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## Learning about identity, race, history, and sexuality by viewing musical theatre : a social learning theory perspective

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## ABSTRACT

### LEARNING ABOUT IDENTITY, RACE, HISTORY, AND SEXUALITY BY VIEWING MUSICAL THEATRE: A SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY PERSPECTIVE

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Relational dialectics 2.0 argues that individuals use cultural discourses to make sense of what is being said in relational interactions. However, relational dialectics does not explain how people learn these cultural discourses. This thesis uses relational dialectics 2.0 and social learning theory to focus on five cultural discourses that are present in four musicals in order to better understand how people learn and apply what they learn about cultural discourses to their daily interactions. The five cultural discourses examined are historical representation, identity, race, sexuality, and social class, and the four musicals are *Hamilton*, *Hairspray*, *Les Misérables*, and *Rent*. Social learning theory was used to develop five research questions. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with participants ( $N=12$ ) who had seen *Hamilton* and at least one of the other three musicals. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, and the results identify and explain the themes related to what people learn about cultural discourses from viewing live performances of musicals and how they apply that learning to their interactions. The last chapter provides a discussion of the results including the implications they have for relational communication.

NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
DE KALB, ILLINOIS

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LEARNING ABOUT IDENTITY, RACE, HISTORY, AND SEXUALITY BY VIEWING  
MUSICAL THEATRE: A SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY PERSPECTIVE

BY

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE  
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Kathleen S. Valde

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## **Chapter 1**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Introduction**

One focus of relational communication research considers how people make sense of what is said in interactions. One theory that works towards this goal is relational dialectics theory. Relational dialectics theory looks at competing discourses and how they work to shape interpersonal communication practices. The focus of this theory is utterances, or communication acts either written or verbal, which are used to construct relational systems of meaning (Baxter, 2011). Relational dialectics itself has developed over the years, most recently to focus on discourses, rather than individuals, and how they create meaning. These discourses guide interpersonal interactions and inform the relational communication that develops over time in society.

Relational dialectics theory 2.0 examines the overall need for open communication by looking at discursive practices in an effort to understand people's lived realities. This idea has been used in multiple studies. Faulkner and Ruby (2015) studied e-mails sent between a romantic dyad to determine how they discuss themselves and their relationships. Prentice (2015) used the theory to study cross-cultural discourses of romanticism as viewed by Chinese women. Lastly, O'Hara (2017) used the theory to look at patient-physician discourses relating to diabetes management.



These examples encompass varying dyadic relationships and how knowledge of discourses has shaped conversations that surround serious topics. However, relational dialectics research has not given a lot of attention to how people learn about cultural discourses and how they spread throughout society. People are socialized to the discourses that are present in each of these studies. One main source for the socialization of these discourses is through education. Education is the basis for teaching students about diversity and its interpersonal effects because higher education serves as preparation for the workplace (Martinez, Hearit, Banerji, Gettings, & Buzzanell, 2018). The classroom is also a primary example of interactions that occur in everyday life, and it allows for a way for students to learn about new perspectives. “The instructional realms have never been immune from discourse about prevalent ideologies, and students will be exposed to a variety of worldviews and ideologies in the classroom” (Simmons & Wahl, 2016, p. 225).

Education that socializes people to cultural discourses can either be formal as described previously or informal. One informal education source could be musical theatre. Musical theatre creates connections with audience members by portraying common and relatable plot lines and themes (Schrader, 2009). The effects of these connections may include influencing the ways that people see the world around them, formulating decisions in their everyday life, and engaging in and making sense of daily interactions. In an organizational context like the theatre industry, it has been found that environment often effects how people learn from and imitate their interactions (Reed, Goolsby, & Johnston, 2016).

Another way that musical theatre makes connections with audience members is by incorporating common cultural discourses into their plotlines and themes. These discourses often

emerge through the differences presented between characters and their tensions and ultimate resolution. For example, some musicals like *Hairspray*, *In the Heights*, and *West Side Story* base their storyline on racial struggles, and musicals like *Rent* and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* primarily address issues of sexuality.

Musical theatre as medium has not been the focus of much scholarly work, but it is a vital component of many people's lives. When people put themselves in the audience of a live theatrical performance, they are often impacted in their everyday lives. For these reasons, this qualitative study seeks to understand how audience members apply what they learn about cultural discourses on diversity from musical theatre production to their daily interactions by using social learning theory. Research has not considered the informal learning about diversity that occurs when people attend musical theatre productions. Thus, studying what people learn about cultural discourses from musicals and developing an understanding of how they apply this learning in their daily interactions is important because this is a medium that has the ability to greatly effect its audiences.

The first chapter of this thesis will offer a review of the relevant research for this qualitative study. First, the rationale for this study will be developed by defining cultural discourse and identifying the connections between cultural discourse and musical theatre. Next, a justification will be provided for the four musicals that are the focus of the study. Finally, this chapter will provide an overview of social learning theory in order to develop the research questions.

## Rationale

### Cultural Discourse

Baxter and Braithwaite (2008) describe cultural discourses as systems of meaning that help us to make sense of interactions. For instance, if someone says, “I can’t ask him to go out with me because I’m from the wrong side of the tracks,” we would use our cultural discourse about class to make sense of the comment. Baxter and Braithwaite suggest that people’s knowledge of cultural discourses results from their societal membership. In a sense we are socialized to cultural discourses; in other words we learn about cultural discourses as a result of being part of a community. Communities develop as a result of common interests and common occurrences in everyday life.

Because musicals are written by people who are members of communities, cultural discourses are incorporated into the plotlines of musicals. Embedding cultural discourses into the plotlines of musicals enables the musicals to present characters, plots, interactions, and events in ways that are relatable to the audience members. The cultural discourses embedded in a musical production may also reinforce or change audience members’ understandings of particular cultural discourses, and they may influence how people use those cultural discourse in their daily interactions. Cultural discourses present in musical theatre productions may include historical events, identity, race, sexuality, and class structure.

One cultural discourse that may be present in some musicals is a historical cultural discourse. For instance, a historical cultural discourse may help audience members make sense of events in shows such as *Hamilton*, *Hairspray*, and *Les Misérables*. Each of these shows has a historical cultural discourse embedded in it and having knowledge of the relevant historical

discourse may help audience members make sense of the musical. For instance, having knowledge of the discourse surrounding the Civil Rights movement helps audience members make sense of events in *Hairspray*. In addition to using cultural discourses to make sense of historical events and interactions in a musical, attending a musical theatre performance may reinforce or change audience members' understanding of a historical cultural discourse. For instance, watching *Hamilton* might change how audience members understand the historical cultural discourse surrounding the founding of the United States.

A second cultural discourse present in musicals may be identity. Identity refers to the presentation of certain characteristics that make up personal communication practices (Willson, 2015). For example, Smith (2015) describes the community depicted in *Rent* constructed through the identities of the characters, including the place where they all live and their common ideals in addition to their connection with the larger AIDS community. Identities are “actively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed through human relationships, which are in turn sustained and experienced through processes of communication” (O’Boyle, 2014, p. 170). So, a cultural identity discourse helps people make sense of and understand the identities that are used in particular interactions and to make sense of what is being said in an interaction. When identities are portrayed on stage, a cultural discourse of identity allows people to make sense of the experiences that characters are having in the show. Further, watching the identities that characters portray in shows might reinforce or change how people understand and use an identity cultural discourse in their daily interactions. Identity has been the focus of several musicals including *Dear Evan Hansen* and *Wicked*. Identities are often comprised of multiple components, including race, sexuality, and social class, and each of these represent a cultural discourse.

A race cultural discourse enables us to make sense of statements made in interactions that are related to race, racial identity, or racial differences. “For example, when partners refer to one another as ‘chickadee’, they may be invoking a core meaning system about themselves as a biracial couple” (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, p. 349). Within everyday discussions where the topic of race is present, a larger racial discourse presents itself. Knowledge of this discourse helps people to make sense of their interactions. Thompson and Collier (2006) describe that the race issues that are present in society have a large impact because of the cultural discourse. The ideas that are present in the cultural discourse shape their relational and workplace interactions. These interactions are presented in musicals like *Hairspray*, where race issues are a large part of the plotline. Audience members therefore can apply what they see on stage to what they view in their everyday lives in an effort to be more aware of the patterns in real life discussions.

Sexuality as a cultural discourse is present when looking at dyadic romantic relationships (Faulkner & Ruby, 2005). This discourse includes not only descriptions of sexual activity, but also sexual identity, including gender and sexual preference, that people present. The ideas present range in openness of information and comfort with the topics, and these impact each person’s feelings towards discussions that involve the topic of sexuality. Because sexuality can be discussed in many different ways, it is important for people to pick up on meanings as they develop and change through interpersonal interactions (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Musical can be useful in presenting the topic of sexuality as it can be seen in everyday public communication. Sexuality is depicted in many musicals, especially *Rent* where romantic relationships are explicitly shown. *Rent* also has overt descriptions of people with different sexual preferences as well as ideas about sexual activity. *Hairspray* also tackles the idea of

gender and sexuality through its common casting of the main character's mother as a man dressed in drag (Woodward, 2012). When these discourses are presented on stage, audiences have the opportunity to use these meanings that they develop in their own conversations.

Lastly, a social class cultural discourse helps people make sense of comments in interactions that are based on social class and its effect on societal divides. For centuries people have discussed social class and how it is presented in the public eye. Social categorization is often shown in representations of class divides in media. Maines (2018) gives an interesting take on this topic, pointing out the divide between celebrities and the general public in magazines. This presentation of the discourse makes it simple for people to find information and provide meaning to the class structure divide that occurs in everyday interactions. Musical theatre presents social class in a large part in *Les Misérables*, where people are fighting to control the class divide during the French Revolution. *Rent* is also dominantly shown through struggles of low-class groups, and *Hamilton* uses the class divide to show Alexander's upward climb through his marriage and his constant work. These depictions further describe the divide between social classes. Audiences therefore are given more information about social class that can impact their overall ideas and help them to formulate their system of meaning. This thereby impacts how they interact with others based on their social class and the discourses present in their network.

### **Rationale for Focusing on Four Musicals**

As demonstrated in the previous sections, cultural discourses are likely embedded in the plots of most musicals. One way of studying what people learn about cultural discourses through watching musicals might be to study all the musicals that people indicate they have seen, which would be a large task. In order to limit the scope of the project and to ensure some commonality

in the issues that people were discussing, this study focuses on live productions of four musicals: *Hamilton*, *Les Misérables*, *Hairspray*, and *Rent*. Because of its popularity and the ways it addresses issues of race and history, *Hamilton* was the first show selected. The other three shows were selected because of their connections to *Hamilton* and their use of the five cultural discourses discussed in the previous section.

As a basis, *Hamilton* has proven itself as a strong representation as a new musical for modern society. It stands out because of its “color-blind” casting strategy, hiring actors of color for characters that are historically seen as white men, as well as its interpretation of historical events with a modern musical style like rap and hip-hop. It has even been pointed out that characters like Alexander Hamilton are shown rapping to incorporate the large amount of information that he created over time, but styles like jazz are used for newly introduced characters like Thomas Jefferson to highlight his disconnect from society when he returned to America from France (Miranda & McCarter, 2016). The unique entertainment style makes it possible to spread the cultural discourses presented to a wide audience, therefore increasing the influence potential.

The creation of this musical was inspired by many previous works of the same medium, as the writers took inspiration from other works in an effort to connect with the audiences. *Hairspray*, *Les Misérables*, and *Rent* are only three of the musicals that influenced the creation of *Hamilton*. They have been found to each have aspects that influenced the creation of *Hamilton*. *Rent* had a large impact on the creation of *Hamilton*, beginning as a passion for many of the original actors. *Rent* portrayed a piece that reminded them of their younger selves that first fell in love with musical theatre (Gioia, 2015). Lin-Manuel Miranda said that he used *Rent* as

proof that he could ultimately write musicals himself. “Miranda had an ‘a-ha!’ moment the first time he saw *Rent* (“The show exists, and people go, ‘That’s for me. I can do that show.’”)” (Gioia, 2015, par. 8). *Hairspray* portrays a strong lead, Tracy Turnblad, who influenced the creation of the character of Alexander Hamilton (Miranda & McCarter, 2016). The production of *Hairspray Live!* in 2016 even made reference to *Hamilton*, quoting one of its most memorable lines to describe the character’s motivation. “Unlike Tracy, Link didn’t believe he could do anything else other than be on The Corny Collins Show. Without the show, his future would be in jeopardy and that’s when he dropped the famous Hamilton line. ‘I can’t throw away my shot,’ he told Tracy emphatically before turning around and leaving her behind” (Jamal, 2016, par. 2-3) This line is frequently used throughout *Hamilton* to demonstrate Alexander’s determination in the show. The song where it is introduced, “My Shot”, is a high point at the beginning of the show which outlines the onset of Alexander’s motivated path to work in the American government. *Les Misérables* aided with the creation of emotional scenes in *Hamilton* like the song “Satisfied.” When the character of Angelica Schuyler remarks “At least I keep his eyes in my life”, Miranda adds the comment “Trying to out-Eponine Eponine up in this piece” (Miranda and McCarter, 2016, p. 85). In this metaphor, the character of Eponine in *Les Misérables* has unrequited romantic feelings towards Marius. This plot point of unrequited love is also portrayed in *Hamilton* with Angelica’s feelings towards Alexander. Both of these women not only have the commonality of unrequited love, but they are also put in that situation because they choose their independence over their love interest.

Another reason for choosing these four shows is their popularity in the musical theatre industry. *Hamilton* quickly became a smash hit, attracting many audience members from its inception in New York. It won the Tony award for Best Musical, a title previously held by each



of the other three shows being discussed. *Les Misérables*, *Hairspray*, and *Rent* are also all still touring throughout the nation or have been interpreted and used in smaller productions like high school performances. Since these four shows are still commonly being performed, it increases the likelihood that participants will have seen at least two of the shows chosen for the study.

The purpose of this study is to understand what people learn about cultural discourses when seeing live performances of these four musicals and how they apply what they learn in their day-to-day lives. This study uses social learning theory as a framework for studying the informal learning that occurs when people attend musicals. Social learning theory is also used to develop the research questions that guide this study.

### **Theoretical Perspective and Research Questions**

#### **Social Learning Theory**

Albert Bandura (1977) created social learning theory by combining certain concepts from psychology and human interaction. Social learning theory “explains that one learns new behaviors not only by actually performing those behaviors, but also by observation of others’ performances” (Larson, 1991, p. 381). The three main tenets of Bandura’s social learning theory are observation, imitation, and modeling. Following this structure, the theory suggests that people ultimately learn new ways of performing actions and their preferred ways of thinking through observation of others. When they possess efficacy, or the ability to accomplish the task, they will likely continue to act. They therefore formulate their thoughts and actions in a consistent manner. This creation of thoughts and actions can be pulled into many cognitive and physical activities that people present on a daily basis. The process of following others’ example is used in multiple contexts and shows itself in different ways. It is speculated that people

observe others and follow their example in an effort to avoid extraneous work (Lam, Krause & Ahearne, 2010). Social learning theory also describes the idea of imitation, where observations are taken by people and replicated (Zentall, 2011).

The first major process in the social learning theory is observation. Observation occurs through watching actions of other people that are seen in everyday life (Bandura, 1977). Observation then leads to people ultimately recreating the actions seen through the processes of imitation and modeling. Imitation refers to direct recreation of actions observed (Bandura, 1977). Lastly, modeling refers to the new representations of communicative processes like emotions (Davis & Haynes, 2012). Modeling is often seen in practice through the representation of some communicative processes which will be discussed later. Observation, imitation, and modeling work in a process where people adjust their behavior based on their reactions to certain material. Social learning theory has been studied in a range of contexts beginning with interpersonal interactions like a parent-child dynamic where children emulate their parents (Davis & Haynes, 2012). It is also taken to media exposure with the popular idea that children emulate violence depicted in video games (Lin, 2012), and it is then used to describe the effects that popular media outlets like television have on similar interpersonal interactions (Larson, 1991). This wide range of applications shows the malleability of social learning theory in multiple contexts.

Larson (1991) takes social learning theory and places it in the context of popular media. Television shows often depict certain relationships, and Larson focuses on the evolution of family dynamics as shown through television shows from the 1950s to the 1980s. Overall, it is proven that people emulate dynamics based on their relatability to real life scenarios (Larson, 1991). “Television provides a rich source of behaviors to observe and from which to learn, and

many television behaviors are imitated by viewers. The behaviors most likely to be imitated are those which occur in situations with which users can identify.” (Larson, 1991, pp. 381-382) We can assume that entertainment depicts realistic characters with whom the audience can identify; therefore, the audience is able to understand the characters and situations they are in and apply what is depicted to their own social situations.

Social learning theory has been used to gauge audience associations using a great variety of media platforms. Larson (1991) more fully describes family dynamics by discussing the idea that sibling interactions depicted on television were often found to be imitated by viewers. Lin (2012) describes the commonly followed theory that children who are exposed to violent video games will ultimately emulate this aggressive behavior. These ideas follow the logic that “character identification has been proposed as the popular mediating mechanism to explain such effects” (Lin, 2012, p. 4). This shows that viewers of media creations will therefore find characters and other constructs of entertainment outlets with which they identify and use that information to formulate their own plans. Through the creation of realistic characters, media platforms like television and film can impact their audience and inspire their future actions. Like these mediated platforms, musical theatre offers similar opportunity for engagement in a live setting.

Social learning theory provides a clear basis to structure the extent to which entertainment creations shape audience reactions, not only through the medium of television, but also musical theatre. Because people take social cues from the characters that they view in television and other media, it can be assumed that the media platform of musical theatre will follow the same pattern. The structure of social learning theory can fall into the context of

musical theatre based on the audience observation and interaction with the show represented. The observation can focus on a particular concept demonstrated by a character or an idea or fact that is represented throughout the musical. The ideas represented in performances of musical theatre offer their audiences a background for information to be learned in an entertaining manner, and audiences may often emulate the characteristics of the characters represented on stage.

Musical theatre audiences may engage in the imitation processes that are described in social learning theory. Imitation describes the idea that people observing a scenario will often attempt to recreate the same process. It is important to note that typically “there was little if any similarity between the visual stimulus the observer saw during observation and the visual stimulus it saw during its own performance of either response” (Zentall, 2011, p. 246). People will therefore take their observations and tailor them in a way that will stray from the original action. It is possible that the similarities will increase through multiple observations. “Social learning through vicarious observation is crippled if the opportunity to directly observe role models is less frequent” (Lam et al, 2010, p. 66). One example is laid out by Bailey (2006) who explains that advertising agencies ultimately tailor the diversity in their messages to what is common in popular daily society, and that is therefore how people view the norm. This idea of everyday observation and subsequent imitation can then potentially follow in the musical theatre context. Through multiple viewings of shows through reading books and listening to soundtracks, musical theatre audiences have the opportunity to reinforce the learning that they have processed.

Imitation is sometimes done in the format of goal emulation. Goal emulation is a term used by Zentall (2011) to describe the phenomenon when something is shown to have a particular purpose without a clear representation of how to carry out the intended action. For example, Anuradha (2012) connected imitation with children and gender stereotyping presented in advertisements. Children were seen to take different ideas to imitate or model based off of how their prescribed gender was being portrayed in commercials (Anuradha, 2012). As another “character” being constructed, these commercials are seen to be directly effecting children’s gender constructs and overall personality. Theatre audiences can be assumed to use this mental strategy in the process of creating their own representation of the actions in the show. Tools for interaction are presented in a way that allows the audience to use the ideas presented on stage to fit their needs according to their personal necessity.

Bandura describes that “social learning theory suggests that learning is not independent of context and that people are both selective and proactive in what they observe and from whom they learn” (as cited in Lam et al, 2010, p. 65). People have the power to choose the format for information they will take in and use in their own lives, whether or not that is done consciously. They will then apply each of the most impactful and desirable qualities through the processes of imitation and modeling described earlier. In the musical theatre context, it also means that ideas presented on stage can be reconfigured for use in the real world.

### **Historical Representation**

Educational influences are clear in the development of many musical theatre productions. This is done through their direct representation of historical time periods. Three musicals that stand out as clearly representing different time periods are *Rent*, *Les Misérables*, and *Hairspray*.

These musicals each set up clear representations of the time period and full setting in which they were placed. These shows subsequently influenced one of the most highly regarded recent musicals *Hamilton: An American Musical*. Their representations of time period and characters ultimately provided a platform for the creators of *Hamilton* to build a new creation based in its own time period and setting construction. These stories put the setting and characters into a context with which the audience can hopefully identify and will adequately be able to absorb and remember the educational information presented.

Musicals often use their unique context to represent historical periods of time. *Rent*, which incorporated the AIDS epidemic in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century into the plotline, is one of the first musicals that tackled a health crisis (Smith, 2015). The show follows the story of a group of friends living in New York City in near poverty, and it depicts the struggle of many of the characters to care for their illness through these times of great financial hardship (Larson, 1996). Most of the main characters in the show are struggling with AIDs, a stigmatized disease. *Rent* challenges the stigma of the disease by making the audiences feel affection and compassion for the characters before diving into the effect that AIDS has on those beloved characters (Smith, 2015). Larson depicts the severity of the issue clearly when the friends are enjoying their time together during the song “La Vie Boheme”, and suddenly the majority of the group has to take a break in order to take their medicine before resuming the festivities.

Musicals have also tackled other similar issues that have historically been part of societal dialogue. Racial segregation has consistently been a controversial issue in the United States, and it has been depicted in many different pieces of art, from museum exhibits to literature.

*Hairspray* discusses racial segregation specifically in the 1960s. The main character, Tracy

Turnblad is working to create a more inclusive social structure in her hometown of Baltimore, Maryland. (O'Donnell & Meehan, 2002) This fight against racial oppression is done throughout the show with a lighthearted approach to much of the plot. "*Hairspray* condemns racism and offers feel-good anti-segregation messages that suggest that we should look beyond a person's physical appearance to appreciate his or her uniqueness." (Schrader, 2011, p. 128) The writers present the contextual format of a story about opposing racial discrimination in a way that people could take into the everyday world and either see its effect or continue their own opposition for the issue. Ankersmit (2001) describes this tactic as idealism, or when a story is presented in a way that highlights the good moments that can come from a difficult situation. Idealism details the idea that people of the time period were not as positive as the show might convey, but they use this entertainment to make people interested in seeing a show. The audiences will become interested in having good feelings when they leave, and they look for the idealistic structure to make them feel good about the work against segregation done by the characters in the show.

*Hairspray* not only presents racial segregation in an idealistic format, but the serious issue is also tackled in a way that sheds light on the intense emotion felt by people who went through the struggle for equality. The story is presented at times in a format that is intended to evoke the emotions felt by people who were placed in the situations being represented in the musical. Motormouth Maybelle, the mother of Tracy's friend and fellow civil rights activist Seaweed Stubbs, has the majority of this serious representation in her song 'I Know Where I've Been' at the climax of the characters' development in their work for the civil rights movement. "There's a light in the darkness though the night is black as my skin. There's a light burning bright showing me the way, but I know where I've been." (O'Donnell & Meehan, 2002, p. 108) This specific line not only demonstrates the intense emotion that the characters in the show are

feeling, but also acknowledges the fact that people have continuously struggled in the past and they are simply continuing to find the light in the situation. The construction of this piece is also layered, both instrumentally and vocally, in a way that builds the emotional impact. The instruments and character vocals that are added through the progression of the song ultimately show the rapid spreading of the message and the idea of group unity (*WordPress*, 2011).

Using musicals to represent a historically significant moment has not only been done in the context of American history, but other countries' historical struggles have also been presented in musical. *Les Misérables* offers a representation of the French Revolution based off of Victor Hugo's book. Victor Hugo created the characters of Jean Valjean, Marius, and Enjolras, each of whom hold a varied level of commitment and involvement in the French Revolution of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (2003). While building up a rebellion, these characters show strength and heroism while audiences are also provided with some insights into their individually created, yet fictitious, lives. The show does, however, create a realistic setting that clearly shows the struggle that the French people had gone through to gain their independence from Napoleon. Enjolras is depicted as the leader of the rebellion, and his words echo the way in which people would often be called to arms. "For the army we fight is a dangerous foe, with the men and the arms that we never can match. It is easy to sit here and swat 'em like flies, but the National Guard will be harder to catch" (Behr, 1989, p. 177). This statement shows the significant opposition that had mounted against the common French people at the time of the Revolution. Through this depiction of strength and bravery, audiences are given a sense of the intensity that the opposition of the throne felt in the time of the French Revolution.



*Hamilton* is a game changer, combining previous methods to show the struggles of the founding of America from the perspective of one of the lesser acknowledged founding fathers. The show follows the plot of Ron Chernow's (2004) book in a similar fashion of *Les Misérables* and Victor Hugo's book. It also portrays a new look on a historic struggle similar to what was done in *Hairspray*. Through the construction of highly complex characters like in *Rent*, we follow the life journey of one of America's founding fathers. Alexander Hamilton has his life laid out in a way throughout this show that presents his overall contribution to the development of the United States. The use of hip-hop to do this, however, is unique to the genre of musical theatre because it creates a very specific way of depicting the life of such an important figure in American history. "This is the kind of thing that happens in hip-hop but not so much in musical theatre: breaking the rhyme scheme to highlight the meaning of the word. Musical theatre purists may scoff, but I love that Hamilton's soliloquy [in 'Yorktown'] leads him to maturity" (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 121).

The American people have continuously been taught the story of the founding of the nation and the people and events that were involved. Alexander Hamilton is highlighted in Ron Chernow's book (2004), which became the inspiration for the musical. Not only does the show follow his life through important moments such as the end of the Revolutionary War, but it also depicts the work that Hamilton put into the founding of our nation. A significant moment that is depicted is the writing of the Federalist Papers, which shaped our overall governmental structure. "In the end they wrote 85 essays, in the span of six months. John Jay got sick after writing 5. James Madison wrote 29. Hamilton wrote the other 51." (Miranda & McCarter, 2016, p. 143). The song shows that Hamilton went above and beyond to create a strong foundation for the nation that the founders were working to build.

The historical representation of these shows is only one of the major ideas in communication scholarship that is tackled through the creation of musical theatre. The interaction of characters and dialogue presented in the shows creates a specific social construct that is ultimately attempting to create a vivid scenario for each audience member. “Interest in the social system, which is nothing other than a system of human relationships governed by law, creates the possibility of conceiving the kinds of tensions, conflicts, struggles, and their various kinds of resolutions that we are accustomed to find in any representation of reality presenting itself to us as a history” (White, 2001, p.14). This suggests that the way that each story is structured will ultimately formulate certain reactions and allow the audience to easily interpret information. “A historical representation of the past may contain only true statements about the past, yet these statements may have been selected and arranged by the historian in such a way that they suggest a certain (political) course of action.” (Ankersmit, 2001, p. 94) Historical representation also often follows an approach, as discussed before, which adds an element of social interest and building of relationships in order to create an entertaining scenario for the viewers. This is described by White (2001) as the Romanticist approach which creates culture in a way that focuses on the personal emotions of the characters created. The first research question focuses on the extent to which people learn from watching the historical representation presented in live performances of musicals.

RQ1: To what extent does viewing historical events in a musical theatre context alter how the audience learns about historical material?

## **Identity**

As in most artistic productions, musical theatre is a platform for writers to create very distinct representations of identity that people are then able to relate to and/or emulate. Identity is

studied in communication literature as a way to predict and explain audiences' responses to various materials when presented (Coover, 2001). Some characters are developed to show a verbalized struggle with finding who they are and what their role is, while other characters clearly provide a more confident aura where they are open about who they are and why their storyline has been laid out. In the musical theatre context, identity can be shown through group association. "The group level of identity refers to the identities individuals possess by virtue of membership in a group (i.e., race/ethnic groups or gender groups)" (Coover, 2001, p. 416). This group association creates what is called a social identity, or how people portray themselves in public in following group norms (Coover, 2001). The remainder of the discussion of identity will be based in Coover's definition of identity.

*Rent* uses the camaraderie of the main group of characters to show a structure that can be difficult to break down (Smith, 2015). However, each individual presents their own backstory, which has created their own personal being. Mimi Marquez focuses on how her upbringing has affected her life when she says "in the evening I've got to roam; can't sleep in the city of neon and chrome. It feels too damn much like home when the Spanish babies cry" (Larson, 1996, p. 42). Characters' backstories, along with the relational development of each character, shows their struggle and overall growth through mutual support. Through their individual character development, each character builds their own place in their group and evolves the overall relational dynamic. This dynamic is created through a unique discourse that is laid out to show the strong connections in the group. "The characters of *Rent* utilize this effective counter-discourse, which is based upon ideals of community constructed by creativity and characterized by love; this act of creating discourse restores power to the marginalized." (Smith, 2015, p. 234)

Through this strong community that is presented, people can emulate this construct of group identity.

*Hairspray* strays from the idea that a group dynamic will promote character development, but it instead shows the idea of being forced to create a specific identity in order to go along with social norms. Tracy shows the idea of assimilation when she adjusts her own appearance, like dying her hair and changing her clothes, in order to conform to societal norms (Schrader, 2011). Her attempts to change her identity ultimately backfire, and her negative reaction to this assimilation is ultimately used as motivation for the people who are ostracized like herself. The attempts also encourage the African-American people to branch out and make a space for themselves in their society. Seaweed Stubbs also provides a clear representation of a character who takes an individual stance. He has placed himself in the position of leading the group of African American students and working to promote integration for his community in Baltimore (Schrader, 2011).

*Les Misérables* shows the idea of creating identity through crisis. Jean Valjean ultimately creates his own identity when he breaks his parole after being released from prison at the beginning of the show, while his nemesis Javert creates his identity through his desire to find Valjean and finish his work in justice. (Behr, 1989) This divide ultimately leads to the downfall of Javert and Valjean's ability to become a father to his adoptive daughter, Cosette. Cosette's love interest, Marius, also develops from simply being a love interest to being a rebel in the French Revolution when he joins his friends fighting for the rebellion.

*Hamilton* also involves the setting of a revolution which helps to develop the characters' identities. Alexander is working to create his space as a leader for the United States, but

ultimately finds his own devotion for his family, especially his wife Eliza. This integration of an individualistic stance and construction of identity is especially important in the field of communication. Following Coover's (2001) logic, we can show that through social identity, people are able to better themselves individually by using the influence of the people who surround them.

As mentioned earlier, people often create their own personal ideas for communication by viewing entertainment media. This culminates in an overall identity that will follow each person's life because they will present that identity to the rest of society. Examples in the musicals chosen indicate that identity performance can be individual, based in a group, or formed through crisis. This can be done through their consumption of the identity construction of each of the musical theatre characters described. The second research question considers what people learn about identity performance from watching musicals and the extent to which they apply what they learn to their daily lives.

- RQ2: a. What do people learn about identity performance from watching musicals?  
b. To what extent do people apply what they learn about identity from watching musicals to their own lives?

### **Race and Sexuality**

Some of the most prominent portrayals of identity are shown through distinct presentation of characters' race and sexuality in shows. Musical theatre has often used the depiction of unique tensions of race and sexuality in order to attract more attention and build a storyline, following the Romanticist perspective described previously. Race and sexuality, as described by Levon (2015), are compartmentalized, or grouped together, in an effort to show that they do build our identities through our prior knowledge and presumptions of the presentation of

these structures. As Coover (2001) describes, these constructs will be formed individually for each person based on their group association. The significance and specific effect of the constructs of race and sexuality are aided by the norms of each specific time period and culture.

*Rent* ultimately uses sexuality as a basis for tension and interaction between each of the characters. Each of the romantic couples portrayed in the show ultimately have their sexuality openly depicted in order to build their characters' personalities. One of the most explicit presentations of sexuality is when Maureen Johnson tells her partner, JoAnn Jefferson, "don't fight-don't lose your head. 'Cause every night, who's in your bed?" (Larson, 1996, p. 104). This dialogue shows their openness with discussing their lesbian identities.

When issues of sexuality are addressed in musical theatre, it is often not as explicit as shown in *Rent*. *Hairspray* uses sexuality to demonstrate the divide between races. "The African-American dance style is portrayed as more sexualized and exotic than the white dance style previously illustrated through *The Corny Collins Show*." (Schrader, 2011, p. 131) They are therefore promoting their individuality as well as demonstrating the need for reform and an open attitude towards new styles. *Hairspray* follows this open mindset through their common casting of a man for the role of Tracy's mother, Edna Turnblad. In order to promote an open-minded audience, the writers created "a family-friendly drag queen to soothe the nerves of the heteronormative film spectators" (Woodward, 2012, p. 116).

*Hamilton* creates a unique mix between the open sexuality depicted in *Rent* and the veiled references in *Hairspray*. The character Mariah Reynolds, with whom Alexander had an affair, offers the most open and clear form of sexuality in the show (Miranda & McCarter, 2016). Reynolds is portrayed as Hamilton's mistress, depicting an affair that led to blackmail and

overall political downfall for Alexander. The shows' creators do however promote an open environment through their casting choices. The decision to choose a diverse cast, which has been carried out by every new production of the show so far, to depict historically Caucasian characters, creates an open environment that forces the audience to be open to new perspectives. This was done in an effort to subvert audience expectations and connect with people of a different race and have the relatability that, as discussed earlier, is greatly beneficial for any show. Delman (2015) describes that the diverse casting of *Hamilton* makes the show more relatable and offers a new way for people to view the founding fathers. The third and fourth research questions focus on what people learn about race and sexuality from watching musical and the extent to which they apply what they learn to their day-to-day interactions.

RQ3: a. What do people learn about race from watching musicals?

b. To what extent do people apply what they learn about race from watching musicals to their own lives?

RQ4: a. What do people learn about sexuality from watching musicals?

b. To what extent do people apply what they learn about sexuality from watching musicals to their own lives?

### **Social Class**

While creating individual character identity shows present specific social constructs that are relatable to an audience. This is an attempt to connect with and reach a significant population. Class has always been a widely discussed and highly subjective construct for artists to depict. It has also created our views of society and is therefore a significant struggle to be presented to all audiences. "The domestication of history effected by the suppression of the historical sublime may well be the sole basis for the proud claim to social responsibility in modern capitalist as well as in communist societies." (White, 2001, p. 75) This tells us that even

in a society that is defined by class struggles, social responsibility still plays a key role in the effort for civilized society. This description also shows that class is determined by income and wealth, which determine social standings. As societies have been built, we are able to see multiple class structures that are presented in musical theatre.

*Rent* clearly follows a format for defining class structure in New York City in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. “It is difficult to discuss the community of New York City without speaking in terms of bounded neighborhoods. New York City is segregated into boroughs then further subdivided into distinct neighborhoods.” (Smith, 2015, p. 230) These distinct neighborhoods are laid out in the show, specifically the “alphabet city” where the main characters in the show live. Not only is this section of NYC shown as home to some of the less wealthy citizens, there are even people in the production seen to be attempting to purchase and subsequently overhaul the buildings effectively demolishing the home that the tenants have made (Larson, 1996). The ultimate diversion from this low-income group is the character of JoAnn Jefferson, a lawyer who clearly has a disconnect with the rest of the group since she is placed in a higher-class status. Despite the fact that she has a higher income and higher social status than the other six members of the group, she is able to create a connection through proof of her caring for group members, especially her partner Maureen Johnson.

*Hairspray* follows a different class representation ultimately through the depiction of the higher-class individuals who are fighting certain propositions of the civil rights movement. The teenagers who are members of *The Corny Collins Show* like Link Larkin and Amber Von Tussle are shown to be more privileged, even wearing a more traditional wardrobe of the time period. They are also given dialogue that is cutting and rude, ultimately creating a negative connotation



for the higher-class individuals who are looking down on people who have less than themselves. (O'Donnell & Meehan, 2002) This is shown when Tracy auditions for the show, as she is initially rejected because of her financial inability to maintain a similar physical appearance as the other cast members of the show.

*Les Misérables* lays out the class struggle in a very similar construct as *Hairspray*. Ultimately, the people who are involved in the rebellion are seen to be in a more difficult position. They are then taken advantage of by people who are cognizant of their struggle. One example of a middle-class citizen is “the villainous ex-innkeeper [Thenardier], now masquerading under various aliases, has become a small-time criminal, specialising in blackmail and confidence tricks” (Behr, 1989, p. 46). Thenardier, as an outsider, was depicted as a bridge between the worlds of the classes since he takes from both the rich who are fighting for France and the rebellion who are expected to lose the war and therefore not require their belongings since a safe return is not expected.

*Les Misérables* not only depicts homeless people in France as low-class citizens, but the beginning of the show describes Jean Val Jean's difficult position to find work after returning to civilian life from a 19-year imprisonment for stealing a loaf of bread (Behr, 1989). By destroying proof of his parole, he rises to the position of mayor of his town. After ultimately giving up his true identity to his captor, Inspector Javert, he continues to run from his past in order to provide for Cosette and provide aid to the Revolution (Behr, 1989).

*Hamilton* takes class in a very different direction, presenting the specific scenarios of Alexander Hamilton, an immigrant who is working to simply make ends meet while fighting for the revolution, and his wife Eliza Hamilton, who is from the extremely wealthy Schuyler family.

This divide provides an instance where they are able to work and build to a more stable and financially secure life through lucky circumstances and continuous effort. These efforts to work for a higher-class structure ultimately prove that comfort lies in the high-class positions. It is also, however, suggested through the idealistic representation (Ankersmit, 2001) that people can be happy despite their class position, and they will ultimately be able to build themselves up based on their strength of character. The fifth research question focuses on what people learn about class struggles from watching musicals and the extent to which they apply that learning to their daily lives.

RQ5: a. What do people learn about class struggle through watching musicals?

b. To what extent do audience members apply what they learn from viewing class struggles in musicals to their everyday lives?

Each of the constructs developed in these pieces of musical theatre create a context through which people can use the art to adapt their own lives. McKeen (1980) describes that bringing a traditional vaudevillian style of theatrical performance into his classroom benefited his students. Based on their evaluations, students reported that they experienced increased interest in the classroom through the professor's informative approach. This is showing that the points being made are significant to the evolution of communication as a discipline. "These are not matters of craft or mechanical detail; these are questions of meaning, of value, of philosophy." (Hunter, 1958, p. 17) Overall, this creates reason to discover why musical theatre can be educational and impactful for its audiences, and this study will expand on that by directly discussing the concepts with real people and evaluating their impact.

## **Preview of Chapters**

The first chapter of this thesis has used relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011), and social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) to develop the rationale and research questions for this study. Chapter 2 will describe the methodological approach used to develop this study. The chapter will include a rationale for the research design, a description of the participants and how they were recruited, a description of the research design, a description of the procedure that took place for the study, and a description of the data analysis, which includes the data set and thematic analysis process used in the study. Chapter 3 will present the results of the study. For each research question, themes will be identified and explained, and data will be used to illustrate each theme. The fourth and final chapter will be a discussion of the results. This will begin with a description of the goal of the study a summary of what was found for each of the five research questions, and a discussion of the significance of those findings. In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of the study will be identified, and a conclusion will summarize and conclude the thesis.

## **Chapter 2**

### **METHOD**

#### **Rationale for Research Design**

The goal of this thesis is to understand what people learn about certain cultural discourses through viewing live performances of four musical theatre productions and how they apply that learning in their daily interactions. Qualitative interviews provide one way to talk with people to discover more about what they are learning when attending musical theatre productions. Fontana and Frey (1995) suggest that “Interviewing is one of the most common and most powerful ways we use to try to understand our fellow human beings” (p. 361). Lindlof and Taylor (2010) indicate that “interviews are particularly well suited to understanding the social actor’s experience, knowledge, and worldviews” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010, p. 173). Thus, interviewing should be an effective method for gaining an understanding of people’s learning experiences while attending musicals.

#### **Participants**

Twelve participants were interviewed for this study. These participants ranged from 22 to 64 years of age with an average of 33.4 years of age. They are predominately Caucasian (10,

83.3%) with one Mexican (8.3%) and one Italian-American (8.3%). Eight women (66.7%) and four men (33.3%) participated in the study. Participants' education level ranged from high school to Master's degree plus. Because it was a requirement of the study, all participants had seen *Hamilton*. *Rent* had been viewed by five of the participants, while *Hairspray* and *Les Misérables* had each been seen by eleven of the participants. Two participants had only seen two of the shows being discussed, five had seen three, and five had seen all four in live productions.

Participants were recruited based off of their ability to talk about their experiences attending live productions of musicals. Lindlof and Taylor (2010) explain that "The researcher defines the reasons and goals for the meeting to occur and then finds the people who are best suited for realizing these goals" (p. 172). Participants were recruited via Facebook and social networks. To be eligible for the study, participants needed to have seen live performances of *Hamilton* and at least one of the other three shows discussed. To recruit participants, the researcher began with people in her social network who were familiar with the musical theatre productions discussed, and she and her advisor posted a recruiting statement on Facebook. Once initial participants were identified, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional participants.

### **Design**

For this study, semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted. This was chosen as a way to gain information through conversation and find information about the participants' world and interactions. During qualitative interviews, interviewees are actively engaged in creating information that will aid in the research process (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). Qualitative interviews have been used to study a range of topics including journalism (Gutiérrez, Rodríguez, & de Guereño, 2018), dentistry (2015), medicine (Barnes & Ferguson, 2015), public engagement

(Brabham, 2012), social media (Barry & Bouvier, 2012), and education (Dannels, 2005). The two common conceptions of the qualitative interview are as a research instrument, consisting of reports of the lived experience of the interviewees, or as a social practice, which offer accounts of the situated interaction at hand (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). For this particular study, the qualitative interview is being utilized as a research instrument because the data can be used to report and analyze the lived experiences of the participants.

Qualitative interviewing involves three types of questions. These move from general research questions to specific questions asked in every interview and finally questions that guide the overall coding of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These questions offer a detailed analysis of the topic at hand. Specific details are also used to aid the quality of data that results from the study. “Looks, body postures, long silences, the way one dresses – all are significant in the interactional interview situation” (Fontana & Frey, 1995, p. 371). These details are specific to interviews that are conducted personally like the ones in the study. Overall, this method ensures rich information that will be beneficial and give a specified data set to meet the overall goal of the study.

A semi-structured qualitative interview is the middle ground to an everyday conversation and a structured questionnaire. “A semi-structured life world interview attempts to understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subjects’ own perspectives. This kind of interview seeks to obtain descriptions of the interviewee’s lived world with respect to interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 27). By developing questions that search for information about the participants’ lived world, the necessary information is found about their use of musical theatre to explain and develop cultural discourses

in the world. For the specific interview protocol for this study, questions were developed in conjunction with the research questions to reach the study's overall goal.

A semi-structured qualitative interview follows a protocol that includes the topics to be covered and questions for each. The degree to which those questions are followed is then determined by the interviewer through their natural conversational flow (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). By adapting each interview, the researcher will enhance the quality of information that they receive from every participant. The researcher will find patterns from the participants answers that could either eliminate the need for certain questions or give ideas for the best follow-up questions. Follow-up questions are questions outside the planned protocol that expand the interviewees' answers (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These probing follow-up questions are important to gather adequate information from the participants, and they offer new directions to the interviewer.

### **Procedures**

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher began data collection. Data collection happened either in-person (7, 58.3%) or via Skype (5, 41.7%). The in-person interviews were conducted in public settings, mostly in a college campus office. Before recording each interview, the researcher went over the overall purpose of the study with the participants. The researcher also discussed the consent form (see appendix #1) with each participant, explaining that demographic information would be used to describe the overall participants and numbers would be used rather than names. Each participant was also given the opportunity to ask any questions about the study before the interviews began. Each interview was recorded using an Olympus digital voice recorder and then transcribed.

After obtaining participant consent the interview began. The first interview questions focused on demographic information. Then in order to develop rapport and start focusing the conversation on musicals, participants were asked about their personal perceptions about the content of each musical. Once there was a general idea of the participants' perceptions of each point of the musical, the questions lead into more specific information about what they felt they had taken from the musical. This specific information was formatted in a way to answer each of the research questions. The topics were arranged in order of the research questions, history, identity, race and sexuality, and then social class. The questions were asked specifically to answer the research questions, so they typically began with overall ideas of how the topics were presented in each show. After this information was given, participants were asked what they have learned about the topics from the shows as well as how other audience members could be impacted and how, if at all, their personal interactions were impacted by musical theatre. The full interview protocol can be found in appendix #2.

Because of a lack of participants who were able of participation in the interview, the study reached partial saturation with the interviews conducted. Drisko (1997) defines saturation as "the comprehensiveness of both the data collection and analysis" (p. 1992). Saturation in this study was evident when participants consistently offered answers that were consistent with other information and themes could be clearly found in the data.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Data Set**

The data set consists of interviews with 12 participants. The length of the interviews ranged from 26 to 81 minutes. The average length of the interviews was 44.4 minutes.



Transcription was done through verbatim transcription of the words stated by the participants and research. In addition, pauses were also noted in the transcriptions. Transcription resulted in approximately 132 pages of single-spaced text in Times New Roman, 12-point font.

### **Analysis of Data**

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data for this study. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Because participants had had similar experience viewing four musicals, thematic analysis was an appropriate method for analysis. “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Each of the themes brought about specific results for the research questions previously written. Participants have common interests that will overall offer rich data to answer the research questions.

Braun and Clarke (2006) offer a six-step process that outlines the process that occurred to find these themes. These steps are familiarizing yourself with the data, generating codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Familiarizing with data happens both during the interview process and through reading over transcripts after interviews are completed. After collecting data, transcripts were reviewed to familiarize further. Generating codes is done by noting ideas that will aid in the creation of themes. “Coding involves attaching one or more keywords to a text segment in order to permit later identification of a statement” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 227). Searching for themes then happens after familiarizing with data, and in this study it was done through highlighting

specific ideas in the transcripts. Reviewing themes is then done by looking through the themes present and determining whether or not they would aid in answering the research questions. Themes are then named and defined in order to further explain the themes in a way that readers could understand. Lastly, these themes and definitions are written in the thesis to produce the report.

This process was done to find each of the themes in the project. For example, for the theme of inspiration to continue learning, the researcher first looked over the transcripts from every interview in addition to recalling information that was heard in each interview. Coding, or categorization of data, was done by writing notes in the margins of transcripts. Themes for historical representation were found, for example many participants learned about history from reading, they enjoyed entertainment media most as a learning tool, and they often interacted with others by sharing new historical information. After gathering all themes that emerged pertaining to history, the three main themes of a reductionist view of history in musicals, character-focused detail, and an inspiration to continue learning were named and defined. Lastly, a report was written to detail the final results of the data analysis.

### **Summary**

This chapter has provided a description of the methods used in this study. First, a rationale for the research design was provided. Then, a description of the participants and how they were recruited was provided. The design of the semi-structured interview protocol was then provided, followed by a description of the procedure that was used to conduct the research study. Lastly, the analysis of the data was described, which involved a description of the data set followed by a description of the thematic analysis that was used in the study. The third chapter of

the thesis will present the results of this data analysis in an effort to answer the research question developed in the literature review.

## **Chapter 3**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Results Relating to Research Questions**

The goal of this study was to determine the effect that musical theatre has on learning and interpersonal communication. Five research questions were developed in order to develop an understanding of what people learn from viewing live musicals and how they apply that learning in the day-to-day lives. Each of the five research questions will be independently discussed. In an effort to continue inclusive practices in discussing the results of this study, each individual participant will be described using the pronoun “they”. This action has become a part of recent cultural discourse, and the use of this pronoun will promote that idea.

#### **Historical Representation**

The first research question asked, to what extent does viewing historical events in a musical theatre context alter how the audience learns about historical material? Three themes emerged when answering this research question. The first theme is that the writers of the book, which includes songs and dialogue, use a reductionist view of history, meaning that audiences are given a smaller yet more personal view of history. “It seems like they kind of glamorize it” (participant 8, line 102). This glamorized representation might not be what some audience

members expect, but it brings a new perspective to events that have been discussed historically.

Participant 6 noted that some people hope for only historical facts by saying,

Personally, I think that they portray the emotion and kind of the personal aspect of the events. It's not, obviously, as historically accurate as some people hope, but I think that's kind of impossible. So, I think they really focus on the emotion of the population during the time of the historical events. (lines 174-177)

These on-stage depictions are not the standard presentation of certain historical events, so the plotlines stray from the traditional structure of pure fact and add some emotion to the characters. The audience, therefore, learns about how people might have felt during the time period rather than just hearing facts about history.

Another theme that emerged was character-focused detail. This theme refers to the fact that musicals portray history in a way that offers a more insightful and detailed perspective for specific characters. This unique perspective was demonstrated through one participant's description of character-centered details shown in musicals.

When you think about it, in history class you just learn the broader picture. There was this war that happened. All these people died. But with the musical you get to slow that down and look at it from a more smaller perspective and see what it was like for the people who were actually living that history. (participant 4, lines 163-166)

Participant 2 also mentioned expanded knowledge of the life of nonfiction-based characters.

I sort of know history. Not a super huge history buff. But my best friend is and so she knows a lot about all of the stuff that sort of revolves around all of that going in, but I didn't. So it was interesting to have that sort of like educational opportunity but also, in a way, that makes you want to keep paying attention. It's not my history professor telling me about how Alexander Hamilton created the financial districts. It's learning about that through songs and through his life that makes it interesting for us to understand. (lines 139-144)

This detail about the characters is important for audiences to view because the individual approach gives them a stronger connection with the characters being presented in the shows. They then have a better sense of how everyday lives might have been for people at the time.

The last theme identified in the data analysis for research question one was inspiration to continue learning. The inspiration to continue learning theme included data in which participants stated that the information gained inspired them to continue to research, to look up specific facts online, to further their knowledge base, and to check the accuracy of information presented in the shows. One participant mentioned their continued learning about the French Revolution after seeing *Les Misérables*. “At least, that was how I felt when I was watching Les Mis like they made a big deal about the so-called Revolution that I didn’t know about, but then, when I went on to actually Google that failed revolution in France, I found out that this was one of many revolutions France has tried to have and failed” (participant 8, lines 103-106). Participant 10 said that she even looked back at the reference material that inspired *Hamilton, Alexander Hamilton* by Ron Chernow in addition to other research in order to understand some of the work that Lin Manuel Miranda put into the show. “I read the book and did my own weird research stuff, but obviously he picked and chose things to showcase in the musical, and he put things in the order he wanted and changed things for the show” (participant 10, lines 147-149). These knowledge-seeking strategies show that the knowledge is not limited to the productions that they see, but audiences gain motivation to further develop that knowledge.

Overall, each of these themes address the research question by explaining how the participants learn about historical events by watching musical theatre. With the first two themes, we see that the learning focus for historical events is changed because of what they see on stage

and how that is interpreted. The third theme suggests audience members go out and seek further knowledge because of inspiration from the musicals that they view.

## **Identity**

The second research question asked, what do people learn about identity performance from watching musicals? And to what extent do people apply what they learn about identity performance from watching musicals to their own lives?

Two specific themes emerged related to identity. One theme answered the first part of the research question about what people learn about identity from watching musical theatre. This theme was labelled body image. Body image was used to capture instances in which participants mentioned seeing their own physical characteristics in the characters that are portrayed on stage. Three participants (1, 2, & 11) noted feeling a connection to Tracy Turnblad from *Hairspray* because of her full figure; because of their personal weight struggles, they could relate to her plight. For instance, participant 1 said, “You don’t see a lot of musicals dealing with those kinds of issues. You see a lot of suicidal stuff. You see a lot of struggling with drugs like in *Rent*. But you don’t see a lot of struggling with body issues like that” (lines 206-208). Another participant said, “Like I talked about before, *Hairspray* (pause) I really related to her because it was nice to see someone who looks like me on stage” (participant 2, lines 412-413). Therefore, one thing that comes from *Hairspray* is that, for some audience members, it helps to normalize a variety of physical characteristics and their resulting body issues. By seeing these body issues portrayed by characters on stage, the participants learned about the issues themselves as well as how people might react when dealing with these issues.

One theme emerged pertaining to the second part of the research question, which focused on how people apply what they learn about identity to their everyday lives. This theme was labelled realization of emotions. Realization of emotions was used to capture instances in which participants noted that viewing a character's emotional expression on stage provided them with information about their own emotional expression. This answered the second part of the research question by explaining how participants learn about their own emotions and how they are viewed publicly through watching pieces of musical theatre. The serious emotions portrayed by characters in *Hamilton*, for example, can easily connect with audience members who have gone through similar emotions in their lives. For example, participant 1 said the following,

I mean, maybe, I become more emotional about things. After I saw Hamilton, because Angelica is a relatively emotional character even though she portrays herself as this strong feminist woman. She still has this deep caring for other people and wanting people to be okay. And same thing with Eliza, how she's like, 'Oh, if you stay alive.' I was seeing someone at the time who was an alcoholic and he had just gotten alcohol poisoning, and it was the whole big thing. I felt that. I was just, 'Please, just don't die.' But I'm still trying to be strong and not show my emotions too much because sometimes you have to be strong for other people, too. (lines 194-201)

This participant not only connected to the emotion portrayed by Eliza's character, but they also used that connection to reflect on the amount of emotion they are willing to publicly display. Because participants had felt the same emotions that characters portray on-stage, they became aware of the how the characters' reactions could be seen in real life. One participant mentioned their connection to Marius in *Les Misérables* because of his emotions.

I would definitely say I would relate to a bit in Les Mis, at least when I was a teenager, I related to Marius a bit, just because I felt I was a bit of a romantic. I think I had a girlfriend when I first saw that show, so during all the lovey dovey scenes, when he wanted to be with this girl, that was kind of my mindset back when I was in high school. (participant 8, lines 153-156)



Connecting with the emotions displayed by characters on stage humanized the characters for participants. Participant 6 noted the humanization of characters: “I think the beautiful thing about musicals is that they express human emotion, human failures, human successes and everything” (participant 6, lines 435-436). By humanizing the characters, it is clear that their struggles could actually happen in society. Participants reflected on the emotions they that have felt that are similar to those that characters portray on stage. This reflection offered ideas for how the participants might show emotion in the future.

## **Race**

The third research question for this study focused on race. The two-part research question asked, what do people learn about race from watching musicals? And to what extent do people apply what they learn about race from watching musicals to their own lives? Two themes emerged pertaining to the research questions addressing race.

One theme addressed the first part of the research question about what people learn about race by watching musical theatre. The theme was that of modern relevance of racial tensions. The modern relevance of racial tensions theme included instances where the participants discussed issues of tolerance and equality and the presence of common tensions in modern society. Participants discussed the racial tensions as what they see in modern times and related that to what they saw of the time periods depicted in the musicals. While discussing issues of tolerance and acceptance as present in *Hamilton* and *Hairspray*, participant 7 said, “What is very scary is that we are still dealing with that stuff now more than ever” (lines 242-243). Participant 2 discussed the fact that equality like the characters are searching for in *Hairspray* is a constantly evolving concept in society. “But the overall message of equality and giving people equal rights

is so important that I still think that it's an important message that needs to be learned. It's still an important educational opportunity that needs to happen" (participant 2, lines 632-635). This description of common societal discourses thereby transferred to the participants' views of current racial tensions.

One theme answered the second part of the research question about the extent to which people apply what they learn about race to their everyday lives. This theme was reinforcement of openness to differing races. This theme captured data where participants felt reaffirmed of their progressive ideology and open mindset after watching shows. Participants often felt reaffirmed about their openness to people based on what they saw in the shows. For example, participant 2 felt that they were supportive of diversity because of their feelings when they saw it in shows, like in the casting of *Hamilton*. "I think that it helps to reaffirm what I already knew in that...because I'm a very progressive person and I think that it's super important to have people who are underrepresented to be represented in these sorts of roles (lines 563-565). Participant 8 also had their feelings of overall acceptance reaffirmed based on their reaction to musicals. "I guess it has just kind of reinforced my idea where I have always been an 'everybody love everybody' kind of guy" (lines 191-192). This affirmation promotes a positive perception of their acceptance and openness that may lead to a continuation of the same type of behavior.

## **Sexuality**

The fourth research question for this study discussed sexuality. The two-part research question asked, what do people learn about sexuality from watching musicals? And to what extent do people apply what they learn about sexuality from watching musicals to their own lives? Two themes emerged pertaining to the research questions addressing sexuality.

One theme answered the first part of the research question asking what people learn about sexuality through viewing musicals. This theme was a lack of explicit sexuality in musicals. This captured instances where participants failed to notice sexuality presented in musicals. Sexuality as a theme was only noticed when explicitly stated in the show's plotline. Participant 7 demonstrated this by saying, "I would like to think that I keyed in on those, but I don't think I really did. It was more of a Gestalt kind of thing, like okay, taking it in as a whole. I don't think it had a whole lot of an effect" (lines 297-298). When discussing the way that sexuality is depicted in shows, participant 10 said, "If the show is doing its job, and actually teaching anything, I guess, you are not aware of it" (lines 284-285). This showed that participants realized sexuality when it was discussed in the musicals when prompted to recall those instances, but they focus their learning on other topics present in the plotlines.

One theme emerged in answering the second part of the research question pertaining to how participants apply their learning to everyday life. This theme was labelled lack of outside discussion about sexuality. This theme captured instances where participants described not having discussed the topic of sexuality with their friends or family members after seeing any shows. While serious topics might come up while discussing musical plotlines, sexuality is one of the least common because it is not something frequently discussed with family members or other people who might also go to the show. One participant noted this lack of conversation about sexuality from a young age because she had seen *Hairspray* with her family. "Hairspray I didn't really [pause] I was in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade when I saw it so I wasn't really talking to my mom or my grandma about sex. But I never really talked to either of them honestly. I don't know if my age would have changed that" (participant 1, lines 402-404). Participants also viewed sexuality as a topic that would not need to be discussed in their typical social groups. For example,

participant 8 described their conversations about sexuality after seeing *Rent*, *Les Misérables*, *Hairspray*, and *Hamilton* by saying, “Honestly, at least in my experience, it hasn’t changed that much because the people I see these shows with or talk with have the same ideas as me, so we don’t really have that much to talk about” (lines 218-220). Based on this lack of discussion, participants show that they typically do not discuss the topic of sexuality in everyday conversation.

### **Social Class**

The last topic discussed was social class. Two questions were asked relating to this topic: What do people learn about class struggle through watching musicals? To what extent do audience members apply what they learn from viewing class struggles in musicals to their everyday lives? Three themes emerged pertaining to the discussion of social class as presented through musical theatre.

One theme answered the first part of the research question, asking what people learn about social class by viewing musical theatre. This theme was the presentation of specific class structures. This captured instances where participants identified specific characters in the shows that portrayed specific class structures. Some participants noted that *Les Misérables* strongly depicted class structures. For instance, Participant 7 stated, “Clearly, with Les Mis, it is about class struggle and that is the basis for the revolution” (lines 332-333). This description of class struggles portrayed in shows also happened in *Hairspray* when financial struggles for working class families were presented. “I remember Tracy’s family...her dad own a joke shop or a magic shop or something...and, I don’t know how it was in the 60’s, but it didn’t seem like it got a lot of business. It seemed like they were financially struggling” (participant 1, lines 476-478). Lastly,

*Rent* portrays a fairly consistent view of characters who are in a lower-class structure. “Actually, all of the characters in *Rent* represent what it is like to be in your early 20’s and poor and not getting a job” (participant 8, lines 253-254). These specific presentations are agreed upon by most participants. By seeing characters that are part of these class structures, they learn more about the clear class divisions.

Two themes answered the second part of the research question pertaining to how people apply what they learn about social class to their everyday lives. One major theme was open dialogue. This theme was used to capture data that frames how people discuss social class after viewing specific musicals. Participants picked out ideas from the shows being discussed, like *Hamilton*, and connected those to general conversation. “I think that *Hamilton*, presently, has opened up a lot more conversation about the class divide. Even if we’re talking about different social groups and things like that, I mean (pause) I’ve never been to a musical where the audience was so emphatic and just a part of the whole production from beginning to end” (participant 6, lines 517-519). Participant 2 also used this idea to explain the class structures in *Hairspray*. “It’s interesting to see class played out - like class struggle played in both these narratives of history, but also at all different levels. We see people of color struggling, but we also see white people struggling in terms of how class affects us all. And I think that’s super interesting” (lines 782-785). When asked what that told about human experience they said, “I think that it shows that we all have class struggle and that it’s important where you fall on that. Part of intersectionality is figuring out what your intersections are. It is something that is often uncomfortable but it’s something that we have to face” (participant 2, lines 789-791). Depiction of class structure, in these instances, shows the accepting nature of the audience and gives the

participants an idea that class struggles are present to a large group of people, not only a select few.

Another theme that emerged was a challenge with social mobility. The challenge with social mobility theme captured the idea that participants recognized and related to characters' struggles to join a higher social class structure. Challenge with social mobility means that participants realize that characters, like people in everyday life, can have difficulty moving to a higher social class structure. Participant 8 related this struggle to their own life by stating, "It seems like everyone is always stuck. Like you don't see a lot of progression from class systems and all that. Like right now, I will use myself as an example, I feel like I have been stuck at lower middle class for a very long time now no matter how many times I change my job" (lines 224-227). They also sympathize with the characters who are part of a low-class structure. One participant noted this struggle for people who are categorized in a lower class. "It's not always fair. People who come from less probably have to fight a little harder to get where they are" (participant 11, lines 271-272). The information gathered about the social classes therefore makes them more comfortable with their class position, because they realize that it is acceptable to remain in a social class.

## Chapter 4

### DISCUSSION

Using semi-structured qualitative interviews this study focused on how audiences of musical theatre learn about cultural discourses and apply that learning to their everyday lives. The study focused on *Hamilton*, *Hairspray*, *Les Misérables*, and *Rent*, and all participants had seen live performances of *Hamilton* and at least one of the other musicals. Five cultural discourses were discussed as presented in these musicals. Those discourses were historical representation, identity, race, sexuality, and social class.

The goal of this thesis was to view how relational communication is effected by cultural discourses presented in entertainment media like musical theatre. Relational dialectics theory 2.0 (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Baxter, 2011) suggests that people use cultural discourses to help them make sense of what is being said in relational interactions. While relational dialectics 2.0 suggests people learn about cultural discourses through socialization, relational dialectics does not provide much specificity about that learning process. Therefore, this study argued that social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) could be used to explore how people might learn about cultural discourses. Social learning theory uses its three main tenets of observation, imitation, and modeling to describe the process that people go through when they learn about social constructs by watching others and tailor their own actions. Bandura (1977) also addressed the importance of efficacy in applying learning to an individual's repertoire of actions. In the theory, efficacy is defined as a feeling of competence and capability in behavioral performance. If an individual

notices and learns behavior but does not feel capable of enacting the behavior, the learned behavior is not performed. In this study, a lack of efficacy could result in learning a discourse but not communicating that discourse in conversations. This study used the principles of social learning theory to better understand the processes through which people learn about cultural discourses while viewing musicals and to identify the extent to which they apply what they learn to their daily lives.

The study focused on informal learning that influences people's knowledge of cultural discourses. Specifically, this study focuses on the informal learning that occurs when people watch live performances of musical theatre productions. Musical theatre productions were chosen as a source of informal learning because they appear to have a strong influence on their audiences and because the plots of musicals tend to address important social issues. Cultural discourses are not only developed through interaction, but they are also learned through observation of social trends. This therefore combines the observation tenet of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) with the cultural discourse component of relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011). As discussed below the results of this study provide support for the claim that people learn about cultural discourses through watching live performances of musicals and that they apply this learning to their daily lives. The discussion will focus on the implications of the results for each research question and the strengths and limitations of the study will also be discussed.

### **Findings Related to Research Questions**

The first research question asked how musical theatre audiences alter their learning about history based on the historical facts that they see presented on stage. Three themes were



identified related to this research question. These themes were writing a reductionist view of history, character-focused detail, and an inspiration to continue learning. Each of these points demonstrated the unique approach that musical theatre has towards presenting historical facts. The reductionist view of history theme means that audiences see a specific storyline in a larger time period being discussed, and it helps people connect with the emotions portrayed. The character-focused detail suggests that musical theatre offers more detail about the characters being portrayed, and it allows for the audience to gain more detail about the character. These pieces of learning history through musical theatre lead to the third theme, an inspiration to continue learning. Because audiences gain this detail through an entertaining medium like musical theatre, they are inspired to go out and search more information in addition to what they knew previously and what they learned through the content of the musical.

When discussing theatrical teaching used in standard history classes, McKeen (1980) found that this view of history aids in learning because audiences are entertained and enjoy learning about the storylines and the people being described. This interest in learning through a new and entertaining medium is important for teaching history in recent times. This inspiration to continue learning also helps to connect the two theories which are used to ground this study. Participants first participated in observation (Bandura, 1977) of a historical cultural discourse when they watched the musicals, which led to further understanding of that discourse. This then led participants to question what they know and seek out further information. This information suggests that watching musicals reinforces and extends what people know in terms of a historical cultural discourse. They then have knowledge from the historical cultural discourse that helps them to make sense of comments when they are made in interactions.

The second research question asked what people learn about identity performance from watching musicals and how they apply what they learn to their own lives. Data analysis for the second research question identified two themes. These themes were body image and realization of emotions. These themes shed light on two significant pieces of emotion that are often present for people, but sometimes overlooked. The theme of body image provided insights on what audience members learn about identity from watching musicals. Body image has been shown to have a strong impact on self-esteem based on the ideal standards portrayed in entertainment media (Bissell, 2004). Low self-esteem has been shown to effect on interpersonal communication because it has a positive correlation with aggressive communication practices (Rill, Baiocchi, Hopper, Denker, & Olson, 2009). When participants view an underrepresented body type because of inclusive casting in the shows, it may help to alleviate those concerns. They also learn about communication practices present with people in situations where underrepresented body types are present. This learning process follows the observation component of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) because audiences observe the characteristics and absorb information about the cultural discourse because of the characters.

Emotions have also been found to have an impact on relational interactions and vice versa. Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, and McLaren (2016) discussed in their study focusing on romantic relationships that emotions will alter how people interact with others, and those interactions will help people to develop their emotions through experience. The theme realization of emotions focused on instances in which participants described characters' emotions portrayed on stage and connected those to emotions they have felt in their own lives. In other words, participants have used what they learn about emotions to make sense of emotions that they have experienced in relational interactions, which addresses the second part of the research question,

and illustrates their use of an identity cultural discourses (Baxter, 2011) in their interactions. They also described their own reflection on those emotions and how they handled them. They also noted the humanizing factor of emotion for characters because it helps people apply their actions to their own lives. Bartsch (2012) found that this education about emotions is important even for adults as they age to promote emotional well-being, which strengthens their relational communication ability. The interaction of seeing characters' emotions adds to audience members' lived experience, which is important for people to learn more and become increasingly more secure with their identity (O'Boyle, 2014).

The third research question asked what people learn about race from watching musicals and how they use what they learn in their daily lives. Two themes were identified for this research question. These were modern relevance of racial tensions and reinforcement about openness to differing races. Modern relevance of racial tensions addressed the first part of the research question. Modern relevance of racial tensions shows how people learn about the recurrence of many issues from the past in today's society. The audiences observe the behavior on stage. In this way, the observation component of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is utilized. Simmons et al. (2013) demonstrate that racial divides are still prevalent in society. When audiences view a storyline that depicts realistic events, they learn more information about these racial tensions.

The second part of the third research question was then addressed by one theme, reinforcement of openness to differing races. Race was found to reaffirm participants' feelings of openness in everyday conversation, therefore promoting a positive feeling about open-minded conversation as present in their interactions. Nakamaya (1994) points out that these presentations

of race along with other cultural discourses in media are important to shape societal views, especially with their presence through spatial awareness, or awareness of people in society that immediately surround people physically. This spatial awareness can be described by discussing cultural discourses as presented in relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011). When people are aware and retain knowledge about the cultural discourse they can apply that knowledge to their conversations. For example, if people know the meaning of the term inclusion because of the race cultural discourse, this can aid their communication practices if and when someone uses the term in conversation.

The fourth research question was another two-part question, asking what people learn about sexuality through watching productions of musical theatre and how they apply that learning to their everyday lives. Two themes emerged to answer this question, and they were labelled lack of explicit sexuality in musicals and lack of outside discussion about sexuality. Lack of explicit sexuality in musicals addresses the first part of the research question. Sexuality was described to not be a point of musicals that participants actively noticed. Overt sexuality has been found, for performances of music, to be a point of discomfort for audiences (van Oosten, Peter, & Boot, 2012). This discomfort translates to the audience members not seeing the sexuality present in the shows or not wanting to see the sexuality present. This uses the observation component of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) because participants do not observe the sexuality cultural discourse when watching these musicals, and they therefore do not learn about the discourse from the content of the shows. One explanation for this result might be that with the exception of *Rent*, the shows selected for this study did not explicitly address issues of sexuality.

Lack of outside discussion about sexuality was the theme that addressed the second part of the research question. A lack of outside discussion about sexuality presented the idea that people are often made uncomfortable if they discuss the topic of sexuality, even with the closest members of their social networks. Dennis and Wood (2012) found that people have a hard time discussing the topic of sexuality with people close to them. This difficulty in discussion ties in with the efficacy component of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), describing an inability to discuss the topic. Efficacy describes the feeling of ability to perform an action, and if people do not feel capable of discussing the topic of sexuality they lack efficacy. This shows that knowledge of a cultural discourse is not enough to contribute to the relational communication of that discourse as described in relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011).

The fifth and final research question asked what people learn about social class from watching musicals and how they apply that learning to their own lives. Three themes emerged from the data relating to this topic. These themes were presentation of specific class structures, open dialogue, and social mobility. Presentation of specific class structures addressed the first part of the research question, allowing for people to learn about the social classes depicted in musicals. Through watching musical theatre, audiences are given clear examples of class structures that they relate to what they see in everyday life. This data can be explained using the steps of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Audiences observe the social classes presented in the shows, and they learn about multiple classes, thereby expanding their view of society and their understanding of class cultural discourses.

The theme of open dialogue discussed instances where participants described an open discussion of class after viewing musicals. The conversations about class structure that were

described addressed the second part of the fifth research question. The theme of open dialogue follows the premise of relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011), adding to cultural discourse by making audience members more aware of social classes in society. With relational dialectics, cultural discourses are only built when they are used and incorporated in society. This open use of class cultural discourse is demonstrated through the theme of open dialogue. Maines (2018) points out that conversations with open dialogue about class are important to build our society and ultimately connect to the class cultural discourse (Baxter, 2011). The importance of the conversations described in the theme of dialogue is therefore affirmed. Performances offer audiences insight on their own social class as well as those that they are not a part of.

The theme of social mobility also addressed the second part of the research question. Musicals also offer connections based off of a sense of being stuck in a certain social class, which is discussed with the social mobility theme. Lucas (2011) points out that even when people are able to achieve upward mobility, they maintain an emotional connection with the social class that they have been a part of for the most amount of time. These ideas for social class normalize financial struggles, and they offer a point of connection for audience members with the characters on stage as well as with the people around them. This suggests that when people view social classes (Bandura, 1977), they can apply what they learn to the social class cultural discourse and provide a larger knowledge base relating to the issue. This knowledge base of the cultural discourse helps them to make sense of comments made in everyday conversation, which develops their understanding of the cultural discourse (Baxter, 2011).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had three limitations. First, the participants of the study provided for some limitations. The participants are all located in a common area, which limits the theatrical productions that are available for viewing. Because of their prior interest in the medium, they also often only the perspective of people who have a positive perspective of the productions when they choose to view them. Recruitment of participants presented a second limitation for the study. During recruitment, many participants failed to meet requirements, or they had scheduling conflicts that limited the number of potential participants. This made it so that the number of potential interview participants was low and only partial saturation was able to be reached with the data. Third, there were only four musicals that were chosen as the focus of the study. The study is limited because of the shows chosen, but their choices are reasonable because of the idea that they have likely been seen by a wide range of people.

### **Strengths of the Study**

Four strengths are present for this study. First, there are multiple social structures, including class, race, and sexuality, that are each presented in musical theatre productions that are discussed in this study. This means that multiple perspectives are presented in some way in this field of study. This open representation offers a wide range of communication concepts that are incorporated in the study. The second strength of the study is the cultural discourses chosen. The discourses described in the study of historical representation, identity, race, sexuality, and social class each present ideas about a wide range of topics that are present when discussing musical theatre. The ideas presented give a wide range about the effect of musical theatre by not only discussing these issues, how they are presented, and then discussing the impact that they

have on certain audience members. Third, the choice of participants for answering the research questions is a strength of the study. Because the participants in the study are fans of musical theatre, they have a great deal of experience with the medium. They have also listened to and seen the content often enough that they can easily recall specific information about what happened in the shows. Their wide age range also gives multiple perspectives. Lastly, the shows that were chosen for the focus of the study provide another strength. The shows chosen to be part of the study are each very different, but they offer important information about the concepts being discussed that benefits the purpose of the study. Overall, the study provides interesting new information for the communication discipline.

### **Conclusion**

In their relational communication, people use cultural discourses as a way of making sense of comments that are made in everyday conversation. Relational dialectics 2.0 (Baxter, 2011) outlines these cultural discourses and their presence in society, but it does not yet discuss how the discourses are developed. This study has used social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) and shown that people learn about and expand their knowledge of social discourses through observation, imitation, and modeling. The combination of these two theories presents a new idea of how people learn about cultural discourses and how that learning is applied to everyday interactions. Modern shows like *Hamilton*, *Hairspray*, *Rent*, and *Les Misérables* are commonly viewed by people who are interested in musical theatre, and those audiences take the lessons that the characters learn and apply them to their own lives. These issues include historical events, identity, race and sexuality presentation, and social class. Each of these issues are important to



society as a whole, and these issues are part of essential cultural discourses for helping people make sense of their day-to-day interactions.

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## APPENDIX A

### CONSENT FORM

As a research participant you are being asked to participate in a research project, *Learning about identity, race, history, and sexuality by viewing musical theatre: A social learning theory perspective*, being conducted by Molly Ginn a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. The purpose of this study is to understand how people learn from performances of musical theatre and how they then use certain information in their everyday lives.

As a participant you will be asked to provide some demographic information, and to talk about what you have learned from about identity, race, sexuality, history, and social class by watching live performance of musicals. The interview should take about 45-60 minutes.

Your participation should help provide the scientific community with a greater understanding of the ways musical theatre influences learning and communication about identity, race, history, and sexuality.

A potential risk of this study is some participants may experience discomfort when speaking about identity, race, and sexuality. You may choose to not answer questions and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

The researchers will keep your responses confidential. Since excerpts from interviews may be used in the reporting of findings, we ask that you use pseudonyms when referring to people who are not members of the casts for the productions you are discussing. In the reporting of the results, the researchers will also try to disguise identifying information in order to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

Consent forms will be kept in a location separate from audio files and interview transcripts. Audio files will be stored on password protected computer. Five years after publication of research, consent forms and transcripts will be shredded and digital audio files will be deleted.

The purpose of this study will explained to your satisfaction upon the completion of the interview, and you may request a copy of the research report for this study.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant, please contact the Northern Illinois University Office of Research Compliance at 815-753-8588. Any questions regarding this research may be directed to the primary researcher, Molly Ginn at 815-753-6996, or to her advisor, Dr. Kathleen Valde, 815-753-7106, [kvalde@niu.edu](mailto:kvalde@niu.edu).

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Signature of Subject

Date

I agree that this interview may be audio recorded.

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Signature



## **APPENDIX B**

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### **Introduction**

Hello, my name is Molly Ginn and I am a graduate student at NIU. Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. This study is part of my master's thesis project studying the educational process that occurs from watching pieces of musical theatre. The interview will last approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Participation in this study is voluntary, and you are welcome to avoid answering any questions or stop the interview at any time.

#### **Demographic Questions**

I would like to start with some demographic questions.

What is your age?

What is your ethnicity?

What is your gender identification?

What is your level of education?

#### **General questions about musicals**

Now I would like to move on to some general questions pertaining to musicals.

Why do you go to musicals?

What do you get out of watching musicals?

What do you learn through viewing musicals?

What are your thoughts immediately following viewing musicals typically?

What, if anything, do you dislike about musicals?

This study focuses on audience's experiences with live performances of *Hairspray*, *Rent*, *Les Miserables*, and *Hamilton*. Which of these shows have you seen?

How many times have you seen each of these?

- What was your motivation to see \_\_\_\_\_ more than once?
- How did viewing \_\_\_\_\_ multiple times change your reaction?

Do you have a favorite of the ones that you have seen?

Do you prefer one of these musicals to the others? Why or why not?

What are some conversations that you have pertaining to musicals after you have seen them?

Do you own the soundtracks for these musicals?

- How often do you listen to those soundtracks?

Have you seen films of the musicals?

### **Questions related to historical lessons from musicals**

Now I would like to talk about the idea of historical events being depicted in these musicals.

What do you notice about how musicals portray historical events?

What, if anything, have you learned about history from watching live performances of *Hairspray*, *Rent*, *Les Miserables*, and *Hamilton*?

What, if any, new information about history have you learned from musical theatre performances?

- How has that influenced how you view those time periods?

How does musical theatre affect your view of history with shows like the four we are discussing?

Have you talked to other people about the ways the time period is portrayed in the musical?

What did you talk about? Why?

Have you posted on social media about the ways the time period is portrayed in one of these musicals?

What did you post?

How did people respond to that post?

What other ways have you learned historical facts outside of standard education?

What is your preferred method?

### **Questions related to identity**

Now I would like to focus on the idea of identity as portrayed in musicals.

Characters often have a very specific identity created. Have you ever had a character that you related to? If so, please explain.

What aspects of identity do you usually notice when viewing musicals?

Have you ever emulated characteristics of a musical character? If yes, please explain.

After viewing *Hairspray*, with which of the characters did you identify? Why?

After viewing *Rent*, with which of the characters did you identify? Why?

After viewing *Les Miserables*, with which of the characters did you identify? Why?

After viewing *Hamilton*, with which of the characters did you identify? Why?

Did you emulate characteristics of any of the characters in *Hairspray*?

If yes, who?

Why?

Did you emulate characteristics of any of the characters in *Rent*?

If yes, who?

Why?

Did you emulate characteristics of any of the characters in *Les Miserables*?

If yes, who?

Why?

Did you emulate characteristics of any of the characters in *Hamilton*?

If yes, who?

Why?

Did you talk with anyone about the characters in these shows?

What did you talk about? What came up in the conversation about identity?

Did you post anything about social media about identity and characters in these shows?

What did you post?

How did people respond to that post?

### **Questions related to sexuality and race**

Moving along with the topic of character development and presentation, I would now like to talk about how race and sexuality are presented for characters in the shows.

How, if at all, is race depicted in the four shows we are discussing?

How did these depictions influence your personal interpretations of the shows?

What can audiences learn about race from these depictions?

To what extent have these depictions influenced your views about race?

Please tell me about a time when a depiction of race influenced how you interacted with someone.

After seeing one of these shows did you talk with people about race?

What did you talk about?

To what extent did the show influence the conversation?

After seeing one of these shows did you post anything on social media about race?

About the show and race?

What did you post?

How did people respond to your post?

Shows like *Hairspray* also create a specific description about ideas of equality. What does this do for your opinion of the show?

Sexuality of characters from very obvious in shows like *Rent* to very subtle things like dance style in *Hairspray*. What does this do for your view of the show?

With the four shows being discussed, how, if at all, is sexuality depicted?

How do these depictions influence your interpretation of the shows?

What can audiences learn from these depictions?

What have these done for your views of sexuality?

Did you talk with people about the depictions of sexuality?

What was discussed?

Did you post anything on social media about the depictions of sexuality?

What did you post?

How did people respond to your post?

To what extent had seeing the shows influenced the ways in which you talk with people sexuality?

### **Questions related to social class**

Lastly, I would like to discuss how social class is presented in shows.

Please describe an example of class struggles you may view in everyday life.

How have these been portrayed in musicals like the ones we are discussing?

What, if anything, does this portrayal show about human experience?

How does representation of social class affect your opinion of characters?

Often, social classes will be presented through description of financial responsibility. How does this alter the character's image for you?

What character(s) from *Hairspray*, *Rent*, *Les Miserables*, and *Hamilton* do you see as a clear presentation of a class structure?

Which class structure are they a part of?

What does this do for the character(s) in general?

How, if at all, do these representations change your view of class struggles in everyday life as described earlier?

To what extent, as a result of seeing these musicals, have you talked with others about social class?

What was said in those conversations?

After seeing any of these musicals, did you post anything on social media about social class?

What did you post?

How did people respond to your post?

**Closing**

Is there anything else relating to this topic that you would like me to know?

Thank you!