

**Constellations of Meaning and Emotion: Gay,  
Bisexual, and Queer Men's Experiences of Holding  
Hands in Public**

**by  
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## **Abstract**

There is a scarcity of literature examining gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) men's experiences of public displays of affection. An interview protocol informed by Emotion-Focused Therapy was used alongside narrative inquiry to conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 GBQ men about their experiences of holding hands with other men in public. Specifically, this research endeavoured to understand how GBQ men made meaning of their hand-holding experiences and how emotion was woven into these narratives. Analysis revealed that the GBQ men in this study made meaning of their hand-holding by comparing their experiences to dominant cultural meanings about hand-holding and GBQ identity. In particular, those whose experiences least matched dominant cultural meanings shared stories which were suffused with the most detail and emotionality. Counselling implications include the possible benefit of psychoeducation about emotions, helping couples increase mutuality, and exploring the effects of heterosexism in individuals' and couples' lives.

**Keywords:** holding hands; public displays of affection; gay, bisexual, and queer men; counselling; narrative inquiry; Emotion-Focused Therapy

*I would like to dedicate this work to the 10 GBQ men who broke ground on this topic by sharing their stories. Thank you for your willingness to be vulnerable in the process of sharing the positive, the negative, and everything else in your stories of hand-holding. Personally, it has been an honour to hear these stories and reflect on their greater implications for myself and for other GBQ men. In this sense, it is my hope that this research will open up a space for other GBQ men to reflect on their hand-holding and notice what is happening for them when they join, or don't join, hands with other men in public.*

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# Chapter 1.

## Introduction

A 2017 survey found 38% of Canadian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) respondents were uncomfortable showing public displays of affection (PDA) with their partner in a public setting (CROP, 2017). On the other hand, 50% of respondents in that same study were comfortable showing PDA, and the remaining 12% felt the question “did not apply” (CROP, 2017). If one desired to paint lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) Canadians in a particular light, opting to highlight any one of the above statistics might give a particular impression of the LGBTQ landscape in Canada. However, viewed together, the range of responses suggests a more complex and varied experience in the everyday experiences of affection for LGBTQ Canadians. In fact, the above statistics raise questions about the particular context of comfort or discomfort, specific types of affection, and for whom these statistics best apply.

Although the existing literature on LGBTQ individuals has started to address some of these questions (de Oliveira et al., 2013), the precise details of LGBTQ PDA have yet to be explored. Indeed, it is acknowledged in the literature that even the most robust LGBTQ research is often limited in specificity because it treats the LGBTQ community as a singular entity (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012). Similarly, research viewing two-spirit individuals’ experiences through a Western lens has been questioned because it may not respect indigenous concepts of gender, sex, and spirituality (Ristock et al., 2010). As a result of this amalgamative approach, the existing research routinely outlines vague approaches for building knowledge about specific subsets of the LGBTQ community. Certainly, it is important that specific subsets of the LGBTQ community are examined more closely, as past research has highlighted that health statistics, experiences, and perceptions can vary broadly depending on the context, and which subset of the LGBTQ community is examined (Morrison et al., 2016). In particular, the American Psychological Association’s (APA) recent Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men note that “men have historically been the focus of psychological research and practice as a normative referent for behavior rather than as gendered human beings,” (2018, p. 3) and that there is a need for better understanding

the intersectional nature of men's gendered experiences. In this sense, taking into account an individual's specific gendered experiences in addition to specific sexual orientations would give a more precise understanding of how experiences of PDA unfold. For these reasons, the present study focuses on the experiences of gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) men. The term "queer" in this research will borrow from Sprott and Hadcock, and is defined as "at the most basic level, [an] identity [which] may be understood as non-heteronormative" (2018, p. 215).

In a similar manner to clustering sexual orientations, examining PDA as an amalgam of experiences poses the risk of diluting a close reading of how PDA is perceived and experienced. As an illustration, amongst 800 heterosexual Canadians, 81% reported being comfortable seeing people of the same sex holding hands in public, but only 62% were comfortable seeing people of the same sex kiss in public (CROP, 2017). For comparison, 94% were comfortable seeing people of the opposite sex hold hands in public, and 80% were comfortable seeing people of the opposite sex kiss in public (CROP, 2017). In addition, past research has highlighted how these perceptions of PDA, and even what is considered PDA, are influenced by the social and cultural context of the perceiver and those engaged in PDA (Cavico et al., 2015; Hewitt & Alqahtani, 2003; Remland et al., 1995). These findings illuminate that there are variations in how different forms of PDA are perceived. Yet, the existing research has yet to explore in depth how specific forms of PDA are perceived or experienced by LGBTQ individuals. With this rationale in mind, focusing on the specific experience of holding hands using an intersectional lens may begin to illuminate the particular characteristics of this experience.

Moreover, the above perceptual research highlights a propensity for LGBTQ research to focus on the attitudes and perceptions toward LGBTQ people rather than the experiences of LGBTQ people themselves. Mason asks "what does it mean for lesbians and gay men to *know*, whether through individual experience or not, about the risks and possibilities of homophobic hostility and violence?" (2001, p. 25). Meaning, even in the absence of direct violence and hostility toward sexual and gender minorities, Mason (2001) grapples with the idea that the possibility of violence and hostility could have an effect on LGBTQ people in their everyday lives. The answers to this question are intimated by the thorough corpus which examines a more general notion of stigma-

related stressors conceptualized through the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) and the concept of structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2014).

Despite the comprehensive work of the macroscopically-focused research on minority stress and structural stigma, an obscurity remains about how these stressors are experienced or how they manifest in the everyday lives of GBQ men. Denzin and Lincoln contend that “one of narrative inquiry’s strengths has been exploring lived experiences through a focus on personal narratives, often revealing aspects of life previously hidden from or suppressed by social science” (2018, p. 963). Furthermore, Riessman argues that for LGBTQ people in particular, personal stories are an instrument for organizing and mobilizing campaigns to confront the effects of societal prejudices (2007). In this way, using narrative inquiry to examine GBQ men’s experiences of holding hands in public would provide a promising entry point for understanding these experiences more robustly.

The present study addresses the paucity in the scholarship by examining a distinct experience of PDA while focusing on GBQ men from a gendered perspective as a particular subset of the LGBTQ community. The insights from this research may help GBQ men, researchers, counsellors, and others in the helping professions better understand how GBQ men’s experiences of distress, or lack thereof, in their everyday relational lives contribute to their wellbeing. To be sure, the APA notes that men in particular “are overrepresented in a variety of psychological and social problems, [and that] many boys and men do not receive the help they need” because of the manner in which masculinity is socialized (2018, p. 3). Moreover, preliminary studies have suggested that GBQ men may be particularly sensitive to these inhibiting gendered effects of seeking help when needed (Elder et al., 2015). Consequently, a close investigation of GBQ men’s experiences of holding hands in public through narrative inquiry may provide a starting place for understanding how GBQ men narrate and make meaning of these experiences.

## **Chapter 2.**

### **Literature Review**

The act of holding another person's hand, kissing another person on the cheek, or standing closely to another person in public may be experienced and perceived in a variety of ways depending on the characteristics of the people engaging in the behaviour, their relationship, and the cultural context they find themselves. Indeed, Cavico and others (2015) outline how a kiss on the cheek is considered a non-romantic greeting between the same and different genders in many parts of the world, but not as commonly in North America. In this way, "it is very important to know one's environment and to ascertain the pertinent 'society' and its cultural and moral norms" (Cavico et al., 2015, p. 41). It is from this contextual reading of the external world that the literature highlights how GBQ people have differing emotional experiences when they engage in PDA depending on their own characteristics, and the characteristics of their sociocultural environment (de Oliveira et al., 2013). By inspecting these experiences from an emotional viewpoint, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of GBQ people's experiences in the public sphere. In fact, Greenberg asserts that viewing experiences through an emotional lens is a foundational way of understanding: "emotions are an adaptive form of information-processing and action readiness that orient people to their environment and promote their wellbeing" (2010, p. 33). That is, looking at GBQ individuals' emotional experience also illuminates how GBQ people interact in their environment and make decisions. Although GBQ literature tends to focus on perceptions or attitudes toward GBQ people, this literature review will investigate what is currently known about the factors related to GBQ men's emotional experiences of PDA.

#### **2.1. GBQ Emotional Experiences and Processes**

##### **2.1.1. EFT: An Integrative Conception of Emotion**

In order to review GBQ emotional experiences and processes, it is important to first establish a framework that outlines what one means by "emotion." Although the concept of emotion may seem commonsensical to some, there are a variety of perspectives on emotion that view emotion from dissimilar vantage points (Greenberg,

2015; Massumi, 1995; Moon, 2010). While philosophical theorizing about emotion can be used to criticize the veridical claims of purely biological emotional models, these approaches fall short by the nature of their own criticism. Namely, approaches which rely entirely on interpretive or biological models fail to address a synthesis of these two elements. By contrast, Greenberg's emotional conception in Emotion-Focused Therapy (EFT) grounds emotion in affective neuroscience while acknowledging how constructivism mediates these emotional processes (2015). Greenberg describes emotion as being produced through two different pathways. The first pathway being the more automatic emotional response of the amygdala, and the second being the slower neocortex pathway mediated by thought (Greenberg, 2010). These thought-mediated emotional responses are understood to be useful in producing more complex learned emotional responses. In this way, Greenberg views emotion from a "dialectical constructivist" view. Meaning, the cultural and social contexts people find themselves in influence how people make sense of their emotions (Greenberg, 2010). Given the integrative character of Greenberg's (2015) work, his model of emotion will be used throughout the entirety of this literature review as a base for situating emotion.

In addition to integrating the constituents of emotion, EFT posits that emotion is a fundamental factor in the formulation of self (Greenberg, 2010). Specifically, emotions are a way to process incoming information from the environment and locate oneself in relation to their perceptions. The emotional processing of incoming information is argued to be the primary avenue which individuals use to develop and hierarchize needs (Ellison et al., 2009). The roots of this emotional processing are shown to be biological, happening through the two distinct pathways noted above. One might argue that understanding emotion in a biological manner removes the consideration of social and cultural factors which would be relevant to GBQ men's experience. Yet, this biological understanding carves a path toward conceptualizing how these two emotional processing systems contribute to what Greenberg (2010) calls "emotion schemes."

Emotion schemes are the culmination of physiological response, memory, and meaning that result from a strong emotional experience becoming engraved in memory, such as an abuse or confrontation (Lane et al., 2015). Although the response of the amygdala during an intense emotional experience provides part of the subsequent emotion scheme, the interpretation and consolidation of the experience into memory through the neocortex is influenced by cultural, familial and prior personal learning

(Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2001). As an illustration, the coming-out process can be an emotionally-charged cacophony of events for GBQ men which creates a strong memory because of the cultural or familial ideas one understands when revealing their sexual orientation (Kort, 2018). In this instance, a GBQ man with a negative coming-out experience could consolidate an emotion scheme that revealing too much of himself to others is a dangerous experience. Indeed, these emotion schemes are a primary point of evaluating healthy and non-adaptive functioning when choosing where to focus a therapeutic intervention.

Furthermore, these emotion schemes can be deconstructed into four broad categories of emotional experience: primary adaptive, primary maladaptive, secondary, and instrumental (Greenberg, 2010). Primary emotions are the initial responses to a scenario (Greenberg, 2015), such as the common feeling of shame among gay men when they feel rejected for disclosing their sexual orientation (Downs, 2012). The difference between adaptive and maladaptive primary emotions is that primary adaptive emotions enable an individual to take an action that fulfills a need, want, goal or concern, whereas primary maladaptive emotions are not useful in this same regard (Greenberg, 2015). Secondary emotions are how one feels toward their primary emotional response, such as the anger gay men sometimes feel about shame (Downs, 2012). Greenberg contends that secondary emotions are either a reactive or defensive response to obscure a more primary emotion (2015). Finally, instrumental emotions are a type of learned performative emotion meant to influence or manipulate another person (Greenberg, 2015). For example, one may cry in order to elicit sympathy, or express anger to dominate another person. Greenberg explains how instrumental emotions are often expressed as more of an overall emotional style rather than situational reactions (2015). Eventually, this emotional style often becomes a part of one's personality (Greenberg, 2015). Altogether, these four general categories of emotion act as a framework to map an individual's emotions and assess the depth and utility of their emotional processing (Greenberg, 2015).

### **2.1.2. GBQ Emotions in the Literature**

Predominantly, the identified emotions in the literature were what one might call "negative" emotions, such as shame, anxiety and fear. Shame, across all the literature, stays closest to this negative common understanding. Allan and Johnson reflect that:

To the extent that partners are dealing with internalized homonegativity, relationships can be threatened by even subtle forms of discrimination and the vigilance necessary to protect against it. Calls for proximity such as hand holding or a request for comfort can trigger internalized homonegativity with individual experiences paralleling the social messages about gay relationships being shameful and sinful and the subsequent feelings of being defective, unworthy, depressed, or suicidal. (2017, p. 292)

Here, one can see how an emotion such as shame can be experienced in nuanced moments between partners and cascade into a range of emotional sequelae. Moreover, the dialectical constructivist view of emotions is important in highlighting how GBQ men in particular may integrate cultural messages into the expression and processing of specific emotions like shame within a relational context.

However, emotional expression and experience do not always look the same when one looks at shame among GBQ men (Downs, 2012; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996). Based on his clinical work with gay men, Downs categorizes gay men's shame into three successive developmental stages (2012). These three stages are (1) overwhelmed by shame, (2) compensating for shame, and (3) cultivating authenticity. It is in this first stage that Downs describes gay men as often directing an anger, or "rage" towards oneself when confronted with circumstances that bring an awareness to their sexual orientation juxtaposed against internalized homonegativity. This first stage is represented by Allan and Johnson's quote above (2017).

The second stage of shame described by Downs is the experience of shame expressed as anger directed outward, often towards other people or ideas outside the individual (2012). It is also in this stage that Downs argues gay men are more likely to look for outward validation to assuage a sense of shame about their sexual identity. In his classic work, *The Best Little Boy in the World*, Tobias (1973) describes the lengths that gay men may go to in order to seek external validation in an attempt to mitigate a sense of shame. Specifically, Tobias describes his own tiring quest to appear "perfect" to others outwardly through career, appearance and social connections in order to stave off the sense of shame which would surface, particularly when with romantic partners in public places. Tobias describes how he would become explosively angry toward his romantic partners if he felt that other people were looking at him disapprovingly during brief or subtle public displays of affection (1973). Greenberg (2015) would categorize these experiences and expressions of anger, or rage, as secondary emotions. In this

way, this second stage of shame, currently only understood clinically for gay men, removes a gay man from his primary emotional experience (shame) and thus moves him further away from behaving in a way that fulfills an emotional need (validation/acceptance) (Greenberg, 2010).

Downs' theory that gay men in this second stage of shame look to bolster their self-worth through external validation has been studied further with more specified findings (Pachankis & Hatzenbuehler, 2013). Pachankis and Hatzenbuehler (2013) sought to study this "best little boy in the world" hypothesis by comparing 56 young heterosexual and 136 young GBQ men who were attending American colleges. The researchers measured participants' ratings of self-worth using a contingent self-worth measure (Crocker et al., 2003) that has been repeatedly validated with college students. Results of this study revealed that GBQ men were significantly more likely than heterosexual men to base their self-worth on academic success, appearance, and besting others (Pachankis & Hatzenbuehler, 2013). Moreover, the authors found that there was a correlation between levels of contingent self-worth and the degree of support for sexual minorities in the individual states participants had been raised in as adolescents. Simply put, participants who grew up in states with less policies for protecting sexual minorities reported higher levels of contingent self-worth in the three domains reported above (Pachankis & Hatzenbuehler, 2013). In addition, the researchers found that the longer participants had concealed their sexual orientation from others, the higher their reports of contingent self-worth in these same three domains. Pachankis and Hatzenbuehler (2013) hypothesize that GBQ men may show higher contingencies of their self-worth in these specific domains because they are a more self-assured avenue to furnish self-worth. By comparison, the GBQ men in the study showed lower levels of contingent self-worth on other measured domains based on an external others' acceptance, such as family support. Although this study provides further support for stage two of Downs' shame model, the study is not without limitations. In particular, the participants were all recruited from university settings, were primarily White, and recruitment targeted heterosexual and GBQ participants from social and ideological college campus groups. Thus, as Mallard (2013) notes in their critique of this research, the findings may be limited in generalizability, and cannot be expected to apply to all GBQ men.

In addition to the above research, Pachankis, Goldfried, and Ramrattan (2008) studied the implications of Downs' first and second stage of shame further when they looked at rejection sensitivity as a construct mapped onto the interpersonal functioning of gay men. The authors explain that gay men may not go through the stages of shame as described by Downs (2012) in such a stepwise manner, and that some gay men may not readily experience this second externalizing stage of shame at all. Instead, Pachankis and colleagues argue that the first stage of shame may be where some gay men become "stuck," with internal experiences of shame leading to debilitating social anxiety and unassertiveness (2008). Furthermore, the authors share how a high level of rejection sensitivity reflects "internalized homophobia or sensitivity to gay-related rejection [which] may underlie decisions to reveal a nonheterosexual orientation" (2008, p. 314). In other words, the 149 gay men in this study highlighted how gay men's emotional experiences of shame, and the social anxiety and unassertiveness that may result, could lead gay men to avoid PDA altogether.

This avoidance of public visibility has also been studied through the lens of fear. Fox and Asquith (2018) studied lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer (LGBTIQ) people's fear of heterosexist violence and found that the experience of fear surrounding public visibility differed for LGBTIQ people by falling into two categories. In the first category, the authors unearthed that fear can become an emotionally and socially debilitating perception that becomes applied in a pervasive manner to all, or most, situations when an LGBTIQ person is in public. Again, this second categorization of fear is what Greenberg (2015) would call a primary maladaptive emotional response because it does not move one toward behaviour which fulfills a need. Instead, as Fox and Asquith note, this type of fear can actually move LGBTIQ people toward social disconnection:

It is plausible that [identity concealment] is cyclic, and that breaking the mutually reinforcing processes of disclosure/concealment and [fear of heterosexism] is difficult if victims experience additional violence after disclosure, or if their openness about their [sexual or gender identity] is not supported or recognized by the communities in which they live. (2018, p. 998)

However, one can see how it may be difficult to ascertain where the genesis of this social disconnection-fear link begins. That is, an environment suffused with social connection is only possible if there are supportive social connections available to begin

with, and that an environment which feels universally unsupportive may in fact be an accurate environmental reading (Fox & Asquith, 2018).

Fox and Asquith (2018) propose that the second category of fear they identified acted as a functional emotional gauge which helped LGBTIQ people decide when to engage or disengage in behaviours like PDA. As Fox and Asquith explain: “if experiences of heterosexist victimization are consistent, then it is functional to worry regularly (if only momentarily) about those experiences and the likelihood that they will reoccur” (2018, p. 999). Although the experience of fear in these cases may still be unwanted, this type of emotional response is what Greenberg (2010) would call an adaptive primary emotional response, because it guides an individual toward a behaviour which fulfills a need, such as the need for staying safe. In short, Fox and Asquith’s work begins to unfurl the understanding that emotions are not experienced in monochromatic hues of “negative” or “positive.” Rather, emotions such as fear can be considered desirable when rooted in tangible versus imagined scenarios (Greenberg, 2015).

Despite the deluge of focus on maladaptive, or “problematic,” emotions in GBQ research, there exists research which highlights some of the “positive” emotional processes experienced by GBQ people when engaging in PDA. Indeed, a small but growing body of literature on emotional resilience in GBQ people sheds light on some of the emotional strategies used by GBQ people during experiences such as PDA (Herrick et al., 2014; Kwon, 2013; Wang et al., 2016). For instance, Wang and colleagues (2016) found that gay and bisexual men who were able to articulate the benefits related to their sexual orientation, showed a greater capacity for regulating their emotional responses. The gay and bisexual men in the study were hypothesized to use this greater capacity for emotional regulation to attenuate anxiety and depressive symptoms to a larger degree than gay and bisexual men with a lower capacity for emotional regulation. Admittedly, Wang and colleagues (2016) note that this “stress-related growth” may be due to hereditary factors involved in different individuals’ potential for emotional regulation. Yet, the key finding of this study was that shifting perception of one’s sexual orientation toward one of abundance instead of deficit was the critical element in bolstering emotional regulation (Wang et al., 2016). To this end, this resilience strategy again highlights how emotion can be viewed as a dialectical constructivist process (Greenberg, 2010).

Coming back to Downs' three stages of shame, Downs describes the third stage, "cultivating authenticity" as building one's perception of themselves on their passions, values and inherit self-worth rather than on continuously having to prove their worth to themselves and others as a means to eradicate shame (2012). This third stage of Downs' shame model aligns with Wang and coworkers' (2016) argument that gay and bisexual men are better able to emotionally regulate when there is an individual sense of self-worth which is deemed sufficient by the individual. While Downs' conceptualization of emotional stability is easier to imagine, Wang and colleague's proposition of articulating the "benefits" of sexual orientation is not as clear. Accordingly, a further examination into the literature was necessary to find that Stone Fish and Harvey provide an example of this sexual orientation "benefit" concept in their work with queer youth, when they exclaim that:

Queer people often are expected to make an accounting of their sexuality. We are expected to explore, explain, and defend our desires. This process is rich and powerful, especially when it is not done under threat or coercion. This is a gift that queer people have to offer their straight counterparts. (2005, p. 39)

Truly, the above quote offers an example of what is not most common in the literature, but what is possible for more GBQ people by further understanding experiences of emotion. Moreover, Stone Fish and Harvey's (2005) work showcases that the dialectical constructivist understanding of emotion can enable people to understand their emotional experiences in ways that are more adaptive from an EFT perspective (Greenberg, 2015).

While the above researchers highlight the benefits to emotional wellbeing that may exist through an increasing sense of self-worth, other authors have highlighted how these concepts of self-worth can become entangled in Western cultural scripts about happiness and individual agency. To this end, Meyer (2017) conducted a qualitative study in which they analyzed themes which were present in 159 "It Gets Better" (IGB) videos. These videos are part of the IGB anti-gay bullying project which was started in 2010 by gay rights activist Dan Savage. The aim of these videos, often created by adults, is to encourage an assumed bullied adolescent LGBTQ audience to refrain from attempting suicide because "it gets better" later in life. In examining these videos, Meyer argued that videos disregard heteronormativity by ignoring the structural heterosexism which may fuel discrimination against LGBTQ youth. Instead, Meyer highlighted how

many videos place the onus on LGBTQ youth to accept “inevitable discrimination” that will only exist in adolescence by trying to “be positive/happy.” Moreover, Meyer contended that the ideas purported in many videos mirrored narratives of upward mobility that ignore the discrimination which exists for LGBTQ adults, and the additional structural barriers associated with race/ethnicity and economic status which exists for some LGBTQ individuals. In these ways, Meyer’s critical analysis of the IGB project asks readers to consider how Western inculcations to be happy/positive may be used to disregard structural discrimination and pathologize negative emotional experiences of LGBTQ adulthood.

## **2.2. Shifting Masculinities: A Modern History of Male Homosocial Touch**

It is important to recognize how perceptions of same-sex male touch have evolved within Western societies in recent history. Ibson illustrates some of these differences in his historical photo research which includes photos of American men from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (2002). Specifically, these photos depict intimate portraits of men embracing, holding hands, and sitting on each other’s laps. Yet, Ibson makes clear how these photos would not have been taken with the understanding that they portrayed same-sex romantic or sexual partners (2002). Rather, the author explains how these photos represent a form of homosocial intimacy which was more common among men a century ago (Ibson, 2002). While one may view the photos in this project through a modern lens and see men who appear to be GBQ, the notion of “homosexual” as an identity was not commonplace during the periods in Ibson’s work (Bullough, 2019). In fact, the term “homosexual” was not found in print until 1869 (Bullough, 2019). Instead, during the mid 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, same-sex sexual behaviours were chiefly seen to represent just that: a type of behaviour—not a form of identity (Bullough, 2019). In this way, it is theorized that once homosexuality became an identity one might inhabit in Western societies, same-sex male touch became suspect of a sexual orientation other than heterosexuality (Bullough, 2019). Critically, the emergence of homosexuality as an identity in Western cultures during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was paired with the notion of pathology (Bullough, 2019). D’Emilion and Freedman captured this sentiment of change when they noted that:

Same-sex relationships thus lost the innocence they had enjoyed during most of the nineteenth century [once] medical labeling of same-sex intimacy as perverse conflated an entire range of relationships and stigmatized all of them as a single, sexually deviant personal identity. (2012, p. 130)

Simply stated, men of all sexual orientations were affected by the increasing notion that physical intimacy displayed between men was indicative of something characterologically abnormal. Truly, Ibson highlights how one can see this increased pathologizing display itself through the increasing formality and decreasing of intimacy in the photos of men together through the progression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (2002).

However, in recent years, researchers have begun to document how homosocial male touch has emerged as a less pathologized behaviour among men (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & McCormack, 2015; Robinson et al., 2019; Scoats & Robinson, 2020). Even looking back to the recent past, Rabinowitz documented the difficulty men in a therapeutic process group had with hugging each other, often for fear of “appearing gay” (Rabinowitz, 1991). In this sense, shifting perceptions of male-male touch have been recent, and mostly documented in millennials, generally categorized as those born between 1980 and 2000 (Della Porta, 2019). Some have argued that these recent changes are due to an overall societal decrease in homonegativity (Scoats & Robinson, 2020). Specifically, a decrease in what has been called “masculinity as homophobia” (Kimmel, 1994). Meaning, the construction of a masculine identity through homonegative dialogue or behaviours which are meant to distance oneself from a gay identity (Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2011). Elements such as “masculinity as homophobia” are part of culturally dominant forms of masculinity which have been labelled as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity is conceptualized as masculine traits and identities which aim to subvert less traditional embodiments of masculinity, such as the masculinity of a GBQ man (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

With these shifting conceptions of masculinity in mind, researchers have looked at how forms of homosocial touch have begun to emerge again on college campuses regardless of men’s sexual orientations (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & McCormack, 2015). While increased homosocial intimacy has been well-documented in situational contexts such as military, athletic, and college environments among men in the past (Ibson, 2002), recent analysis has found that even in these environments there appears to be an increased comfort with homosocial intimacies displayed among men (Anderson

et al., 2012; Anderson & McCormack, 2015). For example, Anderson and colleagues found that among the 145 heterosexual men they interviewed on a British college campus, 89% reported kissing other men on the lips in various contexts (2012). Anderson and coworkers underlined how kissing during athletic events was most common, likely because these athletic men had more masculine social capital and were able to “afford” these behaviours without diminishing their masculinity (2012). Additionally, the authors hypothesize that same-sex male kissing on the sports field seems to have spilled out into other college social spaces and become acceptable for men who are not college athletes (Anderson et al., 2012). Thus, this change represented a spatial-temporal shift which made same-sex kissing more acceptable for all men, regardless of sexual orientation (Anderson et al., 2012). Largely, participants described their kissing as a form of nonsexual bonding which they used to foster affection and intimacy (Anderson et al., 2012). However, participants from Anderson and colleague’s study resoundingly indicated that they would not engage in same-sex kissing away from the vicinity of the college for fear of how they may be treated or perceived (2012). In this way, these heterosexual men experienced a reduced ability to share intimacy and express affection with other men due to the same homonegative factors that may limit GBQ men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Despite the PDA limitations that both straight and GBQ men may perceive, behaviours such as heterosexual men kissing (Anderson et al., 2012) or cuddling (Anderson & McCormack, 2015) represent emergent concepts of masculinity which also affect GBQ men. Specifically, Anderson categorizes these emerging forms of masculinity which are not based on homonegativity as “inclusive masculinity” (Anderson, 2009). Anderson and McCormack contend that “as cultural homophobia decreases, gendered power becomes distributed more evenly between men, independent of sexuality or masculine capital” (2015, pp. 117–118). In other words, masculinities become less vertically stratified and more horizontally coexistent. In this manner, straight and GBQ men are theorized to benefit from these expansive notions of masculinity when less men perceive their masculinity as dependent on the subjugation of others (Scoats & Robinson, 2020). In addition, men enacting these concepts of masculinity are less concerned about if their behaviours could lead others to question if they are straight or GBQ, and are less concerned about policing other men’s behaviours (Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson & McCormack, 2015). Ultimately, this decrease in homonegativity

enables all men regardless of their sexual orientations to benefit from increased intimacies with other men without the same fear of the past (Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2011).

One could see how the expansiveness of inclusive masculinity could also incorporate the ways masculinity is conceptualized for transgender men. Vegter interviewed six Canadian transgender men in a qualitative study which asked: "how do female-to-male trans-identified individuals conceptualize and understand their masculinity?" (2013, p. 94). A primary theme in this study was that masculinity and femininity were not seen as mutually exclusive. Rather, participants reported overall that they felt their sense of masculinity was comparable to cisgender men, and that they were comfortable with a sense of femininity being a part of their gender identity and/or expression. In this way, Vegter's work calls into question the zero-sum way in which femininity and masculinity can be placed into a binary in Western societies. In a similar sense, Vegter found that participants sometimes made a distinction between "masculinity" as a group of traits which were expressed to the outside world, and "maleness" as a gender identity that an individual had an inherent sense of regardless of their external presentation or expression. While the sample size of this study was small, and thus limits the degree to which findings are transferable, these findings begin to offer insights into the ways that transgender men speak about and perceive their masculinity. In all, the way these transgender men talked about their masculinity coexisting with femininity, can be encompassed in Anderson's (2009) construct of inclusive masculinity because they highlight the ways that their sense of maleness or masculinity is not predicated on the quelling of femininity or other notions of masculinity.

In reviewing the recent shifts in masculinity and homosocial touch, it can be seen how the more emotionally and physically intimate same-sex friendships described by men in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century are once again emerging through new notions of masculinity. Yes, some researchers have stressed how changes in heterosexual men's homosocial behaviours do not suggest a complete attitudinal change that is more inclusive (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Yet, it is crucial to recognize that even hybridized masculinities which incorporate hegemonic and inclusive masculine traits indicate a move toward a space which condones the homosocial intimacies of the past without societal reprimand. However, instead of inclusive masculinities mirroring the GBQ-unaware underpinnings of the past, newer structures of masculinity are poised to be

both aware of differences in sexual orientation and less controlling about these differences.

### **2.3. Diverse Understandings of PDA: An Examination of Cultural Context**

Examining differences in cultural and perceptual factors is critical to gain a truly dialectical constructivist understanding of GBQ men's emotions about PDA. To this point, Cavico and colleagues looked at the various cultural understandings of touching and proximity between people and note that: "ethical relativism theories have shown that individual norms, values, and morals differ as a function of their cultures. Behaviours that are considered acceptable and moral in some cultures might be totally offensive in other cultures" (2015, p. 39). That is, even with personal experiences of PDA, these experiences may shift as GBQ men move through different cultural and social spaces, and bring their culturally-specific understanding of GBQ identity. Indeed, GBQ men's emotional experience of their PDA will be influenced by the cultural context they find themselves in, their understanding of the cultural context, and how they imagine others' perspectives of the cultural context will influence how others view them. There is little research explicitly combining the elements of cultural perception and GBQ emotional experience, but the research which does exist signals how perceptions may unfold.

To illustrate, Hewitt and Alqahtani (2003) examined the differences between Saudi and American students' reactions to same- and mixed-sex intimacy shown by others. The study tested a basic assumption by the authors, that Saudi students would have greater discomfort with the idea of public male-female intimacy, whereas American students would have greater discomfort with male-male intimacy. Participants in the study were tasked with viewing nine photos: two males, two females, and a male-female pair each sitting at either a close distance, intermediate distance, or a far distance from each other. Participants were told that the photos were of siblings sitting on a couch at an extended family gathering with family members in the same room. For each photo, participants were asked to self-report their level of comfort on a Likert scale from 7 (extremely comfortable) to 1 (extremely uncomfortable). As the researchers predicted, Saudi students were the most comfortable viewing the male-male pairing, and least comfortable viewing the male-female pairing. Whereas the American students were most comfortable viewing the male-female pairing and least comfortable viewing the male-

male pairing. While the results may seem a confirmation of everyday knowledge, the study began to expose the potential complexity by reflecting upon a conundrum faced in the research design:

Sibling interactions were chosen in an attempt to control for possible cultural differences in attributions that might arise if Saudi participants saw unrelated men and women sitting close to one another (Saudi students might infer sexual relations) and if U.S. participants saw two unrelated men sitting close to one another (U.S. students might infer sexual relations), although there was no check on this assumption.” (Hewitt & Alqahtani, 2003, p. 241)

It is by highlighting this research challenge that one can begin to see how the interplay between subject, viewer, assumed culture of subject, and culture of viewer all may intersect to form varying perceptions. In a similar sense, the researchers in this study did not account for a social desirability bias of participant’s self-report, or the differences in social desirability bias which may have existed between the Saudi and American students. Indeed, Hewitt and Alqahtani’s (2003) research underscores the difficulty in confidently making generalizability claims about research cross-culturally even when the focus of research is on cultural comparisons.

The issues with research on culture and perception of PDA are exemplified further looking more deeply into the literature. Regan, Jerry, Narvaez, and Johnson (1999) compared observations of Latino and Asian heterosexual couples’ public touching behaviours on a Western university campus. The authors hypothesized that there would be more public touching behaviours between couples from a contact culture (Latinos) than those from a noncontact culture (Asians). Previous research would support the author’s hypothesis, as a more rigorous observational study comparing different areas of Europe found that those from contact cultures such as Italy and Greece interacted at a closer distance, oriented their bodies toward others more readily, and touched more while conversing than those from noncontact cultures such as England or the Netherlands (Remland et al., 1995). A study comparing French and American youth found similar results (Field, 1999). Of course, one could argue that Regan and colleagues’ (1999) simple study makes many assumptions about who is considered “Asian,” who is considered “Latino,” and who is considered heterosexual. Yet these assumptions highlight another part of the perceptual complexities when thinking about visibility in public spaces.

These perceptual public assumptions and their affects are exemplified in Steinbugler's (2005) interviews with 4 interracial and 4 monoracial couples who were either same-sex or heterosexual. Steinbugler contends that visibility as a couple is a form of heterosexual privilege which goes unnoticed because it represents the principal social and moral union in Western societies (2005). Heterosexuality's pervasive perceptual effect is what Brickell terms "invisibly visible" (2000). That is, the naturalization of heterosexuality secures its concurrent invisibility and visibility in social identification and social environments. In a list of 44 heterosexual privileges, Carbado further formalizes heterosexual visibility as privilege by asserting that "heterosexual couples do not have to worry about whether kissing each other in public or holding hands in public will render them vulnerable to violence" (2000, p. 120), and that "a husband and wife can comfortably express affection in any social setting, even a predominantly gay one" (2000, p. 117). Through these examples, Carbado (2000) aims to highlight the ease that heterosexual couples can move through, and interact in, social spaces without a great deal of forethought or self-monitoring.

In a more recent study, Doan and colleagues (2014) examined perceptual differences between "formal rights" such as marriage, and "informal privileges" such as PDA in the United States. The authors had participants in three conditions which each had a vignette describing a gay male couple, a lesbian couple, or a heterosexual couple. Afterward, participants were asked to rate the degree to which they felt it was okay for the hypothetical couple to have a variety of formal rights and informal privileges. The study revealed that heterosexuals did not favour straight couples over same-sex couples for most formal privileges (except marriage), but were less approving of informal privileges (Doan et al., 2014). The researchers speculate that as it becomes less acceptable or possible to deny formal rights, those who desire to dominate other groups increasingly do so in more subtle informal ways, such as disapproval of PDA (Doan et al., 2014). In addition, the study found that heterosexual participants were even less likely to afford informal privileges to gay male couples than lesbian couples. Indeed, this finding matches other research which highlights how gay males are often more penalized for breaking gendered norms due to more rigid parameters around masculinity in Western societies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Kimmel, 2008; Pascoe, 2011). On average, gay men and lesbians in the study did not rate informal privileges differently for any of the vignettes in comparison to heterosexual participants. However, the study

revealed that in-group participants rated some informal privileges (hand-holding for lesbians, kissing for gay men) significantly lower than heterosexual participants. The authors hypothesized that the lower gay male and lesbian in-group ratings of some informal privileges may represent internalized homonegativity and/or the perception that certain PDAs were unsafe (Doan et al., 2014). In all, the study highlights how ratings of acceptability around things like PDA can leave questions about why participants view certain behaviours as more or less acceptable for different types of couples.

Moreover, Steinbugler maintains that in Western societies such as America, where their research was conducted, heterosexuality is assumed to be monoracial, and that the visibility privileges on lists like Carbado's (2000), or research like Doan and coworkers' (2014) is fundamentally dependent on a couple being monoracial and White (2005). Principally, Steinbugler found that both interracial (same-sex or heterosexual) and monoracial same-sex couples experienced moments of "visual dislocation" in public spaces (2005). Namely, participants commonly complained that unless they were holding hands or being physically affectionate, they felt they were seen as uncoupled (Steinbugler, 2005). Emotionally, these couples experienced a range of responses including indifference, annoyance, and anger. Although it was often unwanted to feel invisible as a couple, Steinbugler found that "invisibility may be exhausting or painful, but being visible as sexual partners can feel risky or dangerous for same-sex couples" (2005, p. 429). Meaning, same-sex couples in particular may find themselves caught between two options when considering how visibly they would like to highlight themselves as nonheterosexual. Here, one can see how Fox and Asquith's concept of fear as an emotional gauge may come into play in assessing the risks and benefits of becoming visible as a same-sex couple (2018). Looking more closely at the intersection of race and sexuality, Steinbugler (2005) observed that interracial same-sex couples experienced an even deeper sense of visual dislocation that highlights how Western partnering archetypes are monoracial for same-sex and heterosexual couples alike. Indeed, Steinbugler goes so far as to proclaim that "to simultaneously transgress norms of heterosexuality and monoraciality is to violate the basic tenets of the U.S. heterosexual paradigm" (2005, p. 435).

Despite this pronouncement, Steinbugler's (2005) participants also outline how the uncomfortable emotions and visible identities as an interracial and/or same-sex couple are also a function of the space they find themselves. This geographical

phenomenon is what Frankenburg terms the “social geography of race” when looking at nonwhite individual’s awareness of their own racial identity depending on their geographical location (1993). Similarly, both interracial and monoracial same-sex couples in Steinbugler’s study describe how they only “become” a same-sex couple when in spaces which are not explicitly deemed as nonheterosexual spaces (2005). This contrast can be seen in the emotional experiences of Steinbugler’s interracial and monoracial same-sex couples when they highlight how “many [participants] relayed an increased sense of comfort and safety, and a greater inclination to be physically affectionate in queer spaces, whether it be a bar or club, or a gay area or neighbourhood” (2005, p. 435). Considering the micro-, meso-, and macroscopic implications of Steinbugler’s (2005) findings, one can see how GBQ men’s individual emotional experiences of PDA may be intimately interwoven with sociocultural perceptual factors at different levels of analysis.

## **2.4. Macroscopic Understandings of Stigma**

Systemic views of stigma in relation to wellbeing were a common theme in the literature. Certainly, Meyer’s (2003) seminal work on the minority stress model is a pertinent framework to begin looking at GBQ emotional experiences of PDA from this more macroscopic perspective. In short, the minority stress model examines how individuals are affected by stressors which lay along a continuum of everyday experiential closeness. External, more objective elements which independently exist outside of the GBQ individual, would be stressors which are a product of a heterosexist environment, such as antigay stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model predicts that these external, more distant stressors then lead to more proximal stressors, such as how one moves through public spaces, and makes decisions about identifying their GBQ status through behaviours such as PDA. According to Meyer (2003), the most proximal stressor as a result of interacting with a heterosexist environment is internalized homonegativity.

Frost and Meyer (2009) looked at how internalized homonegativity effected relationship quality among GBQ individuals and found that there was a positive correlation between levels of internalized homonegativity and relationship problems. In particular, Frost and Meyer speculate that:

. . . internalized homonegativity leads to relationship problems primarily by increasing depressive symptoms. This is important to consider in interpreting the results from previous studies that demonstrated no effect of internalized homonegativity on indicators of relationship quality controlling for psychological wellbeing. (2009, p. 105)

Without question, Frost and Meyer (2009) have outlined how the process of navigating the world as a GBQ man, and internalizing heterosexist cultural ideas, may begin a process of negative emotionality which breaks down the very systems of social support that have been shown to protect against the damaging mental health effects of internalized homonegativity (Pachankis, 2014). In fact, Newheiser and Barreto's research on concealment of stigmatized identities expanded upon this insidious process by summarizing: "although people may believe that hiding a stigmatized identity will help them secure social inclusion, we propose that it can ironically increase feelings of exclusion, and even actual exclusion by others" (2014, p. 59). In short, Frost and Meyer make clear these doubly defeating effects of internalized homonegativity on individuals' abilities to attenuate the effects of internalized homonegativity through social connection (2009).

Despite the wide use of Meyer's (2003) minority stress model when studying the emotional difficulties of GBQ individuals, Hatzenbuehler (2014) differently conceptualizes the interplay of the individual and damaging sociocultural elements as "structural stigma." According to Hatzenbuehler, structural stigma can be defined as "societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and wellbeing of the stigmatized" (2014, p. 129). This concept differs from the minority stress model by looking at the macrosocial elements that may be affecting GBQ people and then directly measuring effects rather than using internalized homonegativity as a mediating construct between macro and micro elements. This method of investigation does remove the ability to look at individual GBQ emotional experiences as closely, but does enable a clearer macrosocial look at GBQ individuals' emotions in relation to structural stigmas. For example, Hatzenbuehler found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals in American states with no sexual orientation protective policies had 2.5 times the rate of dysthymia (a mood disorder) than heterosexuals (2014). Similarly, LGB adults who lived in American states that instituted same-sex marriage bans experienced a 37% increase in mood disorders, a 42% increase in alcohol-use disorders, and a 248% increase in generalized anxiety disorder

between the pre- and post-passing of the legislation. (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010). In reviewing Hatzenbuehler's work, it can be seen how it is useful to identify the broad effects of stigma in conjunction with the emotional experiences of GBQ individuals as they traverse through society.

Similarly, Burton and colleagues (2018) looked at how cultural stigma, effected GBQ individual's capacity for emotional regulation, and subsequent mental health outcomes. The authors hypothesized that the chronic exposure to stigma-related stress can deplete emotion regulation strategies, and thus make individuals more susceptible to adverse mental health outcomes (Burton et al., 2018). Across two studies, Burton and coworkers determined that above a susceptibility to general life stressors, cultural stigma predisposed individuals to higher rates of depressive symptoms and alcohol use problems (2018). These findings mirror the experiences of gay men in stage one of Downs' (2012) model of shame, and shines a spotlight on the ways that this internalization of cultural stressors effects the emotional regulation, and daily emotional experiences of GBQ people and other stigmatized groups.

Analyzing structural stigma more narrowly, one study looked at how general societal marginalization acted as a mediating factor in relationship quality and instances of public and private physical affection among women in same- and different-sex relationships (Kent & El-Alayli, 2011). Kent and El-Alayli found that the more participants in same-sex relationships perceived a lack of "general societal acceptance" for their relationship, the less they engaged in public displays of affection (2011). Similarly, past research has highlighted how interracial couples are less likely to engage in PDA than intraracial couples (Vaquera & Kao, 2005). Regardless, Kent and El-Alayli comment that the design of their study leaves questions about how participants experienced the navigation of PDA, and give little insight into the ways that participants may compensate for reduced PDA (2011). Indeed, the study found that participants who displayed reduced PDA did not show an increased or decreased amount of private physical affection when compared to participants who engaged in higher levels of PDA (Kent & El-Alayli, 2011). In this sense, other research has shown that lesbians and gay men may engage in unique relationship "maintenance behaviors" such as fostering and seeking out supportive social environments to compensate for the reduced ability to connect in all public spaces (Haas & Stafford, 1998). Certainly, the research conducted by Kent and

EI-Alayli provide some initial insight into how structural stigma may influence GBQ men's PDA, but leaves gaps in the details of these experiences.

Mason sought to explore such gaps in detail by bringing their level of inquiry to thinking about the ways that minority stress, structural stigma, and cultural stigma is embedded in everyday social spaces (2001). Mason interviewed 75 women who identified as gay, lesbian, or queer. Through these interviews, Mason discovered that her participants used internalized "safety maps" to move through public spaces (2001). The research revealed that "individuals draw upon their knowledge of the ways in which specific variables render them vulnerable to personal danger" (Mason, 2001, p. 29). Meaning, more broadly, GBQ people may take an ever-shifting accounting of their surroundings, and presentation, and then make decisions about their behaviour. Indeed, Mason's participants overwhelmingly described managing (reducing) PDA as a predominant response to their internal safety maps (2001).

Although reducing PDA is a means of responding to the emotional experience of fear, Mason was surprised to learn that some of her participants took calculated risks in "flaunting" their sexual orientation through PDA (2001). For example, Mason describes a lesbian participant who enjoyed kissing their same-sex partners when stopped in their car at red lights when in front of groups of people. The participant explained that they engaged in PDA in this way in order to elicit a negative reaction, knowing that they could then speed off once the traffic light turned green. In this way, Mason speculates that the social engineering of these PDAs are an attempt to challenge heterosexism in public spaces, and transform their internal emotional experiences of fear (2001). However, Mason also notes that "such acts of deliberate affront are most likely to take place in situations where lesbians and gay men already feel safe enough to flirt with danger because they can control the outcome of the risks they take" (2001, p. 35). To put it differently, these "flirtations with danger" highlight how safety maps regulate pushing against heterosexist threats of hostility and violence. Mason contends that while these internal safety maps may feel "second nature," they are a product of understanding the threat of violence and hostility inherent in a heterosexist society (2001). In this manner, internal emotional experiences of fear or shame can again be viewed as dialectically constructed with the personal awareness of a heterosexist culture.

## 2.5. Conclusion and Future Directions

As evident in the emotional content of the studies mentioned above, “positive,” or “adaptive” emotions were generally absent from the literature when looking at LGBTQ people’s emotional experiences of PDA. One might ask to what degree this absence represents a realistic portrayal of LGBTQ people’s realities, or is a result of research questions which focus on, and presume, negative emotionally. Future research might ask questions about specific experiences versus specific emotions in order to illuminate the conceivably larger spectrum of LGBTQ emotional experience.

Altogether, further understanding LGBTQ emotional experiences of PDA is a way to open a conversation about the complex ways that individual and societal factors commingle to form what one perceives as their everyday experience. Yes, it could be argued that looking at individual experiences of emotion is too subjective and abstract a perspective to make more generalizable statements about the “reality” of LGBTQ experiences. Yet, a serious reading of the above literature displays that emotion is often an acknowledged aspect of making sense and relating to the environment. By using Greenberg’s (2015) conceptualization of emotion as a dialectical constructivist method of information processing, one can see how emotion is paramount in better understanding the everyday experiences that contribute to “becoming” LGBTQ in the public sphere.

# Chapter 3.

## Methodology

### 3.1. Research Questions

This thesis was guided by the base question: how do GBQ men narrate their experiences of holding hands in public? Within this overarching question, the following sub-questions guided the inquiry:

- (1) How do GBQ men make meaning of the periods just prior, during, and after holding hands in public?
- (2) How do GBQ men make meaning of their decision to hold hands in public?
- (3) What are the emotions GBQ men experience when holding hands in public?
- (4) What are the thoughts GBQ men experience associated with holding hands in public?
- (5) How do GBQ men make meaning of their decision to stop holding hands in public?

### 3.2. Methods of Inquiry

#### 3.2.1. Narrative Inquiry

The literature review above has illustrated that there are likely multiple layers to the experiences of GBQ men holding hands in public. Some have posited that approaches such as cognitive-behavioural research offer the best system for examining GBQ men's experiences (Pachankis et al., 2015). Yet, these research methodologies are best adapted for studying large groups of participants quantitatively and using statistical analysis to draw conclusions. Rather, a narrative inquiry is the preferred methodology to study experiences of individuals in-depth (Riessman, 2007). Narrative inquiry is a framework which intends to prize the stories of individuals, and how they choose to tell these stories (Riessman, 2007). To this end, Riessman proposes that narrative inquiry is an ideal tool for examining the lives of those who have been

underrepresented in past research, such as GBQ men (2007). For these reasons, this study used a narrative method of inquiry for collecting and analyzing data.

While the aim of research is often thought to objectively look at the reality of what is “out there,” the narrative method of inquiry used in this research is based on the assumption that narratives are not a facsimile of what “actually” happened (Clandinin, 2012). Indeed, narrative inquiry is not concerned with a positivist ontological notion of a singular and knowable reality. Instead, the narrative method of inquiry in the present study takes a constructivist ontological and epistemological stance (Riessman, 2007). That is, “meaning-making,” or simply “meaning,” in the narrative sense, functions to “create order and contain emotions” (Riessman, 2007, p. 10) of an individual’s past, present, and future. Simply put, meaning-making through narrative is understood as a way to both make sense of, and construct, an autobiographical self (Riessman, 2007). Moreover, narrative inquiry is sensitive to the ways that dominant cultural understanding or “meta-narratives” influence the activity of self-construction through narrative (Arvey, 2002). In fact, these very dynamics are brought to bear on the microcosmic level in research and encourages researchers to ask how larger cultural narratives or power dynamics play out in interactions such as those between researcher and participant (Arvey, 2002). Accordingly, the narrative approach views the meaning-making of an individual’s story during an interview as a co-construction process as the individual considers whom they are speaking with, and how they will tell their story within a perception of a shared cultural narrative (Riessman, 2007).

Considering narrative inquiry’s constructivist stance on meaning, it would make sense for one to question how research in this manner could be useful for broader understanding outside of an individual’s subjective (and intersubjective) project of meaning-making. McLeod and Lynch addressed this question by stating that narrative inquiry’s goal “is to construct a representation of a slice of social reality that promotes a sense of an enhanced understanding, and contributes to new ways of seeing that reality” (2000, p. 403). That is, McLeod and Lynch expound that narrative methods aim to unearth new and better considerations of topics while acknowledging these new understandings inability to access some form of “ultimate truth” on a subject. With these considerations in mind, narrative inquiry is a suitable method for investigating GBQ men’s narratives of hand-holding while remaining considerate of the micro- and macroprocesses embedded in their storytelling.

### **3.2.2. Emotion-Focused Therapy**

In addition to narrative inquiry, work in the field of EFT was used as a supportive lens to bring additional exploratory and analytical insights while sharing the same epistemological and ontological constructivist assumptions (Greenberg, 2015; Riessman, 2007). Given the understanding of emotion as an integral part in the perceptual and meaning-making process, EFT's dialectical constructivist viewpoint is a fitting companion to narrative inquiry (for a review of EFT's basic concepts, see literature review).

### **3.2.3. Researcher Subjectivity**

In view of the narrative and EFT stance that stories are a co-constructed endeavour, it is critical for researchers to consider how their own views, biases, and cultural presumptions influence the research process (Angus & Greenberg, 2011; Creswell & Poth, 2018). In particular, the researcher's role in sharing participants' narratives places a responsibility with the researcher to reflect on how they will be inescapably shaping the form of the data in light of their own perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than denying this interpretive inevitability, Creswell and Poth promote the concept of "restorying." Meaning, the researcher acknowledges the interpretive inevitability of their analysis, and holds a self-reflective lens to the research process (2018). As such, the Principal Investigator of the present study engaged in continued reflective writing throughout the research process to keep their views, biases, and cultural presumptions in sight. While researcher reflection and participant involvement in the research process does not entirely solve the above issue, these exercises assist researchers in moving toward a clearer reading of participants' narratives and the elements which orbit those stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## **3.3. Participants**

### **3.3.1. Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through the use of a poster (See Appendix A) with instructions to contact the Principal Investigator via email. The poster was shared with

the assistance of local LGBTQ community groups and local LGBTQ social media forums and pages.

When a potential participant sent an initial inquiry, they were asked if they met all of the participant criteria and given a copy of the informed consent to provide more details about the nature and commitments required of the study. If participants met the participant criteria and were still interested in participating, a date and time for the initial interview was scheduled.

### **3.3.2. Participant Criteria**

In order to participate in the study, participants needed to self-identify as a GBQ man, be at least 18 years old at the time of the study, and have had at least one past instance of holding hands with another self-identified man in a public setting.

### **3.3.3. Participant Demographics**

Ten GBQ men from a variety of backgrounds and stages of life participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 54, the average age was 32, and the median age was 26. For ethnicity and/or race, one participant identified as Korean/East Asian, one as Chinese Canadian, four as White/Caucasian, one as Sri Lankan/French and Irish/English, one as Vietnamese/Samoan, one as First Nations/Métis, and one as Asian. Nine of the participants had at least some university education, and one participant's highest level of education was high school. Six of the participants identified exclusively as gay, one as queer, one as gay/queer, one as pansexual/gay, and one as pansexual/bisexual. Two participants identified as transmasculine/nonbinary men, and eight of the participants identified as men/male with one of these eight explicitly denoting they were cisgender. Six of the participants indicated they were not currently partnered, and four of the participants indicated that they were currently partnered. Two participants shared that they had children from previous heterosexual relationships. Lastly, participants' occupations covered a range of academic, service, professional, and technical fields. Following is a more detailed profile of each participant.

### **3.3.4. Participant Profiles**

#### ***Jay***

Jay is 26 and identifies as a queer transmasculine nonbinary male. Jay described their gender identity as being the most important aspect of the demographics they shared. In particular, Jay stated that they had wished they'd known what it meant to be transgender as a child, but that they were glad they did now so they could live as they wanted to. Jay defines their lineage as Sri Lankan/French and Irish/English. They are currently an undergraduate student and work in the food service industry. Jay is currently unpartnered and lives alone with their cat. During their interview, Jay primarily described hand-holding experiences that occurred at different public music events.

#### ***Jeff***

Jeff is a 48-year-old Caucasian gay male. He speaks English and French and works in the public service. His highest level of education is a bachelor's degree. He is currently unpartnered but is still legally married to his ex-wife whom he had three children with. He no longer lives with his ex-wife and was closeted during this relationship. Jeff spoke about his hand-holding experiences in different cities and the different relationship dynamics with different men which influenced his experiences of holding hands in public.

#### ***Alex***

Alex is a 24-year-old man who identifies as gay and queer. When asked what information was most important about him, he shared: "I guess my ethnicity, I think that's something that's particularly important to me, is the representation of queer people of colour. Which is why I put down that I was Korean and East Asian." His highest level of education is a bachelor's degree, and he is fluent in Korean and English. He both lives and works on a university campus. He lives with his partner, and they are in a long-term monogamous relationship. During his interview, Alex talked about his experiences of holding hands with his current partner on the university campus and of his experience holding hands internationally at the Bangkok airport.

### ***Geoff***

Geoff is a 23-year-old gay male. He identifies as Chinese Canadian and speaks English and Chinese. When asked what things were most important to know about him, he stated “gay, male, and counselling (one of the areas he is studying).” He is currently an undergraduate student studying in the social sciences, and works in an administrative and retail job. He is currently unpartnered and lives at home with his family. He is out to his mother as gay, but not his father. Lastly, Geoff’s level of outness to his family played an important role in his interview. He described being on dates in various public settings and being concerned he may be outed to his father if his father or someone who knew his father saw him holding another man’s hand in public.

### ***Thomas***

Thomas is a 25-year-old White nonbinary male. He is in a long-term relationship with his partner who is also a nonbinary male. He describes both he and his partner as “passing male.” He is originally from a small city in Eastern Canada and first lived with his partner as a non-romantic friend when he moved to Vancouver. He does not currently have any children, but would like to foster children with his partner in the future. He identifies as bisexual/pansexual and stated both he and his partner are polyamorous. Although they are polyamorous, he said they don’t tend to meet a lot of people because they both are homebodies who have a lot of anxiety. His highest level of education is high school and he works part-time due to mental and physical health restrictions. Thomas shared various stories of holding hands with his partner at different stages of transitioning, and the different challenges he faced in potentially outing his partner if they were seen holding hands in public.

### ***Kristie***

Kristie is a 33-year-old cisgender male who identifies as gay. Kristie indicated they were of Vietnamese and Samoan lineage. When asked what he felt was most important to know about him, he stated that he thought being a “true Vancouverite”—a Vancouver local since birth—was the most distinctive piece of his identity. He works in the public service and has completed some post-secondary education. Kristie is “officially” single and lives with a roommate. Although he is officially unpartnered, Kristie explained that “the guy he is currently seeing” is not his boyfriend at this point. To this end, Kristie talked about a recent experience he had holding hands with the guy he is

currently seeing, as well as other men he's dated and held hands with around Vancouver. In particular, Kristie gave details about how he dealt with, and prepared himself for, homonegative incidents while holding hands.

### ***Jeremy***

Jeremy is a 26-year-old White gay male. His highest level of education is a master's degree, and he currently works in a research-oriented occupation. He is currently in a long-term relationship with his partner and lives alone. During his interview, Jeremy talked about the language he has developed with his partner around hand-holding, and how this language influences when and how they hold hands. In addition to talking about his experiences holding hands around Vancouver, he talked about how he navigated hand-holding in London England in the aftermath of a homonegative attack on a lesbian couple.

### ***Andrew***

Andrew is a 54-year-old Caucasian male. He describes coming from a conservative religious background which contributed to him being closeted for most of his adult life. He married to a woman in his early 20s, and has two adult children from this relationship. He came out as gay in his early 40s and is currently unpartnered after recently ending a long-term relationship with another man. His highest level of education is a master's degree and he is employed in a professional occupation. During his interview, Andrew spoke about many of his first experiences of holding hands with another man in public after first coming out, and of some of the experiences he had in his last romantic relationship.

### ***Zach***

Zach is a 25-year-old male who identifies as pansexual and gay, though he stated "I like to just say I'm human." He indicated he is First Nations/Métis. He shared that he grew up in the Northwest Territories and came from a large family whom he is very close with. Additionally, he said that he enjoys the culture where he grew up and spending a lot of time in the outdoors. In this way, Zach explained that moving to Vancouver was perfect for him because Vancouver is more "outdoorsy" than other cities. Zach currently has some post-secondary education and works in technology and web development. He is currently partnered and lives with his partner. During the interview,

Zach explained that his partner was currently away for the summer working. As a result of being on his own over the summer, Zach talked about a friendship he had recently developed with another man, and how he had navigated holding hands in a way that was not overtly romantic. In addition, Zach talked about how he handled a homonegative incident while holding hands with his partner.

### ***Moon***

Moon is a 38-year-old gay male who describes himself as Asian. Moon grew up and spent most of his life in Pakistan, moving to Vancouver five years ago. He is currently unpartnered, but is in the process of divorcing his ex-wife of 10 years whom he married through an arranged marriage. His highest level of education is a bachelor's degree, and he works in a professional occupation. During the interview, Moon talked about the differences between same-sex male hand-holding in Pakistan and Vancouver. Specifically, he was shocked to see that men in Vancouver usually did not hold hands platonically with their close friends as he had in Pakistan. Moreover, he talked about the challenges he faced holding hands platonically in Vancouver, and how he viewed romantic hand-holding for himself and others.

## **3.4. Materials**

### **3.4.1. Demographics Form**

The demographics form (See Appendix C) itself enabled the participants to include as little or as much demographic information as they felt was important to provide. A list of suggested demographics information such as age, sexual orientation, and gender were included on the form. However, the structuring of the demographics form was intentionally flexible in order to give participants a greater sense of autonomy about what information they felt comfortable sharing. The purpose of this flexibility was to set a precedent at the beginning of the study which signalled to the participants that they were a collaborator in the research process, and that they had autonomy to choose how and to what degree they answered questions during the interview (Arvey, 2002). Similarly, the demographics form instructions explained that during and after the demographics form completion, the Principal Investigator may ask the participant to expand upon how they had completed the demographics form. The aim with this

description was to model to the participant that the interview process would include being asked to expand or go into detail about their responses in a conversational (dialectical) style (Angus & Greenberg, 2011). Overall, this approach to the demographics form was influenced by Arvay's (2002) collaborative approach to narrative inquiry, and Angus and Greenberg's dialectical constructivist view of emotion within narratives (2011).

### **3.4.2. Interview Protocol**

The semi-structured interview protocol (See Appendix D) was informed by research in EFT (Greenberg, 2015). In particular, Greenberg's (2015) research provides directives for working with participants within a dialectical constructivist framework which highlights the cognitive, affective, and temporal pieces considered relevant in narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2007). In addition, using a semi-structured interview protocol allowed participants the opportunity to share the information they believed to be important while also being directed by the research questions of interest.

First, the interview protocol starts with describing the purpose of the study and explicitly explaining to participants that if they become distressed beyond their comfort level during the interview, the interview can be paused in order for the participant to work with the Principal Investigator to feel more regulated. This explanatory step is important in establishing the safety and trust which Greenberg contends is a necessary element for work with individuals which may feel distressing (2015). Likewise, participants are first asked about a "positive" past experience of holding hands in public to comfortably and ethically guide participants into the rhythm of the interview. Specifically, practitioners in experiential or process-oriented therapeutic methods recommend starting experiential tasks with a new individual by focusing on experiences which are more likely to elicit positive cognitive, emotional and somatic elements (Gendlin, 2018; Greenberg, 2015; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). This intentional structuring also fulfills an ethical obligation to gauge an individual's "window of tolerance" (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Meaning, starting an individual with an experiential task which is likely to be the least emotionally painful is a way to assess at a less distressing level if an individual is able to engage in experiential tasks without becoming emotionally dysregulated and/or dissociative (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). For these reasons, the interview protocol is broken into three

main experiential tasks wherein participants were asked about a “positive” experience, a “negative” experience, and then a time where they wanted to, but did not hold hands.

Within each of these main experiential questions, an EFT intervention called systematic evocative unfolding (SEU) was used as the basis for creating the question framework (Greenberg, 2015). Vibrant evocation of experience in this intervention is aimed at enabling individuals to create associations between the thoughts, emotions, and meaning of an experience (Greenberg, 2015). In this vein, the interview protocol follows the structure of SEU by first asking participants to “set the stage” by describing the setting, time, place, and people of an experience. Thus, participants are first asked to verbally create a scene which subsequent questions have them walk through moment by moment in a purposeful and detailed manner. Specifically, the moments before, during, and after a hand-holding experience are scrutinized with the intent to increasingly add layers to the participant’s narrative of an experience which may have previously gone unarticulated (Greenberg, 2015). This scrutinization is achieved by using experiential focusing which asks the participants to first enter the experience more deeply by inquiring about emotions, physiological sensations, and then thoughts (Gendlin, 2018; Greenberg, 2015). As Greenberg notes, this process facilitates “previously condensed narratives with immediacy and vividness; they expand the moment so as to unfold small elements of experience that were coded in memory but not presented in the initial condensed narrative” (2015, p. 126). Put another way, this method of inquiry uses neuroscientific understandings of narrative, memory, emotions, cognitions and physiology to expand a participant’s experience and see what new elements may emerge (Angus & Greenberg, 2011; Lane et al., 2015; Ogden & Fisher, 2015).

Lastly, participants are asked questions about anything they would like to add, and how the interview process was for them. These questions serve two purposes. First, any missing details can be expanded upon. Second, this cognitively-focused process brings participants out of the somatic and emotional pieces of their narratives which may have felt distressing, and into the present moment. This intentional shift into the intellectual is a grounding method suggested for debriefing and regulating individuals after experiential tasks (Greenberg, 2015; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Similarly, participants were asked overtly how they were feeling, and if they felt they needed any support or

additional debriefing at the end of the interview to ensure participants were comfortable upon leaving the interview, and treated ethically.

## **3.5. Data Collection and Analysis**

### **3.5.1. Interview Process**

The Principal Investigator met with participants in a private room booked on one of Simon Fraser University's (SFU) campuses. To start, the Principal Investigator would introduce themselves, and offer a beverage and snack to increase participant comfort. Following this introduction, the Principal Investigator would give the participants a folder which contained their compensation for participating in the study, a resources list (See Appendix E), and a place for participants to discreetly store their informed consent once they left the interview. Next, the Principal Investigator would review the informed consent document (See Appendix B) with the participant and ensure the participant understood the voluntary nature of their participation. If the participant agreed to the parameters of the informed consent process, the Principal Investigator would ensure the informed consent was signed by the participant prior to collecting any data.

Following the informed consent, the participant would choose a pseudonym for their interview data, the audio-recording would be initiated by the Principal Investigator, and the participant would complete a demographics form (See Appendix C) to act as an entry point into the participant's narrative. In addition, the demographics collection acted as the initial period in which the participant would be establishing in-person rapport with the Principal Investigator and developing comfort talking about themselves. After the completion of the demographics form, the Principal Investigator would ask the participant to describe their process of completing the form and if there were any important aspects the participant wished to expand upon. In this way, the demographics collection highlighted the collaborative approach to narrative inquiry advocated by Arvay (2002) which was used throughout the data collection process.

Next, semi-structured interviews were conducted. An interview protocol (See Appendix D) was used to guide the structure of these interviews. Although there was latitude to deviate from the interview protocol based on the nature of participants' narratives, the interview protocol was largely followed in a stepwise manner. A detailed

description of how the interview protocol was developed and applied can be seen in the Materials section. At the end of interviews, participants were given a list of counselling resources, and details about being contacted for follow-up questions and a review of their interview transcript.

### **3.5.2. Data Organization**

The entirety of data from even a few interviews and their accompanying analysis can be an immense amount of data which is difficult to accurately manage (Saldaña, 2015). To manage this large quantity of data during analysis, Saldaña (2015) recommends using computer assisted qualitative data assisted software (CAQDAS). For this reason, the CAQDAS NVivo was used to aid in organizing the data for analysis.

### **3.5.3. Transcription**

Riessman (2007) contends that the undertaking of narrative analysis can be deepened by the interviewer transcribing interviews rather than having the task of transcribing completed by another person. That is, the researcher will connect with the data more fully by having to consider each part of the interview as it is transcribed (Riessman, 2007). Thus, analysis begun with the Principal Investigator transcribing the interviews. The transcriptions themselves were formatted in a co-constructivist style (Riessman, 2007). Meaning, that the dialogue between the participant and Principal Investigator was included rather than just including the participant's answers and excluding the Principal Investigator's questions. During transcription, interviews were listened to twice: once during the initial transcription, and a second time while the transcripts were reviewed for accuracy. Listening to interviews in this way formed a critical piece of the initial analysis process, as Riessman notes that "meanings become clear only after repeatedly listening to [interviews] for relevant units of discourse and recurrent figurative language" (2007, p. 128). Moreover, these two rounds of transcribing were an inaugural entry into participants' emotional worlds, as the idiosyncrasies of their emotions were revealed in the tone and prosody of their recorded voices. This transcription style is congruent with the theoretical foundation of narrative inquiry (Riessman, 2007) and Greenberg's (2015) work on emotions which assumes that the autobiographical self is created through dialogue, rather than entirely reflected in dialogue.

### **3.5.4. Analytic Memo Writing**

The data analysis used narrative methods of analysis. One of these narrative methods of analysis was analytic memo writing by the Principal Investigator during the analysis process. Saldaña explains: “the purposes of analytic memo writing are to document and reflect on: your coding processes and code choices; how the process of inquiry is taking shape; and the emergent patterns, categories and subcategories, themes, and concepts in your data” (2015, p. 41). This description of analytic memo writing highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity during narrative analysis (Riessman, 2007), and codifies this reflexive process formally and transparently into the research.

### **3.5.5. Member-Checking of Transcripts**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that in qualitative studies, researchers collaborate with participants during the research process to maintain the integrity of the study data. Therefore, a follow-up email was sent to participants once transcription and the first phase of data coding had been completed. In this follow-up email, participants were asked to review their transcript for accuracy, indicate if any details were missing, and asked what they would like people to know about their hand-holding experiences (See Appendix F). Four out of the 10 participants responded to this follow-up email, with none of the participants reporting any inaccuracies or missing details.

### **3.5.6. Coding Cycles**

Once interviews were transcribed, they went through two cycles of coding and data organization. The first cycle contained a number of readings, analyzing the interviews for different types of data. Splitting the process of coding into two phases allowed for a preliminary set of readings which aimed to organize the data, followed by a second phase aimed at synthesizing and identifying broader themes from the first phase of coding (Saldaña, 2015). The first phase of coding consisted of three readings examining the interviews for descriptive codes, affective codes, and process codes. During each of these three readings, the Principal Investigator listened to the corresponding interview recording in order to better understand the subtleties of each

participant's experience. Overall, each interview recording was listened to a total of five times over the course of the analysis process.

### ***Descriptive Coding***

The first reading was aimed at identifying broad topics, such as “discrimination” or “culture,” and descriptive codes such as information about setting, time, or place. In this way, codes from this reading were focused less on participants' relationships or experiences, and more on ideas, descriptions, or things outside of the participant (Saldaña, 2015). In a broader sense, descriptive coding during the first reading also followed the format of the semi-structured interviews by isolating the key components of the environmental “stage” set by participants prior to sharing their stories of hand-holding. Indeed, this stage of coding laid the groundwork for subsequent stages of coding, and the thematic coding in phase two of data analysis.

### ***Affective Coding***

The second reading was aimed at identifying emotional content. This type of coding was an effective tool for analyzing narratives because it detected key underpinnings of the participants' narratives (Saldaña, 2015). Additionally, specific themes related to emotion such as the physiological description of an emotion, or the absence of an emotion were coded during this reading. Without doubt, the consideration of emotions in this reading identified codes related to the research sub-question focused on participants' emotions related to hand-holding. By the same token, dedicating a reading solely to affective codes was in alignment with the theoretical foundations of EFT and its assumptions that emotion are a key component in the dialectical constructivist nature of narrative (Angus & Greenberg, 2011).

### ***Process Coding***

The third reading focused on identifying process codes. Process codes highlighted actions, relational dynamics, and thought processes in the data (Saldaña, 2015). In this way, the consideration of thoughts in this reading identified codes related to the research sub-question focused on participants' thoughts related to hand-holding. Likewise, this reading aided in investigating the research questions associated with how participants made meaning of their experiences of hand-holding.

## Focused Coding and Visual Mapping

The second phase of coding consisted of using a focused coding method which is useful for identifying major categories or themes from the first phase of coding (Saldaña, 2015). Rubin and Rubin (2012) recommend visually mapping data during focused coding to ease the creation of categories and subcategories for the data. Thus, a mind map was used in NVivo to visually group together codes, and allow a hierarchy of themes to emerge from the data. Mind maps are a type of diagram which visually links data into hierarchical relationships (Saldaña, 2015). Codes from the initial cycle of coding were rearranged throughout this mapping process, and new categorical codes were created. Finally, once all codes from the initial cycle of coding had been categorized, broader themes were drawn from the data to provide a concluding organization of the study's results.

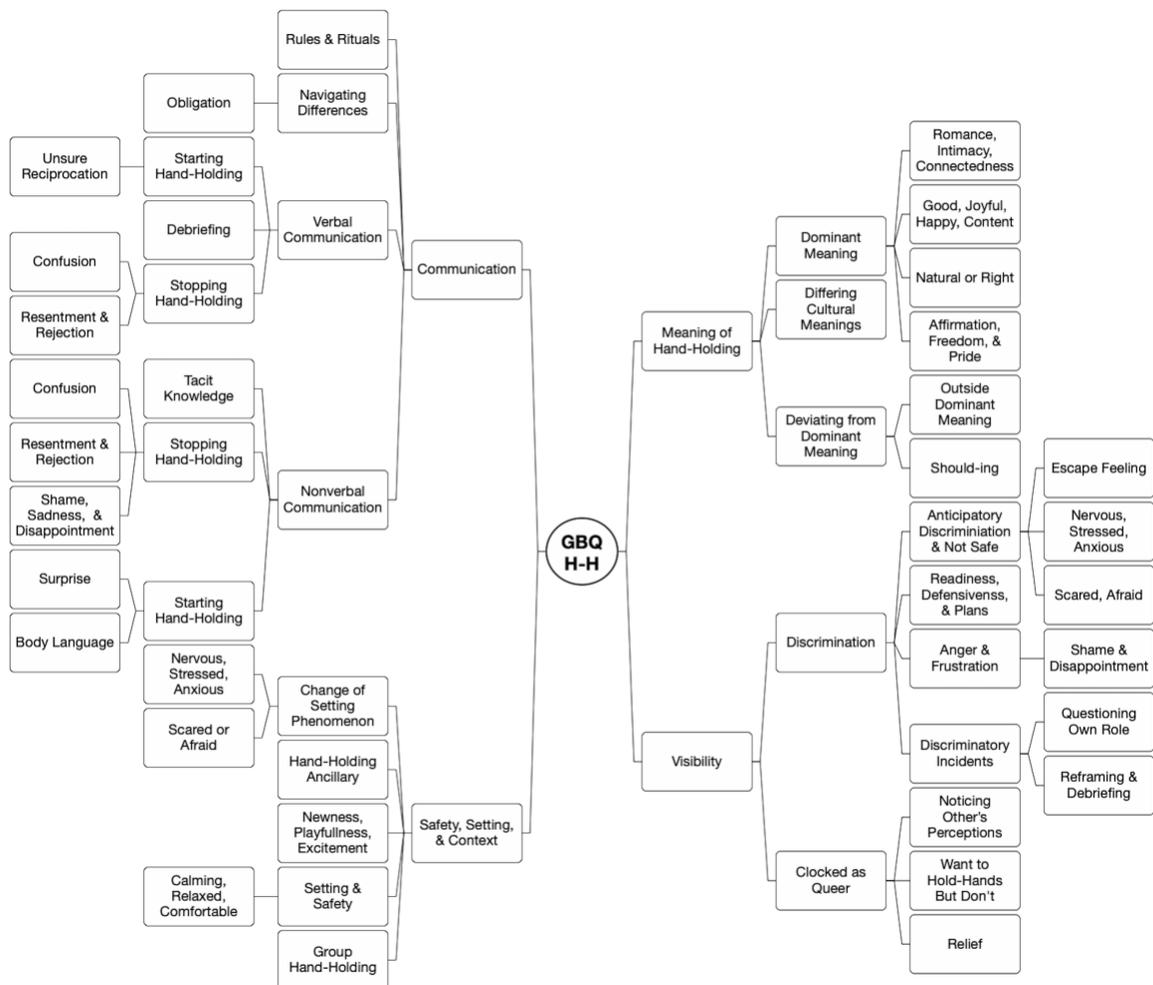


Figure 1. Mind map of codes from second phase of coding.

## **3.6. Establishing Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba assert that trustworthiness in research is established by “persuading [one’s] audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to [and] worth taking account of” (1985, p. 291). Moreover, Lincoln and Guba underscore that the criteria for establishing trustworthiness in research must match the research strategies utilized because there are different sets of assumptions and types of data which are generated using different research strategies. Therefore, given the qualitative nature of narrative inquiry, Lincoln and Guba’s four criterion for establishing trustworthiness are a suitable choice for evaluating the quality of the present study.

### **3.6.1. Credibility**

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) first criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is credibility. Credibility is comparable to the concept of “internal validity” in positivist designs. Specifically, credibility is focused on two tasks. One, executing the research in a manner that the likelihood of the results being viewed as credible is amplified. Two, to exhibit the credibility of the results by having them supported by the participants, who have each contributed to constructing their own subjective realities.

Three activities are suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for increasing the probability that credible findings will be produced: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation. Prolonged engagement is not simply a sufficient amount of time to learn the “culture” of participants, but also an acknowledgement that a researcher must engage with participants over a sustained period of time in order to see what distortions or misconceptions are noticed amongst participants, and within the researcher themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this sense, prior to the collection of data, the Principal Investigator spent time reviewing the existing literature to learn what was currently known about hand-holding among GBQ men. This review of the literature was a way for the Principal Investigator to better understand what the experiences of participants may be, and to begin challenging any assumptions the Principal Investigator may have had about hand-holding amongst GBQ men. In a similar way, the reflective journaling and analytic memo writing during the research process was another manner

in which the Principal Investigator could explore how their own biases or assumptions may be influencing the research process. Through these reflective methods, the Principal Investigator was also better able to start recognizing patterns that existed amongst participants. Lastly, establishing trust with participants is seen as an important part of prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trust was established with participants from the first correspondence to the last moment of contact with the Principal Investigator by emphasizing at each step of the research process that the participant's confidentiality and voluntary participation would be respected. Moving to the next activity for increasing the probability of credible findings, Lincoln and Guba note: "if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth" (1985, p. 304). Certainly, the current study's credibility is enhanced further by the multiple types and levels of analysis which are outlined previously in the methods section. This study can be said to have fulfilled the criteria of persistent observation because analysis and data collection was completed to the extent that the topic of this study is understood in a nonsuperficial manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Similarly, the 10 participants in this study act as a way to triangulate findings by providing multiple data points. In all, the probability of the current study having credible findings is strengthened by meeting the three suggested activities of prolonged engagement, persistent observation, and triangulation.

Referential adequacy is an additional measure which can be considered in thinking about a study's credibility. Namely, referential adequacy refers to the availability of a study's data for outside observers to review independently (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process provides the opportunity for critics to compare their observations and analysis of the data to the conclusions drawn by the original researchers. In line with this credibility measure, the present study's transcripts and coding data will be made available upon request to interested researchers through SFU's Radar data repository. In a similar fashion, the present study followed Lincoln and Guba's suggestion for member-checking throughout the research process (1985). Member-checking refers to two factors: participants' review of the study data, and the ongoing way in which the researcher verifies understanding with research participants. The current study aimed to fulfill this conception of member-checking by providing participants the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy. In addition, the Principal Investigator confirmed

their understanding of participant's narratives during interviews by summarizing what participants reported, and asking follow-up questions for clarification.

Shenton (2004) expanded further upon Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for credibility when they argued that the qualifications and experience of the researcher, and those whom the researcher debriefed with, were an important consideration. To this end, the Principal Investigator's past experience interviewing for qualitative research, training in counselling psychology, clinical work with GBQ men, and background as a gay man, gave them a fitting repertoire of experience and skills for developing and implementing the present study. Likewise, the Principal Investigator regularly debriefed with their supervisors throughout the process of developing the study, collecting data, and analyzing the results. Because these debriefings were conducted with individuals who have expertise and experience in qualitative inquiry with LGBTQ participants, their input into the research process also adds to the credibility of this research.

Given that this study integrated suggestions by Shenton (2004) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) for increasing the probability of credible findings, referential adequacy, member-checking, debriefing, and consideration of the researcher's experience, it is reasonable to claim that this study's credibility contributes favourably to its trustworthiness.

### **3.6.2. Transferability**

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) second criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is transferability. Transferability is comparable to the concept of "external validity" or "generalizability" in positivist designs. Yet, the concept of transferability differs in that the aim is not to provide a precise statement of external validity, but a "thick description" of the data. This thick description is meant to provide others with enough information to reach a verdict about whether the findings of a study can be transferred to another context. In other words, the researcher of a qualitative study can only be aware of the information they are "sending" out, and not the "receiving" context to which others may desire to apply the results of their study. Thus, the present study sought to provide thick descriptions of the Principal Investigator's understanding of the literature, theoretical influences, research methodology, and study

results. In these ways, this research provides a detailed accounting of the study which will enable more accurate decisions about transferability.

### **3.6.3. Dependability**

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) third criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is dependability. Dependability is comparable to the concept of "reliability" in positivist designs. Lincoln and Guba note that the credibility of a study partly ensures a study's dependability, largely due to any overlapping of methods (such as triangulation). Hence, one could argue this study's credibility contributes to its dependability. In addition, Shenton (2004) argues that the dependability of qualitative research can be increased by providing sufficient details about the research process so that it may be repeated by another researcher. As such, the present study's research design, implementation, and data gathering were described meticulously. Moreover, as suggested by Shenton, a reflective appraisal evaluating the strengths, challenges, and limitations of the research process is included in the discussion section of this work. In sum, this study's credibility, detailing of methods, and appraisal of research process all increase the dependability of the current study.

### **3.6.4. Confirmability**

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) fourth criteria for establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research is confirmability. Confirmability is comparable to the concept of "objectivity" in positivist designs. In particular, "steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher" (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). A key process that ensures this notion of confirmability is triangulation, which this study achieved by interviewing 10 participants. Similarly, questions about the extent of researcher bias are reduced by including transparency about the theories and methods used in the research process, and the reasoning for their specific utilization. This transparency about theoretical influence is fulfilled in the current study by detailing the suitability and assumptions of EFT and narrative inquiry throughout this research. More broadly, Lincoln and Guba contend that the ability to perform an "audit trail" of the research process is supported by the transparency and availability of theoretical influences and research materials. In this way, a detailed explanation of this study's

research protocol, and the inclusion of all study materials in the appendices, are a means to bolster the confirmability of this study.

## Chapter 4.

### Results

Analyzing participants' stories unearthed the multiplicity of ways they created meaning through their narratives of hand-holding with other men in public. Participants' narratives were a meaning-making process at three overlapping levels: the individual, the relational, and the societal. At each of these levels, the roots of participants' narratives stretched far and burrowed deep. That is, narratives were personally connected to other relationships, events, and emotional schemes which extended far beyond a distinct hand-holding experience. Truly, this myriad of individualized influences affected how participants made meaning of their hand-holding narratives within broader cultural narratives.

Undoubtedly, participants made clear the multiple dominant meanings of hand-holding through their explicit framing of themselves outside of these dominant meanings, or their unexamined description of themselves immersed in these dominant meanings. In this way, experiences which matched the dominant meanings of hand-holding were contextually invisible to those within their bounds, yet visible to those on the outside. Against the backdrop of these dominant meanings, participants detailed how they made sense of their emotions, thoughts, relationships, and environments. Specifically, participants' narratives outlined the hand-holding contexts in which they felt excited, playful, comfortable, angry, safe, unsafe, and a range of other emotions.

An integral part of these feelings was how participants made sense of their own visibility as GBQ men in public. Discussions of visibility were attached to experiences of discrimination, or more commonly, the raucousness of emotions paired with the spectre of discrimination. Navigating overt experiences of discrimination, or the mere possibility, was one of many details to navigate for hand-holding partners. These details of hand-holding were traversed in a variety of verbal and nonverbal ways. In this manner, both what was said and not said between hand-holding partners was given meaning in participants' narratives.

In the next section, the 10 GBQ men in this study expand upon these themes in excerpts of their own words. Yet, it is critical to remember that these narratives are a co-

construction: told to the Principal Investigator of this study, analyzed by the Principal Investigator and his colleagues, and considered further by you, the reader. Thus, the narratives which follow are not a declaration of universal truth, but an entry point into a conversation about what the meaning of hand-holding experiences in public can be for some GBQ men.

## **4.1. Meanings of Hand-Holding**

### **4.1.1. Dominant Meanings**

Three dominant meanings of hand-holding for the GBQ men in this study mapped onto the three levels of meaning-making noted above. At the societal level, some participants described Vancouver and its surrounding areas as a queer paradise in which homonegativity was absent, and people were privileged to express themselves as queer. At the relational level, participants framed the dominant meaning of hand-holding as an expression of romanticism. The dominance of a romantic meaning was established in two ways. First, some of the participants would qualify their non-romantic hand-holding stories by juxtaposing their experience against what they described as the common assumption that hand-holding was romantic. Second, participants who talked about hand-holding exclusively within a romantic framework did not distinguish their stories as a common or uncommon conception of hand-holding. Instead, these participants described their romantic hand-holding as feeling “natural” or “right.” In this way, these exclusively romantic hand-holders solidified themselves within an assumed shared romantic meaning of hand-holding by displaying an unawareness that hand-holding may have any meaning beyond romance. Finally, at the individual level, some participants espoused feelings of affirmation, freedom, and pride about their hand-holding. In particular, these participants gave the impression that their feelings both reflected and constructed a sense of self which was personally and culturally desirable. Fundamentally, one can begin to see how dominant narratives about a utopian society, romantic hand-holding, and a feeling of personal freedom, affirmation, or pride, set the stage for the dominant meanings of hand-holding. Or put another way, these dominant meanings can be understood as “homonormativity” (Rand, 2012).

## ***An Idyllic Land Called Vancouver***

Within the dominant societal meaning of hand-holding, a narrative manifested wherein three of the participants expressed the sentiment that they were lucky or privileged to live in or around Vancouver because they felt they could hold hands freely. For example, throughout Kristie's interview, he highlighted being lucky to live and work in the LGBTQ supportive environments he had surrounded himself with. Below, Kristie frames this perception in safety and acceptance:

For me, it's not a huge issue to hold hands. I probably say that because I'm in areas which are quite safe, which I at least feel comfortable and safe to be in and be around. Living in the West End, every guy is holding each other's hands and every family that lives in the West End is very accepting. (Kristie, 33)

Here, Kristie intimates an idyllic environment for hand-holding, and the sense that this idyllic environment aids in erasing hand-holding as a stressor. Similarly, Thomas spoke about his hand-holding as something which he felt free to do anywhere:

[This interview] reminds me that we're really privileged, and that I do hold my partner's hand wherever now, it's really sort of a reminder that life is pretty good. (Thomas, 25)

This sense of gratitude was framed as privilege by Thomas, and reiterated Kristie's sentiment that they each did not need to think about hand-holding as an issue.

## ***Naturalness and Rightness***

A dominant relational meaning of hand-holding was explicated by participants who described their romantic experiences of hand-holding as feeling "natural" or "right." Kristie described hand-holding as a natural expression with the person they were dating:

[It's] just sort of a nice comforting feeling. We kind of just slipped into it; no real discussion about like "you're going to hold my hand," or anything like that. More so, we just wanted to feel comfortable in each other's hands and that's just the most natural expression that we had. . . . It was just sort of natural, we've been kind of holding hands since our first date (chuckles), about a month ago. (Kristie, 33)

Kristie's description exudes a sense of naturalness and comfort being entangled in a way that doesn't require thought or conversation. In this sense, hand-holding is outlined as an effortless expression between two men because it is "natural." By the

same token, Alex suggests this same sense of “positive” hand-holding as something that is carefree:

A specific positive experience is just holding my boyfriend's hand as we're walking somewhere, and not really having to think or care about who's watching, or seeing, and what's going to happen. (Alex, 23)

It can be seen that even in the way Alex describes his prototypical “positive” experiences of hand-holding, there is no great effort to expand upon the experience: it’s just positive. The use of the word “just” and the scarcity of description accentuate the effortless way he would experience a positive occurrence of hand-holding. The naturalness that Kristie and Alex describe is explicated further by Jeff as something that is predominantly a felt-sense, even when in parallel with opposing thoughts:

Literally it was like a gut reaction . . . in my core. . . . you know there's the heart then there's the head. And so, in my head I'm like "what am I doing?" Like "what is this? Who is this guy?" Like "I don't do this. What is this?" But it felt right. It felt like it was a natural thing. (Jeff, 48)

While many of the experiences participants described were a mix of harmonized cognitions and emotions, Jeff’s experience delineates “naturalness” and “rightness” as a physiological feeling that outweighed thoughts which questioned what he was doing. Jeff’s example brings into focus how the feelings of “naturalness” described by participants is an embodied manner in which an ideal, or culturally dominant, meaning of hand-holding is reinforced by the physiological experience of hand-holding.

### ***Affirmation, Freedom, and Pride***

Related to these narratives of idyllicism and romanticism, other participants spoke about hand-holding as a personally affirming expression of freedom. In this sense, participants spoke about hand-holding evoking feelings of affirmation as a modern narrative which overrode outdated notions of GBQ hand-holding as wrong or shameful. Alex typified these feelings and thoughts as pride and resistance:

Something that my partner and I have talked about is these public displays of affection, within queer relationships, in [themselves are] kind of like an act of resistance, of breaking the status quo. And I think there's kind of a sense of pride with that as well. Being out in public with my boyfriend, being physical with each other, and kind of making a statement I guess? So I guess that's something that frequently crosses my mind when holding my partner's hand in public. (Alex, 24)

Alex articulates how hand-holding is a statement which opposes this outdated narrative because he feels pride when he makes his queerness visible by being physically intimate with his boyfriend. By comparison, Jeremy expressed a sense of flouting an outdated narrative by declaring ownership of public space:

Sometimes I will be holding hands with my partner. I live on Commercial Drive, and it feels like a very queer-friendly, or like a safe space to hold hands, and sometimes we'll be walking on the street together, and we'll be holding hands, and it feels affirming, and it feels like we're taking up space that's kind of rightfully ours. . . . It does feel like a small act, but it can feel like a big thing in the moment. (Jeremy, 26)

With this feeling of ownership, Jeremy also underlines the affirmative aspect that takes place when he holds his partner's hand within a public setting that feels safe and queer-friendly. Likewise, Andrew spoke of how his first experience holding hands with another man was affirming, but for different reasons:

[Hand-holding was] sort of affirming, or confirming, because when I started to come out to people, some people said "well, have you ever had an experience with another guy?" and I hadn't. And you know, there's always that sort of question that "well maybe it's just something that I think I want," but you haven't actually experienced it. And so, I think it's part of that whole thing where the feeling just confirms what you knew about yourself for so long, and it's so satisfying to be in that situation where you can finally express it, and finally experience it. (Andrew, 54)

Andrew's experience speaks to the effects of embodying a sense of self through relationship in the public sphere. That is, Andrew felt his identity as a gay man was more real by testing his identity through behaviours that gave confirmative and affirmative feedback. Moon spoke about hand-holding as expression within the public sphere in a more emotionally principled manner when he worked to convince another male friend to hold his hand in public:

I think I was just trying to kind of prove that it's not a big deal and it's just up to us. If we want to, we can hold hands. If we don't want to, then we don't. So we don't need to worry about people's perception: we are in a free society. . . . [Holding hands] felt very good, I felt brave, and [I was making] a pride posture. (Moon, 38)

To be sure, Moon's explanation encapsulates an archetype of the contemporary narrative other participants reference. In particular, Moon emphasizes the right he has to hold hands regardless of others' perceptions and that holding hands gave him feelings of

bravery and pride. Although Moon described these feelings in a positive way, his mention of feeling brave indicates a sense that he, his friend, or both of them, may be “overcoming” an outdated narrative about hand-holding by doing what they are allowed to do in a “free society.” In these ways, participants spoke in a fashion which stressed a modern meaning of freedom, affirmation and/or pride that aimed to supersede an archaic meaning of wrongness and shame.

#### **4.1.2. Interplay of Different Cultural Meanings**

Two participants mused at the different meanings and perceptions of hand-holding between men based on their cultural knowledge outside of Canada. These narratives further cement the dominant meanings of hand-holding in Western Canada because participants’ comparisons indicate they have an understanding of homonormative Canadian notions about hand-holding. Moon spoke about how the sense of what may feel “natural” is intertwined with cultural meaning. Moon described his experiences of platonic hand-holding with men in Pakistan as a young adult:

It was very natural, and a friends thing. Although I really enjoyed it because I'm interested in guys. But it was a very open kind of thing, very natural. . . . I say natural because I never even thought about it like it's "a thing." Only when I moved [to Vancouver, and] I found that actually it's not that common. It was quite surprising, because I thought here, my perception was it's a very open society, it's legal here. Even like going around downtown [Vancouver] in the gay village, people were not holding hands. And so it was surprising. . . . What we were doing [in Pakistan] was [hand-holding] without even thinking, so it was very natural in that way. (Moon, 33)

Indeed, Moon’s experience of “naturalness” juxtaposes the experience of “naturalness” within a Canadian context. Certainly, this juxtaposition could move one to ask how even the physiological or “gut” responses which undergirds hand-holding is braided with culturally contextual meaning. In comparing cultural meanings, Geoff pondered about what seemed like a contradiction with hand-holding between men in some Asian countries:

At least what I've noticed, just in Asian countries, they're more liberal with hand-holding or touching, or just physical gestures in general. . . . I mean I definitely wouldn't do it in Asian countries either where it's less socially accepted. They just don't see it as a relationship if you do hand-holding over there, so it's like a little weird thing. (Geoff, 23)

Primarily, Geoff highlighted the theory that hand-holding between men in some Asian countries was more liberal because the behaviour did not signify a same-sex relationship. Even with this knowledge, Geoff expressed discomfort at the idea of holding hands romantically within these other countries. In other words, it seems as though Geoff's conception that his romantic hand-holding would not necessarily be seen as romantic did not feel comfortable within a less queer-friendly country. Although Moon was comfortable with holding hands in Pakistan and Canada, he was mystified by what seemed like a contradiction between Pakistan and Canada's dominant relational meaning of male hand-holding. Moon had previously assumed hand-holding between men was similar between Canada and Pakistan:

I couldn't understand, because it's Canada. But then I thought "okay every country is different." But to me it was very surprising, that just this part is kind of like, not backward, but like even Pakistan is ahead in this one area. Otherwise, it's so backwards in Pakistan on gay rights . . . So it was quite surprising. . . . I do miss [hand-holding]. I think for me, it's a sign of friendship, being close to someone, trust, and comfort. And being comfortable is natural. (Moon, 38)

In addition to surprise in comparing cultures, Moon expressed a longing for holding hands with other men again as an expression of friendship. He later explained that he had tried to hold hands with a gay male friend and found the experience was not the same because he felt his friend was too nervous. Since this experience, Moon stated he had not tried to hold hands with another man again, and felt his next opportunity may only come with a boyfriend. For Moon, he had come up against the dominant relational meaning of hand-holding, and had not yet found space for other ways of hand-holding between men within a Canadian context.

### **4.1.3. Deviating from Dominant Meanings**

#### ***Playing Outside of Dominant Meanings***

Although Moon expressed a sense of needing to succumb to the parameters of the dominant meanings, other participants did deviate from these dominant meanings of hand-holding, and described how extra communication was often needed to frame the meaning of their experience within a platonic relational context. Both Zach and Thomas shared that they enjoyed platonic physical intimacy with all genders, but understood that

if they wanted to engage this way with someone for the first time, they would need to explain their intentions:

When you're a kid, you hold hands with almost anybody . . . And then when I turned 20 . . . I was figuring out "oh hey I need more physical connection with other people." . . . I realized . . . it's not just something that's exclusive to a partnered situation . . . With the people that I'm not sure of, I usually don't [try to hold their hand], unless I'm feeling more vulnerable and I want to have a physical connection, then I'll usually ask because I'm more unsure about where they're at. (Zach, 25)

In addition to extra communication, Zach also theorizes about the ways in which society normally contextualizes hand-holding based on the ages of the individuals. In a way, Zach challenges the more restrictive manner in which adults normally hold hands by noting that these sorts of behavioural filters don't exist for children. Thomas shared Zach's method of using extra communication when he wanted to hold a friend's hand, but felt awkward knowing the common romantic meaning of hand-holding:

It would be too far to ask someone you only met recently, and be like "can I hold your hand?" Some people think of it as a very specific romantic gesture, [but] I often see it as a platonic [gesture] as well. . . . I mean hand-holding isn't all that intimate (laughs), but a lot of people see it as an intimate gesture. So I didn't want to sound like I was pushing a boundary that was too far, or anything like that, and just make him feel awkward about it. (Thomas, 25)

This quote again illustrates how not all participants had internalized dominant meanings of hand-holding, but that those who deviated from the meaning employed added efforts to navigate dominant meanings with their individual desires.

### ***Should-ing on One's Experience***

Half of the participants talked about hand-holding outside of dominant meanings by describing clusters of emotions or thoughts about their hand-holding experience which they felt they "shouldn't" be feeling or thinking. In particular, participants highlighted feeling unsafe, anxious, and scared as emotions which deviated from what they felt they should, or wished, they could feel.

Geoff described a number of scenarios in which hand-holding with men had caused him fear and anxiety because he thought he might be seen by people he knew who did not know he was gay:

It's like "oh I should be getting over this," like, "what am I doing?" . . . Because I don't want to disappoint them, I mean you know, it's feeling like "I shouldn't be feeling this thing anyways." (Geoff, 23)

Geoff describes feeling anxious and afraid, but also concern about disappointing his hand-holding partner. Additionally, one can get the sense from Geoff that there is a sense of shame for not doing what he feels he "should." Namely, because he was not freely enjoying the experience without fear or anxiety. Jeremy expressed a similar desire to Geoff in wanting to "overcome" feeling unsafe while holding hands sometimes, and reflected that he thought his own perceptions of not being safe did not always map onto reality:

It would be nice if I could just feel like I could hold my boyfriend's hand whenever I wanted to. And I think that's probably more my own baggage, than it being a reflection of my environment. Whether it being actually safe or not safe is probably just my own stuff. (Jeremy, 26)

In particular, Jeremy highlights how his own history has influenced his perceptions of safety, and heightened his awareness about what seems, on an intellectual level, to be a reasonable level of caution. However, there is also an impression that while Jeremy is reflective about how he would like to change, he is dismissive of feeling unsafe as "*just* my own stuff." Jay shared Jeremy's uncertainty about hand-holding with other men, but framed this uncertainty as stress and anxiety about the possibility of homophobia:

I feel like I overthought [hand-holding]. . . . I put too much stress on myself thinking about it, especially considering that the chances of there being homophobia . . . is slim because of where we live. . . . at least from my experience, it doesn't happen a lot. I feel like because I've been overthinking it . . . I raise my anxiety levels and it's such a stressful situation for something that isn't stressful (Jay, 26)

Above his feelings of anxiety and stress, Jay also emphasizes that he feels he ought not have the concerns he does about hand-holding because of the idea that homophobic assaults do not happen very often within Metro Vancouver. This reasoning highlights how Jay compared his feelings against the dominant societal meaning of how holding hands between men "should" be experienced within a region that purports itself to be safe for LGBTQ people.

## **4.2. Safety, Setting, and Context**

### **4.2.1. Hand-Holding as Ancillary Behaviour**

All participants described their hand-holding experiences as an ancillary behaviour which occurred against the milieu of a more overt reason for being together. For example, some participants described holding hands while in movie theatres or sitting closely in restaurants, and all participants described holding hands as something they had done while walking with another man. Hand-holding as an ancillary activity was bidirectional: pre-existing feelings toward their hand-holding partners encouraged participants to hold hands, and hand-holding itself acted as a catalyst for new emotions to emerge. Thomas described how for him, hand-holding acted as a flavouring for what might otherwise be a mundane experience:

Walking down a street with grass on either side . . . it's boring, there's nothing interesting there. . . . But if you're with someone holding their hand, and talking, and being close to them, it's more like walking in the suburbs where you can look at different houses and see the flowers or whatever, it's like there's more interest on the journey. (Thomas, 25)

Thomas' description illustrates how holding hands for him can feel as though it is adding an additional layer to his experiences of travelling somewhere with someone. The idea of an added experiential layer is useful as a starting point, but only paints part of the experiential picture which participants described moving through different public spaces. Specifically, participants described how their emotional and cognitive perceptions of their environments oriented them towards a sense of being safe or unsafe to hold hands. In this way, many participants described a feedback loop in which they continuously evaluated their changing environment using a sense of safety as a behavioural gauge.

### **4.2.2. Newness, Playfulness, Excitement**

Many participants talked about the feelings of holding hands with a new male partner, both platonically and romantically. During many of these experiences, there was a prior atmosphere of excited anxiousness, curiosity, and playfulness. These relational aspects with new partners were front of mind for many participants, and at least momentarily, overrode any sense of their hand-holding as unsafe or undesirable. Zach's

description of holding hands with a male friend for the first time personifies a sense of playful elation:

I thought he was very adorable for [holding my hand]. And I thought he was very sweet. And I was like, "this is kind of fun." . . . I like holding hands in public . . . and so there was a little like "oooh," that was nice. . . . Contentment is like the biggest thing . . . that little shiver of happy, "yay" kind of thing, and the attention that you're getting. (Zach, 25)

Zach's narrative portrays the physical aspect of his excitement: a feeling of vibrating from the euphoria he felt about the new experience. Moreover, there is a sense that he is satisfied, or content, in some way, that he has gotten what he wanted. One might say he's gotten a desired positive validation for a burgeoning friendship. Unlike Zach's experience, Geoff described many of his hand-holding experiences as instilling a mixture of feeling safe and unsafe. However, during the initial period of holding hands with another man for the first time on a date, he describes other emotions which overrode any sense of being unsafe:

It was interesting, it was like, I've never held hands . . . not like that I guess. . . . It was like butterflies a little bit. . . . But it wasn't like nervous, it was just nice? . . . Giddy, getting a little happy, and a little nervous. A lot of like "oh so this is what it's like." Discovery maybe? (Geoff, 23)

Geoff's description illustrates the physiological component of his emotional and cognitive experience. In particular, he assigns a positive meaning to the nervousness he underwent by describing the feeling like butterflies, and inferring a sense of curiosity and playfulness. Similarly, Andrew recounted his first experience of hand-holding with another man:

My first memory is sitting in a movie theatre, and holding hands with the guy that I was dating at the time. It stands out because it was the first experience, and because it felt like a public place, and even though it was dark and probably nobody would have noticed, it still felt like this kind of new thing. . . . I guess it's the kind of typical sort of excitement that you have when you like somebody, and maybe your heart rate is a little bit faster than normal . . . and maybe happiness as well. . . . I think I was just enjoying the situation, and pretty relaxed. (Andrew, 54)

Reviewing Andrew's remembrance of his first experience 15 years earlier, there is an impression that he is both taking himself back to the moment in his memory, and also filling in the emotional details about what he must have felt at the time. Critically,

Andrew explains how his experience being a “first” lends the memory prominence when he thinks about his previous experiences of holding hands.

### **4.2.3. The Power of the Group**

Four of the participants stated that holding hands in the presence of other queer people, or people they knew, influenced how they felt. For Alex, the presence of friends was a key factor in his feelings of safety:

If I was with a group of friends, I [would] feel a lot more comfortable holding my partner's hand. . . . I think it goes back to that sense of comfort, and familiarity of knowing that the people that are immediately around me have my back. I feel safe, I understand where they're coming from. (Alex, 24)

Alex's reasoning shows how the presence of friends accomplishes at least two things for him. One, he notes having fewer unknown perceptions from other people about his hand-holding. Two, he can imagine being more protected by his group of friends if his boyfriend and him encountered anything which made them feel unsafe while holding hands. In a related way, Jay's hand-holding with a group of male friends acted as an inducement for grounding him in feelings of safety:

I was at a concert with some friends and there happened to be a mosh pit going on . . . So for us to stay together we all started to hold hands and just try to stick together . . . it was comforting and helped me quite a bit because it allowed me to remember that I am in a safe place and that there's not really anything that's going to happen. . . . I felt it in my chest . . . it was like a calming and comforting [feeling]. (Jay, 26)

Entwined in feeling safer, Jay's group hand-holding experience caused him to become awash with the physical feeling of calm and comfort in a situation which had been making him increasingly anxious. Jay's experience of holding hands platonically with male friends in this way mirrors what Geoff shared about the perception of holding hands with men in a group:

[When you're] walking along, talking, joking, and then you joke about something and you hold hands . . . it also feels safer because you have a group of people, and it feels more accepting. I guess from the outside perspective . . . it maybe won't look like a relationship. (Geoff, 23)

Geoff's story highlights how some of the safety he feels holding hands in a group comes from the belief that his hand-holding won't be as likely to be perceived as

romantic by other people. Additionally, he mentions a greater feeling of acceptance from the curated public space which is created by being surrounded by friends. This sense of acceptance being reflected by others in public also coloured how Jeremy felt when he saw another queer couple holding hands on the street:

It just felt like: "look! There's another one of us!" . . . Both my partner and I, and this other couple that we didn't know, were sort of taking up this space, and making it a queer kind of space . . . it was sort of like "yeah we're here, we're queer." . . . [It felt] kind of like butterflies . . . [an] exciting kind of feeling that you're seeing another queer person and they're also holding hands and we're in it together. (Jeremy, 26)

Not only does this episode elicit butterflies of excitement for Jeremy, he declares that being in close proximity to other queer people holding hands creates a new kind of queer jurisdiction. That is, the street becomes a queer zone itself by four queer people inadvertently holding hands in each other's presence.

#### **4.2.4. Comfort**

Participants spoke about comfort and hand-holding in two different ways. One way was to speak about the parameters and settings within which they felt comfortable. The other way was to speak about hand-holding itself as something which physiologically soothed, much like Thomas' experience:

To be in physical contact with someone that you care about; it's just a calming feeling. We both have anxiety and don't really want to go out and be around a lot of people. . . . But holding hands, it's sort of like we're there together. (Thomas, 25)

Not only did Thomas see hand-holding as something that physiologically calmed his anxiety, this feeling was paired with a sense of connecting and being with his partner as a unit. Like Thomas, Zach described the physical function that hand-holding filled for him:

[Hand-holding] is definitely uplifting, it's almost a high. [It] makes me a little bit more relaxed . . . I'm a fairly laidback person, but I carry things, like stress, very physically sometimes. (Zach, 25)

For Zach, hand-holding acted as something which could relieve the physical feeling of stress and instill a sense of being emotionally elevated. In this sense, hand-holding can transform his emotional state rather than simply attenuate undesirable

emotions. Instead of hand-holding infusing a sense of comfort, Geoff spoke about the external parameters which enabled a sense of comfort to emerge when he held hands:

I feel like with the first relationship . . . not showing [hand-holding] too widely felt safe and comfortable. I think if it's friends, or even other gay male friends, we might like just casually touch hands, and that's fine. (Geoff, 23)

Geoff's explanation of his comfort boundaries stresses the degree to which other people may notice his physical contact with other men. Underneath this imagining of others' perceptions is the implication that touching other men solidifies his sexual orientation in the eyes of others. Alex spoke about his own edges of comfort, focusing on external familiarities:

[The university] is such a familiar space for me, I was both a student there, and worked there. So it really does feel like home for me. . . . It was just really being familiar with my environment and understanding the demographic of people, like even strangers that I would encounter there. (Alex, 24)

Distinctively, Alex pinpoints the importance of knowing the physical space, and knowing what he could expect of other people's viewpoints. In other words, a minimum of unknowns facilitated the surfacing of comfort for Alex. Reflecting more personally, Alex went on to share how he felt his Korean and East Asian lineage influenced his lens of comfort:

I think it's interesting how in my relationship, my White partner is a lot more comfortable [holding hands]. [He] feels a lot safer than I do, and I wonder if our different races are a factor in that. (Alex, 24)

Undoubtedly, Alex brought to light the interplay of environmental and personal elements which floated in his awareness as he moved through spaces. In contrast, he hypothesizes how his White partner's baseline comfort is higher as a result of having lived his life in a dominant identity. Altogether, it can be seen how comfort was located differently for each participant, and that these different loci influenced when and how they experienced comfort when holding hands with other men in public.

#### **4.2.5. A Change of Setting Changes Everything**

Many of the participants described a change of setting as a pivotal moment in which they reoriented themselves to their environments and experienced a flood of new

thoughts and emotions. For some participants, change of setting became a noticeable pattern of influence on hand-holding:

We went [into the movie theatre] and he grabbed my hand when the lights went down. Then as soon as the lights came up, he kind of pushed away. . . . And I thought mainly it's just cause the lights came up . . . I never asked him about it, I didn't give it a second thought. (Jeff, 48)

Although he did not assign any prominent emotions to the experience, Jeff articulates how his date initiated and terminated hand-holding in a manner which corresponded with their activity. In this way, he was able to assign a meaning to the behaviour which made sense to him. Alternatively, he experienced a similar situation with the same man which raised more questions:

[In] San Francisco, maybe it's a stereotype, but I thought it was just like, guys holding hands in San Francisco would be like rain falling in Vancouver. . . . But, I guess in every city there's cordoned off areas of town where it's probably not as well-accepted. . . . because we were walking down one street and it was fine, and as soon as we turned the corner, boom (pulls hands apart quickly). . . . So I was confused with that, I'm like "well what was that all about?" (Jeff, 48)

In this second example, when Jeff is only partly able to hypothesize why his date quickly released his hand, he is left with a sense of confusion which lingers, and leaves a question of "why?" which never gets addressed, and hangs over the relationship. Geoff also experienced a lack of knowing, but in the context of potential consequences for his hand-holding:

When we left the store I kind of wanted to let go. Because then I was like "oh it's so open, someone might see us that knows my dad and then my dad would find out" . . . when it's a few people I'm okay, but then we went into a huge mall, where there is a lot of people, and . . . I can't keep track of everyone, and . . . I just don't know what's going to happen. [I felt] nervous and scared. (Geoff, 23)

Geoff experienced the entrance of a store as both a physical and psychological threshold which helped him feel more comfortable inside the store. Crossing this threshold to exit brought a deluge of emotional flotsam which washed over him in a wave of nervousness and fear. To be sure, this change of space induced a new awareness of being recognized as queer through his hand-holding. Conversely, Kristie's emotions shifted as he went from an open to enclosed space:

As we entered the stadium, that was a moment where I felt a bit more concerned because it was an enclosed space as opposed to outside. . . . there's more eyes on you. . . . There's a bit more fear, there's a higher chance for a pack mentality. . . . what if somebody shouted something at us while we're in the stands holding hands, and somebody agreed with them and started coming towards us? . . . [My] heartrate definitely went a little bit faster. (Kristie, 33)

While Geoff and Kristie's experiences differ in terms of shifting emotions with entering versus leaving an enclosed space, the similarity is that they both become aware of the possibility that more people were watching them. For Kristie, his fear thinking about what could happen was palpably felt in his heartbeat. Although it was not mentioned, one could also speculate about how his fear may have been elevated entering into a traditionally hypermasculine space as a gay man holding hands with another man. Moon experienced the inverse of other participants in that he responded to a change he noticed in the friend he was holding hands with:

We started walking towards Stanley Park on the seawall, and then it was like a more well-lit area. So I think at that point I felt like he was feeling uncomfortable and nervous, so then I let his hand go. (Moon, 38)

Moon's response to his friend sheds light on the relational side of emotional shifts. Simply put, Moon nonverbally empathized with his friend and then acted based on the perceived emotional change of his friend in response to the environment. Thinking about the above vignettes, emotional and cognitive changes happened in a range of spaces, but in each there is a definitive moment in which a change in the physical space influences the responsiveness of participants and their partners.

## **4.3. Visibility**

### **4.3.1. Clocked as Queer**

Many of the participants talked about their awareness that hand-holding did or could visibly identify them as queer to others. Alex shared how his boyfriend and him navigated the sudden awareness of their visibility as a queer couple:

[We went] to the Bangkok airport to fly out. . . . [we started] subconsciously holding hands, and then realized . . . [we're] surrounded by people whose opinion on queer culture we're not sure of. I think I made the conscious decision to stop holding hands pretty soon after. I

[was] worried about people's perception, our own safety, . . . [and] not wanting to stick out. . . . [I wanted] to go back to neutral (Alex, 24)

Alex's sudden awareness of his potential visibility as a queer person in an environment with many unknowns led him to desire a sense of invisibility once he began to worry about others' perceptions and his safety. Geoff also described concerns about his visibility when holding hands, but had concerns about specific people:

With the second [boyfriend], he was way more liberal. More hand-holding wherever in public. For me, that was a little nerve-wracking because . . . my main concern was if someone that my dad knows saw us . . . I'm not out to him, but I'm out to my mom. (Geoff, 23)

Geoff's concerns went beyond being visibly perceived as queer. Rather, he worried about his queer visibility ultimately outing him to his father in an unintentional manner. In this way, one can see how Geoff's identity concealment strategies may have been internalized, causing him to continually be on guard. Similarly, Thomas wanted to respect his boyfriend's level of outness if the two could be perceived as a couple in public:

It's his option to come out when he wants to. But it did feel pretty bad to know that my partner didn't feel comfortable telling other people about me, and letting go is always a reminder of that. . . . it was just another side of feeling like it was my fault . . . it felt like [he] should be happy and proud to say that [he's] dating me, and I felt like [he was] embarrassed of me. That would come up sometimes in a grocery store, he'd run into an old schoolmate, and I would stand a little further away and stop holding his hands to look like I'm just a friend. (Thomas, 25)

Although Thomas wanted to respect his partner's level of outness, he shares how he had to hold multiple perspective and emotions at once when he felt he needed to let go of his partner's hand in public. Specifically, Thomas sometimes wondered if part of the actual reason for his partner's discomfort was something personal about him. Thomas goes on to explain that earlier in their relationship, he also navigated the above dynamic before transitioning:

When we were first dating, I hadn't transitioned for the first couple of years. So I still looked most of the time like a woman. . . . I didn't want to have to explain my identity to people . . . So if he [ran] into someone from church, I would still avoid holding hands with him, even before my transition. . . . my name is Thomas, and that's going to need some explanation, so I'd just totally avoid this whole situation. (Thomas, 25)

Thomas' strategy for hand-holding publicly prior to his transition spotlights how visibility for him at one point didn't necessarily include the initial visual cue that he was in a queer relationship, but that the hand-holding itself was a visual indicator which might invite further questions. That is, further questions about Thomas and his partner's identity and relationship that could lead to outing his partner. In this way, Thomas' thinking about visibility included the potential string of events which could occur from being seen as a couple in public. Like Thomas, Andrew spoke about experiencing his partner's greater discomfort being visually perceived as a couple in public:

We were walking downtown, and we were walking along a street that was completely deserted. He grabbed my hand, and we walked along, and I felt really good about just being out and holding hands. But then he let go a few minutes later when there could be people around again. . . . I didn't take it as something personal . . . just that he wasn't comfortable with the idea that we could be seen. (Andrew, 54)

Unlike Thomas, Andrew did not think his partner's discomfort was directed toward him personally. Instead, he located his partner's discomfort externally to the change of environment. Comparing Andrew and Thomas' experiences with visibility underscores how participants' different personal characteristics and relationship dynamics interplay with their comfortability around hand-holding and visibility. One of Jeremy's experiences of visibility focused more on his desire to remain unnoticed:

There're sometimes annoying things . . . I remember one time we were going into a movie, and we're walking down the aisle, and we were holding hands . . . I remember two older women . . . like giving a good [smile and nod]. On the one hand it's kind of sweet, I'm glad that this lady feels positive about my relationship, but also it's like, I'm just here to watch a movie, I don't really need your approval right now. But I'm sure she had the best intentions. . . . Maybe she was queer herself, and I don't know her story . . . [It was] a feeling of being on display, being watched, embarrassed, and [that] attention is on you. (Jeremy, 26)

Jeremy draws attention to a mix of feelings. On the one hand, he indicates some annoyance about the notion that he is being noticed because he and his partner are being perceived as a queer couple. Moreover, his annoyance is blended with feelings of embarrassment around feeling like something which is being examined closely. Or in simpler terms, the feeling of being objectified. On the other hand, he reframes the stranger's response by acknowledging that she may have had good intentions and felt a sense of solidarity if she was queer herself. Overall, Jeremy's experience mirrors Alex's experience of wanting to become invisible or go unnoticed. Distinctly, Jeremy's

experience is different from many other participants' experiences of visibility in that his visibility experience did not raise concerns about safety or traversing the outness of him or his partner.

### ***Quiet Moments of Relief***

Following moments of unwanted perceived visibility, two of the participants described the sense of relief they privately experienced when they stopped holding hands and felt as though they were once again "invisible." Alex characterized this relief as being combined with other emotions:

A small sense of relief, like "oh now we're back to quote unquote normal." I think maybe a small sense of sadness, I'm like "oh it's sad that we can't display our affection and love for one another," or that we feel like it's unsafe to. (Alex, 24)

While Alex was relieved to feel as though he once again blended in with the crowd of a busy airport, he felt a sense of sadness about feeling unsafe to hold hands with his boyfriend. In this way, Alex straddled the emotions of two paradigms: relief to be perceived as part of the greater heterocentric mass, and sadness to feel he could not be visibly affectionate within a parallel queer paradigm in which he felt safe. By contrast, Geoff felt pure relief the moment he could stop holding hands:

[I was] relieved (laughs). Like everything just loosened, and I could breathe. Especially in the throat and the neck again. And the chest. . . . I'm just like "uhh okay it's over." . . . I'm like "oh thank God we don't have to do that anymore." (Geoff, 23)

Truly, Geoff's narrative underscores the way he physiologically unfurled once he felt his visibility had been reduced. Strikingly, Geoff pronounces a different sort of relief from Alex's in that it suggests a torturous quality to the visibility Geoff felt while holding hands. That is, there is an impression that Geoff also feels as though he was being subjected to visibility against his will. With this understanding, it makes sense that he joyously declares his relief. Both Alex and Geoff's feelings of relief emphasize how a seemingly simple feeling like relief can have a range of nuanced meanings and feelings within its remit.

### 4.3.2. Discrimination

#### *Spectre of Discrimination*

While some of the participants did experience overt discrimination related to their public hand-holding, a more common experience among participants was to talk about how the fear of potential discrimination influenced how they made decisions about holding hands. As a straightforward example, Jay spoke about how the fear of homophobia affected him:

I kind of wanted to hold hands with this one friend, but I was afraid to cause I didn't want to experience homophobia. (Jay, 26)

In this example, Jay's fear of homophobia was enough to prevent even his attempts to hold his friend's hand in public. Dissimilarly, Alex expanded further upon recognizing the possibility of homophobia while already holding hands in the Bangkok airport:

[I thought] "oh I don't feel the most comfortable, being in this really public, open space, holding my partner's hand. It was that sense of a bit of fear, a bit of uncertainty. Kind of noticing some stares . . . [the feeling] primarily manifested [as] a tightness in the chest . . . there was kind of tenseness throughout my body. . . . both like a restriction in my chest, but also just my whole body . . . all on guard. (Alex, 24)

Alex's physiological description of fear and uncertainty illustrates how his emotions and thoughts about the potential for discrimination also manifested in a tenseness and restriction throughout his body. In other words, Alex summarized how his body, emotions and thoughts were all pieces of information linked to his awareness of potential danger in the environment. Jeremy spoke about the spectre of discrimination differently, in that he drew parallels with his environment and other homonegative attacks which happened in similar contexts:

When we were [in London] . . . a week or two earlier, they had that report of [a lesbian couple] getting the crap beat out of them . . . on the bus, and I think [they were] holding each other's hands. . . . and I remember being in London . . . being on a double decker bus upstairs, not a lot of people around. . . . being a little frightened to hold my boyfriend's hand . . . I don't know what is going to happen . . . it was definitely in the back of my mind when I was deciding whether or not to hold my boyfriend's hand. Also just being in an unfamiliar area, and not knowing whether this is like a cool queer-friendly street . . . It felt more

like paranoia . . . like "okay, who are these kids? What's going on? Are there other people on this bus? Who is behind me?" (Jeremy, 26)

Like other participants, Jeremy highlights the sense of the unknown as part of his fear about possible homonegativity. Particularly, the recency of another homonegative attack on a London bus, and not being familiar with the area, led to a more generalized paranoia or hypervigilance in scanning his environment for signs of danger. That is, Jeremy's ability to imagine a homonegative attack was increased by the ease of mentally accessing other instances of homonegativity which could be mapped onto his environments and influence when he felt safe to hold hands with his partner. In all, participants' fear of homonegativity underscores the way in which some participants scanned their environments and made decisions about hand-holding based on the degree to which discrimination felt probable.

### ***Anger, Frustration, & Shame***

Anger, frustration, and shame arose as a theme among participants when speaking about the extra awareness they felt they needed to have when holding hands in public. Throughout these excerpts, there is also a connection to ideas about how hand-holding "should" be, as discussed earlier in the results. Geoff spoke about his frustration and worry when he used the excuse of checking his phone or opening a door to discontinue holding hands due to discomfort:

I [was] a little worried if [he] could take it the wrong way. A bit frustrated about the situation. Annoyed that like "why does it have to be so complicated? Other people don't have to do that." (Geoff, 23)

Indeed, Geoff's feelings of frustration and worry were capped by annoyance about what felt like the necessity to constantly compare his own level of comfort to the environment. In addition, there is an air of unfairness expressed in Geoff's annoyance that other, presumably straight, people don't have the same complications with hand-holding in public. Alex experienced a different aggregate of emotions as he pondered about his feelings in relation to the external world:

It's a little disappointing and shameful for myself . . . this act of resistance, it's like a statement. And so shame and disappointment in that I am so worried that I can't do something as simple as hold my boyfriend's hand. I think some of that's also external, like it sucks that we live in a society where I don't feel safe enough to do this, or that it's

something that I have to go through so many hoops and hurdles in my brain to analyze if it's even safe to do. (Alex, 24)

Alex's disappointment and shame in himself is anchored in what he sees as an unfair reality of society. Like Geoff, there is a frustration that he can't hold hands without analyzing the level of safety to do so. Thomas also spoke about his anger and shame when he let go of his partner's hand in order to not out his partner:

[I felt] shame, some anger at my partner, even though I know obviously he's not happy about it. . . . It's just his family . . . but it still feels like I'm some indecent affair . . . So it kind of makes me angry at him for not telling everyone . . . [I felt] a tightness in the chest. Similar to when you're feeling anxious or combined with when you feel like you're going to cry and you start to get that lump in your throat. (Thomas, 25)

Thomas' experience here differs from the other participants in that he describes his struggle with directing his anger about the situation at his partner because he feels devalued by the process of physically disconnecting from his partner. In his depiction of the physical aspects of these feelings, there is also an impression that he feels helpless in adjusting his hand-holding behaviours to the external pressures of the circumstances. Kristie's awareness of others' negative perceptions of his hand-holding was bolted to an anger which was attached to specific needs:

[I] would need people . . . to keep their mouths shut, because I feel like I've lived a life of having to keep my mouth shut . . . why should I be put in a situation where I'm made to feel wrong about my expression of affection? I think it's a need for understanding . . . Having said that, I do think that people just may not understand, because I think they're just two different worlds completely . . . I just want everybody to understand that this is my world, this is their world. We can all live in the same world. (Kristie, 33)

Kristie's expression of anger is embedded in an exasperation with the prejudice he's experienced in his life, and a need for change. A change in the understanding about the acceptability of his expression of affection. Yet, Kristie voices a frustration about his belief that full understanding about differences cannot occur. Instead, he proposes that it may be enough for people to coexist with different bases of understanding. Ultimately, many of the participants conveyed a dissatisfaction with the need to be aware of their hand-holding, and desired for a less examined hand-holding experience.

## ***Discriminatory Incidents***

Some participants had direct experiences of discrimination while holding hands, and had a range of responses depending on the circumstances surrounding the discrimination. For example, Kristie talked about an experience of discrimination in which he responded and reframed the situation:

It was downtown in the West End . . . [I] was holding hands . . . It was somebody who was . . . on the streets, [who] had yelled out a comment towards us. . . . So in that case, I was already prepared to just ignore it, because it was coming from somebody who probably has some sort of mental health issue . . . [They yelled] "you fags," . . . I've heard that way too many times in my life to let that affect me in a negative way. For me, there's an easy way to reframe it, turn it around and brush it off . . . and say something witty or sassy back to them. Nothing rude. . . . If somebody says like "hey faggot," I'm like "yeah girl (snaps fingers) loud and proud, here we go, have a good day." (Kristie, 33)

Kristie describes the situation in a number of ways which reframe the experience and evaluate the level of threat. His attention to the characteristics of the person shouting as possibly homeless with mental health issues appears to be a method of assessing the possibility for further danger, and re-establishing a sense of safety in an environment he previously described as queer-friendly. One might also argue that here Kristie is "othering" the person who yelled at him as a way to see him as less powerful, and thus, less dangerous. Paired with his beliefs about how he will "allow" other people to affect him, Kristie felt able enough to respond back and further regain a sense of control during the encounter. Conversely, Zach's initial experience of homonegativity on his way to get groceries with his boyfriend was characterized by confusion and shock:

It was late at night, and we were holding hands . . . Someone comes out of the store, they walk by, and they're kind of taking up the whole sidewalk. So we break hands . . . and we hear him say "fucking faggots"... And we're just like "oh! That was weird." It was the first time we had experienced that kind of thing together. . . . I made eye-contact with my boyfriend, we sort of confirmed like "we both heard that right?" And then we looked back to see if he was going to engage us anymore. . . . He's still walking. . . . we're like, "what's going on? What do we do?" My boyfriend said "never had that happen before." . . . So then we laughed about it a little bit . . . [I was] just shocked . . . We [went] a few more steps, and then we grabbed hands again just as we were going in the doors. We were not going to let it affect our expression of being together. (Zach, 25)

In this case, Zach and his boyfriend were initially confused to the extent that they had to confirm the reality of their experience with each other in the absence of any past experience of homonegativity as a couple. Only after this initial confusion did they orient themselves toward an assessment of further escalation, and confirm their safety. Once safety was established, they were left with a sense of shock which manifested itself in laughter and beginning attempts to make sense of the experience. Like Kristie, Zach spoke about not “allowing” the experience to prevent his hand-holding, and the subsequent desire to resume holding hands with his boyfriend. Reviewing the two examples of discrimination, it can be seen how a cascade of external events are continually evaluated by participants and responded to with the influence of their past experiences and own beliefs about hand-holding.

### ***Readiness and Defensiveness***

Some of the participants spoke about their preparedness or plans of action if they encountered any discrimination while holding hands. Kristie went into detail about his defensive frame of mind and the physiological feelings of that mode:

I always have a . . . defensive sort of tactic in the back of my mind if somebody decides to say something inappropriate. . . . if somebody comes towards me or my man, I think both of us are in fight mode. . . . it definitely attaches to fear, fear of judgment, and fear of persecution and ridicule. . . . [I feel it] in my heart . . . I know my face gets quite flush red. I always have a real strong physical sensation in my chest. . . . it heats up as well . . . I tend to clench my jaw. . . . I bite down, and I really start to brew up with anger. (Kristie, 33)

Kristie conceptualizes the underlying meaning of his feelings as fear of being degraded through a homonegative response. In particular, he identified the narrow zone from his chest to his face that becomes flush with heat and culminates in a clenched jaw when he becomes defensively activated. These physiological descriptors paint a vivid picture of the way that Kristie prepares to defend himself. In contrast, Zach explained that after he and his boyfriend experienced a verbal assault for the first time while holding hands, they discussed expectations of homonegativity and made plans for future incidents:

[We both said] "I was wondering when that would happen" . . . I remember saying, "well I guess that it's going to be more apparent to other people if we're holding hands" . . . He said "I'm not worried about it too much when I'm with you though because at least there's two of

us, and I'm not by myself." And I was like "yeah well you're weaker," and we jokingly made a plan [that] if it ever gets more serious and physical . . . then he would run away, and I would stay back and deal with it, and he could call the police. It was somewhat of a joke but somewhat serious too. (Zach, 25)

The incident led to a discussion where Zach and his boyfriend revealed that they had both expected some form of discrimination at some point while holding hands in public, but had never discussed the possibility before as a couple. Additionally, Zach's boyfriend frames the couple as a unit that instills a sense of safety when they are together. While Zach notes that there was seriousness to their planning for future discrimination, he explained the joking manner they used to approach the topic more playfully. Comparably, Jeremy went on to talk about his experience in London, and the way he played out scenarios in his head to come up with a plan:

[I was] reading all these [report] details, like one of the women tried to make jokes, and tried to distract them, be self-deprecating, and it just didn't work, and they just both ended up getting gay-bashed. I remember [thinking] "okay, if I was in that scenario what would I do?" I probably also would've tried to make jokes. (Jeremy, 26)

In this manner, Jeremy compared the defensive tactics used in the earlier London attack and tried to theorize how he might use similar or different approaches. Reading closely, Jeremy insinuates a sense of doubt in his ability to defend himself when he remarks that one of the tactics used earlier did not work, and that he would probably have tried to use the same tactic. This detail emphasizes how both Jeremy and Zach thought through the efficacy, and ability to execute the different plans they had for discriminatory incidents. In sum, all of the examples show how some participants used their past, or other people's past experiences, to prepare for future threat.

#### **4.4. Communication About Hand-Holding**

Participants communicated verbally and nonverbally about hand-holding. Equally important, participants shared how a lack of different types of communication affected the way they experienced hand-holding.

#### 4.4.1. Navigating Differences

Some of the participants shared how they navigated different feelings about hand-holding between their hand-holding partners and themselves. Andrew explained how he considered his partner's different level of comfort and interpreted their hand-holding:

[He] initiated it. . . . he was pretty discreet, [and] I would not have initiated it myself. . . . I [was] pleasantly surprised. . . . I felt as if he was aware that I would have liked to be more demonstrative in public, and maybe this was his little way of saying "well I can't give you exactly what you would like, but here is just a little something tip-toeing up to it." Even though nobody was actually there, it still felt like we were out. [It was like him saying] "this is what I can do." (Andrew, 54)

In this way, communication about comfort levels prior to hand-holding gave a framework for Andrew to understand his partner's comfort level and interpret his behaviour. Specifically, their prior communication helped them navigate their different levels of comfort by Andrew understanding that because his partner was less comfortable holding hands in public, he would leave hand-holding initiation up to his partner's discretion. Although Andrew states he had mixed feelings about the above experience, his mention of "tip-toeing" up to what he wants suggests an understanding that enabled some compromise to navigate his and his partner's differences. Jeff also described how his current romantic interest had explicitly communicated a discomfort for PDAs. While Jeff expressed a desire to engage in PDA more often, he, like Andrew, had decided not to initiate any PDA himself:

We went from the art gallery to another bar . . . on the way we were holding hands, and he was the one that grabbed my hand, which was really cool. I [said] "oh I didn't think you did that sort of thing." So it made me feel really good, . . . like the physical shock, like, "oh my god," just like a shot of adrenaline . . . And then, the intellectual like "what the hell?" (laughs) Like "w-w-whattt?" So there was confusion, but a good confusion. I was . . . pleasantly surprised. (Jeff, 48)

In many ways, Jeff's experience mirrors Andrew's experience. Yet, Jeff's surprise about his romantic partner differs in that its magnitude is more pronounced physiologically by feeling shocking, and in the added "good confusion" that coloured his initial reaction. Jeff's understanding of his romantic partner's motivations and comfort during the hand-holding experience are less clear. Consequently, it appears that their level of communication beforehand influenced Jeff's level of surprise and ability to

cognitively place a framework of understanding on the experience. Conversely, Alex shared how he thought about his and his partner's different levels of comfort with hand-holding:

I think I can recognize that my partner really enjoys when we hold hands in public . . . and so I think recognizing that we were in a safe space, . . . we're not really surrounded by a lot of people, it's something that will make my partner happy. (Alex, 24)

Certainly, one can see how Alex's perception potentially draws a parallel to the experiences of Andrew and Jeff's partners. Put another way, Alex articulates how he knows he is less comfortable with hand-holding, his partner is more comfortable with hand-holding, and he recognizes his partner's desire to hold hands. Therefore, he describes how when he realizes he is in a space that feels safe, there is an opportunity for him to initiate hand-holding with his partner. In all, participants' navigation of differences highlights how prior communication can influence the initiation/termination, experience, and understanding of hand-holding in public.

#### **4.4.2. Rules & Rituals**

Some of the participants talked about their difficulties and solutions for communicating rules and rituals around hand-holding. Geoff spoke about his difficulties and process in understanding the dynamics of hand-holding with an ex-boyfriend:

When should we stop holding hands? When should we keep holding hands? You can't exactly just be like "hey..." I don't know. I mean I'm sure you could. I didn't- I wasn't aware about how to navigate that. . . . I think that's the main thing, that wondering of "what should we do every time?" . . . When it's like a split-second action . . . I kind of figured out where it was through repeating and seeing when it happened . . . and then put it together . . . But [it's] also a little bit of frustration. Like "oh why can't we just keep holding hands?" (Geoff, 23)

For Geoff, the rituals around hand-holding felt confusing and difficult to understand because it felt as though the necessary communication needed to happen just prior, or during, the experience in a way that was too condensed to be functional. Given this perception, Geoff was able to find his way through these dynamics more passively by observing how his experiences of hand-holding unfolded, and make inferences about the "rules" and meanings behind different aspects of hand-holding. Although this inductive method made hand-holding less confusing for Geoff, he was still

left with frustration at times when the exact reasoning behind hand-holding behaviours weren't clear in the moment. In contrast, Jeremy articulated the ways in which him and his partner used a blend of codes and intuition to regulate their hand-holding:

My partner and I have this hand-holding code . . . We'll hold hands, and then we'll whisper "not safe, not safe." And we'll stop holding hands, and sometimes it's in a joking way . . . or sometimes it is more of a reflection of our environment . . . maybe some straight-looking people that we don't know, or it's a place we don't know . . . or maybe it's dark, or maybe we're turning a corner . . . and we'll stop holding hands for a bit, and then start holding hands again. . . . We won't ask for clarification every time . . . It's sort of like "okay you're done with this right now," or "there's something going on with you." (Jeremy, 26)

Jeremy's hand-holding code enabled him to quickly communicate a clear desire to stop holding-hands in the moment. Additionally, this code was used in nuanced ways depending on how, when, and where it was said. In this way, the code also acted as a tool to orient the other partner to something in the shared environment. Despite the higher clarity Jeremy was able to achieve using this method compared to Geoff, he reveals that there are still times where the request is understood but the underlying reason remains unknown in the moment. What is clear, is that in both Geoff and Jeremy's examples, even with a predetermined way to navigate hand-holding, environmental pressures and timing sometimes prevented detailed verbal communication about hand-holding between partners.

#### **4.4.3. Verbal Communication**

##### ***Initiation & Termination of Hand-Holding***

While some participants spoke about feelings and expectations around hand-holding ahead of time, some participants described how for first-time experiences with someone new, or in order to adjust previous patterns of behaviour, more explicit verbal communication was used. As an illustration, Thomas described the first time he held hands with his boyfriend before they had started dating:

I asked if he was okay to hold hands and it was okay. . . . [I was] kind of nervous. [I thought] "I hope I don't come off as a weirdo for asking." . . . [I said] "would you mind [holding hands] even if we're not dating yet or anything, is that okay with you?" . . . being able to hold hands after calmed any fear that I had there. (Thomas, 25)

Thomas' story stresses his anxiety with the uncertainty he had about his boyfriend's receptivity to hand-holding prior to asking. In this way, asking verbally to hold hands served to gather more precise information under new circumstances where norms about hand-holding were unclear. Similarly, Geoff had difficulty knowing how to express his discomfort holding hands on a first date:

I wanted to let go, but I also didn't want to make him think I'm letting go because I don't want to hold hands. It's not that, it's the surrounding. . . . I told him "I'm not really comfortable with this." And so that's when we stopped. . . . [It was] in the food court in the mall. We sat down at some tables, and it was somewhat closed off. So I felt I could bring it up. When we were just in public, I didn't know if I could say anything, I didn't know what to say. (Geoff, 23)

The novelty of a new hand-holding partner made it difficult for Geoff to know how to manage the impression he might give to someone he was still becoming acquainted with when they were in a public space. For this reason, Geoff waited until they were in a more private area and he could clearly verbalize his feelings and not give an inaccurate impression. By contrast, Andrew shared how his partner communicated with him to reconfigure an existing norm:

I can remember reaching for his hand, and him saying "uh, I just don't feel like it" . . . I don't think it had anything to do with our relationship particularly, because it felt as if our relationship otherwise was fine . . . I felt pretty rejected, and just sort of confused as to why, after being so comfortable with it, for quite a long time . . . [I felt] disappointment, and [was] wondering what had changed and why. (Andrew, 54)

Even though Andrew's partner verbally communicated with him to the degree that their hand-holding behaviour changed, the communication did not elucidate any reason or meaning. As a result, Andrew was left to interpret the request on his own, and was left feeling rejected and confused. In all, participants' use of verbal communication underscores how speaking about hand-holding was used as a way to establish new shared understandings, clarify intentions, and modify existing norms.

### ***Debriefing***

Some participants who experienced discriminatory incidents used verbal communication in different ways to debrief following the incident. For Zach, he and his boyfriend debriefed in a manner that explored their feelings and relationship:

I was like "no we're good . . . we're just holding hands. . . . I just wanted to let him know that it was okay. . . . we were doing nothing wrong, and that I don't care what he just said . . . We were talking to each other about the thing, but we were also holding hands again. Partly to . . . comfort each other . . . Like "I've got you. We're together, it's not like you went through that by yourself . . . So it's not like we were just trying to move past it and forget it ever happened. But at the same time, acknowledging it, then resuming where we were . . . We felt comforted just by the conversation I think. (Zach, 25)

Zach's description features the tension he felt between allowing the incident to overcome him, and denying any feelings he or his boyfriend had in response to the incident. In addition, Zach took the initiative of reaffirming the shared reality of their righteousness. In these ways, Zach and his boyfriend verbally debriefed as a way to self-regulate, process the incident, and affirm in a united meaning. Kristie's debriefing of a homonegative incident with an ex-boyfriend shared some similar structural elements, but was less co-constructed:

[We] definitely continued to hold hands. . . . [I told] the guy I was seeing "oh, all good. Whatever. No big deal." Just like reassuring him that it's all fine. . . . [We had] a bit of a discussion. . . . He was affected by it, not in a positive way. . . . It was just more encouragement in that discussion . . . saying that really, "they're just words. Those sort of words don't affect me. So you know, if I can do it, you can do it." He did need more encouragement though. . . . [I] was just like "this doesn't bother me at all." I actually asked his opinion like "why does it affect you?" . . . I feel like "hey, you don't need to let that affect you. I don't let it. So you can do it too." (Kristie, 33)

Akin to Zach's encounter, Kristie made an attempt to comfort his boyfriend and regulate the situation. However, unlike Zach, Kristie did not describe a balancing between processing feelings and preventing the incident from overtaking him. Rather, he asserts being emotionally unaffected from the beginning of the aftermath, and questions why his boyfriend would allow the incident to affect him if he could remain unaffected. Simply put, Kristie's experience differs from Zach's in that Kristie tries to assert a meaning onto the situation quickly, whereas Zach blended processing feelings about his incident while co-constructing a shared meaning.

#### **4.4.4. Nonverbal Communication**

Participants voiced a variety of ways that they communicated about hand-holding nonverbally with their hand-holding partners. In fact, it was sometimes what was not said

in moments of silence that affected participants the most in how they experienced and made meaning of hand-holding. In a similar manner, many of the participants communicated with the Principal Investigator as an in-group member nonverbally or in nuanced ways that indicated an implied understanding of GBQ experience and culture.

### ***Silence and Initiation***

A pattern emerged among participants wherein nonverbal communication about the initiation of hand-holding tended to be remembered and construed positively. For example, Andrew saw his date initiating hand-holding with him on a first date as a form of communication in itself:

It felt like a form of communication. It's [like] him saying "I really like what we're doing, and I enjoy being with you." . . . it's in the context of this very new experience of . . . starting my first relationship with a guy. (Andrew, 54)

Thus, Andrew interpreted his date initiating the hand-holding as a commentary on their date so far, and how his date felt about him. Notably, the initiation of hand-holding in this illustration appears to signify a physical manifestation of Andrew's date's enjoyment of being with Andrew. Somewhat similarly, Zach describes how nonverbal communication intertwined with verbal communication the first time he held hands with a friend:

Since he is a friend and not my partner . . . we discussed boundaries . . . but there [was] a lot of room to see what would happen . . . there was a little bit of surprise at first . . . I did actually say "oh okay, I like that" . . . And then we both laughed, and then we looked at each other for a moment . . . during that [gaze] . . . it's more than just friends. It's more like there's . . . some deeper connection there . . . Some kind of information was exchanged, I'm not exactly sure what it would have been. But we could tell that each other was enjoying the moment, like the expression that we gave each other, a little reassuring smile. Like "yeah I'm okay with this" . . . It was sort of like . . . partly confirmation that this is okay, and then partly like "oh well... (laughs)." (Zach, 25)

Zach sets the stage by indicating that although he is just friends with the hand-holding partner in this scenario, his mention of prior communication about latitude within that relationship leaves some excitement about the ambiguity of their nonverbal communication. While on one level Zach describes their gaze and smiles as an acknowledgement that the hand-holding is "okay," for them both, there is also the sense that they both may be "okay" with the ambiguity of the meaning behind the hand-holding

when Zach hints at a feeling of more than “just friends.” In this manner, Zach shows how different levels of communication may be blended in order to intentionally obfuscate what may be known with what is explicitly said while holding hands. Finally, Geoff explained how breadcrumbs of body language might be used by one hand-holding partner to encourage the initiation of hand-holding by another person:

I always try to get their permission first before anything . . . [but I] feel like there was some hints that he wanted to already, and [that] we were both sort of hinting at it, so it was consent sort of? [It was] like rubbing arms kind of closely, and like leaving [hands] open to hold. (Geoff, 23)

Geoff's story shows how body language may be used to passively invite hand-holding when one partner does not verbally want to request hand-holding. Although Geoff states that he normally would verbally ask to hold hands with another man, his depiction of a nonverbal invitation to hold hands emphasizes how nonverbal communication about the desire to hold hands is more indirect, but also enables the invitation to be missed or turned down indirectly. Above all, participants' examples of nonverbal behaviour around hand-holding calls attention to the ways that participants and their hand-holding partners may intentionally communicate passively or ambiguously.

### ***Silence and Letting Go***

Some of the participants talked about the ways that silence preceded or followed negatively-skewed emotions about hand-holding and letting go. Jeff shared the ways uncomfortable silence led him to let go of his date's hands:

We went out for dinner. . . . and we're sitting across the table, I'm trying to . . . just touch his hands. . . . And so we're just holding hands . . . not clasping, just kind of touching. . . . But he seemed really uncomfortable with that. . . . He physically didn't look comfortable. . . . I was very confused and it didn't seem like the right time or place to actually say "what's going on?" . . . . [Instead], I kind of retreated. I [thought] "okay I'm not going to press it," and grab his hand or anything like that. . . . I didn't know what the best solution was. (Jeff, 48)

Jeff's story highlights how his notion that his date's discomfort around their hand-holding was not appropriate to discuss in the restaurant drew a curtain of silence around the topic. In the absence of additional information, Jeff withdrew, giving the impression that he was doused in a mix of confusion, annoyance, and rejection about his partner's discomfort, and the feeling that the topic could not be discussed further in the moment.

In this way, it appears that Jeff “gave up,” after feeling as though he failed to find a way to proceed with his date’s discomfort. Rather than unanswered questions leading to the termination of hand-holding, Geoff was left with unanswered questions as him and his date stopped holding hands when their bus reached its stop:

[I] just wanted to know, was that okay for them? . . . That moment of separation, like are we not holding hands because they don't like me? Or is it because [we're more in] public? (Geoff, 23)

Although the end to their hand-holding was on the surface part of a neutral transition off a bus, Geoff’s questions fill in the void where conversation did not happen. Specifically, he was left with questions of self-doubt wondering if his date liked holding hands, and if his date liked him. Put another way, the undiscussed end to their hand-holding left Geoff wondering what the end might mean about his date’s feelings about him personally. This ambiguity about the termination of hand-holding took on a different flavour for Zach as he began to wonder about the reason for not resuming hand-holding when his friend broke their hand-holding to talk expressively with his hands:

He let go of my hand, so I was like "okay." And then he said his little thing, and I was really listening to him, but as he kept going I was distracted . . . [because] I was like, "oh, I miss holding the hand." It wasn't horrible or anything. . . . But there was the slight thought of "does he maybe not want to be holding hands as we go up to a more public area?" (Zach, 25)

At first, Zach is able to momentarily attribute the break in hand-holding to a natural interruption. However, as time passes, and Zach’s longing for continued hand-holding remains, questions emerge about his friend’s comfort with their change in environment. In comparison to Geoff, Zach’s search for an explanation in the absence of communication is directed toward external elements, whereas Geoff considered the possibility of both external and personal elements. Overall, silence surrounding hand-holding termination brings to light the tendency for analyses to skew negatively when there is no verbal communication about why hand-holding has stopped.

### ***Shared Tacit Knowledge of GBQ Experience***

During the course of the interviews, the Principal Investigator did not explicitly state their sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other personal information to participants. Rather, participants were left to make their own assumptions about the interviewer and their background. Remarkably, most participants did not ask the

Principal Investigator any questions about themselves or about the greater context or purpose of the research. However, during the interviews, many participants spoke in a manner which indicated that they believed there was shared tacit knowledge about their experience because they believed the Principal Investigator was GBQ. For example, the Principal Investigator asked Jeremy whom he might feel unsafe holding hands around and the following exchange ensued:

Jeremy: Probably younger men, yeah. And probably more than one of them, and probably straight-presenting.

Interviewer: And would they be saying anything or doing anything in particular or?

Jeremy: Not necessarily. Young men are scary! (laughs).

Interviewer: (Laughs). Yeah, I know what you're getting at, yeah. I'm just trying to extrapolate.

Jeremy: Yeah (laughs).

During this dialogue, Jeremy gave the Principal Investigator a knowing facial expression, as if to say “you know what I mean because you’re GBQ, I don’t need to say more for you to understand.” It can be seen above that when the Principal Investigator probed for further information beyond the initial sentence, Jeremy exclaimed in laughter: “young men are scary!” The tone of this statement went even further than the first, as if he was saying: “You know what I mean! Young men *just are* scary if you’re GBQ!” Following this exclamation, the Principal Investigator joined in the laughter and indicated they understood the tacit knowledge and went on to indicate that the explicit questions were meant to extrapolate details for the purposes of the research. Jeremy seemed to understand this explanation, perhaps in part because he is employed in a research-oriented occupation.

Although the above is just one example, there were many times that the Principal Investigator got the sense that participants would explain a part of an experience and then finish by looking at the Principal Investigator as if to say “you know what I mean, right?” Consequently, participants sometimes seemed mildly surprised or annoyed when the Principal Investigator asked them to explain something in more detail, or to articulate an experience further verbally. Indeed, it was almost as if the Principal Investigator had broken a cultural norm by asking for the presumably shared tacit knowledge to be

explained. In these instances, there was sometimes a tone to participants' further explanations that could be stated as: "You don't understand what I'm saying? Okay, I will explain, but I shouldn't have to explain this to you." Overall, this tone was mild, but it appeared that some participants were uncomfortable being asked to explain beyond what they felt was a shared tacit understanding.

## Chapter 5.

### Discussion

#### 5.1. Comparison of Findings to Current Literature

This study magnified findings in the current research and revealed additional understandings of how GBQ men experience hand-holding in public. Clearly, the emotions of the GBQ men in the study and their narratives were the primary area of concern for analysis. Participants' narratives illustrated the intricate mosaic of meaning and emotion in relation to dominant cultural narratives about hand-holding for GBQ men. Considering the multiple layers of meaning embedded in participants' narratives, the following analysis endeavours to parse the study's findings and compare them to the corpus of existent research.

##### 5.1.1. Meaning and Emotion: The Heart of Narrative

While the present research provided a more detailed account of GBQ men's emotions regarding their hand-holding than what currently exists in the literature, the emotions described by the participants in the study largely match what would be expected from reviewing the existing literature. In particular, utilizing an interview protocol informed by EFT (Greenberg, 2015) produced new insights into the constellation of emotions, thoughts and physiological responses weaved into participants' hand-holding narratives.

##### ***Emotional Relationship to Dominant Meanings of Hand-Holding***

Participants showed a range of ways they positioned against, or assumed themselves within, a utopian societal, romantic relational, and emotionally positive individual meaning of hand-holding in Western Canada. With each of these positions came a cascade of emotions and emotion schemes.

One of these emotion schemes was illustrated by how participants constructed Vancouver as a queer paradise in which they "should" feel safe and comfortable to hold hands. Although some participants simply felt a primary emotional response of anxiety or

fear around hand-holding, some participants also reported secondary feelings of shame, sadness or disappointment about their discomfort holding hands. Of course, researchers have found that the social expectancy to not feel negative emotions tends to increase negative emotions when people feel them (Bastian et al., 2012). However, additional research has indicated that people who experience low levels of negative emotionality and ascribe to a social expectancy to not feel negative emotion are often able to selectively circumvent negative emotional information (Bastian et al., 2017). Conversely, this same research has exhibited how those who experience high levels of negative emotionality and ascribe to a social expectancy to not feel negative emotions tend to actually focus on these emotions rather than avoid them (Bastian et al., 2017).

Considering the research on social expectancy and emotion (Bastian et al., 2012, 2017), it makes sense that some participants in the present study would have secondary reactive emotions of shame, sadness, or disappointment about their primary feelings of anxiety and fear. At least two levels of cultural social expectancy can be seen to influence participants' ideas about what they ought to feel. At base, Western cultures have been shown to place an intense emphasis on one needing to feel happy (Tsai et al., 2006). This notion was evidenced in some participants' general decrying of their anxious and/or fearful emotions about hand-holding. Furthermore, Meyer's (2017) critique of the IGB project showcased one way the Western persistence toward happiness is directed at LGBTQ individuals. Yet, one could argue that such a broad societal ideal is not an adequate level of scrutiny for describing the stories of the GBQ men in the current study. Rather, a closer intersectional level of analysis at Western LGBTQ cultural literature beyond Meyer's (2017) work on happiness narratives is crucial to illuminate particular factors that may have been influencing the social expectancies for participants.

Muñoz's (2019) idea of the "queer utopia" is a suitable place to start when thinking about how the affective components of Western LGBTQ culture may have influenced the GBQ men in the present study. Muñoz summarizes the functionality of a queer utopia as:

. . . a call to think about our lives and times differently, to look beyond a narrow version of the here and now on which so many around us who are bent on the normative count. Utopia [is] about an insistence on something else, something better, something dawning. . . . Aesthetic and political

practices that need to be seen as necessary modes of stepping out of this place and time to something fuller, vaster, more sensual, and brighter. From shared critical dissatisfaction we arrive at collective potentiality. (2019, p. 189)

Muñoz's impassioned call to action is meant to instill hope, and work toward a future which is more inclusive of diversity. One might be easily inspired by this utopian declaration and miss Muñoz's final suggestion to approach this utopia "from shared critical dissatisfaction" (2019, p. 189). Indeed, other scholars have argued that the rush toward a queer utopia, often centered on the affect of pride and its concomitants, is a focus which assumes a shame/pride binary that subsumes other emotional pathways and possibilities as affective outcasts (Halberstam, 2005; Rand, 2012). Specifically, Halberstam has contended that the affective push away from shame and toward pride represents a pointedly Western, White, and masculine attempt to rebuild perceived losses of privilege (2005). Rand's critique of an international HIV/AIDS political group, ACT UP, questions how the group's affective focus on pride as a mobilizing emotion positions feelings of shame as passive and unacceptable (2012). Moreover, Rand highlights how this shame/pride binary crystalizes the function, or potentiality, of shame as narrowly aimed toward pride (2012). Indeed, Rand goes so far as to argue: "to the extent that an "affective network" can be a source of collective power, it must also be understood to have the opposite effect: to exclude, to divide, and to marginalize" (2012, p. 77).

In this way, one can see how participants in the present study may not have had a cultural framework in which to understand or find their emotions of fear and anxiety about hand-holding as acceptable pieces of affective information. Certainly, viewing this cultural dynamic through the dialectical constructivist framework of EFT (Greenberg, 2010) underscores how emotion schemes are constituted at the intersection of an individual's history, present experience, and cultural context. Cavalcante reasoned that these queer utopian ideals of pride can be intensified and targeted in ways which were not previously possible due to the automated curation of individual's social media experiences (2019). Accordingly, Cavalcante terms this phenomenon a "queer vortex" in which LGBTQ individuals are fed LGBTQ-focused content that increasingly becomes more focused in messaging (2019). To illustrate, a social media diversity campaign focused a number of videos on the challenges LGBTQ couples have holding hands in public, and ended their primary video with the catchphrase "When you feel like letting go,

#HoldTight” (ANZ Australia, 2017a). Other related campaign videos included testimonials of straight and LGBTQ individuals describing how LGBTQ people should not have to be afraid of holding hands, and that the experience should be joyful, loving, and happy (ANZ Australia, 2017b). It is easy to imagine how a social media feed focused entirely on content with messages like those above could give siloed ideas about which emotions are acceptable to have for GBQ men when they are holding hands in public.

Despite this queer utopian consideration, not all participants in the present study had the same secondary emotions of shame, disappointment or sadness about their primary emotions of fear or anxiety. These differences suggest that some participants may have been less tightly bound to the “homonormative” (Rand, 2012) queer utopian ideals of pride than other participants. To address these differences, Cass’ (1979) Homosexual Identity Formation Model provides an avenue to appraise the topic further. The model is an LGBTQ developmental model which is currently in use by mental health practitioners (Kort, 2018) to understand how LGBTQ individuals develop their identities in relation to the overall, and LGBTQ, culture. Particularly, the fifth stage of this six-stage model, “identity pride,” is a plausible explanation for some participants’ secondary emotions of distress about their hand-holding (Cass, 1979). Cass describes this fifth stage as the period in which an LGBTQ person has accepted their sexual orientation as a piece of their identity, feels pride toward this identity, and feels belonging and loyalty to the LGBTQ community (1979). Others have noted that it is during this period which many LGBTQ individuals take on a more overt “activist” role toward LGBTQ issues and become engrossed in LGBTQ cultural ideals (Kort, 2018). Kort asserts that this fifth stage coincides with the public “coming out” of many LGBTQ individuals, and can be described as “gay adolescence in full force,” typically lasting two to three years (2018, p. 141). Although Cass’ model has continued to show clinical relevance, some have argued that the model is not inclusive enough of individuals’ intersecting identities (Kenney & Oswalt, 2014). For these reasons, there may be limited applicability of the Cass model to participants in the present study. Nonetheless, Cass’ model is one additional system by which the findings of the present study may be made more comprehensible.

To be clear, this analysis of participants’ relationship between the dominant LGBTQ culture and their hand-holding is not a covert argument against the encouragement of pride as an affective ideal. Rather, the analysis is an attempt to make

sense of participants' differing affective responses within their specific cultural context. In line with this thinking, Muñoz argues for a queer utopian perspective that is additive, not subsuming (2019). Meaning, queer utopian ideals which are accepting of diverse emotional experiences temporally bound to the present moment, and of those that are set as an ideal. Truly, this cultural framework aims to be accepting and curious about a range of emotion schemes and the different emotional pathways which are possible in each.

Conversely, participants' feelings of "naturalness" or "rightness" highlighted how experiences sited within dominant relational meanings contribute to how participants made meaning of their own wellbeing, and the emotions attached to this habitus. Predominantly, those who felt their hand-holding was "natural" or "right" did not report secondary emotional responses about their feelings of "naturalness" or "rightness." On the contrary, participants' descriptions of these experiences and feelings were more nebulous than those whose experiences fell outside the dominant queer utopian ideal. Arguing from her model of emotional critical self-reflection among minority groups, Flam remarks that "for many people, conversations become 'wired' in very specific ways, preventing them from thinking ahead or reflecting upon their selves as they [sic] 'really' are, could or should be" (2010, p. 198). Here, Flam observes that those who have an experience aligned with dominant narratives are inclined to engage in less self-reflection, and experience less complex emotional processes (2010). In opposition, those whose experience lies outside a dominant narrative may engage in deeper critical self-reflection which often remains silenced in the public sphere (Flam, 2010). However, Flam discerns that these silenced voices are likely to be externalized when in the presence of empathic and/or similar others (2010). Similarly, others have recognized similar dynamics with LGBTQ therapists/presenters and LGBTQ clients/participants (Kort, 2018). Considering these undercurrents of self-reflection, it is easier to understand why those whose hand-holding fell outside dominant narratives had clearer and multifaceted emotional descriptions compared to those who described hand-holding within a dominant narrative.

### ***The Anger-Shame Cycle: Further Considerations***

Participants' experiences of anger, frustration and shame about their hand-holding partly matched the interweaving of these emotions as described by Downs (2012) but did not account for the full swathe of this emotional configuration.

Distinctively, while participants experiences of anger, frustration and shame can be placed within Downs' (2012) three-stage model of shame, participants in the present study also brought in an awareness that they were responding to a larger homonegative/heterosexist society. In other words, the findings from this study indicate that GBQ men may be straddling the effects of internalized shame about their hand-holding and directing anger inward or outward while also recognizing that a heterosexist society has a role to play in their negative experiences. One could propose that this awareness of a heterosexist culture is a means for GBQ men to move toward Downs' (2012) third stage of shame in which an individual is able to see their inherent self-worth.

Yet, participants emotional responses of anger, frustration, and shame suggested that the intellectual awareness of an external oppressive source was not sufficient for participants to *feel* that this intellectual understanding was true. Simply stated, participants narratives emphasized that disconnects can exist between cognitive and emotional understandings of their hand-holding. Indeed, this cognitive and emotional disconnect is a common occurrence in experiences of trauma (Greenberg, 2015; Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Furthermore, Kort argues that for LGBTQ individuals, growing up in a heterosexist environment can be thought of as a form of trauma (2018). In this sense, it is apt to wonder how a felt sense of shame corresponded differently with intellectual awareness for each participant. Overall, the GBQ men in this study highlighted how the connections between anger, frustration, and shame are more nuanced than Downs originally proposed (2012).

### ***Fear: Based in Which Reality?***

Experiences of fear shared by participants supported the work of Fox and Asquith (2018). Particularly, participant experiences which fell under the two branches of fear about hand-holding were recounted during interviews: generalized fear with all hand-holding, and situational fear responding to existing threats. Generalized and situational fear was a prominent response when participants had a change of environment and/or feared discrimination while holding hands. In this sense, fear was an anticipatory emotion which usually propelled participants to change their behaviour—often disengaging from holding hands. Undoubtedly, the acronym FEAR: future events appearing real, is an accurate descriptor of the fear recounted by participants. These

anticipatory experiences of fear are in contrast to the shock, confusion, and anger that participants reported during and after discriminatory incidents.

Some participants responses suggested that they understood their fear while holding hands, and that while these emotions may have been uncomfortable, they felt the emotions were contextually appropriate. Contrariwise, other participants showed a pattern of fear in most or all of their hand-holding experiences. Despite some participants' fear being easier to categorize as either situational or generalized, it is difficult to determine unquestionably for each participant, and each experience, if they were sincerely responding to a plausible perceived threat in their environment. Therefore, what these experiences do reveal more distinctly is the spectre of discrimination in participants' emotion schemes. That is, participants attested to how past experiences of discrimination toward themselves or others informed their sense of fear when holding hands in public. This finding mirrors other research which shows that past instances of personal discrimination over a lifetime can act to cumulatively increase an individual's fear of discrimination (Fox & Asquith, 2018).

More broadly, one could wonder how a participant's awareness of themselves as a social actor submersed in structural stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2014) or minority stress (Meyer, 2003), and an awareness of rates of LGBTQ discrimination (Katz-Wise & Hyde, 2012), might affect the genesis of fear. Although participants' fear was not quantified for the present study, awareness of heterosexism and discrimination in a given society does seem to have a positive correlation with fear (de Oliveira et al., 2013; Fox & Asquith, 2018). Hence, it is probable that the GBQ men in the current study were affected to different degrees by more macroscopic elements when fear was associated with hand-holding. In a related manner, Cavalcante's (2019) concept of the queer vortex is relevant in thinking about how participants' social media feeds, which likely include content curated on a global scale, may be influencing their fear of hand-holding locally. As an illustration, an imaginative video about the discrimination faced by two men holding hands in Glasgow, Scotland (BBC The Social, 2018) appeared in the Principal Investigator's social media feed the day the video was released. One could reasonably ask to what degree a video like this reflects the realities of both Glasgow and Vancouver, and to what degree do videos such as this effect how participants in the present study experience fear when holding hands in Vancouver? While the answers to these questions remain unknown in exactitude, they highlight how participants' fears about

hand-holding may be based on a multitude of factors. Above all, this combination of an individual's personal history, cultural context, and perceptions testify to the dialectical constructivist nature of emotion offered by Greenberg (2015).

### ***Playfulness and Excitement: Emotions of a New Encounter***

An assemblage of specific emotions were paired with experiences in which participants reported feeling safe or comfortable while holding hands. Specifically, some of the GBQ men in the study described feelings of playfulness and excitement when they felt safe holding hands. These emotions can be organized into broader perceptual frameworks called action systems. Action systems are the perceptual amalgamation of physiological, emotional and cognitive processes which orient an individual toward their environment and prepare them to enact a corresponding behaviour (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). The findings from the present study are congruent with research which has shown how human action systems fall into two main categories: those that defend an individual against threat, and those that aid in the operation of nonthreatening daily life (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). The playfulness, excitement, comfort, and safety described by participants would fall under nonthreatening action systems. This categorization is an important distinction, because these two principal categories of action systems are mutually exclusive: when any of the threatening action systems are activated, nonthreatening action systems are not active, and vice versa (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). For the purposes of the study at hand, this division paints a way to think about the bundle of emotions described by participants when they did or did not perceive threat during hand-holding.

Of the eight action systems accounted for by Ogden and Fisher (2015), the play and exploration action systems are relevant for discussing participants' feelings of playfulness, excitement and comfort. While these two action systems tend to co-occur, they are associated with distinct brain pathways and parts of experience (Panksepp, 1998). As an example, the exploration action system is linked to curiosity, exploration and seeking, whereas the play action system is linked to spontaneity, humour, and excitement (Panksepp, 1998). Regularly, these two systems work cyclically, with exploration leading to play which leads to further exploration and so on (Panksepp, 1998). Participants' hand-holding descriptions often met these descriptions of the exploration or play action systems when they also described feeling safe. Even in

instances where participants did not report feeling safe, if they reported playfulness or excitement, it would be reasonable to assume they were also feeling nonthreatened (Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Panksepp, 1998).

While categorizing participants' excitement and playfulness into neatly ordered action systems creates a tidy description of these experiences, how a sense of safety arose for participants in these instances is another important point of inquiry. To start, participants' narratives of excitement and playfulness were habitually shared in relation to first experiences of hand-holding and/or new romantic relationships with other men. Yes, participants' individual histories of attachment in various relationships would have set a baseline for how easily different participants felt safe with a new partner (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). Yet, past research has stressed how the meaning given to ambiguous physiological arousal can change given the cues one orients to in their environment (Dutton & Aron, 1974). In this way, it is plausible that the dominant relational meaning of hand-holding for participants acted as a way to contain heightened physiological arousal into a framework of meaning in the absence of overt threat. Once given this meaning, participants may have been locked into recurrent emotional patterns of the exploration and play action systems. Without doubt, participants did report a disengagement from these patterns when an explicit threat arose such as discrimination, or a change of setting induced a more examined reorientation to environment. Nevertheless, participants' narratives outlined how new experiences of hand-holding often coincided with excitement, playfulness, comfort and safety.

### **5.1.2. Rethinking Couple Dynamics**

The findings from this study expand upon and contest aspects in QBG romantic relationships previously detailed in the literature (Allan & Johnson, 2017; Gottman et al., 2003; Kort, 2018; Pepping et al., 2019). In particular, participants' descriptions of their relational interactions when navigating hand-holding challenges provide new considerations for GBQ men's relationship dynamics.

#### ***Caregiving in Moments of Distress***

Participants' recounting of moments in which they were distressed or scared give further consideration to how the stresses of a broader heterosexist society (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Hatzenbuehler, 2014), or specific incidents of threat can influence how

couples care for each other. Looking at the two overt instances of discrimination toward participants reported in the results, one can see how the responses of participants to their hand-holding partners differed. On the one hand, Zach described an aftermath in which he attempted to soothe his partner through conversational empathy. On the other hand, Kristie conveyed an aftermath in which he attempted to remedy the situation by questioning his partner's emotional fortitude. Comparing these two examples, one gets the sense that Kristie was attempting to contain their partner in an effort to contain themselves, whereas it appeared that Zach bracketed their own self-regulation while attempting to respond to the needs of their partner. Although both participants made attempts to alleviate distress, the employment of different strategies requires further attention.

The caregiving action system described by Ogden and Fisher (2015) is a fitting framework to begin examining how participants acted toward their hand-holding partners in moments of distress. This system encapsulates caring and protecting emotions which are described as "subtle, warm and soft" (Panksepp, 1998, p. 247). Like the action systems described previously, the caregiving action system is mutually exclusive to action systems associated with threat. To this end, it is fair to theorize that the difference between the two participants' responses above are a result of the different degrees to which each participant was able to regulate their own emotions in the aftermath of a discriminatory incident and reorient to caring for their partner. Compared to other action systems, the development of the caregiving action system is highly influenced by attachment experiences to caregivers in early life (Ogden & Fisher, 2015; Panksepp, 1998). Additionally, each participant's prior history with discrimination, minority stress (Meyer, 2003), and larger relationship with societal heterosexism (Hatzenbuehler, 2014), is likely to have affected participants' abilities to respond to their partners (and themselves) in a caring manner (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Pepping et al., 2019). In sum, evaluating participants' interactions with their partners in moments of distress gives an additional example of how stigma may be a factor in effecting GBQ men's ability to regulate emotions (Burton et al., 2018), and thus, their ability to care for their partners.

### ***Physiological Soothing: Under Which Circumstances?***

As many of the participants' narratives indicated, hand-holding presents a dilemma for GBQ men compared to heterosexuals: an activity which many participants

desired to be a way of connecting with their partner could be fraught with anxiety. This reality presented a challenge for participants who may have already been in distress about an unrelated issue, and felt that comforting hand-holding was not an option available to them because it would induce further uneasiness. To compare, research has shown that hand-holding for heterosexual couples in highly satisfactory relationships has a particularly powerful effect in regulating neuronal responses to threat (Coan et al., 2006). This study is cited in two popular forms of couple therapy, Gottman Method Couple Therapy (Bradley et al., 2011), and Emotionally Focused Couple Therapy (Johnson et al., 2013), as an example of the importance that physical affection plays in romantic relationships. Yet, these therapeutic recommendations do not consider how the implementation of physical affection may differ for nonheterosexual couples. Undeniably, one can see how in the extreme, the perceived removal of hand-holding as an option for GBQ men may be an antecedent to, and consequence of, relationship distress which persists in a recurrent downward spiral (Frost & Meyer, 2009). In this way, the present study highlights how GBQ men may be negatively affected by barriers to hand-holding because of their reduced access to relationship-maintenance behaviours.

### ***Silence in the Chasm: Navigating Different Levels of Outness***

Different levels of outness presented a relational impediment for communication about hand-holding in public. In particular, this study expands upon the ways that internalized homonegativity and identity concealment may manifest in nonheterosexual couple interactions (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Kort, 2018; Pepping et al., 2019). Participants shared a range of emotions which were associated with trying to figure out hand-holding when each partner had a different level of outness. These emotions included anger, confusion, sadness, trepidation, and anxiety. In a related sense, participants reported “mixed” feelings of understanding and compassion for their partners with the aforementioned emotions. These “mixed” emotions can be understood as instrumental or secondary emotions (Greenberg, 2015). Specifically, participants often talked about feeling “understanding” or “compassion” for their partners who were less out after first talking about more “negative” emotions. Given the previously discussed emphasis which Western societies place on the social acceptability of “positive” emotions (Tsai et al., 2006), it is reasonable to theorize that some participants’ after-the-fact testimonies of understanding and compassion could be classified as personally preferred secondary emotions, or instrumental emotions reported for social acceptability (Greenberg, 2015).

There was a common backdrop to many of the above emotions: silence. A major theme among couples with different levels of outness was the silent suffering that seemed to be common. This silence was reported by participants who were silent themselves, and from participants who observed their partners struggling silently. Identifying this leitmotif of silence is important because it provides an example which further amplifies existing findings. Particularly, that the more one conceals their identity, due to internalized homonegativity or other perceived consequences, the more one tends to emotionally and interpersonally conceal other aspects of themselves from others (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014). Accordingly, silence around hand-holding for GBQ men can be seen as one way in which they may close themselves off to others and contribute to a poisonously recurrent cycle which undermines their wellbeing and isolates them from those around them (Newheiser & Barreto, 2014).

## **5.2. Implications for Counselling**

The counselling implications from this study reach into two branches: couple counselling, and individual counselling. For couple counselling, this study has brought into awareness the underpinnings of heterosexism and internalized homonegativity in relationship challenges, and identified additional barriers that GBQ couples may face during hand-holding distress. For individual counselling, the present study has distinguished specific emotional areas where GBQ men may face obstacles with hand-holding.

### **5.2.1. Couple Counselling**

The key consideration for couple counselling which can be taken from this study is that GBQ couples may benefit from understanding the broader societal influences which are affecting their relationship, and how to cope with these effects. Indeed, Pepping and colleagues note that “exploring the potential impact of internalized homonegativity on relationship processes and outcomes, as well as highlighting the external origins of internalized homonegativity, may be a useful focus for some same-sex couples in [relationship education] and couple therapy” (2019, p. 105). Specifically in regard to the present study, couples could benefit from psychoeducation that highlights

the effects of internalized homonegativity, heterosexism, identity concealment, and emotion regulation on relationship-maintenance behaviours such as hand-holding.

Furthermore, couples could be encouraged to explore dyadic coping as a means to integrate hand-holding into their relationship when safe, and/or consider other ways to comfort each other in moments of distress when hand-holding may not be a safe option. Dyadic coping is based on research which has shown that same-sex couples who are able to confront stressful life events jointly as a couple are able to attenuate some of the effects of discrimination (Whitton et al., 2016). This dyadic encouragement is also known as “we-ness” in couple therapy research, and has been shown to be a predictor of a couple’s resiliency (Buehlman et al., 1992). In this manner, the present study highlights how increasing a couple’s mutuality by encouraging dyadic coping, and highlighting communicative silence around topics such as hand-holding, could be therapeutically beneficial for GBQ couples.

### **5.2.2. Individual Counselling**

Primarily, the individual therapeutic value of this research is that it brings attention to the spheres in which GBQ men may confront difficulties with understanding and accepting their emotions related to hand-holding. This therapeutic engagement with emotions could be focused on understanding and effectively utilizing “negative” and “positive” emotions. EFT would be a suitable system for approaching these topics with GBQ men in therapy. Psychoeducation about the functional ways emotions operate, and their associated needs, could be an effective way for GBQ men to make sense of the emotions associated with their hand-holding experiences (Greenberg, 2015). In particular, this approach could alleviate the distress some GBQ men have about their emotional experiences by exploring their emotions from a utilitarian perspective instead of a culturally normative perspective. Put another way, this type of psychoeducation about emotions could help clients understand their emotions as information which is telling them something about their personal history, cultural context, and the present moment (Greenberg, 2010). Moreover, this type of exploration may also lead clients toward processing past distressing experiences and benefiting from stress-related growth (Wang et al., 2016). Ultimately, the findings from this study provides mental health practitioners additional considerations for how emotional patterns may emerge for GBQ men in counselling.

## **5.3. Study Limitations and Challenges**

The present study's limitations and challenges can be summarized into two main areas: methodological challenges with the interview protocol and limitations due to the participant population sampled. While these two categories are analysed separately, it is evident below that the methodological challenges were likely in part due to the distinctive characteristics of restricting the study to a GBQ male sample.

### **5.3.1. Methodological Difficulties**

Although all participants were able to articulate basic emotions and describe some corresponding somatic elements, many of the participants had difficulty formulating a narrative about their physiological sensations. Truthfully, it was common for participants to describe their thoughts when initially prompted to describe their emotions or physiological sensations. To be sure, practitioners of process-oriented therapies have noted that the ability to articulate a physiological feeling with a commensurate word from one's emotional vocabulary is a base skill that must be learned by many clients in therapy (Gendlin, 2018; Greenberg, 2010). Moreover, in his therapeutic work with GBQ men, Kort explains that it is common for clients to have difficulty verbalizing and understanding their emotions (2018). Instead, Kort notes that men are more prone to cognitive descriptions which emphasize thoughts and minimize emotions (2018). A body of research exists which postulates that this generalized gender difference is primarily the result of cultural gender ideals which guide men toward the masculine ideal of rational thought and away from the perceived feminine proclivity for emotionality (Kimmel, 2008).

Yet, it is an oversimplification to end at attributing emotional processing and articulating to the general framework of "cultural gender roles." Indeed, Connell and Messerschmidt contend that "it is men's and boys' practical relationships to collective images or models of masculinity, rather than simple reflections of them, that is central to understanding gendered consequences" (2005, p. 840). Meaning in the context of the present study, that each participant had a particular relationship with cultural ideals of masculinity, and this relationship was expressed uniquely for each participant. Furthermore, Wetherell and Edley argue that hegemonically masculine norms are enacted tactically to establish one's position within a discourse (1999). In other words,

men may align with or distance themselves from specific masculine ideals depending on their perceived interactional needs in any given situation. Wetherell and Edley argue that this understanding of men's relationship with hegemonic masculine norms enables men to navigate the multiple and sometimes contradicting ideals of masculinity in an adaptive manner (1999). Given this framing of masculinity, one might ask how aware participants actually were of an emotion, and how they then chose to engage with this awareness depending on their positionality within a fluid hegemonic masculine discourse.

Regardless of the reasons for participants' barriers engaging with emotion, the study did not account for the extent to which many participants had difficulties understanding the distinction between an emotion and thought, articulating emotions, and describing physiological sensations. Accordingly, an interview preamble which gave a short psychoeducational explanation of thoughts, emotions and how to focus on somatic elements may have increased participants' understanding of the interview protocol and generated more detailed emotional narratives of their hand-holding experiences. Further, modifying the language of the interview protocol to account for participant discomfort discussing emotions and bodily sensations may have increased participant comfort and yielded more detailed responses.

### **5.3.2. Participants**

Although the detail of this research may have been increased by limiting the scope to GBQ men, there are also transferability limitations which result from demographically constraining the study. For example, examination of two-spirit individuals' experiences of hand-holding was absent because it would have been unsuitable to examine these experiences through a Western lens (Ristock et al., 2010). As such, results from this research are not easily transferable for two-spirit populations. Likewise, these transferability constraints apply to other gender or sexual minority groups who would have been negated from inclusion in the study.

Despite two of the participants in the present study identifying as transgender, transferability of this research may also be limited regarding transgender men's hand-holding experiences for two reasons. One, the number of transgender men in the study was small: a comparison of two individuals. Two, and more importantly, the scope of the study was not focused on eliciting the potentially unique experiences of transgender

men. Beyond the demographics collection at the start of the study, there were no specific prompts in the interview protocol that asked participants to talk about their identity in relation to their experiences of hand-holding. Even though the interviews were semi-structured, and participants were free to speak about their identities in relation to their experiences, it may have been the case that the transgender men in the study were not comfortable, or unsure of sharing more about their identities, because they were not explicitly asked throughout the interview. On the other hand, one could argue that the transgender men in this study simply felt they were being treated as fellow GBQ men by the Principal Investigator, and thus did not feel the desire to greatly differentiate their experiences as distinctively transgender. To this end, the transferability of this study for other transgender men's experiences of hand-holding may be limited because it did not go into the further details of what may make these experiences similar or different than cisgender GBQ men.

A final limitation of the participant pool in the present study was the age of the GBQ men interviewed. Most of the men interviewed for the study were in their twenties, with only one man in their forties, and one in their fifties. Understandably, the skew of participants toward men in their twenties also binds the transferability of the study toward that age demographic. Moreover, it is important to note that age can be thought of within Cass' identity model (Cass, 1979) and that a GBQ man's "age" according to this model is a strong predictor of their experiences (Kort, 2018). Because the two oldest men in the study also came out later in life, their "age" according to Cass' model may mean that their experiences more closely resemble other men in the study who also came out within the recent past. Furthermore, it is possible that the study was skewed toward men in a particular stage of Cass' identity model because men in that particular stage were more drawn to participating in research focused on hand-holding experiences. If this is the case, it is probable that men in stage five of Cass' identity model—identity pride—would be attracted to participating in the study because men during this stage are generally the most interested in being vocal about their GBQ identity and engaging in LGBTQ-related activities (Cass, 1979; Kort, 2018). Of course, one could argue that Cass' identity model is simplistic because it appears to negate the effects of other life experience for the participants who did come out later in life. While these limitations about "age" are speculative, Kort's clinical work with GBQ men highlight that for some men who come out later in life, experiences and relationships associated with their GBQ

identity do match what would be developmentally expected from a younger man to a surprising degree (2018). For all of these reasons, the study may not be transferable to GBQ men who are in their thirties or older and/or been out for a significant period of time.

## **5.4. Strengths**

Despite the limitations listed already, this study benefits from a meshing of methodological, theoretical, and practical strengths. First, a primary strength of this study is the rigour of the methodology. Again, this rigour was detailed previously in articulating how this study established trustworthiness. In particular, this rigour was initially established by means of a thorough understanding of the literature and theories which informed this research. From these understandings, and the Principal Investigator's past experience, research-informed decisions were made about the research methodology and analysis. This studied approach enhanced the discernment of the data. Moreover, this data resulted from having a sample size that provided a saturated understanding of hand-holding. In all, the overall rigour of this study is a strength that is supported by its trustworthiness.

A second strength of this study was the purposeful blend of EFT and narrative inquiry into the research methodology and analysis. The blending of these two views meant that a comprehensive understanding was required of both domains' ontological and epistemological underpinnings. The benefit of this deep understanding was increased comprehension of each perspective independently, and an awareness of how this match enhanced the depth of the research. Specifically, employing EFT acted as a way to knowingly amplify the emergence of emotional, cognitive, and somatic details within the framework of narrative inquiry. Consequently, this high level of theoretical understanding resulted in an approach which was befitting of the research topic, and resulted in rich data.

Lastly, the Principal Investigator's roles as both researcher and clinician in the field of counselling psychology was a strength for integrating the technical aspects of research with the interpersonal details of interviewing. This merging meant that there was a research-informed approach to the topic of hand-holding while also understanding the high level of empathy and listening required to unearth the nuance in participants'

narratives. Moreover, these two roles informed the Principal Investigator's understanding of how to deliberately and ethically create a sense of trust, comfort, and safety. The desired effects of this environmental tone were to maintain participants' own wellbeing, and facilitate an environment that would increase participants' willingness to share their narratives. Indeed, at the end of interviews, many of the participants commented that they felt good after sharing their stories, and had gained new insights.

## **5.5. Future Research**

Future research could benefit from addressing the methodological challenges of the current study, comparing other populations' experiences of hand-holding, and focusing more on the dynamics of couples. First, future research implementing similar EFT-informed interview protocols may benefit from first providing a short psychoeducational exercise on the function of emotions and how to identify emotions from an EFT perspective. This intervention prior to conducting interviews could ease some of the challenges participants in the present study had with understanding how to articulate their emotions. Second, focusing hand-holding research on other populations, such as lesbian, bisexual and/or queer women could highlight how other populations experience hand-holding similarly or differently from GBQ men. Lastly, future research could use a similar inquiry method to the current study, but instead focus on couples. Shifting the focus of future investigations onto couples could give further insight into some of the dynamics that emerged in the current study through individual interviews. In short, future research could expand the findings of the present research by modifying this study's methodology and expanding the populations of individuals and relationships studied.

## **5.6. Conclusion**

This research strived to unearth the ways that GBQ men made meaning of their hand-holding experiences, with a particular focus on the emotions rooted in their narratives. Indeed, even the most robust examples of the existing LGBTQ literature have routinely delineated imprecise descriptions of everyday LGBTQ experiences. Although there are limitations to the scope of the present study, it is in part due to its limited scope that meticulous narratives of GBQ hand-holding experiences were possible. Moreover,

this level of scrutiny was made feasible through the selection of narrative inquiry and EFT as theoretical bases from which to conduct and understand this research. These apposite theoretical frameworks enabled an appreciation of the means through which dominant meanings intersected with participants' individual spheres to form the specific meaning fashioned by each of the GBQ men in this study. In particular, their stories displayed how reported emotional complexity increased for many participants the further they found their individual experiences from dominant meanings. In a related manner, this study has expanded insights into how heterosexism and internalized homonegativity may influence the wellbeing of GBQ men and their relationships. With these considerations in mind, counsellors could benefit from these findings by drawing attention to the effects of stigma in their client's lives, and work acceptingly with the range of emotions which have been shown in this study. Thereupon, clients may be able to see how their experiences are located within a larger narrative, and feel that the meaning and emotions of their hand-holding serves a worthy function within their own lives.

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## Appendix A.

### Recruitment Poster



The poster features a blue background. In the top left, there is a red and white logo for SFU Faculty of Education, with the ethics number 2019s0182 below it. A large white speech bubble on the right contains the main question. Below the speech bubble, there are two white silhouettes of men holding hands. To the right of the silhouettes, there are three paragraphs of text and a note at the bottom.

**SFU**  
**FACULTY OF**  
**EDUCATION**

Ethics # 2019s0182

Are you a guy  
aged 19 or older  
who has held  
hands with  
another guy in  
public?

Researchers at Simon Fraser University are interested in better understanding your experiences of holding hands in public.

If you are a gay, bi or queer man\* aged 19 or older who has held hands with another man in public before, and are open to discussing your experiences, we are inviting you to share your stories. The initial interview takes approximately 1 - 2 hours and will require a follow-up interview within a few months of the initial interview.

You will be paid \$20 for participating in the study.

For further information, or to book an interview, please email:

\*self-identified men/trans inclusive

## Appendix B.

### Informed Consent

**Study Title:** *Men's Experiences of Holding Other Men's Hands in Public*

#### ***Who is conducting this study?***

- **Principal Investigator:** Jordan Gruenhage, Faculty of Education.
- **Faculty Supervisor:** Sharalyn Jordan, PhD

This form provides an overview of the study and the details of your participation. Please ask any questions you may have while reviewing this form. Your participation is voluntary, and you can choose to end your participation at any time.

#### ***Why are we doing this study?***

We are doing this study to better understand gay, bisexual and queer (GBQ) men's experiences of holding hands in public. Your participation in this study will help the research team investigate this topic.

#### **Your participation is voluntary**

Your participation is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you may still choose to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences to the education, employment, or other services to which you are entitled or are presently receiving.

#### ***How is the study done?***

If you agree to participate in this study, you will have an audio-recorded interview with the Principal Investigator lasting between 1-2 hours. During the interview we will ask you to fill out a demographics form, and about your experiences of holding hands in public.

In the three months following the initial interview, you will be contacted to review the interview and answer any follow-up questions with the principal investigator. The follow-up contact will last approximately 30 minutes.

#### ***Is there any way being in this study could be bad for you?***

There is low emotional risk if you choose to participate in this study. You may experience some negative emotions during or after discussing your experiences of holding hands. If at any point during the study you do not feel comfortable answering a

question, you do not have to answer the question, and you do not have to provide a reasoning. In addition, you will be provided with a list of counselling resources for if you are in distress after the interview. Please let one of the researchers know if you have any concerns at any point during the study.

### ***What are the benefits of participating?***

You may or may not benefit from participating in this study. You may find that it is beneficial to explore your experiences of hand holding and that you develop new insight into these experiences. In addition, the findings of this study could be useful in supporting other GBQ men in counselling or other health settings.

### ***Will you be paid for taking part in this research study?***

You will be paid \$20 for participating in this study. If you choose to withdraw from the study at any point, you will still be paid for participating.

### ***How will your privacy and identity be protected?***

Your confidentiality will be respected. Only the Principal Investigator and the Faculty Supervisor of this study will have access to study data. Although every measure will be taken to ensure your information is kept private, the confidentiality of communication through electronic channels such as email or telephone cannot be guaranteed.

To ensure your privacy, your interview data will be coded using a pseudonym of your choice. Documents or materials with your real name will be kept separately from study data. If you have any further personal information, such as your age or occupation, which you do not want included in the study results, you are not required to offer this information when completing the demographics form.

Audio from interviews will be recorded and stored on a digital voice recorder. Once transcription and data analysis of the audio recording is completed, the audio recording will be deleted completely.

Any information gathered from participants who withdraw from the study will be destroyed immediately. However, finalized transcripts and data analysis will be stored on an encrypted USB drive for seven years after the completion of the study and may be used for secondary analysis or future research. Similarly, the finalized transcripts and data analysis from the study will be stored indefinitely on an online data repository. This data repository fosters best practices in research by allowing other researchers to request access to the finalized study data for review and to inform additional research.

Identifiable information will only be made public with your permission, or if required by Canadian law. For example, if you tell the researchers that you plan to harm yourself or

others, the researchers will report this information to the appropriate authorities.

***How will the results of this study be used?***

This study is being completed as part of a graduate thesis. This means that the results of the study will be publicly available once the study is completed. In addition, the findings may be communicated in academic or nonacademic mediums (e.g. journal articles, books, presentations, and/or news articles).

***Who can you contact if I have any questions about the study?***

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Principal Investigator, Jordan Gruenhagen

***Who can you contact if you have complaints or concerns about the study?***

If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant and/or your experiences while participating in this study, you may contact Dr. Jeffrey Toward, Director, Office of Research Ethics

## Future Contact

We would like to contact you via email in the following months to ask additional questions about the interview, for feedback on our analyses, and provide the results of the study.

Yes     No    *I may be contacted to answer additional questions after the interview.*

Yes     No    *I would liked a copy of the final results.*

Yes     No    *I may be contacted for interest in future studies.*

## Consent

Taking part in this study is entirely up to you. You have the right to refuse to participate in this study. If you decide to take part, you may choose to pull out of the study at any time without giving a reason and without any negative impact

- Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.
- Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.
- You do not waive any of your legal rights by participating in this study.

---

Participant Signature

Signature Date (YYYY/MM/DD)

---

Printed Name of the Participant Signing Above

## Appendix C.

### Demographics Form

**Study Title:** *Men's Experiences of Holdings Other Men's Hands in Public*

The purpose of this form is to collect and visually show some of the demographic information which you feel is important for us to know about. You are not required to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and will not be asked to provide a reasoning. Please ask the researcher if you have any questions while completing this form.

When writing your information, you may write the information anywhere below. You may want to group certain information together or apart, connect some information with arrows or lines, and/or write answers in different styles or sizes. While you are writing your information, and once you are finished writing your information, the researcher will ask a few questions about what is important for us to know about what you have written. Below are some ideas for the information which you may feel is important to provide. Please feel free to add any additional information you would like to add.

- Age
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender
- Occupation
- Currently Partnered?
- Ethnicity/Race
- Education
- Living Situation
- Family/Children
- Language(s)
- Other Important Aspects?

# Appendix D.

## Interview Protocol

### Central Research Question:

- *How do gay, bisexual, and queer (GBQ) men narrate their experiences of holding hands in public?*

### Subquestions:

- *How do GBQ men make meaning of the periods just prior, during, and after holding hands in public?*
- *How do GBQ men make meaning of their decision to hold hands in public?*
- *What are the emotions GBQ men experience when holding hands in public?*
- *What are the thoughts GBQ men experience associated with holding hands in public?*
- *How do GBQ men make meaning of their decision to stop holding hands in public?*

### Study Information and Consent:

*As we have already discussed, the purpose of this study is to understand how GBQ men experience public displays of affection, specifically-holding hands in public. I will be asking you some questions to get a detailed understanding of your experiences and to get a sense of how you make decisions about holding hands in public.*

*Sometimes when people talk about their experiences, they can become upset or overwhelmed. Please let me know if at any point you find yourself getting too uncomfortable, and we can pause the interview and talk about how to ensure you are more comfortable.*

### Consent and Recording Instructions:

Review the consent form with the participant and answer any questions. Have the participant sign the consent form and pick a pseudonym before audio recording the interview. Once recording has begun, verbally state the date and participant pseudonym before continuing.

### Interview Instructions and Questions:

The format of this interview is semi-structured and uses an interview guide approach. The interview is focused on elaborating the central research question and subquestions above. The probing questions below will be asked as entry points into exploring the central and sub- research questions. The sub-questions are listed under the probing questions as prompts to ask the client to elaborate further in these specific sub areas.

Greenberg's (2015) method of incorporating timeline, emotion, and thoughts into a coherent narrative are used to provide a semi-structured flow to each question and subquestion below.

1. *I am interested to know about if you have had a past experience of holding hands with another man in public that you remember positively. If so, could we review this experience chronologically?*
  - A. *Set the stage for me: the time, place, who you were with, and how you think you each were perceived.*
  - B. *Tell me the story of what was happening before you began holding hands.*
    - (a) *What do you remember feeling before you started holding hands? If participant lists specific emotion, continue to subquestions. If no,*
      - (I) *Is there a specific place in your body you can feel that emotion? (If yes, ask participant to sit with the emotion for a few seconds.)*
    - (b) *As you sit with that emotion, are there any words or thoughts that come to mind?*
    - (c) *When you remember this moment before holding hands, whether you did it or not, what were you wanting to do next? (If participant answers a variation of "hold hands", continue to next subquestion. If participant gives any other answer*
      - (I) *What was it that let you know you wanted to hold hands / continue holding hands / stop holding hands? (If participant gives answer, ask subquestion. If participant states variation of "I don't know," continue to ii.)*
        - (i) *Is there a particular place in your body that is telling you that?*
        - (ii) *See if you can sit with that question a bit and notice if anything comes up for you.*
  - C. *Tell me the story of what was happening once you began holding hands. (Follow by asking questions (a) through (c) above).*
  - D. *Tell me the story of what was happening once you stopped holding hands. (Follow by asking questions (a) through (c) above).*
2. *There may also be past experiences you have had of holding hands with another man in public that were not so positive. If you have had an experience like this, could we review this experience chronologically? (Follow by asking questions (A) - (D) above).*
3. *There may also be past experiences when you wanted to hold hands with another man in public, but decided not to. If you have had an experience like this, could we review this experience chronologically? (Follow by asking questions (A) - (B) above).*
4. *Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. Is there anything else you would like to add, or anything we have missed?*
5. *Thank you again for your time and willingness to participate in this interview. As we come to the close of the interview, I am wondering what that was like for you to talk about your experiences with me today?*
  - A. *Is there anything you need to feel able and comfortable with continuing your day?*
  - B. *Give participant list of resources and remind them they will be contacted for follow-up interview.*

## Appendix E.

### Resources List

#### **Health Initiative for Men (HiM)**

*Free and low-cost counselling available for self-identified gay men and other men who have sex with men.*

<http://checkhimout.ca/mind/him-programs/>

604-488-1001

#### **Qmunity**

*Free counselling available for the LGBTQ2S community.*

[www.qmunity.ca/get-support/](http://www.qmunity.ca/get-support/)

604-684-5307 ext. 100

#### **SFU Surrey Counselling Clinic**

*Provides free counselling by counselling psychology graduate students.*

*Next intake starts August 19, 2019. Services available from September to April.*

<https://www.sfu.ca/education/centres-offices/sfu-surrey-counselling-centre.html>

604-587-7320

#### **UBC Scarfe Counselling Clinic**

*Provides free counselling in Vancouver by counselling psychology graduate students.*

*Services available September to April.*

<http://ecps.educ.ubc.ca/counselling-centres/scarfe-free-counselling-clinic/>

604-827-1523

#### **UBC New Westminster Counselling Centre**

*Provides free counselling by counselling psychology graduate students.*

*Services available from September to June.*

<http://ecps.educ.ubc.ca/counselling-centres/new-westminster-ubc-counselling-centre/>

604-525-6651

#### **Fraser Health Crisis Line**

*The Crisis Line provides immediate, free, and confidential emotional support, crisis intervention and community resource information to people of all ages, 24 hours a day – everyday.*

<https://www.options.bc.ca/program/fraser-health-crisis-line>

604-951-8855

## **Appendix F.**

### **Member Checking Form**

- (1) Are any of the transcript details incorrect?
- (2) Is there anything missing from the interview you would like to add?
- (3) What would you like people to know about your experiences?