

CAN YOU REALLY GO HOME?

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ATTITUDE CHANGE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department
of the Jack J. Valenti School of Communication
University of Houston

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By

Daniel F. Curren

December, 2015

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ABSTRACT

Individuals are born into membership groups and are socialized through affiliations, ideals, and systems of belief that are not of their own choosing. These memberships can include, but are certainly not limited to, family members, social communities, cultural groups, and political and religious affiliations. At some point in our lives, we are faced with beliefs or attitudes held by our membership groups that are in conflict with our own views or beliefs. Some of these inconsistencies are mild and avoidable, while others are severe and threaten our connection. This study is a qualitative examination of those extreme examples of dissonance which can lead to separation from our memberships. More specifically, it examines the extent to which college can play the role of catalyst in this separation. This examination is accomplished by conducting a series of narrative interviews with individuals who have attended college and experienced a change in attitude or belief held by prior membership groups. Experiences and themes are compared and contrasted to determine what effects college has on an individual's shift in attitudes, values, and beliefs. Additionally, the ways in which the adoption of new attitudes, values, and beliefs affect communication with members of these groups are studied.

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CHAPTER I - INTRODUCTION

The Downriver

I grew up in a small town in the southern suburbs of Detroit, Michigan, in an area referred to by locals as the “Downriver.” The Downriver is home to many of the steel and auto manufacturing plants for which Detroit is so well known. It is primarily a blue-collar community, comprised of many tradesmen, contractors, and family-owned businesses. The citizens of the Downriver are hardworking and community focused, and they place high value on loyalty, fairness, and reliability. These values are taught to the children who grow up in this area. Work hard, play fair, and be the master of your own destiny.

I was raised with this same set of principles. My story is the same as many other children who grew up and were socialized in this community. I was raised in a single-parent household. My mother, a hard-laboring steelworker, regularly struggled through 16-hour shifts to pay bills and provide for our family. I grew up of meager means, but did not realize it until I was old enough that it no longer mattered. For what we lacked in money, my mother more than made up for in virtue, love, and selflessness. Every day I saw her sacrifice. I saw the pain and fatigue of the 16-hour shifts in a steel mill; I saw the grease, dirt, and grime on her dull green factory fatigues. I helped clean and bandage the wounds wrought from hard physical labor in hazard-laden factories. It was all so I would not have to do the same.

Not everyone in the Downriver grew up with the same story; however, those who did not certainly knew someone close who did. Those who lived this life bore a soul of depth and fire. We knew sacrifice, loyalty, and community. Not just by name,

but by look, feel, and spirit. While it may seem bleak or sad to some on the outside, it is more a story of devotion and perseverance for those of us who have been given so much in the name of sacrifice.

Times of Change

I personally grew up during a time of sharp transition in this community. As my parents, their parents, and their parents' parents were growing up, education was certainly important, but there was an understanding that one could easily find employment with an auto-manufacturing plant or steel mill after high school. It was a way of living that was tried, true, and seemingly sustainable. Walk onto the floor of the mill at age 18, work until retirement, receive a good pension, pay off the house, and then help your children do the same. More priority was given to skilled trades and labor, and the cycle continued for generations.

By the time I was in high school, the notion that getting a job at one of the mills was a safe and sure thing, was no longer an uncontested truth. By the mid-1990s, even the local school vocational programs seemed less focused on machining and tradesmanship and more interested in computing and design. The seemingly endless corridor of shop classes began to give way to computer labs. While many of the vocational courses still kept an eye toward manufacturing, precedence was now shifting from labor and operation to advancing efficiencies and system maintenance. More and more focus was placed on continuing education and college, and post-secondary recruiters began to appear more frequently in the high school hallways.

The current generation of laborers noticed digital applications and computed processes giving rise to automation on the assembly line floors. The technology that

was once heralded as a savior had now gained a foothold and began displacing workers. While these progressions were persistent and gaining ground, they still were not yet in position to turn the industry and its workers on their collective heads. The transition was slow and gradual, and while the grinding had given many reason for concern, very few had yet to show legitimate panic.

Something Happened

Then something happened; something sharp, drastic, and unprecedented. Economists and politicians will likely debate the causes, effects, and catalysts for years to come. In late 2008, the United States suffered a substantial economic crisis that many referred to as the Great Recession (Pendery, 2009; Simkovic, 2009).

Reasons aside, stocks plummeted, jobs disappeared, and pensions and insurance dissolved. Savings were depleted, and homes were lost. Many suffered across the country, but the Rust Belt, Detroit, and subsequently the Downriver, were particularly hard-hit. The slow grind gave way to a precipitous drop. While the transition from manual to automated labor had been tough, but gradual and manageable, it was suddenly unsustainable and insurmountable.

Why had this happened to us, who was to blame, and what could be done? While I find my perception of the larger and overarching issues to be in line with the vast majority of this community, I find my conclusions and rationale to be at considerable odds.

Against the Grain

Therein lies the purpose of this study: To explore situations in which an individual has been socialized as a member of a particular culture or community, but

finds himself or herself confronted with a cognitive dissonance when internalizing a core value or belief of the community. Cognitive dissonance, as explained by Leon Festinger (1957), occurs when an individual holds two or more ideals that are in conflict with one another, or is confronted with new information or evidence that conflicts with previously held beliefs. Festinger suggests that these contradictions produce mental stress and discomfort, and that the individual will be driven to reconcile these inconsistencies. Mitigation comes in various forms ranging from acceptance to denial, with several methods of coping that fall somewhere in-between.

Growing up, I had experienced some level of cognitive dissonance in my formative years, as do many adolescents. There were times that I perceived that certain actions or attitudes were expected: indignation toward grocery store self-scanners that were eliminating local jobs, or anger toward owners of foreign vehicles who were taking money from the community. These inclinations did not always make sense, but as a child, they were generally easier to ignore and adhere.

According to Bandura's (1971, 1972, 1977) Social Learning Theory, individuals learn within social contexts through the processes of observation, modeling, and imitation. These contexts are often shown to include our direct and extended families, as well as the cultures and various social communities in which we are raised. At times, we may feel at odds with those around us, but when embedded in a community, there is a tendency to avoid conflicting behaviors and beliefs simply for fear of rejection or shunning. To cling to a belief or opinion that is against the core of your upbringing can seem like a winless battle steeped in futility. When faced with this dissonance, it is often easier to suppress these feelings, or at the very least, keep them

to oneself (Seligman & Miller, 1973). For me, much like many others, it was this embeddedness that discouraged against the grain attitudes and behaviors.

The Catalyst

Values and beliefs can be difficult to grasp, let alone define, at such a young age. I was not able to fully articulate this concept until later in life, particularly during my college years. Not because of some new knowledge or insight that I had gained, but because of the opportunity that was granted by stepping outside of my normal circles and gaining exposure to new reference groups. This is where the role of college as a catalyst for attitude change can truly bear effect.

While some will spend an entire lifetime in the same communal groups, college affords individuals the opportunity to explore and step outside their traditional social circles, both physically and ideologically (Milem, 1998). They are able to embrace, rather than avoid, notions that contrast with that of their community membership or normative groups. It is a setting that promotes self-reflection, analysis, and evaluation. It is a place where students often find more cultural diversity, and for many students, it can represent the first experience of prolonged interaction with other groups (Fischer, 2011). Many will be exposed to new belief systems and attitudes and behaviors that may not be congruent with their own. Instead of avoiding or denying inclinations that contrast those of their traditional social communities, students are often encouraged to challenge and explore these feelings. In my own experience, critical thinking and exploration was encouraged above all else.

Dissonance in Action

Upon reflection, several instances stand out as significant confrontations of cognitive dissonance. The first occurred while purchasing my first new vehicle. As a full-time college student moonlighting as a professional mobile deejay, I was in need of a reliable means of transportation that fit my budget, but was versatile enough to haul an extensive amount of fragile equipment. After a considerable amount of research and test drives, I found Toyota's Scion xB, a non-American-made vehicle. It seemed tailor made for my situation, and I decided that it was my best option.

This may not seem like much if you are not from the Downriver, but purchasing a foreign-made vehicle is a cardinal sin. The entire time I had this vehicle, the vehicle and I were met with scorn and contempt. Offensive notes left on my car, spit, trash, and even a mysterious dent during a trip to the grocery store. Some friends and family were visibly uncomfortable when I parked in their driveway, and when relatives visited over the holidays, the foreign car in front of the house was typically the first thing addressed when a new guest walked through the door. Purchasing a non-American-made vehicle was killing American jobs, and to this community, I was a microcosm of a much bigger issue.

I recall another instance unfolding while visiting my mother for the weekend. We were a few ingredients short for dinner one evening, and had to take a quick trip to the grocery store. We had just three or four items, and the lines were long. I noticed that the self-checkouts were empty, and suggested that we use a self-scan. This suggestion visibly troubled my mother, "Those things are taking away American jobs," she replied.

Yes, that was it. The ethnocentrism hit me all at once. In an area so rocked by the recent economic crisis, with a pressure so heavy and relentless, it is almost impossible for many in this community to see beyond what they could reach. I was finally able to admit to myself that I had a much different understanding of the situation. This machine was not taking American jobs, it was progressing global ingenuity. For the sake of progressing our culture, would it not be logical to promote technological advancement through the use of such a machine, then train a skilled technician in its maintenance? It made more sense than paying several unskilled laborers to repeatedly slide an item across a small square. My initial realization was in stark contrast of the community in which I was socialized.

Changing the Terms

I decided to embrace the ideology that had been on the periphery of my rationale for many years: for our culture to progress, ingenuity must be allowed to play out in its natural course, social Darwinism (Claeys, 2000). To me, it was less an issue of foreign- and domestic-made products, and more an issue of progress or stagnation. The problems and issues that faced this community were not a product of technological advancement, this was merely the messenger. The complications were a product of complacency, poor planning, and lack of foresight. In my estimation, much of the tribulation suffered by this community could have been avoided had decision-makers at the upper echelons acted in a more prudent and responsible manner. While I understand the sentiment of the greater community, I felt that their blame was misplaced.

I had grown up and had been socialized, with a specific set of values and beliefs bestowed upon me as a member of the Downriver community. At some point, I began to take note of isolated instances, nagging inconsistencies with some of these ideals, but always pushed them down. Then, when I went to college, I separated and was able to exchange ideas and converse with others who were not a part of my perceived community. College offered me the opportunity to step outside of my normative circles and experience new people and new ideas. I found college to be an environment ripe for intellectual and conceptual experimentation. Personal history did not matter, and preconceived notions were irrelevant. One could connect with any number of new people, groups, or associations. I began to look at things from a more universal point of view. I strived for objectivity, and eventually was able to admit to myself that there were several distinct areas in which I felt at odds with the community where I was socialized.

Moving Forward

The purpose of this study then, is to better understand the process of attitude change in college students. More specifically, the idea that college often acts as a catalyst in an individual's change in attitude or belief, and is primarily due to altering normative reference groups. Attention will be shown to shift from the membership groups in which an individual is socialized, to the reference groups that they have come to adopt as a point of orientation while attending college.

Contemporary studies, as detailed later, have been conducted to explore the extent to which reference and peer groups affect attitude change in college students. Studies have examined the multitude of variables that make attitude change more or

less likely in this setting. What seems to have been studied to a lesser extent, however, is how attitude change is perceived and experienced by the individual enduring these changes. Furthermore, attention should be given to the effects and lasting impressions that this experience has on the individual as they move forward through life and sometimes attempt to reconnect with past membership groups.

Indeed, if attitude change has occurred, there must be some identifiable departure, perhaps spatial and psychological, on the part of the individual. What did they give up or walk away from? More importantly, who did they walk away from, and can they go back? In many cases, these individuals will be shown to withdraw from the membership groups in which they were initially socialized. Through subsequent interviews, these departures will be shown to have markedly different effects on other members within these groups. While some offer acceptance and understanding, others choose to shun and ostracize. It is well understood that departure from many of these groups is a form of self-exile on the part of the individual.

To draw upon and illustrate these experiences, I have conducted semi-structured interviews geared toward uncovering patterns of socialization within the participants' membership groups. They account for feelings of cognitive dissonance or deviant thought on the part of the individual. Accounts of experiences while attending college and being removed from membership groups will be examined, as well as the process that each participant has undergone while coming to terms with their inner-conflict. In each case, these ultimately lead to embracing change, and accepting consequence.

In what ways were these individuals socialized, and what values were encouraged during their upbringing? When did they first start to realize that some of their own values may not have been in line with their greater community, and when and how did they address these conflicts? What role did college play in attitude or belief change, and how have relationships played out with family, friends, or the past membership groups now that a change has occurred? These are the questions of socialization and change that this study intends to examine.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Learning Theory

From a very young age, we seek acceptance while developing our sense of self within our social communities (Asch, 1956; Williams, 1976). While at times we may challenge or be at odds with some of the beliefs and opinions that our communities hold, the desire for social acceptance is a strong mitigating factor in our own development of attitude and belief. Albert Bandura's (1971, 1972, 1977) Social Learning Theory made great headway in terms of explaining the process of socialization, and was fundamental in bridging cognitive and behavioral learning theories.

Social Learning Theory draws heavily upon the concept of models and modeling behavior, and was empirically demonstrated in the Bobo doll experiment conducted by Bandura in 1961. During this experiment, children between the ages of 42 and 72 months were placed into several groups, some exposed to an aggressive model of behavior, and others to a non-aggressive model (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961).

The experiments began by bringing an individual child and an adult model into a playroom filled with toys and activities. The adult was seated at one side of the room, and the child at the other. On the adult's side, there was a set of toys including a Bobo doll and a mallet. It was explained to the child that this particular set of toys was only for the adult, and that the child was to play with their own set of toys on their side of the room.

In the aggressive model scenario, the child and the adult began playing in the room normally, and after about a minute, the adult began to act aggressively toward the doll. Examples included punching, kicking, and throwing the doll, and using aggressive language such as “kick him” and “throw him in the air.” In the non-aggressive model scenario, the child and the adult played simultaneously at each end of the room, and the Bobo doll was completely ignored by the adult.

In each scenario, after several minutes, the child was then taken from this room and shown to another play room. Here, the child was allowed to play for several minutes, then the experimenter returned and told the child that they were no longer allowed to play. It was suggested that the toys were now being reserved for another child. The child was made to sit for several minutes in an attempt to build up the child’s frustration. The child was then led back to the original room, and allowed to play with the original set of toys. The child was then observed playing in the room alone for a period of 20 minutes while undergoing behavioral observation.

While the results were nuanced and somewhat varied based on the sex of the adult model and the participant child, in the cases of both boys and girls, children exposed to the aggressive model of behavior were much more likely to behave both verbally and physically aggressive toward the Bobo doll than children who were exposed to the non-aggressive model.

The study demonstrates the effects of behavioral modeling and social learning. When exposed to certain behaviors, even for short periods of time, the researchers demonstrate how quickly those behaviors can be acquired through observation, imitation, and modeling. It also reveals the propensity for these behaviors to be

adopted even in the absence of reinforcing punishment or reward. In the case of these children, imitation was instigated by little more than observation and proximity in a closed setting. It begs the question of just how much influence social peers can affect the initiation of imitative behaviors.

Behavior and Cognition

According to Social Learning Theory, individuals learn within social contexts, initially through the processes of observation, modeling, and imitation (Bandura, 1971). These contexts include our direct and extended families, as well as the cultures and collective communities in which we are raised and socialized.

The theory posits that due to the human capacity for mental cognition, learning can either occur through direct experience, or on a vicarious basis through modeling of behavior (Bandura, 1971). When learning by direct experience, knowledge is generally gained from simple trial-and-error learning, reinforcement, and internalization of consequence and outcome. When faced with a decision, an individual acts in a way that will either bring about a favorable or unfavorable response or outcome. The individual acts in these situations and internalizes the various outcomes, and eventually favorable modes of behavior are adopted while unfavorable ones are rejected (Bandura, 1977).

Prior to the introduction of Bandura's Social Learning Theory, approaches to psychosocial development focused primarily on behavioral leaning; these theories largely depict learning as a product of direct experience. One of Bandura's key departures from this mode of thinking was the idea that learning can occur on a vicarious basis. In his own words:

Man's capacity to learn by observation enables him to acquire large, integrated units of behavior by example without having to build up the patterns gradually by tedious trial and error. Similarly, emotional responses can be developed observationally by witnessing the affective reactions of others undergoing painful or pleasurable experiences. (Bandura, 1977, p. 2)

Human agency, or the human capacity for mental cognition, is what allows for perceptive and predictive behavior (Bandura, 2001).

That is not to say that behavioral influences are to be ruled out; they are, in fact, a significant contributing factor to social learning. Behavioral learning is perhaps our most fundamental system of socialization during childhood, and is largely based on simple positive and negative reinforcement (Skinner, 1953). Skinner outlined a system of operant conditions, or rewards and punishments, which dictate how individuals will act when confronted with similar occurrences. Through trial and error, an individual will learn which responses produce favorable outcomes, and future action will be driven by these conclusions. This is a process that occurs so often that it frequently takes place on a subconscious level (Skinner, 1976).

Through this process, reinforcement plays a considerable role, and can be shown to have multiple functions (Hall, Lund, & Jackson, 1968). Dulany and O'Connell (1963) describe an informative function in which an individual is able to glean information not only from direct behavioral responses, but from observing differential outcomes associated with various actions. Bandura (1971) highlights a blend of rudimentary behaviorism with cognition in which an individual is able to develop a hypothesis about which types of behavior are more or less likely to succeed.

The internalization of understanding, and the ability to predict an outcome are not necessarily bi-polar, and are much more likely to occur on a vastly dynamic continuum. In both cases, subtle nuances in behavior can yield subtle nuances in response and reinforcement, and this can serve as a continually evolving form of communicating which behaviors are more likely to yield favorable outcomes.

For example, most parents of young children can attest to the complexities of fine-tuning boundaries and conveying expectations. A little boy told to stop hitting his sister will inevitably respond by holding his finger a half inch from her face and proclaim, "I'm not touching her!" When they are told it is time to pack up and leave the park, it is always, "just five more minutes." Then there is the fine art of negotiating an after-dinner snack so long as the child agrees to finish all of their vegetables.

Testing limitations and searching for triggers and tipping points starts early on in life and is carried out through adulthood. We often ignore the parallels from this type of behavior to what we see in the workplace on a daily basis. Individuals show up later and later for work in small increments to discern how late is too late in their department. Other will test the limits of insubordinate behaviors to determine how much bad behavior will go unpunished.

Motivation also plays an important function in the reinforcement process. Here, Bandura (1977) again cites the human capacity for insightful and foresightful behavior through cognition. Through the aforementioned process of behavioral trial and error, he describes how an individual is able to anticipate the outcome of certain behaviors, and is thus motivated to achieve those which are more favorable. Human

behavior in these cases is not controlled by a direct external source, but by an internal reflective process.

Through this process of contemplation, a reasonable individual will not have to endure the misfortunes of a vehicle collision to understand the importance of obtaining insurance, nor will they have to receive a burn to know that they should not touch an open flame. In these instances, the avoidance of a negative outcome proves to be just as much a motivating factor as the desire to bring about a positive one.

Models and Modeling

One of the more essential components of Social Learning Theory is learning through modeling, or observational learning. Bandura (1977) stressed the crucial role of modeling behavior in the learning process, and the overly laborious process that would ensue if learning only occurred through reinforcement. He cited the many potential environmental dangers that humans would encounter if reinforcement through trial and error was our only form of acquiring knowledge. Bandura (1971) explains:

Apart from questions of survival, it is difficult to imagine a socialization process in which the language, mores, vocational activities, familial customs, and the educational, religious and political practices of a culture are taught to each new member by selective reinforcement of fortuitous behaviors, without benefit of models who exemplify the cultural patterns in their own behavior.

(p. 5)

One could imagine seemingly simple activities like driving, swimming, or shaving without the help of a model. Models clearly serve a meaningful and centralized role

during socialization, and based solely on proximity during the developmental years of childhood, they often take the form of parents, siblings, teachers, and friends.

Individuals are typically born into social groups; they are born into a particular religion, culture, or community (Williams, 1976). They are raised, socialized, and model individuals within these groups, and through this socialization, they learn a prescribed set of values, norms, and attitudes (Sherif & Sherif, 1953). These social groups have been defined and dissected many times, including Cooley's (1902) primary and secondary groups, Tönnies's (1887) community and society, and Tajfel's (1970) in-groups and out-groups. Siegel and Siegel's (1957) explanation of membership and reference groups, however, is particularly useful when studying socialization through the lens of observational learning and attitude change.

Social Groups: Memberships and References

Membership groups have the clear and definable delineation of a particular group in which an individual is a prescribed member (Siegel & Siegel, 1957). A person is born as a member of a family, people are members of the companies for which they work, and children are members of the classes that they attend in a given semester. Membership affiliation can be by default, as in the case of a family, or by choice, as in the case of someone affiliating with a political party.

Concerning an individual's initial experiences of socialization, the memberships that the individual is born into, particularly family, culture, and community, are not chosen (Siegel & Siegel, 1957). While we are able to join new memberships throughout our lives, we do not choose the initial models for which we will develop our basest social patterns (Williams, 1976).

Reference groups, on the other hand, can prove to be more ethereal, sometimes with clear definitions, and other times without. Merton (1968) suggested that reference groups are groups in which individuals compare themselves when evaluating their own beliefs, attitudes, or actions. Perception plays a large role in referencing behavior. Kelley (1952) viewed these groups as serving two distinct functions. The normative function is enacted when referencing values, norms, or attitudes of a group. A comparative function is used when an individual references the physical or perceived behavior for purposes of comparison. Our understanding of how such a group would view our actions or behaviors can vary wildly based on whether our references are constructed from direct experience, speculation and assumption, or something in between.

By these definitions, reference and membership groups may or may not overlap. A member of a given culture or family may very well reference their fellow members when modeling behavior or considering actions, but they may also reference individuals who are not members of their group. A child playing a pickup game of basketball can model an older sibling or parent, or instead model the perceived behaviors of their favorite professional athlete. A teen interested in learning how to cook might model behaviors they have seen in their own kitchen, or might look for guidance by enacting cues from cooking programs on television.

In an individual's life, he or she will construct an interrelated web of numerous memberships and reference; it is an infinitely complex system and is highly nuanced (Siegel & Siegel, 1957). We are often raised as a part of several membership groups that might include our religious, cultural, political, or socio-economic affiliations

(Williams, 1976). Each of these groups will carry with it a very specific set of prescribed attitudes, beliefs, values, and behaviors. To this extent, our membership groups often act as normative reference groups, or groups from which we glean an understanding of normative behavior. When we act or make a decision in a given situation, we often reference the perceived reaction of other individuals within our normative circles, and use these references to develop a sense of what normal behavior would look like. Whether or not we choose to adhere, we use these judgements as the base level of our decision-making process.

Fixed Models

To understand how we develop a sense of membership, references, and normative behavior, it is important to reflect back to the process of socialization during early childhood. Bandura (1972) describes the processes of attention as a variable in social cognitive learning. When socializing within our memberships, there is a finite and isolated pool of actors from which we can choose to give attention. We are surrounded with a fixed set of models, and in these developmental years, it is a set not of our own choosing (Williams, 1976). One must consider the factors that play the greatest role in vying for a child's attention. A parent or family member who shouts, who raises a booming voice, towering over the child who spilled a drink, can be difficult to ignore. It would be a truly introspective toddler who could look within and determine that they will not model such behavior because it produced an unpleasant feeling. More likely, and through little fault of the child, this toddler will adopt similar triggers and response mechanisms. This demonstrates the isolation and lack of choice

that can sometimes present itself to a child growing up in strong-willed or prominent membership groups.

This illusion of free choice has strong parallels to the media theory of agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Agenda-setting theory suggests that while media outlets cannot always dictate what the public will think, they can dictate what the public will think about. In many instances within the membership group, it is presupposed that an inquiry's response can only fall within a set of predetermined options. A child growing up in strong and domineering membership groups may only have the illusion of decision, that they have the option of choice. In reality, they are often only able to give attention within a fixed set of models.

At this stage, retention and repetition play crucial roles in the learning process (Bandura, 1972). Simply put, for learning to truly be internalized, an individual must be able to retain and repeat an action or attitude. This concept can be used to explain the process of internalizing beliefs and behaviors, and also how their absence can discourage an individual from adopting beliefs and behaviors that are in contrast to that of the greater membership.

There can be occasions where models or actors supporting or representing an opposing viewpoint from that of the membership come in contact with an observer. In these instances, the opportunity for attention and retention can be fleeting. If an actor representing an opposing belief is presented to the group and chastised, the actor may disengage. Not only does the absence of the model hinder retention on a spatial basis, the resulting chastisement and disengagement can be internalized by the

observer, reinforcing the deviance of the belief or behavior for fear of their own disengagement (Clinard, 1968; Kemper, 1968).

Models presented through media can also prove difficult to engage. If a family or membership group detests physical violence, for instance, they may not let their child watch certain programs on TV. The child may watch these programs when family members are not around, but immediately change the channel when someone approaches. In these instances, the time available to give attention or retain is fleeting, and likely done with a sense of fear, wrongdoing, and guilt (Taylor, 1996). When an individual knowingly violates a social norm in such a way, deviant behavior is enacted (Clinard, 1968).

Attitudes, Beliefs and Cognitive Dissonance

People are not automatons, and Bandura's very inclination toward cognition suggests that people will eventually find themselves at odds with some value, attitude, or belief forwarded by a model within their membership group. The individual is then faced with the decision of obstinacy or adherence. Decisions and actions that go against some core ideal of a normative group will be discussed in detail later, but it will suffice to say that defiance can be a laborious and unpleasant task. Often, the individual will instead choose to observe the ideals of their social community either for fear of rejection, shunning, or simply avoidance of unpleasant situations (Clinard, 1968).

Cognitive dissonance, as explained by Festinger (1957, 1962), occurs when an individual holds two or more ideals that are in conflict with one another, or is confronted with new information that conflicts with previously held beliefs. Festinger

demonstrated that people have a powerful underlying motive to preserve mental harmony and accord, and will work to reduce these deviations of thought.

He suggested that to strive for an internal consistency, people will engage in the process of dissonance reduction, and he outlined several techniques that individuals utilize to alleviate these stresses. How the individual chooses to deal with these inconsistencies will ultimately determine whether a legitimate change in attitude or behavior will occur, or if the individual will choose adherence. In an example where an individual is faced with cognitive dissonance while driving over the legal speed limit, Festinger's (1957) reductions suggest that the individual will rationalize with:

1. Change in behavior: "I'm going to stop speeding now."
2. Justification of behavior by altering the conflict: "It's okay if I speed every once in a while."
3. Justification of behavior by adding new conditions: "I will only speed if I'm running late for an appointment."
4. Denial that the instance is in contrast with existing belief: "There must be something wrong with the speedometer, I can't be going that fast."

Cognitive dissonance is of particular interest to social learning when the individual is encouraged to act in a way in which they privately do not agree. A conscious dissonance can arise between thought and action, which Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) referred to as the induced-compliance paradigm. This was demonstrated by the psychologists in what is now considered a classic experiment in social psychology.

In Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) study, participants were asked to perform boring and tedious tasks (e.g., spinning a peg in a board in vary degrees) for an extended period of time. For their participation, half of the participants were paid \$20, and the other half were paid \$1. The tasks performed were designed with the intent of frustrating participants, creating boredom, and producing negative attitudes. Upon completion of these tasks, the experimenters asked participants to speak with another participant who was preparing to partake in the same experiment (who was actually an actor), and convince them that the tasks they were about to perform were interesting and engaging.

At the conclusion of the study, participants were privately asked to rate the experiment. Participants who were initially paid \$1 were found to have rated the experiment as more engaging and enjoyable than those who were paid \$20. Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) determined that this was evidence of cognitive dissonance. They theorized that being paid \$1 was not enough incentive to lie about the nature of the task, thus creating cognitive dissonance within these individuals. To overcome this mental inconsistency, these participants worked harder to convince themselves that the tasks were indeed enjoyable, and thus rated the experiment higher. Being paid \$20, on the other hand, provided reason enough to perform a tedious task and bend the truth in its relation to other participants. This internal justification then produces less, or no, dissonance within the individual. The group who had been paid \$20 was more comfortable rating the experience as dull or unengaging.

This portrayal of the induced-compliance paradigm can be used to explain why individuals will overtly adopt the social behaviors of their normative membership

groups although they sometimes do not necessarily agree with them. With the desire to avoid conflict and condemnation as a mitigating factor, it is often easier for the individual to convince themselves that they are indeed in accord with the group. This principle is of significant importance to this thesis study, and will be a focus in subsequent participant interviews. Understanding and illustrating induced compliance through participant narratives can explain why normative behavior is embraced within the context of the membership group, but later rejected when the individual enters a new setting.

Exploring New Models

The attentional process is also a subject of concern when studying the individual entering into a new and foundational setting. Arnett (2006) referred to the period of growth occurring from the late teens into the early 20s as “emerging adulthood.” This is a period of considerable personality development, and can be shown to have exponential effects when overlapping with the college years (Roberts, Walton, & Viechtbauer, 2006; Vaidya, Gray, Haig, & Watson, 2002). This setting often presents the chance for many individuals to view concepts and systems of belief from unfamiliar points of view. The actors and models that an individual has to choose from is often increased and expanded in a monumental way. If the individual chooses to explore inner-feelings or address any sense of cognitive dissonance, this setting allows for a series of choices and options that is often unprecedented.

Additionally, this is often time spent in further proximity from traditional membership groups. There are other mitigating factors to consider such as reinforcement dependence and extinction for the individual in this setting

(Miltenberger, 2012; Skinner, 1979). Even in cases where the student only commutes a short distance to school, there is at least some amount of physical and psychological detachment that takes place from the normative membership group. In cases where an individual lives on campus, or in another state, the physical and metaphorical distances are even greater.

Concerning this perceived absence of normative reinforcement, Bandura (1971) suggests that, "It is feared that reinforcing practices may not only interfere with development of self-determining characteristics, but may render people so dependent upon extrinsic supports that they remain unresponsive without payoffs" (p. 23). With the extinction of reinforcement, it can be theorized that cognitive dissonance will be less likely to occur in cases of exhibiting social behaviors that are not in accord with the now-detached membership. This can be another contributing factor to the likelihood of college students seeking, or being comfortable with, new modes of thinking.

Gewirtz & Stingle (1968) focused a great deal on retention, and how the progression of learning can fluctuate during different stages in development. From birth, through the earliest stages of childhood socialization, an individual's responses tend to be more imitative and based on the immediate and direct actions of models; the mind acts as more of a sponge than a filter. Through adolescence and into adulthood, an individual is able to exercise a higher level of cognition and contemplation. Bandura (1971) asserts that:

Immediate imitation does not require much in the way of cognitive functioning because the behavioral reproduction is externally guided by the model's

actions. By contrast, in delayed imitation, the absent modeled events must be internally represented, and factors such as symbolic transformation and cognitive organization of modeling stimuli and cover rehearsal, which facilitate retention of acquired content, serve as determinants of observational learning.
(p. 7)

The individual is in a new environment, often experiencing some level of detachment from traditional memberships, and are at a matured level of psychological reasoning. Where their initial memberships were forced by situation, circumstance, and proximity, new references in the college setting can be chosen autonomously.

Motivation and Inspiration

This new environment affords many new opportunities in terms of attention and retention, and if a student so chooses to explore new modes of thinking, new sets of reinforcement and motivations may prove more than enough to accept an alternate set of values. Kemper (1968) studied the process of social sanctioning and reinforcement in great detail. He explains an individual's relationships with normative groups and comparison groups. For these purposes, normative groups can be seen as an individual's membership groups, and the comparison groups as new college reference groups.

To Kemper (1968), it is of significant importance that our membership, or normative groups, often sanction by punishment rather than by reward. While early on in life we are rewarded for the display of desired attitude or behavior, once we have shown the propensity for normative action and belief, we are later punished for its absence. For instance, consider a child during potty-training. They are often

commended and rewarded for a successful trip to the bathroom when first exhibiting this new behavior. However, once they have shown that they can successfully use the bathroom on a consistent basis, they are later chastised for the absence of this behavior.

This small instance is a microcosm for a much larger process predicated on negative reinforcement and sanction within these groups. When an individual behaves in a way, or expresses an ideal, that is in contrast to that of the membership, they face the decision of altering their beliefs and behaviors so that they abide by that of the social community, or remaining obstinate and facing social sanction. They are once again faced with the choice of adherence and deviance, and all that comes with the decision.

Kemper (1968) explains how divergence, or deviation, can initiate a cycle of punishment, resentment, and ultimately, avoidance within these groups. He explains that, "deviance [...] becomes transgression, a significant transformation in the quality of punishment meted out and the self-attitudes likely to arise in the deviant, now sinner," and furthermore, "to do the right is reinforcing only in that punishment is avoided" (p. 303). Therefore, avoiding the punisher or subject in contention can become an advantageous behavior in itself. If the individual in this circumstance feels any inclination toward exploring a behavior or attitude that is deviant to that of their membership, this proclivity toward avoidance can become a polarizing force.

Comparison, or reference, groups, on the other hand, have neither rewards nor punishments directly associated with them. They can be shown to offer reinforcement through the concept of achievement. Kemper explains the process of

striving for achievement as something that is adopted by the individual, and is based on their own understanding of performance that is average or customary for someone at their level of knowledge and understanding. If an individual has adopted a new reference group, achievement can fuel their involvement two-fold: by the gratification of achievement itself, and by the desire to achieve more.

Moreover, these systems can be completely self-contained and based solely on the perception of the individual. According to Kemper (1968):

It is a matter of indifference whether or not the audience selected has asked anything of the individual. The audience may not even know of the individual's existence. In the individual's scheme of things, however, the audience is valued as a potential source of reward, and he will endeavor to win that reward." (p. 304)

This idea echoes Merton's (1968) concept of reference groups, and an individual's inclination to use a comparison group as a benchmark. This can prove true whether or not they are a proper member of the group.

This holistic process exemplifies how compelling it can be for college students, who feel any level of disconnect with their normative membership groups, to explore new reference groups. The individual is now distanced, both in terms of proximity and mindset, and avoidance of punishment and sanction is much easier. They are in a new and expansive environment that promotes critical thinking and personal reflection. They are exposed to new and innovative ideas, and have multiple opportunities to connect with new groups. If the individual chooses to explore or interact with one of these groups, they receive gratification through their own concept

of achievement rather than reinforcement through sanction or punishment. Through this process, new reference groups promote further exploration, while prior memberships drive them further towards separation.

College: The Catalyst

One of the earliest studies focusing on the normative effects of reference groups, specifically with college students, is Newcomb's (1943) analysis of the student population at Bennington College. Conducted in the late 1930s, the study demonstrated significant changes in the social attitudes of students, particularly concerning political and economic issues, from their freshman through senior year of college. Newcomb attributed these changes to the students' adoption of the institution of college as a positive reference group. Weidman (1979) later made great strides in the field by revealing a multitude of variables that affect the values of college students, including their backgrounds and social upbringing, the characteristics of the academic departments in which they were enrolled, and their involvement in extracurricular activities and organizations. Affiliations and environments were shown to affect the individual who was now surrounded by new groups and models.

While much of the previous work in this field had determined that, "students have mutual and reciprocal influence on each other" (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969, p. 240), Milem (1998) went through great lengths to demonstrate that both peer and faculty reference groups play a considerable role in the socialization of college students. While studying this population, Newcomb and Wilson (1966) point to selection, or the particular set of characteristics held by the individual when they

enter college, and peer influences, as central considerations of interest. Each of these studies illustrates how college, both as a physical setting and conceptual experience, can alter the views and normative behaviors of an individual.

More recent studies concerning the college population have focused on reference group influences in regard to contemporary social issues. Prince and Carey (2010) studied the malleability of norms among college students, particularly in regard to excessive alcohol use. The researchers studied this subset while highlighting the interrelatedness of student's discernment of injunctive and descriptive norms, and their effect on attitudes and behaviors. Injunctive norms contextualize an individual's perception of what they believe to be acceptable or unacceptable normative behavior within a group. Descriptive norms focus on an individual's understanding of how people actually behave within the group (Aronson, Wilson, & Aker, 2010; Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). For the purposes of this study, the researchers explain how participants systematically overestimated both how often their peer's consumed alcohol, and the perception of widespread acceptability of excessive alcohol use.

Conducting their study at a northeastern university in the United States, Prince and Carey (2010) suggest that because alcohol use was highly visible, and regularly a topic of discussion, the appearance of acceptance was created: "Drinking attitudes are inferred from the most salient observable drinking behaviors and conversation about alcohol with peers; such inferred attitudes may be simultaneously hard to disprove and also divergent from reality" (p. 940).

The researchers conducted a series of surveys gauging the behaviors and perceptions of peer alcohol use among undergraduate students. Two-thirds of the way through the survey, half of the participants were presented with what Prince and Carey refer to as injunctive norm feedback. This was essentially a page of text detailing the discrepancy between student attitudes toward excessive drinking, and systematic overestimation with peer acceptance of excessive alcohol use.

The study revealed considerable differences in perception regarding peer acceptance of excessive alcohol use between the two groups. To no surprise, those who had read the injunctive norm feedback estimated that their peers were less accepting of said behavior. More interesting, though, was the effect that injunctive norm feedback had on student's perception of descriptive normative behavior among their peers. According to Prince and Carey (2010):

Informal feedback that alerted students to the risk of overestimating peer approval for excessive drinking not only reduced estimated peer approval rating, but also reduced estimates of peer drinking. This finding underscores the interrelationship of students' injunctive and descriptive normative beliefs, and suggests that the information used to make one judgement also informs the other. (p. 945)

The study highlights the significance of perception in regard to referents, and the considerable effect that it has on overt behavior.

Scheuble, Johnson, and Johnson's (2012) study of college students' attitudes toward marital name change illustrates the importance of environmental factors and prevailing attitudes as contributors to referent behavior. The researchers studied

attitude change over a 16-year period from 1990 to 2006 at several universities in the midwestern and eastern United States. Over this time period, women's attitudes toward retaining their birth surnames after marriage were shown to have no change. However, it was shown that the Eastern regional college women were significantly more likely to keep their given surname after marriage. Midwestern regional participants were more likely to say that a woman was more committed to the marriage if she took on her husband's surname after marriage. Two of the researchers, in an adjacent study, also found that women from the South were more likely to maintain their birth surname as a middle name upon marriage (Johnson & Scheuble, 1995).

These findings highlight the importance of cultural and regional variables, particularly in regard to the attentional process discussed earlier, and raise several questions. If women raised in the Midwest were to attend college at a southern university, would they feel more comfortable retaining their surname as a middle name? If a young woman raised in the South were to attend college at an eastern university, would she be more comfortable retaining her birth surname without hyphenation or as a middle name?

While future quantitative studies could potentially shed light on certain predictive behaviors and likelihood models concerning these populations, it would still beg the question of whether these changes in attitude were more a product of conformity as a means of seeking acceptance, or if these individuals purposefully assimilated into these populations as a means of spatially and idealistically escaping

their memberships. These are questions that would require a deeper understanding of the cognitive processes of these individuals.

A 2012 study concentrating on the college population by Sinatra, Kardash, Taasoobshirazi, and Lombardi examined the variables that impact student willingness to take action toward climate change. In this study, a group of students at an urban university in the southwestern United States were asked to read a persuasive text about human-induced climate change. Before and after reading the text, students were asked questions gauging their belief in climate change, whether they believe that it is a human-induced phenomenon, and their willingness to take meaningful action toward reducing their own “carbon footprint.” After reading the text, students showed significant increases in affirmation that climate change is a real occurrence, and is human produced. They also reported an increased willingness to take meaningful action on the issue.

While the researchers determined that “a persuasive text has the potential to promote change around complex socio-scientific issues” (Sinatra et al., 2012, p. 1), more significant questions are raised concerning the potential role that college, as a conceptual environment, played in the student decision-making process.

Building upon the findings of aforementioned studies (Milem, 1998; Newcomb, 1943; Prince & Carey, 2010; Weidman, 1979), if students regard college and the greater student body as a positive reference group, and operate on a set of perceived notions regarding peer injunctive and descriptive norms, it may be prudent to reconsider our own perceptions about the student cognitive process. To what extent can we attribute the willingness to alter attitude and behavior to the internalization of

a persuasive text, versus adherence to a perceived injunctive norm held by a reference group with high regard? While many of these studies help to determine the likelihood that a student will take new reference groups into regard and embrace a change in attitude or belief, there are other variables to consider that drive likelihood one way or the other on an individual basis.

Impetus for Action

In my own case, I had notions about progressing global society in a positive and effective way, and felt that these inclinations were in contrast to my social upbringing. When I entered into college, I was able to connect with other individuals who had similar views and experiences. I was able to freely entertain these ideas, and was encouraged to evaluate and develop these thoughts on a conceptual level. While these experiences spurred my interest in the subject of attitude and behavior change in college students, I have come to see that my own experiences seem trivial when compared to the more severe and demanding dissonance that others sometimes experience.

Research Questions

Specific research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What effects can college have on an individual's shift in attitudes, values, or beliefs from past membership groups to new reference groups?

RQ2: How do new attitudes, values, or beliefs that differ from prior membership groups affect communication with members of these groups?

CHAPTER III – METHOD

Constructing Narratives

To answer my research questions, this study employs narrative inquiry, which is particularly useful in the context of attitude change. Narrative inquiry seeks to establish a story, or develop a chronology of events, through an individual's life experience as a means of social analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As an individual describes a social phenomenon in their own terms, researchers are able to develop contextual inferences to better understand the cognitive components that affect the individual's decision-making process (Eagly & Chaiken, 1995). When we are able to derive meaning regarding a social phenomenon from the point of view of the individual, we are able to work toward a process of patterned behavior. We can then use this patterned behavior as a basis for comparative analysis with other individuals who have endured similar phenomena. In the case of this study, narrative analysis is a useful means of establishing parallels in the stories of multiple individuals who have all undergone significant changes in attitude, but in very different ways.

Everything and everyone has a narrative. There is a chronology of events in the rise and fall of a company, there is a tale of struggle and determination during the season of a sport's team, there are events and experiences that people use to describe their childhood and career path. We explain these chronologies as a series of meaningful events, one leading to another. We assign meaning and value to these instances, and organize them in a way that can be communicated as linear history. This is the essence of narrative as a form of inquiry, the idea that knowledge can be constructed as a story, can be communicated, stored, and retrieved (Fry, 2002).

The construction of an autoethnographical experience is much like the construction of a narrative, and is also a core component of this study. To address, explore, and expound the subtleties of the socialization process, to draw an understanding from instances and events by the subject's own terms, and to furthermore pinpoint the seminal moments in an individual's life, it is essential to empathize with the participants' stories. If we are to go beyond the input/output measurements of frequency and mechanical causal relationships, and are to truly understand the motivations and rationale of another individual, we must immerse ourselves in the other.

Autoethnography differs from traditional ethnography in that the researcher is evaluating and describing their own personal experiences in relation to the culture or social context in which they were acting (Maréchal, 2010). As seen in the introduction of this study, and my account of socialization in the Downriver, it is an introspective method of study that relies on the researcher's ability to evaluate their own subjective experiences while relating to the greater study in an objective manner. These can be particularly strong accounts due to the elimination of misinterpretation between researcher and participant.

This study will be both narrative and ethnographic in nature. Indeed, the introduction of this study itself was an autoethnography detailing my own experiences, and how I arrived at the subject of attitude change in college students.

Participants

I recruited six participants for one-on-one interviews. Participants were identified through word-of-mouth and personal referrals, and were contacted via

email with an explanation of the study and an invitation (see Appendix A) for participation. Pseudonyms are used in the place of participant's real names.

Table 1: Participants

Name	Subject of Attitude Change
Alexis	Member of affluent community foregoes handout to earn and learn value
Jace	Member of Christian faith confronts doubt and accepts Atheistic views
May	Member of rural southern community rejects pervasive racism
Zander	Member of conservative family affiliates with liberal organization
Kai	Member of religious cult emancipates from family and church
Ben	Member of Bible Belt rural community accepts own homosexuality

As the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the process of attitude change in college students and graduates, participants were required to meet certain criteria: a) they have obtained a degree from an accredited college or post-secondary institution; b) they are at least 18 years of age at the time of the study; and c) they note a change in some attitude, belief, or ideology from attending college.

As justification to aforementioned criteria, accredited institutions, such as universities and large private colleges, are often more populous in setting and afford access to a wider array of new reference groups. Those who have attended long enough to have obtained a degree are more likely to have exposure to a wider range of new ideas, concepts and reference groups. Additionally, they are more likely to have spent extended time outside the context and reinforcing environment of their membership groups.

Participants were asked to choose an interview location to ensure their comfort and privacy. Several interviewees chose to use online video chat services such as Skype and Google Hangouts. Using an informed consent form, I thoroughly detailed the project and assured participants of confidentiality. As part of the consent process, I also informed all participants that their participation was voluntary, that they were able to stop the interview at any time without consequence and that they had the right to decline an answer to any question at any time.

Data Collection

Interview as a method of narrative assessment is particularly useful for drawing out detail and depth from a participant. In qualitative analysis, interviews are typically constructed in a way that poses open-ended questions as to prompt an explanation or story from the respondent. They are designed to elicit the construction of an instance or series of events by the participant, and furthermore, make meaning through their own understanding of the context and their actions and sentiment therein. This is a particularly useful method of inquiry for this type of study due to its malleable nature. It is conducive to probing and encouraging a participant to expand on a subject, and can lead to a rich illustration of significant events.

For the purposes of this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews that follow an organic path and proceed naturally through give-and-take conversation. With each participant's permission, I audiotaped and transcribed verbatim all interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to one hour, with the exception of Kai, whose lasted for roughly four hours.

The interview guide is included in Appendix B. I have conducted these interviews in a way that seeks to construct a chronology of life events and circumstances that ultimately have led to some type of substantial change in the participant's attitude or belief concerning a particular subject. Instances of particular importance to the construction of each participant's narrative chronology include: a) initial socialization through membership and normative groups; b) experiences of cognitive dissonance in regard to membership norms; c) exposure to, and adoption of, new reference groups while attending college; d) marked change in a significant attitude, value, or belief held by previous membership group; and e) subsequent interactions with past membership groups after attitude change.

Data Analysis

I employed a constant comparative method to conduct a thematic analysis of the transcribed interviews. This method enabled me to establish themes from the data and link the themes together to create a larger story. To do so, I moved back and forth among the data to look for commonalities, differences, and emergent themes. The initial analysis began with transcribing interviews. Once I completed transcribing, I first printed and read each transcript individually for a general review of the interview. I then read through the transcripts a second time and manually coded the data. These codes are marked with category names to identify particular themes and aspects of the interviews. Coding continued until I had satisfactorily collapsed the various codes into categories that best describe the patterns and contradictions in the data (see Table 2). Once I finished coding and making notes of emerging patterns, I identified and evaluated the major themes. Each category, or

theme, was examined and will be discussed in depth with numerous examples from the participants' own words.

Table 2: Preliminary Codes

Socialization	Dissonance	Separation
Models	Avoidance	Alone
Culture	Coping	Distance
Norms	Conflict	Parting
Tradition	Evaluation	Detachment
Ideology	Rationalization	Escape
Ritual	Struggle	Erosion
Hierarchy	Confusion	Rejection
Influence	Guilt	Fear
Reinforcement	Resentment	Outcast
Teaching	Frustration	Disconnect
Adherence		
Exploration	Reengagement	
Community	Avoidance	
Reference	Conflict	
Fellowship	Coping	
Progression	Acceptance	
Independence	Progress	
Discovery	Futility	
Opportunity	Resentment	
Inspiration	Frustration	
Affirmation	Pain	
Choice	Complexity	
	Obstinacy	

CHAPTER IV – RESULTS

Participant Narratives

Alexis: All That Glitters Isn't Gold

Alexis was raised in an affluent community in the south. She describes how members of her community ascribe to the same political affiliations, attend the same church, attend the same college, join the same fraternities and sororities and belong to the same clubs and organizations. Furthermore, Alexis describes being part of an in-group within the in-group, an inner-circle defined by popularity and even more “intense ritual.” Her family is well-known in this community, and favor was passed down to her and her elder sister.

Growing up in the shadow of her sister, she was granted popularity, not for what she had done, but for who she was. There was little choice and little variation. Much was had, but little was earned; it didn't feel right. The pretentiousness, the excess, the seclusion ... she needed to prove to herself that she could make it on her own. She needed to “escape.”

Jace: Looking for Answers in All the Wrong Places

Jace was raised in a Christian household with deep convictions. His father is a lifelong Catholic and his mother was raised Protestant before converting to Catholicism upon marrying his father. Jace attended church and Sunday school with regularity, and in his teenage years, even attended Catholic boarding school. The Catholic religion and culture were deeply ingrained in every part of his life.

Jace had a thirst for knowledge and expansion as a young man that is still prevalent today, but his searching took him down a road that he neither expected nor

intended. Towards the end of high school and into college, Jace began to question his faith. In his search for answers, he attended multiple churches and read extensive religious literature and scripture; he found only inconsistency and contradiction.

May: I Just Don't See What the Big Deal is

May, a small town girl raised in the rural East South Central United States, was brought up with a firm belief in “guns and God.” There was little cultural diversity, and racial acceptance was not an article of faith. She was never sat down and taught the doctrine of racial segregation, but it was learned tradition. As a young Caucasian girl, it was known that, “people don’t mix; colors don’t mix.”

When May attended a summer camp dance during her youth, and danced with one of the city boys, a black boy, it was as if the sky had fallen. “They can’t help it if they were born that way,” was how the fifth grade May tried to plead with her parents. We were born this way and they were born that way, and, “I just don’t see what the big deal is.”

Zander: They're All Full of Hot Air

Zander was brought up in a Midwestern family with strong Republican principles. He describes how conservative beliefs ran so deep on his father’s side that it was more a way of life than a political affiliation. As he grew older, he found their philosophies to be distorted and self-serving. Greed and excess were put on a pedestal and one-upmanship replaced family bond and unity.

This behavior seemed to go against everything he was taught as a child. He was driven away by the hypocrisy, and in an extreme swing to an opposing viewpoint, Zander went on to lead his university’s chapter of College Democrats.

Kai: One of the First Times I Felt Sane was in an Asylum

Kai's family joined an Independent Fundamental Baptist church when he was four years old. Strictness and severity, punishment, isolation, trauma, and abuse were everyday realities. His family attended services and church events as many as seven days per week, and were only permitted to engage in activities outside the church for recruitment purposes. As the group rapidly grew in size, they opened a school. It was headed by their pastor, and Kai was among the first attending classes.

As he looks back on what he now considers to be a cult, he recalls the widespread rape, and physical and mental abuses perpetuated at the highest levels of the organization. As he grew older, he knew that he needed to escape. With barely an inch of turning-room, he used every resource at his disposal to become legally emancipated from his parents and, by association, the church.

Ben: My Father Still Doesn't Know to this Day

Ben grew up in a small, rural Bible Belt town with a population of roughly 600 inhabitants. A virtual Christian Republic, conservative ideals were the fabric of everyday life. As an adolescent, Ben knew that he had to suppress his homosexual inclinations and desires. He recollects how during his youth, two members of his extended family identified as gay men, and how they were met with ridicule and vilification.

He struggled with his feelings through middle school, into high school and through most of college. Then he met another man whom he adored. This man didn't fit the gay stereotype of a flamboyant clown. He was popular, he was charismatic ... he was cool. It challenged all of Ben's beliefs and principles. This was a good man and

a good friend; a friend that gave Ben the courage to embrace what he had felt all along.

Themes

Upon exploration and coding of participant interviews, five distinct themes were revealed: Socialization, Dissonance, Separation, Exploration, and Reengagement, and are shown in the table below. These themes follow some level of chronology, each with a poignant foundation of its own. They can also be viewed as phases that the individual encounters as they go through the process of attitude change. Participant accounts can also be shown to revisit themes and phases throughout the construction of the narrative, and will be reported in multiple contexts. Themes are first isolated and discussed individually, then in conjunction with one another.

Table 3: Primary Themes

Socialization	Dissonance	Separation	Exploration	Reengagement
Culture	Evaluation	Erosion	Community	Avoidance
Models	Confusion	Detachment	Reference	Futility
Expectations	Rationalization		Affirmation	
Hierarchy		Escape		Conflict
	Conflict	Rejection	Autonomy	Resentment
Teaching/ Learning	Resentment		Discovery	Obstinacy
			Opportunity	
Reinforcement	Avoidance			Acceptance
	Guilt			Progress

Socialization

As participants detail their social upbringing, they often speak in the context of their immediate family and the culture in which they were socialized. They discuss

patterns of teaching and learning through various affiliations within their community.

Ben, for example, reminisces:

I lived in a very rural area, it was a town of about 600. I grew up in a very religious, Christian family. [...] Very conservative. Very, very, very conservative — in regards to just the whole town, to my family, all across the board. [...] We would always go to church and Sunday school. Singing in the children's choir, doing all sorts of activities with the church. It was definitely a very strong part of my upbringing.

It is clear that Ben belongs to a network that stretches beyond the confines of his home. It is something larger than he and his family. They are a part of community and a culture, and they ascribe to similar sets of norms, values, and beliefs.

Rules, normative behaviors, and boundaries are also common themes discussed by participants as they recall their upbringing. Kai is an extreme example, socialized in what he now refers to as a cult. Kai's experiences with socializing forces are more marked by hierarchy, strict adherence and strong reinforcement, often in the form of punishment. He recalls growing up in the constant confines of his church:

We were not allowed to so much as hold hands until marriage. There was a six-inch rule. You always had to be six inches apart from each other. We were not allowed to go to any movies whatsoever, because the same movie that would show a Disney movie would also show an R-rated movie, and we can't support those kind of people. [...] Boys had to keep their hair so short that it could not touch your ears. You could only wear button shirts, it had to have a collar. You could not wear denim because the devil created denim. Boys and

girls shouldn't swim together. You couldn't go roller-skating. You couldn't listen to any popular music.

His list goes on. As a child growing up with these patterns, Kai never knew any other way of life. It is the same with all participants, though the guidelines are often less severe.

Models and modeling behavior is a common foundation to all participant narratives, as are an expressed set of expectations passed down from the membership. These expectations and adherence to tradition can play a strong reinforcing role in the framework of the membership group. These traditions are often expressed and passed down through generations. Sometimes through direct teaching and learning, and sometimes vicariously.

Zander, recalls how he was raised in close relation to his father's side of the family, with individuals whom Zander suggests, "attained a certain level of wealth and are very religious. They classify themselves as staunch republicans." He explains the values and ideals forwarded by his family:

They tend to be very protective of their wealth. In addition to that, they're braggadocios about it. [...] Not only are they keeping up with the Joneses, they're showing off because they can. I've got nothing against accumulating wealth, working hard and attaining different levels of success, but I don't think that it's appropriate to rub it in other people's faces.

Zander discusses growing up with a group of young men who echoed many of the ideals and philosophies forwarded by his parents and family members.

Discussing political beliefs in particular and without truly understanding their inherited views, Zander reflects:

All of my friends growing up in my hometown all come from extremely religious and conservative families, which spilled over onto them. At least in that initial high school stage, we all brought a boilerplate mentality to the lunchroom debate. They weren't intelligent arguments, they weren't intelligent debates.

Zander and his group of fourteen-year-old lunchroom mates were not truly deliberating anything. They were simply repeating the dinner table conservative maxims articulated by their parents the night before.

The primary membership groups in which the participants are socialized are shown to dictate nearly every aspect of the individual's life, even into adulthood. In cases where participants acknowledge a complete shift in attitude resulting in detachment from prior memberships, they still often express remorse when confronted with an ideal or belief that goes against the membership. Now in his late 30s and well into his adult life, Ben admits that he still feels guilt and derision confronting his own sexuality:

It's a daily struggle. There have been several times that I've just flat out cried out to God. Why is this my struggle, or identity, or my issue? Because I wrestle with my flesh, and I'm still attracted to another man. The moment I start dating someone, or start to have feelings for them, all of a sudden this switch comes on inside of me that says it's wrong — and I call it quits or distance

myself from that person. I retract. It's an internal battle, and it always has been. My whole life.

The patterns of socialization that occur through childhood and adolescence can punctuate nearly every aspect of the individual's life, even after they have left the group.

Instances of socializing forces are also present later in participant narratives, particularly during the exploration phase experienced while attending college. The primary difference between socialization during the initial membership phase and the socialization that can occur during college exploration is the perception of choice. Very little autonomy is expressed in the context of initial memberships, but is expressed to a great degree in the context of the college environment. This is discussed in greater detail in the Themes in Conjunction section.

Dissonance

During some stage of the socialization process, all participants are able to recount an example of a meaningful and distinct cognitive dissonance. They identify a specific example of how they first came to realize that they held an attitude or belief that was in contrast to that of their social upbringing. Most participants were able to define a specific event and recall in great detail how it affected them both as an individual and as a member of their group.

Alexis remembers when she first grasped the opulence and distortion of value in her community. It was when her best friend was gifted several expensive vehicles at a very young age. Alexis explains:

When she was still 14, right before her 15th birthday, she got a brand new BMW. A 323i, a brand new BMW so she could learn on it. When she graduated, she got a Mercedes, a brand new Mercedes. So that's when I really started noticing.

May recalls a similar experience of confrontation when she first realized that her views and opinions regarding race and segregation differed from that of her family. When May was in fifth grade, she remembers attending a local summer camp dance. Racial slurs and disparaging comments were commonplace in her community, and she went into the dance well aware that, "People don't mix; colors don't mix." She muses how, "No one ever sat me down and said that it was inappropriate, you just knew better." She saw family members and school mates echo the same ideals and beliefs all throughout her life. It was a vicarious internalization, but she internalized the rules nevertheless.

She remembers that at the summer camp dance, "The boys were there from the city school. There was a group of guys, and they were African American." It was one of her first experiences spending time with individuals outside of her community and her race. She was interested and quickly befriended some of the boys, "And we danced ... at the dance." She laughs about it now, the simplicity of dancing with someone at a dance, but that wasn't the issue. It wasn't what she was doing, it was who she was doing it with.

"My sister saw me dancing with a black guy and threw a fit," May says. "She went back to the cabin and had the team leaders come get me and have a chat with me, because I'm doing something wrong." May knew the rules, but still didn't

understand. She confronted her sister, “What is your deal? There’s nothing going on here.” She thinks back, “How bad could it have really been? We were in the fifth grade. That stuck with me.”

It was May’s first outward confrontation with racism. She had grown up with a set of beliefs and values that seemed normal. Like Kai, she hadn’t known any other way. As she ventured outside of the isolation and reinforcing nature of her community, she began to see things from another vantage point. She was able to finally articulate what she felt was an inconsistency, and for that, she was met with scorn.

There is a genuine complexity expressed by each participant when describing feelings of dissonance. They range from disbelief, confusion, and frustration, as we see with May, to reason, evaluation, and inquiry, as we see with Jace.

Jace was raised in a Christian household and was taught to live by the Judeo-Christian philosophy. As a young man, he attended church several times per week and even attended Catholic boarding school. He was always a bright young man and as an intellectual on a constant quest for knowledge and expansion, he recalls nagging contradictions. “I began questioning the leadership of the local church,” says Jace.

He perceived a level of hypocrisy and inconsistency. His solution was to look deeper. He began visiting other local churches and religious groups in the area. “I realized that everything is completely different, it really just depends on which church you’re going to.” It didn’t sit well with him. Jace was looking for something more than a support group. He thought he was a part of something larger and was dejected

when his evaluations had shown him otherwise. Looking for consistency in faith, he resolved to seek as pure a message as he could find. He recounts:

If you're going to be Christian and go towards the son of God, it made sense that you would use the text most recent to that event. [...] I started reading what Catholicism teaches. I'd read different saints, and looked into the theology behind the text. I was trying to find different pieces of the puzzle and eventually I realized they were pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that didn't really fit.

He still kept searching. He remembers, "My senior year, I tried to get in with another church, but never really clicked with anybody. I realized I'm not really following anything and nothing's really making sense." He was going through the motions, but no longer held any conviction. It seemed meaningless, and it was a feeling that he was never able to reconcile.

Each participant expresses some marked internal struggle, something that they attempt to resolve. They question, plead, and rationalize. They reason, they debate and they search for answers. When they confront these grievances with members of their group, they are often met with chastisement and disdain and they often revert to avoidance.

Separation

Ben describes, "Being free from my parents, it was like nirvana for me. It was the most amount of freedom I had ever experienced before in my entire life." As a theme, separation occurs as a part of each participant's narrative when they accept that there is no suitable way to alleviate the internal conflict caused by cognitive dissonance. As a theme, separation is defined by a philosophical and/or physical

parting with the membership. Whether there is a purposeful separation sought out by the individual, or the separation occurs more as a matter of course, at some point, each participant is shown to confront a deep-seeded inconsistency that they have struggled with for some time. It is a pronounced and pivotal point as all participants deliberate.

There are two types of separation that participants narrate. A physical separation is emphasized by all participants as they discuss the actual act of leaving home to attend college. The majority of participants attended college more than two hours away from home, living in a dormitory. Save for Jace, who had attended boarding school, this physical separation was the first prolonged period outside the context and reinforcing influence of the membership groups in which they were initially socialized.

There is also a mental separation experienced by participants. This perceived separation is a variable of particular interest as it is shown to manifest in different ways, at different times and with varying degrees of significance. Furthermore, how and when separation is experienced is shown to dictate how and when the Exploration phase will be initiated.

Alexis, Kai, and May describe a purposeful separation where college is sought as a tool for which to “escape” the confinement of the membership. May explains why she chose the college that she attended:

I wanted to get far away from home, but I had to stay in state. [...] I had about two or three colleges listed. One of them was close to home, and everyone goes to that school. I didn't want to go.

Alexis shares a similar experience. As part of a tight-knit in-group, the majority of her friends, family members, and community attend the same university. Alexis, on the other hand, chose to go to an out-of-state school. One that was well-known, and disapproved of by her parents. She remembers:

I decided that I'm not going to live off my high school glory days. I'm going to go somewhere no one else is going. [...] Out of 751 people in my graduating class, I went there, and there were only seven of us. I barely knew who those people were. I went there to, you know, do my own thing.

In both instances, college is leveraged as a tool; a means of purposeful separation.

Ben, Jace, and Zander, on the other hand, discuss separation in terms of "erosion". For these individuals, time spent outside the reinforcing environment of the membership group was enough to embrace a change in attitude. They were not necessarily seeking to escape the confinement of their memberships, but the introduction of new groups and references eventually led to separation nevertheless.

Zander attended the same college that many of his family members attended. He reflects back on his family's longstanding relationship with the school, "We have a long history of many people in my family attending. Immediate family: cousins, mom and dad, aunts and uncles, my sister eventually." To Zander, his college experience was marked by both detachment and connection to his membership. While they were not physically with him at the time, there was a membership association with both the college and the city. He remembers visiting the campus even as a child, "As a kid, I had been to the area many times with my parents. In a homecoming of sorts, they would go back and sightsee where they went to college."

While he felt a level of discord with parts of his family and social community back home, Zander certainly did not attend this college to escape. Indeed, when he walked the halls, attended classes, and cheered at sporting events, it was done in the footsteps of these same individuals. His separation, then, is better described as a corrosion of beliefs. Zander remembers the consummation of his separation and how he became involved with his school's chapter of College Democrats:

It was a turbulent time in American politics in that Bush had been president since 2000. He was, in my mind, the antithesis of what a politician should be and how a government should be run. I saw joining the Democratic Party at the college level as counter to that.

The more time spent outside of his membership's influence, the more he was able to confront his dissonance.

Jace describes a similar experience in which a gradual crescendo leads to a change in belief. As he struggles with the perceived inconsistencies of the church, he recounts how, "From freshman year of college, till about junior year, I wrestled with everything. I tried to go to church here and there. I made excuses." He went less and less and began to avoid the topic in conversations with family. Slowly, he embraced change, "I went through an agnostic period and I guess over time that morphed into atheism." College doesn't signal a sharp or precipitous change as we see with Alexis and May. In Jace's and Zander's case, it is a slow and gradual assimilation that leads to a change in attitude, value, or belief.

There is a dynamic relationship between the Separation and Exploration phases. It is driven by the extent to which each individual pursues a deliberate

uncoupling from their membership versus a gradual and natural parting that occurs circumstantially. As the participants in this study let go of their membership groups, they do not stagnate. As they uncouple and venture through a new and expanded environment, they encounter new relationships and new ways of thinking. Separation and exploration, then, can sometimes be shown to have a direct causal relationship, while at other times occur simultaneously.

Exploration

While discussing difficult and often painful experiences, participants spoke with enthusiasm and fondness in relation to exploration. Using terms like “discovery”, “freedom”, and “opportunity”, exploration was a bright spot in what proved to be conflict- and struggle-laden accounts.

For participants, college is punctuated, and often defined, by exploration. Alexis remembers the feelings of discovery, individuality, and confronting the unknown:

Just being away that last year and having to make all new friends. Get by without a car in a different state where I had no family. I went there with no friends. I mean, I had to meet people there. That gives you a sense of independence that my high school friends will never know.

Zander regarded the atmosphere as:

A very open environment to explore political ideologies and then follow those to different means. Whether that was joining a political party, whether it was joining a political group or something that’s more mission-based around a certain issue, I think there was a lot of opportunity.

Exploration in particular is marked by choice. This is the first time that many participants are able to openly embrace an attitude, value, or belief that is in contrast to that of their membership groups and social upbringing. Away from the watchful eye and reinforcing power of these individuals, college is an atmosphere of liberation and autonomy.

Exploration encompasses each participants' acknowledgement of the effects of new references. Ben remembers the man who gave him the courage to confront his own sexuality and embrace what he had felt for most of his life. He explains:

When I was 23, I met a guy at the university. In my mind, I always had homosexuals targeted as being over-the-top and girly. I met this guy and he was none of those characteristics. He was openly gay and he was very attractive. [...] It was significant because in my experience growing up, we were always taught that these people were sinners. That they were weird, different, ostracized ... this guy was none of those characteristics. He was super popular, super energetic, super charismatic and I was just instantly attracted to him. Once I found out that he was gay, it was my first experience with someone that was cool *and* gay. And I was like, okay ... I'm gay.

Ben sees that someone else is able to accomplish what he had previously considered unrealistic or impossible. He is then able to reference this individual in different situations and experiences of his own. It is a guide for his own beliefs and behaviors to be able to achieve what he thought was unachievable.

Exploration is also an experience of the unknown, unexpected, and unprecedented. May remembers "feeling very intimidated" one evening, stepping out

of her dormitory after hearing a commotion outside. It turned out to be several Greek organizations rushing new students in front of her dormitory. At the time, it seemed like much more:

I remember going outside once, and all the fraternities and sororities that were black were in a big circle. I don't know what they were doing, but there were so many. I turned around and I went right back upstairs! I didn't know what was going on.

She laughs about it now, because she knows that the May of today would not react in the same way. She was in the process of exploration, but the distrust, resentment, and general fear or non-white people that had been ingrained since birth rushed back. Yes, there was a bit of a culture shock, but May was determined to find her own path. She recomposed and stayed resolute.

I asked May what had happened between then and now. How long did it take? When and how did the intimidation cease? She pauses, then slowly replies, "Well ... I had a boyfriend..."

Reengagement

May remembers coming home from college one weekend. Her mother waited till she was away, "She went through my text messages; she went through my phone. So she knew, she knew that I was seeing a black guy." Somewhere between exploration, rebellion, and acceptance, May committed the ultimate taboo and had to answer for it when she got home. "She would punish me every time I went home," said May. "For an extended amount of time. She'd go through my phone, and take it away from me. Not allowing me to have that communication."

It didn't stop there. Racism was present far beyond May's front door. There was an entire community that felt the same way as her mother. She remembers:

Over the summer, he and a buddy came down. I was at a party, and he wasn't allowed to be there. That's when I realized how different I was, truly, from everyone else back home. [...] They had no idea who he was, what he was about. They didn't care. They just said the worst things ever, to me, as my friends.

They decided to skip the party, but she remembers feelings "categorized" and "outcast" by her high school peers. The cycle of avoidance and conflict ensued.

Reengagement is defined by participant encounters with past memberships after some level of separation has occurred and a change in attitude has been acknowledged. All participants express a deep dichotomy marked by a constant struggle between acceptance and resentment. While conflict and confrontation are common to most stories, avoidance is employed to a deep degree by every participant interviewed. Reengagement is the culmination of the question of whether or not you can really go home. The answer, however, is as complex and conflicting as the theme itself.

The greatest ambivalence expressed during participant narratives is between avoidance and confrontation; most convey a copious mixture of both. Zander still wrestles with his desire to express his beliefs and respond to baiting and ideological attacks from family members, but feels that they are not looking for honest debate. They are likely to remain obstinate regardless of the discussion so engaging would be meaningless.

While Jace would like to tell his parents that he no longer shares their deep internal Christian convictions, he feels that:

There's no point. They're happy. They're okay with where they're at. Most of them have been doing it for forty years, or even longer, so it's not like I'm going to change them. [...] If we ever did have a conversation, I think that all they would have is despair. It would be the end of the world.

Jace chooses complete avoidance and thus bears the burden of conflict within himself.

Participants also struggle between acceptance and resentment. They are often shown to seek harmony and accord. They express the desire to go on through life. It proves difficult to ignore, however, and many feel indignant or even cheated by their experiences. All participants express the precarious balance between progress and futility. While many find a level of acceptance, or truce, among past memberships, it is often understood as an uneasy stalemate. Concerning his family, Ben admits that:

I'll be the first to say that the way that I act with them is very different than how I am with my friends, or other acquaintances or co-workers. It's sad; it's almost as if I wear two different faces. When I'm with them and when I'm not with them. It's not probably the best or healthiest.

Themes in Conjunction

Socialization Throughout: Memberships and References

As previously mentioned, socialization occurs at multiple stages throughout participant's construction of narrative. Socialization in particular is somewhat of an omnipotent concept, and it can be suggested that some level of socializing forces are always present. Socialization does occur first and foremost, however, in the context of

the initial membership group. For dissonance to occur in this context, there must be some socialized belief with which to be in conflict. Therefore, as themes of socialization do occur again throughout the narrative, it is shown to always appear before any of the other themes.

Initially, socialization occurs in the context of the membership groups in which the individual is raised. These membership groups are also shown to be reference groups as participants regularly regard and take cues from the behavior of others those in these groups.

During the exploration phase, we see the introduction of both new membership and reference groups with some participants. Zander, for example, joins the College Democrats, and May speaks in the context of new memberships when relating to her college dormitory. Ben and Kai each identify a specific individual that they use as a point of reference in their decision-making process throughout college. Ben's is a model of sexuality, and Jace's is a model of religious belief, though there is no specific initiation with a new membership.

In each case, the key difference between the socialization through memberships and references that occurs during childhood and adolescence versus the socialization that occurs during college, is choice. Discussing the college exploration phase, a number of examples of expressed autonomy are related. Participants speak in terms of opportunity and discovery. They are shown to socialize through the concept of achievement and progression, and express less frustration, resentment, and avoidance.

Socialization through membership and reference groups, then, is common in both the initial membership socialization phase, and the exploration phase. Through participant narratives, sentiment shifts from the context of hierarchy and confinement within initial memberships, to discovery and autonomy during exploration.

Dissonance, Separation and Exploration

While each theme or phase has a foundational setting or base in a chronological sense, dissonance, separation, and exploration are all shown to shift and occur at multiple stages throughout the narrative. In the specific context of attitude change in college students, we see that separation is neither sought nor embraced until each individual struggles with some sort of internal dissonance. Dissonance appears again and again throughout participant narratives, particularly repeating during the reengagement phase. In each case, the first experiences of dissonance appear after the first point of socialization and before the first pronounced point of separation.

It was originally considered that dissonance and separation might be collapsed into a single theme. The experiences are often internalized in the same manner by participants, and indeed dissonance is often present to a large degree during instances of separation. Both of these themes focus on a parting or extinction from memberships; some kind of departure. There is a key difference, however. The theme of dissonance is defined by an internal struggle, while separation is an active disengagement. This internal struggle is shown to go on for some time before the individual determines that a departure from the membership is necessary.

Similarly, separation and exploration are shown to function in conjunction at times. As some participants express instances of disengagement, it sometimes occurs simultaneously with a renewed sense of searching. Separation and exploration can be viewed as two sides of the same coin. Conjoined but divided, participants let go and begin searching for something new.

There are some cases where exploration can seemingly cause separation. In Zanders case, for instance, he begins exploring the new college setting, and finds a new group with which he identifies: the College Democrats. After becoming affiliated with this group, he overtly moves away from prior memberships. This still occurs after a physical separation. Some level of mental separation, though less overt, can also be accounted for shortly after dissonance is confronted. Finally, by definition of the category, reengagement can only occur after an initial engagement has been disconnected.

Concerning dissonance, separation and exploration, it is seen then that themes often occur in conjunction with one another and with varying degrees of poignancy and significance. However, the first and most pronounced experiences do tend to follow a series of stages within the expressed stages detailed previously.

Dissonance and Reengagement

Strong commonalities are expressed during experiences of cognitive dissonance and reengagement. These are the two stages in which we see the greatest amount of conflict and struggle within the participant. Expression of avoidance is particularly strong during the manifestation of these two themes. During dissonance, participants are shown to hold some knowledge or understanding that is in contrast

to that of their membership, and as a means of coping, they are often shown to suppress these feelings. This is shown to occur again after the participant has acknowledged a departure from their membership and attempts to reengage with previous relations. Ben and Jace are prime examples as their parents are still under the impression that no change in attitude, value, or belief has occurred.

When avoidance is not employed, it is usually replaced with conflict. This is true during both experiences of dissonance and reengagement. We see in May's case for example, how she initially grows confrontational when she realizes that her views concerning race are not the same as her family or her community. Conflict is again employed when she returns home and is confronted by negative attitudes from these same individuals.

In the case of most participants, avoidance and conflict are both utilized in varying degrees dependent upon the situation. Some participants are shown to favor some mechanisms more than others, but there is relative consistency between the mechanisms used during dissonance and again during reengagement.

Beyond avoidance and conflict, other common expressions between dissonance and reengagement include uneasiness, frustration, pain, resentment, guilt, questioning, and acceptance.

CHAPTER V - DISCUSSION

Through the use of qualitative methodology and narrative inquiry, the purpose of this study was to examine the effects that college can have on an individual's shift in attitudes, values, or beliefs. Additionally, I sought a better understanding of how new attitudes, values, or beliefs can affect communication with prior membership groups.

This was done by conducting a series of face-to-face interviews with six participants who each acknowledged having undergone some significant change in attitude, value, or belief during college. Through semi-structured interviews, I endeavored to construct a chronology of events beginning with membership group socialization, through experiences of attitude change, and into instances of reengagement with prior membership groups. After I conducted participant interviews, a thematic analysis of findings uncovered commonalities across participant accounts.

The college setting is shown to bear considerable effects in the case of each participant, and this is shown through a series of marked stages that occur through the construction of each narrative. I identified themes which followed a basic chronology throughout the expression of the participant narrative. While different themes were present throughout the construction of the narrative, foundational stages were identified. These five stages of themes that I found and expounded upon include 1) socialization, 2) dissonance, 3) separation, 4) exploration, and 5) reengagement. Each participant is shown to encounter each of these themes with relative consistency.

There is an initial membership socialization period through which the individual is raised. In the case of all participants, Bandura's (1971, 1972, 1977) Social Learning Theory is strongly reinforced. Through the construction of narrative, all participants are shown to have been socialized within the context of membership groups through the modeling of behavior, imitation, and patterned reinforcement.

Socialization through primary and membership groups begins with the modeling of membership behaviors as outlined by Bandura (1971, 1972, 1977), Siegel and Siegel (1957) and Williams (1976). These models were shown to often take the form of parents, siblings, and extended family like in the cases of May, Alexis, and Zander. Models were also shown to take the form of specific cultural or religious affiliations as we saw with Kai, Jace, and Ben. There are structures and systems of belief passed on to members of the group through direct teaching and learning as well as vicarious learning.

Skinner's (1953, 1976, 1979) behaviorist approach to socialization is also shown to bear influence both through direct and vicarious reinforcement. For instance, when Ben is a child, he internalizes the negative outcome produced when two members of his extended family openly identify as homosexuals. We see a more direct negative reinforcement when May attempts to rationalize dancing with a member of another race to her family. In each case, the reinforcing behaviors affect, or threaten to affect, member stature within the hierarchical structure of their group.

Kemper (1968) made the argument that socialization through membership groups is often reinforced by punishment whereas reference groups reinforce by achievement. Participant accounts strongly support this idea. Kai's narrative is

particularly marked by reinforcing punishment throughout early childhood and into adolescence. In one instance, he describes a horrific experience where his mother forces him to punish his younger brother by locking him upside down in a dirty laundry basket containing a feces soaked pair of undergarments. This is, no doubt, an extreme example, but illustrates the extreme to which memberships will sanction by punishment in the absence of a desired behavior.

During adolescence and in the midst of the process of socialization, all participants are confronted with a cognitive dissonance regarding some ideal or belief forwarded by the membership. Participants struggle with this dissonance and are shown to employ different coping mechanisms ranging from confrontation and conflict, to guilt and avoidance. In many cases, participants attempt to reconcile information that contradicts deep-rooted ideals and beliefs held by their membership.

As Festinger (1957, 1962) suggested, they strive to alleviate or rationalize these inconsistencies by reducing dissonance. In the case of May, she does this by justifying her behavior as wrong, but harmless. Jace endeavors to find more information to supersede his contradictions. In the end, neither is able to resolve their issues, and both, ultimately, go on to embrace a change in attitude.

Kemper (1968) explains how this divergence can lead to resentment and avoidant behaviors on the part of the individual and how this can signal a wedge being driven between the individual and the group. In the case of this study, participants are shown to confront this dissonance and separation from the membership eventually occurs. Sometimes, this separation is quick and pronounced, while other times, it is gradual and understated. In some instances, this separation is

purposefully sought, while other times, it happens through a natural course of events in the college environment.

During college, participants begin to explore new groups, concepts, and ideas with a new sense of autonomy. The exploratory and socializing effects of both students and faculty were recounted by Weidman (1979), Milem (1998) and several more contemporary studies (Aronson et al., 2010; Cialdini et al., 1990; Prince & Carey, 2010; Sinatra et al., 2012) and are strongly reinforced in participant accounts. Additionally, the exponential effect of new models being introduced at a pivotal point in an individual's life is well documented and supported by this thesis (Arnett, 2006; Roberts et al., 2006; Vaidya et al., 2002).

As a subset population, Newcomb (1943) found that college students regard the college environment as a positive reference group in itself. Participants in this environment are shown to utilize both actual and perceived reference groups as a means of socialization. The socializing force of reference groups as explained by Merton (1968) is also echoed by all participants. May and Alexis not only spoke in terms of positive life choices and education, but discussed the environment itself as something larger than life — an unprecedented opportunity for growth and expansion. Zander employed both new memberships and references with his affiliation in the College Democrats. Ben, Kai, and Jace all identified a singular individual who was utilized as a point of reference and means of embracing change.

By this stage, a change in value, attitude, or belief had been confronted and embraced on some level by all participants. When the participant reengages with relations belonging to prior or disjointed memberships, there is now a redefining

stage. In some cases, this redefinition is directly confronted by prior memberships, resulting in some mixture of conflict, deliberation, and acceptance, while in other cases, outright avoidance is employed. In fact, there are several cases in which participants report that their change in value, attitude, or belief is still not known by particular prior member relations. Ben's father still does not know that Ben is a gay man, and Jace's parents still believe that he identifies as a Christian. This further reinforces Kemper's (1968) slippery slope of divergence leading to resentment and resulting in avoidance.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In several cases, what might be viewed as similar stimuli produced diverse results, while dissimilar instances produced comparable results. This suggests that while we can conclude with some confidence that the college environment acts as a catalyst for attitude change, there are other mitigating circumstances for which to account.

Studying the interaction of what are both ethereal and nuanced variables such as socialization, beliefs, and attitudes is likely to produce a wide array of outcomes. While a relatively diverse sample was examined in terms of subject of attitude change, a larger sample would potentially produce a wider array of variable interaction and, thus, expand results. With more participation and greater variation, moderating influences could be further explored.

To another end, sample diversity could be collapsed to isolate and adjust current variables. For example, a subset of individuals who were raised as members of a given religion, but have self-exiled from the community. The results and themes

produced by these subsets could be compared to general and mixed-subject groups to seek and isolate variables.

New contextual variables could be introduced in the onset of future studies. While I chose to focus on college as a catalyst for attitude change, there are many other suitable situations and environments that are conducive to similar effects. New groups could be incorporated including individuals who have experienced significant changes in attitude but did not attend college and individuals who did not experience attitude change but did attend college. Parallel interviews could be conducted among these groups, and thematic analyses could be used to compare and contrast themes across multiple data sets to determine the extent to which college itself is a mitigating environment.

Finally, the paradigm of separation proved to be a particularly interesting theme and is deserving of more concentrated investigation. While half of the study's participants used college as a premeditated tool for separating from their membership, the other half entered the environment with no expressed plans for disengagement. Prior to this, seemingly similar patterns of socialization and cognitive dissonance are present. This suggests the presence of another variable, or trigger, that can manifest and drive the imminence of separation before even entering this environment.

Lack of Expressed Denial

Of particular interest is the lack of expressed denial by participants. I expected some level of repudiation, particularly during instances of cognitive dissonance and reengagement. I noted its absence after the first several interviews, and considered

introducing probing questions. I dismissed this, however, and monitored the presence of denial to determine if it would be conveyed unprovoked. After six participant interviews, a great deal of questioning and coping was expressed, but never in the context of real disbelief or outright denial.

I suspect that a larger sample would eventually produce some sentiment of denial. It must also be considered, however, that perhaps with this specific population, there is no room for denial. As a characteristic for study inclusion, all participants acknowledge a change in attitude, belief or value. Individuals with a greater proclivity to coping mechanisms such as denial are perhaps less likely to embrace this type of significant change. By the very definition of inclusion, the presence of denial would then be less likely.

Conclusion

One of the earliest endeavors I sought with this thesis was to better understand the process of attitude change in college students. This question was based on the premise that participants held a particular attitude, value, or belief, and at some point during college, this attitude, value, or belief was transformed. What I found, however, was that in most cases, the transformative or resulting attitude was present for quite some time.

In many cases, college did not change the individual's belief or ideology. What had changed was the participant's willingness to suppress their feelings and accommodate membership groups. The change in attitude, then, was often in the participant's decision to embrace an attitude, value, or belief that was in conflict with

that of the membership group, and not in the overt attitude, value, or belief itself. This is certainly a change in attitude, but of a much different kind than I expected.

Though encountering very different experiences and relating very different narratives, all participants are shown to endure relatively similar stages and patterns during the process of attitude change. They are all expressly socialized within the context of primary membership and reference groups. These groups bear strong effects on their decision-making processes even after they have formally departed from these groups. All participants are shown to employ similar coping mechanisms though cognitive dissonance and reengagement — particularly conflict and avoidance.

College was shown to play a significant role in the process of attitude change in several distinct ways. When dissonance was confronted and separation is sought by some individuals, college is a tool for disengagement from membership groups. For participants who were not seeking active disengagement, the exploratory nature of college afforded new experiences and opportunities that brought about change. The role of college as a catalyst for attitude change, then, is shown to be two-fold: as a means to an end, and as an end in and of itself.

Finally, to the question of whether or not you can really go home, the answer is as complex as each participant's narrative. Discussing reengagement, participants express mixtures of progress and futility, acceptance and rejection, and conflict and avoidance. Home is constant and home is fleeting. Home is peace of mind and home is strife. When we think back, wasn't it always this way? The real difference now is that we can acknowledge and articulate what, as a child, we could not. Can you really go home?

Yes, just don't expect it to be the same.

APPENDIX A

Open Invitation for Study Participation

Greetings –

I am actively seeking participants for my Graduate Thesis at the University of Houston's Jack J. Valenti School of Communication. The subject of the study is *attitude and belief change in college students*.

Examples can include, but are certainly not limited to, changes in attitude regarding politics, religion, race, gender roles, equality, economy, global issues, cultural or social issues. Some past examples include change in belief concerning the role of unions in America, the importance of money in family or relationships, the rejection of a particular cultural belief or norm, and the role of technology in society. The change in personal belief can be anything that you consider important or significant.

Participants must...

- Have obtained a degree from an accredited college or post-secondary institution
- Be at least 18 years of age
- Have experienced a change in some deeply held belief, philosophy or ideology during or after college

Participation involves...

- A private, face-to-face interview discussing beliefs and social issues (approx. 1 hour)
- Potentially, a short follow-up interview

- Complete confidentiality

If you fit these criteria and are interested in more details, please reply as soon as possible for more information. **If you know anyone who is a potential fit, please do not hesitate to forward this email and my information along.** Thank you for your time and consideration!

Best regards,

Daniel Curren

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APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Interviews follow a semi-structured format and are intended to be malleable to allow for adaptability and probing of areas of interest. The five main areas of inquiry are 1) childhood socialization through membership groups, 2) experiences of cognitive dissonance, 3) exposure to new reference groups in the college setting, 4) change in attitude and 5) communication with past membership groups since change in attitude. The basic interview guideline is as follows:

1. Tell me a little bit about your childhood and growing up.
 - a. What sticks out to you as important and meaningful growing up?
 - i. Any experiences, or instances? Any people who played a large role?
 - b. Who were you closest to, and who did you look up to for guidance?
2. What are some of the most significant values that family and/or friends held while you were growing up? (Could be political, religious, social, ideological, philosophical, economical, etc...)
 - a. Were you or your family a part of any social groups or organizations?
 - b. How were these values taught or passed on?
 - i. How was the importance or significance of values taught or related to you?
 - c. Were these values ever challenged in any way by yourself or someone else?
 - i. If so, what was the outcome?

3. Which values held by family/friends did you specifically not agree with?
 - a. When did you begin to notice that your values might differ from family/friends?
 - b. What were some specific instances where you noticed you felt differently?
 - c. How did you react in these situations, what was the outcome?
 - i. Confrontation vs avoidance
4. Why did you go to college, and where did you go to college?
 - a. Why did you attend that college? Were there other choices?
 - b. What was your major, and why did you choose that major?
 - c. Did you live on campus, commute? Who did you live with?
5. To what extent do you feel that college served as the catalyst for coming to terms with your change in value or belief?
 - a. How did the environment affect your outward actions or behaviors regarding these specific changes in values?
 - b. Were you a part of any social groups or organizations in college?
 - c. Who were specific individuals who helped to nurture or reinforce your change in belief?
 - d. Do you feel that the changes you experienced were more about coming to terms with something that you had felt all along, or were these something new that this environment had shown you?
 - e. What else about this environment added to the construction or acceptance of your change in belief or value?

6. How do you now deal with family and/or friends in regards to these values or changes in ideology?
 - a. How have you reacted when confronted with these values?
(confrontational, submissive, avoidant)
 - b. How have family and/or friends reacted when confronted with your change in value?
 - c. How have overall relationships changed with family and/or friends since finishing college?
 - d. How have family and/or friends changed as individuals since then?
 - e. How do you feel that these relationships will play out in the future?

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