+ acceptance within their schools. The Index also provides data to college administrators on improving programs, policies, and services for these students, such as utilizing the Index's resources to better train staff on creating a safe environment for the LGBTQIA+ community (Garvey et al., 2017). It is useful to learn the college's weaknesses for inclusiveness and find ways to change it for the better.

As the campus climate survey at Utah State University (2021) suggested that many college campuses may promote social environments that are unsafe for and perpetuate discrimination against members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The lack of safe spaces on college campuses can leave LGBTQIA+ students unable to feel accepted or comfortable on their campuses. Higher anxiety, alienation, and prejudice rates are associated with a lack of safe places that support students (Mays & Cochran, 2001; McCabe et al., 2010). Using autoethnography and having a safe place to go to where they feel supported has enabled them to reach out to others who are struggling and to form connections to share their experiences or situations with which they are struggling (G. Soyer & Soyer, 2017).

Several factors contribute to the creation and continuation of unsafe environments. First, a lack of awareness or overall avoidance of diversity has largely led to feelings of invisibility and increased student stress levels (Conlin et al., 2019). Academic institutions that do not even

recognize diversity within student demographics foster unsafe environments for those with identities that fall outside of the presumed and socially enforced straight and cisgender social norms. The presence of religion on a college campus can also impact the college climate for those students. A study of three Christian college campuses showed that 96% of students had a negative view of same-sex behaviors (Yarhouse et al., 2009). LGBTQIA+ students might distance themselves from religious groups because of negative interactions they have had.

Students are at risk of dealing with homophobia, transphobia, and other discriminatory behaviors on college campuses—including frequent bullying and abuse by their straight and/or cisgender peers due to their actual or perceived sexuality and/or gender (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Many people in the LGBTQ+ community may experience social isolation due to the fear of rejection and not feeling safe to share their sexual or gender identity with their peers. This can lead to a sense of being unwelcome, prompting individuals to isolate themselves from others.

Campus housing is another aspect of college that can contribute to unsafe environments for the LGBTQIA+ community. At college campuses, housing is gendered (Marody, 2022). This can leave those who do not identify as either strictly men or women in an uncomfortable position. For example, if the college requires freshman students to live on campus, they will be forced to live with people of a gender they do not align with. These students find that co-ed housing is an easy way for students to find others who are like them and to feel safer. Most nonbinary students have to live off-campus because of non-inclusive housing (Kortegast, 2017).

Additionally, a study by Linley (2016) demonstrates the importance of faculty-student interaction. For someone in the LGBTQIA+ community, having a teacher who is accepting and supportive will likely improve academic success. In addition, college campuses should have all faculty participate in "safe zone" type training that teaches faculty about the issues the community faces. With the college faculty being more educated about the community, they will be able to help an LGBTQIA+ student feel welcome on campus.

Faculty can also help prevent harassment targeted towards those students. Students had reported feeling accepted when faculty confronted homophobic and transphobic behaviors of students, used students' correct pronouns, and used inclusive language (Linley et al., 2016). Students having a positive relationship with their instructor will improve the overall campus climate (Loreto & McDonough, 2014; Merwe, 2014). According to Ziyanak (2023) and Olson (2023), incorporating a small yet significant measure, such as requesting students to share their preferred names and pronouns in a confidential manner, solely for use in designated safe spaces, can prove to be a potent tool in fostering a secure and all-inclusive learning environment. A commitment to respecting and upholding the use of the specified names and pronouns, without any exceptions or deviations, is key to ensuring the effectiveness of this initiative in promoting a sense of safety for all students (Olson, 2023; Ziyanak, 2023).

The Use of Autoethnography

As a writing style that explicitly situates the author's lived experiences and identity within larger social patterns and structures, autoethnography could be a pedagogical methodology to approach the issue of discrimination on college campuses. Writers of autoethnography can gain a sense of personal empowerment and a better understanding of their connection to the social world. Sharing these writings can be even more powerful, creating stronger communities by humanizing real issues. By implementing autoethnographic assignments as a means of self-reflection in higher education, the campus climate could experience a positive transformation, particularly for members of the LGBTQ+ community (Bloom et al., 2021).

Safe Zone programs are a means which can bring college students together and allow them to form connections with others who are also searching for support. In a study conducted

by Young and McKibban (2013), they reflected on Safe Zone workshops and how students acted during those workshops. Those studies helped the researchers determine where they could improve the workshops in order to be able to make them a safer place for everyone. By using autoethnographies to determine what students thought of that certain workshop, the researchers were able to reflect on their past experiences with different workshops as well to determine where they could improve.

Autoethnography can help form connections with others by sharing their experiences. There is a stigma around sharing traumatic experiences with others, and people prefer to keep that part of themselves from others. However, Javaid (2020) wrote about their experiences of being victims of abuse and believed that the use of autoethnography helped them in the healing process. Javaid could feel visible and heard when sharing his experiences with others (Javaid, 2020). For some people, it feels better to talk about their situation or what they are struggling with. Autoethnographies are one of the ways that can help provide support in the healing process for victims of abuse and sexual violence (Bochner & Ellis, 1996). Some students do not feel supported by their college campus and the resources provided for them. Autoethnography can help young individuals form connections, share their concerns, and also educate others (Gannon, 2017). For example, while college students are not properly trained or educated on how to help a peer that is having suicidal thoughts and tendencies (and should not ever be viewed as a substitute for professional help), autoethnographies can help students become more educated on the topic, and thus enable them to help their peers who are struggling around them (Austin & Hickey, 2007).

The use of autoethnography can also help resolve issues involving miscommunication. Howard (2012) shared their experience of being outed by a classmate and how that affected their behavior toward people around them. Howard thought there was an issue with who they were after their advisor found out about their coming out as a member of the LGBT community. A problematic occurrence arises when a person is "outed" by someone who does not realize that the person is not ready to come out publicly to people around them (Howard, 2012). When a person is "coming out" as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is often a moment in their life that can be a great joy and moment of pride or a source of deep pain, depending on the reactions of others. People tend to prefer not to come out until they are comfortable and ready to, so it can be a very problematic, uncomfortable, and even dangerous experience when someone else does it for them.

Frequently, individuals are turning to their phones in order to form connections and build stronger relationships by finding like-minded people, even though the individual may live in an isolated place geographically or socially. Autoethnographies are another way that can help young adults find and share support. Wargo (2020) researched how autoethnography and technology affect students' relationships and how deep the connections can become. He discussed how he did not feel comfortable with the topic while he was growing up in the LGBTQ community because it wasn't something that was supported. The researcher used an autoethnography to be able to talk with six students about their experiences when they addressed the topic of desire (Wargo, 2020). They were able to connect and support one another while discussing a topic that's sensitive for some. Autoethnography helps those college students share their experiences and thoughts without being judged or told they are not supposed to discuss those topics.

LGBTQIA+ college students struggle to find safe places to talk with others and find the support they need. Autoethnography can help students connect and give them a chance to be able to discuss topics that they aren't comfortable talking about in front of others. Safe spaces bring students together to become educated and find support from others by sharing their own experiences and struggles. Creating safe places on campus can give students, faculty, staff, and other members on campus the ability to be heard, seen, and feel comfortable knowing they are supported and welcomed at their college (Murphy et al., 2021).

Research Question

To what extent do autoethnographies contribute to changes in student perceptions of gender and sexuality, both positively and negatively?

Methods and Data

We researched the data from students' autoethnography assignments to examine students' perceptions of gender and sexuality. We employed qualitative content analysis to explore the student's 146 essays to determine whether each student had a positive change, negative change, no change, or a strengthening in perception. This approach enables researchers to evaluate students' perceptions in a detailed means (M. Soyer & Ziyanak, 2017; Ziyanak & Soyer, 2014). This study focused on students' perceptions of gender and sexuality. The findings revealed that the majority of the students' perceptions changed positively.

The researchers gathered data from students' autoethnography about their perceptions of gender and sexuality. The essays have three following main objectives (M. Soyer & Martinez-Cola, 2021):

1. Examine how autoethnography allows them to "be safe" in their contribution to the classroom.
2. Understand how social institutions may have shaped their personal experiences and biases.
3. Use sociological concepts and perspectives learned in the course to explain how their perceptions may have changed or been challenged.

Data Collection

This writing project is a required assignment for the SOC 3010-Social Inequality course at Utah State University. Students were informed about their projects during the first week of the semester. The study comes at the end of the semester after students have gone through modules including gender, sexuality, religion, race, and mental health. The participants were then asked to write their autoethnographies on one topic. Participants' questions were elaborately answered throughout the semesters if some students wanted to start the project early. Some of the participants wanted to wait until all the topics were observed. We collected data from Soc 3010 Social Inequality in the Fall of 2019 and Spring of 2020. There was a total of 146 participants in the research study. There were only one or two participants who did not complete their project. The assignment was required, but students' participation in this research with their autoethnographies was completely voluntary. This research was approved by IRB at Utah State University (Protocol #10361). Students are invited to participate in a research study conducted. In an Informed Consent form, it stated the purpose of this research was to examine how the autoethnography assignment creates safe zones for students to perceive their privileges and vulnerabilities. Student's participation was entirely voluntary. This form includes detailed information on the research to help students decide whether to participate. The researcher will use your autoethnography paper for coding common themes regarding Race, Class, Gender, Sexuality, and Religion. The researchers made every effort to ensure that the information participants provided as part of this study would remain confidential. Students' identities would not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. We would download their autoethnography and securely be stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system (usu.edu).

Data Analysis

Content analysis served as the basis for the analysis (Mayring, 2000, 2008). The analysis aided in determining the perception change among students who either associated with or did not identify with, the group they wrote about. First, we selected the keywords in the research design based on word repetition in students' autoethnography assignment writing. After refining our keywords, we reduced some of the words due to having the same meaning, such as LGBT, LGTBTQ or LGBTQIA+. The second stage provided essential codes regarding gender, sexuality, religion, race, class, and mental health. In the third stage, we separated the student's essays into the categories of gender, sexuality, religion, race, class, mental health, or other groups. In the final stage, we analyzed each theme to determine how autoethnography played a role in measuring students' positive change, negative change, no change, or strengthening in perception. Regarding essays that focused on gender, four deeply interrelated codes are highlighted:

1. Exposure to people of different genders.
2. Limited perspective.
3. Learning about others' experiences.
4. Recognizing gender inequality exists.

These codes seem almost inextricably linked and are mutually reinforced to the point that analytical isolation is not possible. Discussions of exposure necessitate a reference to limited perspectives, as does learning about others' experiences, to highlight just a few paths of relation. Therefore, this analysis stresses the interactional capacities of these themes in identifying positive perspective shifts within these autoethnographic essays. As well, there were five emergent codes from the essays that focused on sexuality:

1. Having someone important in life that belongs to the LGBTQIA+ community.
2. Overcoming personal biases.
3. Equality and acceptance.
4. Religious teachings that homosexuality is wrong.
5. Little exposure to LGBTQIA+ community.

Discussion and Findings

In the current study, we concluded our findings with eight themes. Throughout these themes, there is continued evidence that the autoethnographic assignment and the relationship of trust with the instructor facilitated a safe space for students to work through their feelings, experiences, and identities concerning course concepts. Moreover, this space was routinely characterized by personal growth. At the same time, it is important to emphasize the active choice by the authors in highlighting positive change even when preliminary. To that end, this change represents progression rather than an end goal, and there are lingering limitations and areas for continued growth among students in understanding the complexities through which social inequalities of gender and sexuality are materialized. Specifically, autoethnographic essays regarding gender remain focused on a traditional gender binary and are absent of discussions of non-binary and transgender identities and experiences. That is, the data does not represent autoethnographic assignments as a complete, not totalizing pedagogical solution. It does, however, evidence their applicability in providing students a space to work towards their progressive change. Below, we will explain the themes of the study.

Exposure to People of Different Genders

The first theme present in essays focusing on gender was how exposure to people of different genders had changed that student's perception toward the entire gender. For example, one essay explicitly stated, "I think the biggest factor that changed my perception has been talking to them." Many of the essays showed a very similar pattern of spending time with people of various genders resulting in having a different (and more positive) perspective. According to the essays, the more they talk about and hear about the other person's experiences in their gender, the more likely it will affect their perspective of others who share that gender. Another essay stated how they feel differently towards men, and they can understand men more due to their experiences with them. That student wrote, "I definitely feel that because of my experiences with them, I have come to understand the [experiences of men] a bit more..." People have certain views on gender that they are more likely to stick to if they do not experience being around those genders. Another essay stated how they have learned that it is important not to judge a book by its cover. That perspective can lead to more people with dominant gender identities not associating those with more marginalized genders with stigmas and stereotypes.

Gender-Based Differences

The second theme that involves gender relates to the recognition of one's limited perspectives. A couple of essays explained how their own experiences affect(ed) their view on different genders. One essay explained that they understood that their perspective is limited due to their own experience regarding gender. The student stated their perspective "[…]is limited to my own experiences and just because something appears to be one way to me, doesn't mean someone has the same perspective" (33). Not everyone has experienced the same thing, and some people do not fully understand certain beliefs or perspectives because they have never experienced it.

Another essay detailed a misalignment between their own experiences and perspectives and those of their father. highlighting how they grew to better understand why they differed by listening and learning. This is supported by Javaid's (2020) writing about his experiences with stigmas around men and his family's culture and traditions. He explained how his parents' experiences with their families in Islamic culture "instructed them to be antipathetic towards gay individuals, to be heteronormative, and to be in control of their children's futures" (Javaid, 2020, p.1223). Therefore, if limited perspectives go unrecognized, many may not be willing or immediately able to improve or decrease bias towards more marginalized genders.

Interacting and Learning About Others' Experiences

Building off the themes of the significance of exposure and recognition of own's limited perspectives, another recurring pattern in the essays was how knowing about the experiences of others might widen our understanding of gender. One essay stated how "we are all shaped by our experiences, but when we try to understand the experiences of another, our horizons can be broadened" (24). Stigmas and prejudices are important limiting factors when it comes to diverse gender perceptions. Some people perceive particular identities based on gender stereotypes, as indicated by another essay writing: "I began to realize that some of the stereotypes that I had heard were true but not the whole story… I realized my hatred for feminism came from a lack of understanding" (33). These reflections on the significance of learning about others' experiences also culminated in a recognition of how this awareness can catalyze social change more broadly. For example, one student wrote, "I've gained a better understanding of why certain groups are disadvantaged" continuing to then challenge traditional gender roles "…[t]he

woman can be the breadwinner; the father can stay at home," and finally speaking to the implications of normalizing this understanding "… Ideas like this, when comfortably thought of, can cause waves of change, for the betterment of women in society and culture" (125). In this way, the interaction between exposure, reflecting on one's limited perspectives, and learning about others' experiences appears to routinely support a trend of positive perspective change.

Progress on Gender Inequality

Finally, the positive changes evidenced in autoethnographic gender essays included the crucial theme of recognizing the existence of gender inequality. Critical gender perspectives consistently highlight that men often do not recognize gender inequality since they typically do not experience it themselves. Men are frequently able to find jobs and advance in their careers without having a stigma attached to them that implies they shouldn't work. On the other hand, due to society's belief that women should stay at home, some prejudices expect women to work less hard than men. One student in their autoethnography said, "[i]t was so ingrained for me, a boy surrounded by working women, to [still] view women as weak; how much more of society could be the same? That job was when I realized there was a problem." It is important, though not necessarily sufficient, for men to be exposed to how women are treated in the workplace before they understand there is a problem. One student stated that "What stood out to me the most in this class is the inequalities between genders- the wage gap and the way men and women are treated, portrayed, and valued in society" (125). Unfortunately, some people are unaware of the disparity that exists until it impacts them or those around them as a student mentioned, "This was my first look at the discrimination women face in the workforce and made me begin to question how much equality they truly had" (33).

Therefore, the mutually reinforcing interaction between exposure, recognition of limited perspectives, learning from others' experiences, and the recognition of the existence of gender inequality appears to be an integral part of how these autoethnographic essays evidence personal and positive growth. On their own, each of these themes may not be satisfactory to produce the same result. Exposure does not necessarily translate toward more empathetic expressions without active listening and recognition of perspective limitations. At the same time, recognizing one's own limited perspective requires exposure and is then addressed by learning about others' experiences, and those experiences are impactful when present alongside exposure and humility. Further, for those unaware of the significance of gendered inequality in society, the recognition of that existence relies on exposure, humility, and active listening, all of which are promoted by the facilitation of safe spaces for reflection in these autoethnographic assignments.

Knowing Someone Who is in the LGBTQIA+ Community

Our findings are consistent with the Pew Research Center (2016) report regarding public views on the LGBTQIA+ community. According to Pew Research Center (2016) most Americans (87%) personally know someone who is gay. The course of accepting or tolerance towards homosexuality is heading on a positive track. In the autoethnographic sexuality essays, the fifth theme reflects how knowing someone in the LGBTQIA+ community can help those with heteronormative identities better understand the experiences of those who do not. One student wrote, "[b]ecause I met [my friend], for the first time I began to think what it means to be gay. His friendship opened my mind to a whole community that has helped him heal and me become a better person" (34). Another student said, "I think having people in my life who are a part of this group really made me change my own perceptions and was one of the biggest factors in changing my perceptions" (37). Having a friend or family member within the

LGBTQIA+ community can help cisgender and straight individuals learn about the issues that LGBTQIA+ folks encounter. As one student wrote, "[t]he biggest influencer in my opinion of LGBTQIA+ people in general has been my wife…My wife eventually confided in me that she had experienced bi-sexual feelings while growing up" (44). Some people do not know anyone in the community, so it can be harder to understand and change their perceptions of gender and sexuality. Being around others in the LGBTQIA+ community can help people become more educated on the subject and bring more people together. As one student expressed,

> *I was able to change my animosity towards the LGBTQIA+ community through experience meeting people of this group, as well as an exposure to people who were not the same religion as me and in turn made my question my religious beliefs.* (78)

To be clear, having a gay friend or a loved one does not grant heteronormative people a complete understanding of the wide diversity of experiences of queer folks, it does, however, seem to be one factor in reducing certain stigmas.

Overcoming Personal Biases

As mentioned in the autoethnographies, overcoming personal biases is dealt with in educating yourself and opening your mind to different possibilities. One student expressed, "my perceptions of the LGBT community did not change until after I had acknowledged that my previously-held stereotypes towards them were wrong" (78). Another participant wrote, "[t]aking time to understand a different… culture, and community has directly helped me become a better person" (34). Students further emphasized that people need to put their biases aside to learn about others who may be different from them. "If you speak kindly, look without expectations and embrace all you meet: there is never going to be a stereotype to stand in your way" (69).

Another student stated that "self-awareness about one's background and how it influences their opinion is critical to obtaining a more inclusive attitude" (69). Becoming aware of your biases is the first step in the work toward eliminating them. By talking with someone and being open to listening to their experiences, people can change their perceptions on the topic and have a better understanding of others going through similar experiences. As one essay expressed, this desire "[to] refuse to hold any beliefs that would contribute to the struggle and failure of my fellow human beings (23)," further highlights the relationship between equality, acceptance, and overcoming personal biases in a positive change. It is important for faculty, staff, and university administrations to help students understand that marginalized people have different perspectives as a result of their experiences. Listening to more marginalized experiences regarding gender and sexuality can possibly change a person's perspectives.

Religious Teachings as a Main Factor

In this theme, we found a common thread in participants' writings. On the part of the general view of the participants, religious teachings were often deliberated in these autoethnographies on sexual preferences due to the prevalence of negative views on the LGBTQIA+ community across a number of popular religions. We need to note that topics like gender and sexuality with religion have been entangled in America since the 20th century. Religion has played a significant role in controlling and shaping decision-making initiatives, particularly in sensitive social and political contexts that impact our daily lives (Schnabel et al., 2022). Whether in a public or private setting, systems referencing religion have wielded

significant influence over the LGBTQ+ community in Turkey, resulting in tangible effects on their daily lives (Muedini 2020; Sansal, 2020). Majority of the participants generally viewed that involving in LGBTQIA+ behavior as a sin or unacceptable by their faith. Religious belief plays a main factor in this theme regarding sexuality control understandings. As one student said, "I began to struggle with a lot of mainstream belief systems that taught this community is against God" (34). Many others considered how these teachings affected their perceptions of sexuality and the community, "my church, along with many mainstream Christian faiths, teach that homosexuality is an abomination to God" (34).

This theme was echoed by another student who said, "from a religious setting, I was taught that these people were sinning and that it was very bad to have feelings of attraction to the same sex" (37). This, as a result, could contribute to negative perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ community. These thoughts, however, emerged from essays that exhibited a positive change in perception, indicating that discussion of the causes of negative perception could help increase the acceptance of different sexualities and other identities that face inequality.

Little Exposure to Community

In our last theme, throughout several of the collected essays, there was a lack of exposure to the LGBTQIA+ community and a deficit of open dialogue regarding sexuality and gender. "Family and friends never really mentioned homosexuality. It was a bit taboo and very controversial." Similar to religious teachings' effects on perceptions of sexuality and gender, the lack of conversation and exposure can create a negative and inaccurate perception of the community.

Yost and Gillmore's (2011) findings were also similar to our study. Yost and Gillmore (2011) posit that college campuses promote the notion of education for everyone, including individuals from different backgrounds, races, sexes, genders, and religious affiliations. Educational institutions have made important improvements by addressing these issues to promote diversity and inclusion, resulting in a diverse student body, staff, and faculty. In turn, colleges have become more focused on disadvantaged communities and have provided encouragement and support to the LGBTQ community.

This often begins at a young age and can make changing perceptions difficult. Educating people about the LGBTQIA+ community with an emphasis on treating people with respect, listening to them, and celebrating who people are can move the needle enormously to help marginalized individuals feel comfortable, connected, and supported, especially on a college campus.

Conclusion

In the current study, we sought to answer to what extent do autoethnographies contribute to changes in student perceptions of gender and sexuality, both positively and negatively? We employed autoethnography to determine if 146 students' essays can generate important and distinctive information regarding the perception of LGBTQIA+ communities' ongoing experiences. We need to note that these autoethnography essays contain highly personal experiences (G. Soyer & Soyer, 2017). We analyzed the content of these essays to uncover students' viewpoints regarding gender and sexuality. First, we assigned topics such as gender and sexuality. After that, we analyzed related themes in the student essays.

Our research demonstrated a positive change in perspective regarding gender and sexuality when people are open to better understanding the subject matter. We found no negative differences in perspectives in the essays. The students' essays demonstrated that views could change once someone is exposed to or made aware of the issues other identities and communities face, particularly inequalities compared to their identity or community. By

assigning autoethnography projects in the classroom, we can foster safe spaces where students feel comfortable connecting with one another to learn and share their personal experiences and challenges. This approach not only promotes education but also encourages empathy and understanding within the learning environment.

The Campus Climate Survey (2019) suggested that there are many students who do not feel safe, comfortable, or accepted on their college campus or classrooms, especially when it comes to LGBTQIA+ students. For students to feel welcomed and supported by their college community, they need to have safe places to go. In addition, many students face unsafe environments on their campus, including social and emotional isolation and physical danger. Students are more likely to feel noticed and supported on college campuses with the establishment of safe spaces. They might get the support that they seek during difficult times.

There are multiple studies that use autoethnographies as a resource to be able to connect with students, especially students in the LGBTQIA+ community (Leung, 2021; Ream, 2018). Studies have shown that creating safe spaces for students and connecting with them can help make them more comfortable with their campus. Some studies use autoethnography as an opportunity to educate others regarding topics in the community (Austin & Hickey, 2007; Gannon, 2017). There are people who have different perspectives, and some of those perspectives can prevent a college campus from being accepting of all its students. Students could listen to other people's stories and become more educated on areas they did not know much about previously by participating in autoethnography. While this should in no way be construed as implying that marginalized persons and communities are responsible for the education of those with more dominant identities, using autoethnographies as tools of learning can nevertheless show powerful results.

In terms of further recommendations and limitations of this study, as we reflect on our work, it remains clear that we as instructors must further address the relationship between sexuality and gender with more nuance and complexity. While our aim was to delve into the intricacies of gender, we recognize that the autoethnographies in this analysis were limited in acknowledging the experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals. Heteronormative social structures expect appropriate and normative gender and sexual expression in mainstream social settings (Leung, 2021). This interaction persists in dominant culture by conflating non-binary and transgender identities with inequalities of sexuality, and while they are related, they are not reducible to one another. The continued privileging of cis gender social inequality as the topic of gender inequality is one clear limitation within the analyzed autoethnographies. Another limitation could be that some of the students may have responded positively because they were aware that their responses were being evaluated for their grades and that the instructor needed their responses for research. As such, these assignments are situated as one educational tactic that may be employed in partnership with other critical approaches to facilitating positive change and personal growth among students in perspectives of social inequalities of gender and sexuality.

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