THERAPEUTIC RESPONSES TO A CONFLICT BETWEEN SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND RELIGION

by

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Abstract

For some individuals a conflict arises between their religious and sexual identities. Such a conflict can be extremely distressing, and may cause to many adverse and negative psychological consequences. A sample of 10 participants (between 25-54) were recruited and interviewed. Using content analysis, major themes were identified and grouped. Within the interviews a major homogenous experience arose between all the respondents. This homogenous experience can be classified with five major superordinate categories: (a) sources of conflict; (b) emotional and cognitive consequences of conflict; (c) exploration of gay identity; (d) current negative emotions, and (e) religion as a source of strength. Although counseling was considered by participants as helpful, participants pointed to external factors outside of the counseling setting as the most efficacious.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For some clients, sexual and religious identities are given the same weight in their lives. These two aspects of their identity are important and the one does not trump the other. Their religious identity is as valued and deeply felt as their sexual identity is. Research in the areas of religion and sexuality has focused mainly on the negative and adverse outcomes of gay and lesbian individuals when these two aspects conflict, collide, and cannot be reconciled with each other. Books on the topic can be viewed as slanted with negative perspectives of religion, as evidenced by such clever titles as: Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America (White, 1994), and Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men (Bouldrey, 1995).

Although it could be seen as quite therapeutic for those who are struggling with their religion and sexuality to feel like they are not alone in their struggle, it is quite clear that a great divide exists between those who place religion at the forefront, and those who would have religion completely removed from the equation. But where does this paradox leave a client that sees his or her sexual identity and religion as equal in measure? Where does this leave clients who experience incongruence between their sexuality and religious identity? In a counseling context, it is essential that the proper application of appropriate, evidence based, therapeutic responses that work, be utilized so that a therapist can provide the level of care that these particular clients need.
Authors like Miranti (1996) have proposed that in some individuals, religion is as salient a component as any other part of their identity. Halderman (2002) posits that it may be more conceivable that a client is more ready to change their sexual identity before contemplating a change in their religious values; stating that it may be less “emotionally disruptive” (p. 262). It may also be possible that religion and sexuality can have major problems coexisting due to mainstream religions being explicitly homophobic (Brooke, 1993). For a client who wishes to be both religious and gay, this battle between the identities of religion and sexuality can not only be frustrating for a client, but can also create a sense of bias in the counseling session (Knight & Hoffman, 2007). Because most mainstream religions have, historically, condemned and devalued being gay (Garanzini, 1989; LeVay & Novas, 1995), it can be assumed that a religiously devout lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) individual must deal with strong conflict between their religion and their LGB identity on a constant basis. This internal struggle has been shown to cause guilt, shame and repression among LGB who are religious, and may even cause an LGB individual to reject religion altogether, despite the evolution of some religions as becoming more accepting of LGB individuals (Ritter & O;Neil, 1989; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994).

How individuals navigate between their religion and sexuality can greatly affect both their spiritual and mental health. So how does one navigate through this conflict? Shafranske and Maloney (1996) state “Religion is, indeed, one of those critical aspects of culture that is focal for a significant number of those who seek psychological treatment... Psychotherapists should keep
an open mind and be willing to explore religious concerns as an important component of cultural diversity” (p. 564).

The notion that psychotherapists should keep an open mind is indeed a noble one; however, how does a therapist go about this? What does keep an open mind operationally mean? What is the preferred psychological intervention and treatment for an individual facing strong conflict between their religious and sexual identity? When clients enter therapy for help, what is a counselor to say that will not alienate both their religious and sexual identities? What works, and just as importantly, what doesn’t? Furthermore, do current therapies available to therapists, in addition to the ethical principles and guidelines outlined by the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA, 2000), actually complement what is found to be of benefit to an individual facing such integration.

**Religiosity and Spirituality**

In recent years, there has been a growing understanding of the integration of spirituality into psychotherapy (Richards & Bergin, 2000, 2004; Sperry & Shafranske, 2004). Many of these techniques seem to provide positive clinical outcomes in clients (Probst, Ostrom, Watkins, Dean, & Mashburn, 1992; Richards, Berrett, Hardman, & Eggett, 2006). However, tantamount to the understanding of religion and identity negotiation in the counseling context, is a discussion of religiosity and spirituality. It is possible that a client may view these two concepts very differently and as such important for therapists to understand the distinction.

Literature in the area is vast and varied. Many authors seek in their writings to provide a clear-cut definition of religiosity and spirituality. Religion and spirituality have been discussed
in the literature as related, but not inherently independent, constructs (Hill et al., 2000; Lease, Horne, Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Literature suggests that religion has evolved from a previous viewpoint that defines it as both an institutional and doctrinal expression of faith. In contrast, spirituality is defined as a connection that is personal and as something viewed as sacred (Miller & Thoresen, 2003). Although this may seem to be a minor differentiation, the literature suggests that this distinction is quite relevant for LGB individuals. Lease and Shulman (2003) indicated that family members of LGB individuals make this distinction between a personal connection to God (i.e. spirituality) and organized religion. The authors go on to report that family members of LGB individuals state that spirituality, not religion, facilitates their acceptance and understanding of their family member’s sexual orientation.

Also evident is the fact that the divide between religion and sexual orientation may be moot as many religious organizations are beginning to accept LGB individuals, thus allowing the LGB individual to fully integrate their religion and sexual orientation (Rodriguez, 2010; Rodriguez & Ouellete, 2000; Thumma, 1991). This ideological shift within religious organizations that now accept LGB individuals can provide an alternative solution for solving the religious and sexual orientation conflicts that clients may present within therapy. The Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (TRSO, 2009) clearly articulates the above findings in a manner that is equally respectful of religion and psychology, while keeping with the tradition of evidence based practices and policies by stating that it “support(s) affirmative and multi-culturally competent approaches that integrate concepts from the psychology of religion and the modern psychology of sexual orientation” (APA, 2009, p. 20).
It is invariably possible that a therapist may encounter individuals who are experiencing a conflict between their sexual orientation and religion, who as a result, might have the inclination to change their sexual orientation altogether. These clients may, due to religious or family pressure, wish to change their sexual orientation and become straight. Although it is practice in therapy to meet client goals and expectations, it is essential that therapists understand what the literature has found in respect to sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE). Additionally, therapists need to explore with their clients what their subjective experience is with respect to spirituality and religiosity. Clients may define differently, and even conceptualize these two terms very differently.

**Sexual Orientation Change Efforts**

Studies that examine the possibility of changing one’s sexual orientation typically focus on LGB people who both fall in the conservative religious right and have strong religious affiliations (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Spitzer, 2003), because of course, this group can be highly motivated to try to become heterosexual. Individuals who want to change their sexual orientation, due to a conflict in their religious affiliation and orientation, come from those religious affiliations that believe that homosexuality is not only wrong, but also abhorrent (Ponticelli, 1999; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002). As such, the reasons for an individuals to seek to change their sexual orientation seem to revolve around the rejection and fear of homosexual thoughts and feelings due to the values, beliefs, and doctrine, which their religious affiliation professes (Glassgold, 2008; Mark, 2008). These persons are reported to undergo significant
stress when their religion and orientation are incongruent, and when these individuals try to live their lives conforming to their religion (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005).

Guilt associated with those individuals who find that they cannot change their orientation have also been documented; as well, the potential feelings of loss to their core identity if they were to live an outwardly LGB identity have also been noted (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Glassgold, 2008; Haldeman, 2004). The spiritual struggle that these individuals invariably experience have been described by participants in previous studies as feelings of not being forgiven for their “sin;” as highly distressed because of their conflict in religion and same sex attractions; moreover, as having caused panic disorders, depression and suicidality. These distressing feelings have even been expressed by participants who rated their religion as a coping mechanism (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Glassgold, 2008; Haldeman, 2004)

Those individuals who want to change their sexual orientation need be aware of the potential harm. This, so called, “reparative therapy” has been found to be potentially harmful in many cases because the loss of identity can lead to anger, anxiety, depression, loss of family support, and suicidal ideation (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Schroeder & Shidlo, 2001; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002). Even though some participants indicated that they were able to change as the result of this therapy, some later recanted as the original positive outcomes were replaced with negative effects (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Schroeder & Shidlo, 2001). As such, the APA’s taskforce concluded that “there is insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation” which the APA in turn accepted (APA, 2009, p. 121). Therapists need to be aware of such findings, and explain to the client that change in this regard
has not only been shown to have no treatment effect, but carries with it the potential to induce harm in a client.

Again, what is a therapist to do if a client is exhibiting a conflict between religion and his/her sexual orientation? It is entirely possible for a client to rate their religion as of foremost importance (Haldeman, 2002). It is also entirely possible for a client to reject religion altogether and adopt an LGB identity free of religion (Beckstead, 2003; Goodwill, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). However, neither of these options will be satisfactory for those individuals who strongly value both their religious affiliation and their sexual orientation. With the advent of LGB affirming faiths (e.g., the Metropolitan Community Church), another option of merging religion and sexuality into a cohesive and congruent whole now exists. These options are ones that need to be valued if therapists wish to respect a client’s right to self-determination. Haldeman (2002) clearly articulates this point when he states that, “Psychology’s role is to inform the profession and the public, not to legislate against individuals’ rights to self-determination” (p.263).

Following this affirmation, the APA’s taskforce recommends taking a client-centred approach to counseling individuals with religious and orientation conflicts (2009, p.86). Is this process valid? Does it work?

Clients who are struggling with religion and sexual orientation may feel that it is easier to just create a hierarchy of their needs. This option may place either their religion or sexuality at the forefront. This belief however, can create great distress and feelings of loss in an individual (Haldeman, 2001). If a client decides to place their sexual orientation at the forefront, he or she may lose a sense of community (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Ford, 2001). The decision to place one
part of a client’s identity at the forefront, to the detriment of the other, does not actually confront the identity dilemma that still exists and may still cause future distress for a client. Bartoli and Gillem (2008) suggest that the focus of such a dilemma should be on reducing emotional distress, with therapy centered on the reduction of this stress. Bartoli and Gillem (2008) go on to state that the therapeutic process should focus on the exploration of stress. Since a dilemma between identity and sexuality can elicit; the exploration of this area can potentially provide an avenue where the client can create a greater sense of congruence between their sexual orientation and religious identities. At first glance this may seem to most therapists as obvious; however, this may prove to be more difficult as many more feelings may arise when the door to exploration is opened.

The feeling of loss also appears to be a central theme of an individual who faces such a conflict. In Ford’s (2001) personal account of identity confusion, he describes finding acceptance in the ex-gay community and shelter from the loneliness that he was experiencing. However, this reprieve was short lived as he began to feel hopeless when he realized that his ex-gay identity was not who he was since he was unable to remove his homosexual thoughts and feelings (Ford, 2001). Haldeman (2004) also discusses this fear of loss in his article in which his client, Phil, feared the loss of his African American faith congregation should he chose to live as a gay man. These two examples illustrate the importance of exploring loss, or the fear of loss, within the counseling session.

Understanding that the resolution that a client may reach at the end of their counseling as potentially not being fully resolved has also been identified (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008), as sexual
orientation (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001, Schneider, Brown & Glassgold, 2002) and religious beliefs (Fowler, 1995, as cited in Bartoli & Gillem, 2008) can be changeable. The conceptualization of their religion and sexual orientation can be very different from one client to the next. Understanding that the way in which a client conceptualizes these two aspects of themselves can vary, may help the counselor to allow the client’s feelings to be at the forefront of the session. Understanding how clients conceptualize their religious and sexual identity becomes an important question for therapists as they try to understand and conceptualize how their clients view themselves.

**Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation**

In 2009 the American Psychological Association Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation released its most current review of journal literature on sexual orientation change efforts in its publication Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation (2009). This publication provides a clear framework to work from when dealing with such complicated issues; furthermore, the publication illustrates some important research findings in the areas of religion and orientation conflicts. Given the above considerations for counseling, the APA provides a framework from which a counselor can use in therapy.

The client-centered approach proposed in the report includes acceptance and support, active coping, social support, and the exploration of identity and development (APA, 2009, p. 55). Central to the client-centred approach are: the aspects of honesty, empathy and allowing the client to explore issues without feelings of criticism or judgment (Throckmorton & Welton, 2005; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004); the need for the therapist to empathize with the client’s
potential wish to change his or her sexual orientation (Haldeman, 2004); and to foster both a relationship and therapeutic alliance that places the needs of the client at the forefront of counseling (Liddle, 1996; Yarhouse, 2008).

Assessing both the client’s individual and personal religious experiences and beliefs, in reference to the stress caused by the conflict between the client’s sexual orientation and religion, is also central to the report’s recommendations (APA, 2009, p. 56). This explorative process may include the assessment of a client’s religious goals, motivations, and how their religious and sexual identities intersect (APA, 2009; Harris, Cook, & Kashubeck-West, 2008; Knight & Hoffman, 2007). The goal is to reduce stress by reducing dissonance and developing positive coping strategies (APA, 2009; Mahaffy, 1996). Central to this idea is that many clients facing this type of dilemma may see their conflict as an either/or debate (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Haldeman, 2001).

Allowing the client to explore this way of thinking by using therapeutic strategies as such as cognitive behavioural therapy (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2003) can help a client accept their same-sex attractions by reframing the client’s internal dialogue to become congruent with their same-sex behavior. This process, along with creating more avenues for social support, is evident in the research to provide a client ways in which to cope. Providing a client with self-help groups, regardless of whether these groups are religiously based or not, can help mitigate a client’s feelings of being alone, and provide a venue to both openly discuss their thoughts and feelings and reduce their cognitive dissonance (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Wolkomir, 2001).
The report’s final recommendation is for a client to then explore their individual identity as it connects to and encompasses their sexuality, their ethnicity, their religion, gender and race (APA, 2009). Identity exploration has not only proven to reduce cognitive dissonance, but has been found to have a positive outcome on clients with same sex attractions who may identify as heterosexual, LGB, or ex-gay (Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Haldeman, 2004; Yarhouse & Tan, 2004). By effectively exploring one’s identity, it is then possible for a client to fully integrate those aspects of their identity that are consciously chosen to be relevant. Successful integration of one’s identity has been shown to increase self esteem; provide a better understanding of the individual’s religious views, beliefs, and values; and provide a better understanding of how their sexuality intersects with their religious views, beliefs, and values (Glassgold, 2008; Haldeman, 2004; Tan, 2008; Yarhouse, 2008). It is quite evident that identity exploration and integration is an integral component to counseling an individual with strong religious and sexual orientation conflict.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the current research study is to determine what is helpful for an individual facing strong conflict between their religious and sexual identities. Given that a client’s experience in resolving a conflict between sexuality and religion may vary, does their experience coincide with what has been recommended as a guideline for such therapy by the APA? Although clinical and counseling psychologists have focused on therapeutic responses and clearly recommend a client-centred approach. It is important to look at the therapeutic experience in the whole context of resolving religious and sexual identity issues.
More specifically, when a client enters therapy for help, what is a counselor to say that will not alienate both their religious and sexual identities? What works, and equally as important, what doesn’t? Additionally, it was the aim of the current study to provide not only a detailed picture of what LGB have had to deal with in their past, but to also give these individuals a voice.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were male and female (between the ages of 25-54) who identified as either L, G or B. Participants were screened by asking if they firstly, have previously sought therapy by a psychologist or counselor to reconcile a conflict between their sexuality and religious identity, and secondly, if they have reconciled the two. The screening was constructed so as to have two groups of participants - those who have resolved their conflict, and those who have not. Given that younger aged individuals may not have formed a sexual identity, or foreclosed their identity, participants were all age twenty-five or over (Knight & Hoffman, 2007). The self-report of participants in regards to their sexuality was considered sufficient to assess sexual orientation.

The final sample size was comprised of ten participants whose age ranged from twenty-five to fifty-four (M=32.6). Before data analysis was completed, data saturation occurred. Participants who identified as not having a conflict between their sexuality and religion were not interviewed. In addition, any participant under the age of twenty-five was removed to avoid the potential confounding variable inherently related to the fact that younger individuals may not have formed a concrete sexual identity at that age.
**Sexual and Religious Identity**

All participants interviewed identified as either gay (n=6), lesbian (n=3) or bisexual (n=1). The age at which participants came out as their identified sexuality was between the ages of 22-38 (M=26.2). All participants self reported as identifying with a Christo-centric religion (e.g. a religion where Christ is considered to be the son of God). Forty percent of participants (n=4) identified as Catholic, 30% (n=3) identified as Lutheran, 20% (n=2) identified as Christian and 10% (n=1) identified as Baptist. All participants (n=10) were currently not attending a church that corresponded to their self-identified religious affiliation. 80% of participants (n=9) were attending a religious organization on a regular basis. 10% (n=2) were not attending a religious organization.

**Procedure**

Recruitment for the current study began in February 2012. Interviews began in April 2012 and concluded in December 2012. Participants responded to recruitment flyers placed in the community, placed in religious bulletins, at LGB positive counseling centers and on online message boards (see Appendix A). Each religious organization in the Greater Toronto Area was contacted via email with a copy of the recruitment flyer and a brief message that contained the purpose and rationale for the study. Subsequently, 15 churches decided to place the flyer in their weekly bulletin, on their website, and on their mailing lists for their congregants. Recruitment
flyers were also placed on 10 online message boards that were identified as being LGB affirmative, and throughout the downtown core of Toronto as well.

Recruitment flyers contained information regarding the nature and purpose of the study and included eligibility requirements and selection criteria. The recruitment flyer also informed participants that they would be monetarily compensated for their time and participation in the study in the amount of $20 to be received at the completion of the interview. Contact information for the primary researcher (email address and telephone number), in addition to the email address of the faculty advisor, and the contact information for the research ethics board at the University of Toronto were also included.

To be included in the study, and to meet the selection criteria, participants needed to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, in addition to self-identifying as having had a previous or current conflict between their sexual identity and their religion. Efforts were made to recruit participants who were members of a gay affirmative organized faith group in addition to those who were not.

When contacted by a potential participant, the researcher then sent each participant an information summary (see Appendix D), which again outlined the purpose, scope, procedure, compensation, selection and eligibility criteria for the study. This was done to ensure that each
participant was fully aware of all aspects of the study, and to ensure that each participant who was interviewed would be included in the data analysis of the study.

Prior to the recruitment process, consent was obtained to allow for interviews to be booked and conducted at the Psycho-Educational Clinic at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. Once participants read the information page and fully understood what participation in the study entailed, an interview time was booked with the participant and the researcher. Each participant was given a chance to read, and subsequently sign, the consent form (see Appendix B). At the end of the interview, participants were compensated $20 for their involvement in the study.

All identifying information was removed during the transcription process; in addition, all transcripts were separately stored from the consent documents. All audio files were encrypted and safely stored on a password-protected computer, and deleted once transcription occurred.

**Interview**

The interviews were approximately 60 minutes long in duration. Prior to the start of the interview, participants were briefed that they could choose to not answer any question that might make them feel uncomfortable. Prior to beginning the semi-structured interview, participants were asked several questions to gain some demographic information (age, sex, sexuality, religious affiliation, and age they came out). Participants were asked a series of fourteen
questions that focused on the reconciliation of a conflict between sexuality and religion (see Appendix C).

The semi-structured interview ranged in scope from the participant’s spiritual experience, their past sexual experiences, their coming out process, and what the participant felt was both positive and negative within a counseling session when reconciling their conflict. The semi-structured interview questions were created to give a voice and understanding of the participant’s story, and to better understand the processes and variables that were related to having a conflict between sexuality and religion. At the end of the interview participants were thanked and given a card with available counseling resources should any personal issue raised during the interview may have necessitated counseling services.

**Data Analysis**

The current study utilized content analysis (Marshal & Rossman, 1989) of a semi-structured interview, using the constant comparative method (CCM) to group participant answers. An inductive analysis of all transcripts was utilized to allow the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis to emerge from the data so as not to impose any preconceptions prior to data analysis. During analysis, and to keep in accordance with the constant comparative method, each line of data was analyzed and compared with all other lines to look for commonalities and themes. This process was conducted for each interview transcript several times to ensure the
validity of the analysis. To ensure inter-rater reliability, three interviews were randomly assigned and rated by two third-party researchers. If a conflict in the coding was identified, the two third-party researchers were instructed to debate and come to a consensus as to where the data should be placed. During this process inter-rater reliability reached a 97% agreement and provided sound reliability to the studies findings.
CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

The results section identifies and gives examples of themes that emerged from the data. Although there is some variability in regards to the impact of respondent’s experiences, the vast majority of respondents all described very similar past and present experiences when asked to describe how their religion impacted their coming out process they reported similar sources of conflict regarding their sexual orientation, that was largely grounded in their religious upbringing.

Within the interviews a major homogenous experience arose between all the respondents. This homogenous experience can be classified with five major superordinate categories: (a) sources of conflict; (b) emotional and cognitive consequences of conflict; (c) exploration of gay identity; (d) current negative emotions and (e) religion as a source of strength.

Due to the similarity in regards to both shared history and experiences, results will be shown in a semi-chronological order, from past to present impacts that respondents self-identified with, so as to highlight the respondents’ shared and cohesive experience.

Sources of Conflict

The most common linkage that all participants had in common with each other was the sources of their conflict. All participants stated that much of their conflict stemmed from a strict and conservative upbringing, in addition to religious teaching about homosexuality. When
participants were asked to recount their experiences growing up in a religious environment while being LG or B, all participants stated that they grew up with a feeling that being LG or B in that religious environment was difficult and oppressive. Adding to that feeling, was the commonality all participants shared in growing up in a religion they perceived to be conservative.

**Identified religion as conservative.**

All individuals who identified as both religious and gay described a religious environment that consisted of conformity to the laws and teaching of the church, in addition to their home life centering on the following of those laws and teachings.

Where I came from was a really conservative area. I don’t know if you know anything about Kansas, but it’s really conservative. There’s a lot of religion. I grew in a very religious fundamentalist family. My parents were so religious. Everything we did centered around what my religion said. How we lived, and how we acted, it was all under the control of the church. It was just a given that we would go to church every Sunday. We went to church retreats and all of my parent’s friends were connected to the church in some way. Everyone who went to our church was conservative. There was never any question as to which candidate you were going to vote for. Basically my parent’s religion ruled my life.

**Homophobic church teachings.**

**Implicit teachings.**

The most common source of conflict that every participant identified was the specific teachings that religion had pertaining to homosexuality. Participants painted a picture of
intolerant religious organizations that spoke out against homosexuality. Eight participants stated that they were taught that sex between the same gender was considered an abomination and immoral and that pulpit sermons condemning homosexuality were regular occurrences.

Five participants specifically quoted the scripture passages that were used to support a negative view of homosexuality. Participants spoke about being taught that all non-marital sex was a sin and described instances in which they were instructed to pray the gay away. It was clear from the perspective of participants that homosexuality was compared to many other things the church felt was immoral. Some felt that their church was not only discriminatory, but actually increased their level of conflict and stress regarding being gay. Some expressed that the church’s view made it harder to come out as gay and led to repression and denial so as not to be outed and or ostracized.

Sitting in a Baptist church and hearing about how bad gay people were. I mean, that was expressly said in the same voice as murderers and that sort of thing. Imagine sitting there in church and being told that gay people were going to hell and are abominations, all the while knowing that you’re gay. I didn’t want to be like that. I was taught that it was evil, that it was of Satan. That it was not of God. We were supposed to be in the world, but not of the world. We’re supposed to be a beacon of light for all others, and a force of good for those around us.

Participants also described instances in which the church instructed those who were gay to live an eternally chaste life in order to follow the norms of the church. Several participants went as far as to say that they frequently heard gay slurs and comments from other congregation
members who spoke out against homosexuality and went on to say that it was clear that there wasn’t a place for gay men or lesbians in the church.

**Perceived teachings.**

Even if participants could not recall a specific time in which they heard an outright negative church teaching pertaining to homosexuality, they stated that the church’s negative view of homosexuality was implied and widely known in that religious community.

I don’t really recall anything being said against homosexuals, in church, from my dad in the pulpit, but I knew what the teaching said about homosexuality being deviant and a sin and that the sex talk that we had was, ‘Keep it confined to marriage.’

Two participants stated that although they never outwardly heard negative church teachings about homosexuality, they still felt judged by their church. Many stated that they feared that if their sexual identity would be discovered, that they would be ostracized and or ex-communicated. Five participants stated that given the conservative area in which they grew up in, that it was clear that you did not want to be labeled as gay for fear of church retribution. One participant stated that the church he belonged to ex-communicated him upon finding out he was gay and described the loss of his religious community as extremely distressful; whereas another participant stated that he lost his clergy position as soon as he came out as gay.
Family impact.

*Strict upbringing.*

All participants indicated that they had been raised in a strict household. That is, there was both a requirement to follow the rules and be good kids, and the necessity to closely follow the rules of the church.

We were really expected to be really good kids, like really, really, really. I think the standards for my brother and I were pretty high. My mom, she just said one day, ‘I would rather you be good than happy,’ and that ‘this is against God’s will; you are disobedient to the teachings we brought you up as.’ Yes, it was pretty harsh.

Seven participants also indicated that there was a clear understanding that if they did something that the church would disagree with, there would be clear consequences. Rules were to be strictly adhered to and any deviation from this would be met with punishment. Moreover, it was also indicated that participants’ home life was underscored sometimes by both subtle and direct negative views of homosexuality, which verged on discrimination.

The Baptist church and my parents were super strict. They followed the teachings of the Baptist church without fail. I knew if I swore or if I did something that the church would disagree with I would be in big trouble from my parents. My brother, when I came out to him, was quite angry, because he said, ‘We were raised the same way. Why would you turn out gay? Why would you go this way? Why would you choose this? We were raised to be God-fearing, good Christian men.’
Participants heard many negative views from their family. All participants described this as particularly distressing as it strengthened the fear of being outed and added to the fear of losing their family should their sexual identity be discovered. Many participants stated that the sources of conflict directly related to the level of emotional and cognitive difficulties they experienced while not only trying to reconcile their sexual identity, but their religious identity as well.

**Emotional and Cognitive Consequences of Conflict**

All participants indicated that due to being raised in an environment that was homophobic, they endured serious emotional and cognitive dissonance that prevailed through a large part of their formative years. Growing up hearing through the church, and through a strict family adherence to their church’s negative teachings, about homosexuality, many participants described a past full of repression and emotional difficulties related to their sexual orientation. Participants described the emotional and cognitive consequence of being raised in a homophobic environment as taking up a huge portion of their lives to figure out; leading to many years of living with many misconceptions about their sexuality which is described below.

**Denial.**

Denial of feeling attracted to the same-sex was something that all participants struggled with due to the religious teaching about homosexuality. Participants directly linked their church’s homophobic stance as the number one cause related to their denial of their feelings. Each respondent indicated that denying their feelings of attraction for the same sex was inevitable and that denying these feelings caused a substantial amount of emotional distress in their early lives.
I remember looking through scripture passages and like posting them, you know, about how a good man does this, that you should follow this way and keep this in your mind at all times. I would post things around my house. I would try not to look at porn. I would try to just not even be on the computer, because that was a real temptation. I felt like there was something wrong with me, you know, I prayed to God a lot to take the feelings away from me. I felt a lot of denial. I definitely didn't want to be gay. Even though at that time I really didn’t know what being gay meant, I knew that I was different and that different was bad. It was easier to just push down those feelings and pretend they didn't exist.

Six respondents indicated that the very passages that the churches used to discourage and outright condemn homosexuality were also passages they used to further deny feelings of same-sex attraction. Some participants posted scripture passages around their room, while others stated that they daily read scripture in order to reinforce what their church said about being gay. All participants also indicated that a major reason that they had feelings of denial related to their same-sex attraction were the feelings that they needed to conform to the norms of society, their church and their family.

**Conformity to heterosexual norms.**

Each participant stated that a major reason they either repressed or denied their same-sex attraction was due to the notion that they needed to conform to heterosexual norms and or fear of retribution from their church. Respondents indicated that it was clear that they felt that they were different, but that the pressures of fitting in and being seen as the same as everyone else
around them became really important. One respondent stated: “I really wanted to kind of follow the storyline that it seemed like it was supposed to be how my story was supposed to end”.

The word “storyline” was prevalent in participants’ responses. Some respondents pointed to the lack of gay literature, storylines, and or movies as reasons that they felt their “storyline” did not fit into mainstream society. All respondents stated that they knew that a heterosexual life was not only the norm, that it was expected in the environments they grew up in. The feeling respondents described of needing to conform to heterosexual society most often led to a strong and prevalent desire to not have a same-sex attraction.

**Desire to be straight.**

Participants when asked to recount their coming out stories indicated that throughout high school and into early adulthood they had a strong desire to be straight. Each respondents pointed to growing up in an environment where being gay was condemned and devalued, in addition to wanting to just fit in with the heterosexual norm.

I didn’t want to be gay. Oh, I did not want to be gay. This is not something I was happy about. This was before I got a boyfriend, got gay friends and whatever. I didn’t identify with gay people, and like I said I had kind of this miss-impression of what gay was. I didn’t want my life to end up … I didn’t want to be ‘like that.’

Six respondents described instances where they tried to dress and act either more masculine or feminine, as well as instances where they tried to hide their same-sex sexual attraction from those around them.
I tried to dress more masculine so that it would be harder for people to think I might be gay. Usually I would try and not wear clothes that were too tight or too colorful. I talked to my friends about all the girls I was dating or numbers I got at the bar. Sometimes I would even talk about how hot or good looking a girl was even though I wasn’t attracted to them at all.

Six respondents also described times in which they themselves used homophobic slurs or comments so as to be seen as fitting in with their heterosexual friends and colleagues. All respondents indicated that the main reason they desired to be straight were due to fitting into mainstream society, in addition to negative church teachings pertaining to homosexuality that directly influenced their desire to be straight.

**Dated opposite-sex.**

Each respondent interviewed recalled instances where they actively sought out and dated the opposite-sex in order to fit in. One responded stated “Oh I dated men a lot. It was easier to hide if I had someone by my side that was a man. No one would question my sexuality if I were fitting in with the norm.” The desire to date the opposite sex was linked to the notion of needing to hide their same-sex attraction for fear of what would come of having their sexual identity exposed. The term “beard” was mentioned several times by respondents, indicating that dating the opposite sex was an easy way to hide and fit in. Omitting the bisexual respondent, every respondent indicated that even though they dated the opposite sex, they were neither attracted nor interested in a romantic relationship with the opposite sex.
So I dated men, started to be like the good Catholic girl and it’s like okay, no sex before marriage, which ended up not being that hard because I wasn’t that attracted to the men, so kissing them was fine, but I knew it wasn’t going anywhere else and stuff. I used men as a sort of “beard” to disguise my attraction to women. If I were “dating” a man then it would be harder for those around me to think I might be gay.

The theme of being a “good Catholic” or “good Christian” was described in many of the interviews conducted. Respondents indicated that it was important to them to be seen as following the religious tenets and teachings of their religion; this included dating the opposite sex even if it meant lying to those around them, or using the person they were dating as a cover to hide their same sex attraction. Dating the opposite sex was seen by respondents as a way to also test whether or not it was possible to date the opposite sex. One respondent stated that his/her desire to be straight was so strong that they would have done anything to stop their same sex attraction; even if that meant being in a non-romantic relationship. This respondent indicated that at the time he would have tried to have a heterosexual relationship had he not felt like he would still have had a same-sex attraction to men. “If I felt like it would be possible, and if I could have gotten away with it without the fear of cheating on my partner I would have. I mean at the time I felt like it would have just been easier.”

**Misconceptions about being gay.**

Nine of the respondents stated that due to the many homophobic comments they heard growing up, they had many misconceptions about what it meant to be gay. They pointed to the media’s representation of gay men being effeminate or lesbians being extremely masculine as
furthering their misconceptions, while others pointed to a general misunderstanding about what it meant to be gay. Every male respondent specifically mentioned the misconception that linked being gay to pedophilia.

I think I didn’t really understand what being gay meant, until … I had a misunderstanding about gay men. Like, in high school, it seemed like it was something that you were either effeminate, or you wanted to be a woman, kind of like a transgender thing, or you were a pedophile. I didn’t want to end up like that. I didn’t want to. It seemed like, to me, if you were gay you ended up like an old man who liked little boys.

All respondents indicated that most of their misconceptions furthered their inability to explore what it meant to be gay and helped the repression of their same-sex attraction.

Respondents stated that the misconceptions they had were reinforced by the teachings of the church and by various statements they heard from friends. All respondents indicated that they grew up in a very strict and religious household and that information pertaining to being gay was limited to what the clergy taught and/or to what information about sex was allowed in their family. Most indicated that talking about sex was very limited and was focused solely on same-sex sex for the purpose of procreation.

All outside-the-family information about sex was gained through peer conversations, which respondents indicated usually included gay slurs and/or a general perception of gay sex being wrong and or disgusting. Respondents stated that theses misconceptions furthered their internalized negative emotions about their same-sex attraction.
Past Negative Emotions about being gay.

Exposed to discrimination.

All participants described instances in which they were implicitly or explicitly exposed to multiple acts of discrimination depended on if the participant was openly gay when the discrimination occurred. Respondents defined discrimination as direct or indirect negative acts that they were exposed to because they were LGB. When implicitly exposed to discrimination, respondents pointed to gay jokes and slurs being used around them. Respondents stated that they still felt discrimination even if the jokes or slurs were directed to someone else. Respondents stated that in response to the explicit discrimination, they felt an immense sense of self-loathing and sometimes fear (i.e., if the discrimination was directed at them). Some respondents described instances in which they were targets due to their more effeminate characteristic, while other respondents pointed to growing up in an extremely religious community as furthering intolerance and discrimination.

In Kansas, there’s a lot of homophobia. It’s pretty intense. People routinely use that as, well, there are phrases like ‘faggot’ and stuff like that. People have said things to me because I was slightly effeminate, or because of my voice, or whatever. The church was basically were telling me I was going to hell. That’s a very powerful and scary thing to be told and to hear. And what I was trying now was to patch it, to heal that wound. And it was difficult because I wanted to transcend the fact that that’s a reality. It is that the fact that homophobia is a reality in the Catholic Church and there’s no full acceptance and you still feel that little guilt that we talked about.
Every respondent also stated that growing up in a religious context was central to hearing discriminatory statements about being gay. Respondents indicated that they felt that those anti-gay teachings gave those around them evidence to speak out against being gay. Notably, every participant indicated that the discrimination they endured growing up increased their level of guilt, shame and fear.

It wasn’t like I was scared to be jumped or beaten up or anything, but I think there was constant fear of being outing. There was also fear of losing my church community and the friends I had grown up going to church with. They were close friends, and had been taught the same as I was: that being gay was wrong. I was scared that if my church community found out that I was gay that I would lose them all.

*Past guilt and shame.*

Guilt was the first negative emotion respondents indicated that they felt very early on in their sexual identity development. Respondents explained that due to their religious upbringing, guilt related to being gay was inevitable. Some respondents indicated that the guilt stemmed from going against the teaching of the church and bible, and thus subsequently, going against God himself.

Every respondent explained that they felt guilt, despite knowing that feeling guilt about their same-sex attraction was irrational. One respondent described this feeling same-sex sexual attraction was like going against everything you were taught and were supposed to believe; going on to state that, if you were taught that same-sex sexual attraction was a sin, then you were then being a bad Christian.
It was like I wanted to be a good Catholic girl and so it was suppressed, suppressed, suppress all these feelings that are coming up. This must be wrong. Like me telling myself this must be wrong, I shouldn’t be feeling this way, this isn’t right that which is why I suppressed it for so many years. Had I not felt so guilty I would have come out earlier I know it, like I was scared of all these things I was told would happen if I was gay. Despite feelings of guilt, every respondent indicated that despite feelings of intense guilt, they were unable to stop their same-sex attraction. Even though respondents stated that they tried for years to suppress those feelings to mitigate feelings of guilt, their same-sex attraction was always there.

Oh there was no changing my attraction to men. At the time I felt guilty for checking out my male friends. I was just lost and misinformed. But oh did I try. Had I known that things would have gotten as good as they are now I would have came out a lot sooner.

Participants also described experiencing shame. Some respondents stated that they felt shame in regards to sleeping with the same-sex, while other pointed to feeling shameful and unclean or dirty. On responded stated: “What were you going to tell your parents, ‘I’m sleeping with men, I’m a whore.’ I didn’t want to do that, but my brother knew. I guess I was ashamed to tell them.”

Nine respondents pointed to not being able to tell their parents as a reason for feeling shame, as respondents understood that their family would not approve and felt like they were not being honest. Another reason for shame, as described by respondents, was the feeling of needing to hide their feelings from God, but that understanding that since God was omniscient he would
know what their “dirty” thoughts were regardless. One participant stated, “I would sit in my room and fantasize about men and then I would think to myself ‘God is watching.’” Participants also indicated that the shame and guilt they felt caused them to hide any indication that they were gay, which in turn led to an extreme fear of being “outed.”

*Past fear.*

Respondents indicated extreme feelings of fear when describing the negative emotions they previously related to being gay. Participants stated that they lived in constant fear of being discovered or “outed.” Due to fear, respondents also described that they went to extreme measures to hide their same-sex attraction. This may have been in the form of clearing browser history, trying to act, dress or be perceived as more masculine or feminine, or to date the opposite-sex in order to blend in. Lying was described, as the major way respondents were able to hide, due to the fear they felt. In addition to the fear of being perceived as gay or outed, respondents described times in which they were afraid of religious retribution if their same-sex feelings were to come to light. One respondent described this feeling by stating:

I was afraid to go to hell. I mean you know what the church taught about being gay. It was a direct train ride to hell. I know that if at the time my church had found out I was gay that I would have been ex-communicated. I mean a girl from my church was ex-communicated for getting pregnant. Being gay was way worse than that.

*Past suicidal ideation.*

A majority of respondents (n=8) reported feeling of hopelessness and despair and experiencing suicidal ideation specifically because their same-sex attraction was in direct
opposition to their religious upbringing. One participant described her despair as being caused by the fear of going to hell:

I definitely thought about suicide early on. I just felt like if I was a lesbian then I was going to hell and so I might as well end it now and end up where I was told I was going to go.

Another participant when describing their experience of fear said: “I made a pact with myself when I was 15. I made a cross on the wall and said to myself ‘If you are still attracted to men when you 18 then I would kill myself.’” Participants described painful thoughts of not wanting to disappoint family or their religious community as additional reasons that compounded their suicidal ideation.

Notably, when participants described their past suicidal ideation, all experiences had a religious component such as drawing a cross on a headboard, or feeling as if their same-sex attraction had caused God to turn His back on them. When participants were asked how they dealt with past suicidal ideation, participants pointed to a time in which they began to explore their same-sex attraction by educating themselves about what it meant to be gay, and moving away from their environment of origin as ways that helped their suicidal ideation subside.

**Exploration of Gay Identity**

**Gay education.**

In spite of these negative experiences, participants all pointed to a time in their life where they started to learn what being gay really meant. Participants all indicated that before this time
of exploration, they did not fully understand what the word gay meant, or that there were people living an openly gay life.

Participants described this period of time in which they felt safe to explore their feelings as a huge time of growth and exploration. Prior to this time respondents indicated that the environment they were in was an unsafe place, environments in which their fear, shame and guilt were catalysts for denial and repression of their attraction to the same-sex. This newfound space was one in which participants considered being a safe environment and described that safe place as an essential element in their coming out process. Furthermore, participants stated that had they not educated themselves on what it meant to be gay, outside of what they had been previously taught or previously believed, and that they may be closeted. Participants indicated that doing their own research, being in a new environment, finding a gay affirmative church, meeting other gay people, and counseling were all drivers for change during this period of their lives.

I had no clue what it meant to be gay other than what I had been taught by my family and church. I had this perception that being gay was just plain wrong and somehow dirty. It wasn’t until I met several other gay people that I realized that they were no different than anyone else. I then found a church that was accepting of gay people. That was another huge realization. I realized I could be religious and gay, and that I wasn’t the only one who desired this.

**Researching what it meant to be gay.**

When respondents were asked what exactly helped them begin to accept their gay identities, all respondents described researching on their own what it meant to be gay. Previous
to this period participants stated that their gay knowledge was minimal, limited to religious teachings, and limited to family conversations about sex and being gay. One participant recounted a time in which he could not read enough books written by other gay men in which the authors recounted their own struggle and journey.

When I first got to University I found the gay section of literature in the library. I just read and read and read. I read all about the things that no one in my family or church ever would talk about. That was all the things I knew about being gay at the time. Another respondent stated that learning and questioning during University prompted him to start researching the passages in the Bible, which condemned homosexuality.

And then you start doing research and you start seeing that it really…there are so many different parts of the Bible you can interpret in so many different ways. No one ever follows everything to the letter so, it provoked rage, towards the ignorance that people had and then the way they would use the scripture to justify things.

Notably, one of the consistent experiences that each of the participants described, was a feeling of anger and injustice. Respondents stated that they felt like they had been robbed or cheated out of a large portion of their lives due to their previous religious upbringing, and the repression they experience due to that upbringing. One respondent stated: it wasn’t fair. I was miserable for many many years all due to ignorance really.” When participant were asked why they felt finally safe to start questioning what they formerly believed and or were taught, participants stated that being in a new and removed environment was essential.
**New environment.**

As previously noted, all participants indicated that being in a completely new environment was essential to their exploration of their gay identities, and to their gay development. Each participant recounted the time in their life in which they left their home environment, and indicated that this time of their life, away from their religious upbringing, allowed them to safely explore. Several of the participants said that the new environment was due to travelling abroad.

I moved to Korea. Korea was kind of like a little bit of a test for me. I walked around in this completely new environment. It was like one of those scientific things where you take this little rat from this experiment and you drop him in a completely different … and see, does the same thing happen?

For eight participants the new environment was going away to University.

Then when I went away to the University and stuff I was still religious so that I’d be going to church every Sunday and things like that and but now I was like a little bit more curious.

I could now date because I was away in school.

For these respondents, the new environment they were now found themselves in was a time of self-exploration where they were learning to think and live independently. Respondents spoke about beginning to be curious and having the opportunity to date: something they were not allowed to do at home. This rapid period of growth made it easier to explore and think for themselves; furthermore, the new environment brought the ability to meet other people and join other clubs: many of them gay.
Meeting other gay people.

Seven participants described meeting other gay people as an intense and emotional time in their lives. These respondents stated that while recounting their experience they could remember where they were, what they were doing, and what that person still looked like. These flashbulb memories were described as a pivotal turning point in their gay exploration and development. One young woman expressed, “When I first met the first gay person I was like ‘WOW that's me.’ I realized that I was not alone and that other people had figured themselves out and were living happy lives.” This participant described how her original perception about what being gay looked like was extremely different that of which she experienced in reality. Furthermore, many of the participants spoke to their original view of what it meant to be LGB as being incorrect and/or skewed by the religious teachings entrenched in their home environment.

Meeting other gay people in the form of campus groups or organizations was another way in which participants met other gay people.

I joined a gay group on campus when I heard that there was one. I think it gave me a sense of community and a sense that it would get better, that I could somehow overcome all the guilt and shame my religion dumped on me. The sense of finding a gay community in this new environment was also another way in which respondents began to feel that their guilt and shame, could eventually be mitigated through a sense of others who were dealing with the same feelings.

I can remember going to the library in the seminary and looking for books on being gay. There was only one and it didn't exactly shed being gay in a good light. Eventually I found
a group of gay Lutherans where I could talk about what was happening and how the group allowed me to explore with other people who were dealing with the same issues in a safe space.

The combination of a gay and religious organization was also something many participants pointed to as being extremely helpful in the reconciliation of their religious and gay identities. Finding a group where they felt that others had experienced, and were experiencing, the same feelings created a greater sense of belonging and community.

Religious gay groups allowed for a safe and accepting environment in which many respondents indicated was extremely helpful. This safe space allowed many respondents to share their doubts, fears, shame and guilt in an accepting environment, with those who felt similarly.

**Counseling experiences.**

**Positive counseling experiences.**

Participants endorsed many helpful aspects of therapy. Consistent with previous research, the client-centred approach was endorsed. Participants described having a mental health professional that was warm, a good listener, and who fostered a safe environment as key to their exploration of the different facets of their religious and sexual identities. For example,

The fact that the counselor listened to me and was there for me. She made me feel safe and didn’t judge. She listened, she was open, she was non judgmental. It’s very, very key to not sort of come across as being judgmental.

Six of respondents emphasized the importance of a non-judgmental therapist. May felt that they had many past experiences of being judged based solely on their sexual identities, and being
in a safe and non-judgmental environment helped foster a close relationship with their mental health professional, and subsequently allowed them to openly talk about their conflict. Respondents also felt that it was extremely important for the mental health professional to not “side” with either of their identities. All respondents felt that both their religious and sexual identities were an important aspect in their lives. Despite having many negative experiences with their past religious communities, respondents stated that affirming both sides, religious and sexual, was important in the counseling setting. One respondent used the term “all-affirming” and stated:

Well she just made me feel safe. She allowed me to say anything about both being gay and being religious and it wasn’t judged either way. In a way I think she wasn’t just “gay-affirming” she was “all-affirming”. She did challenge me in the assumptions I had about being gay and did encourage me to meet other gay people so that I would know if what I thought about being gay was the way it was. It was almost like a real world experiment. “Go out into the world and see what it’s really like”. I was very sheltered now that I look back. I had all these assumptions about what my religion and parents said about being gay. I really didn’t have a clue.

Participants also appreciated mental health professionals who believed that it was possible to be both gay and religious, and to live an outwardly gay life while maintaining a religious identity. For example,

In terms of coming out, well, I think that it was more listening and understanding who I was, right...So, I think in the sense the therapist helped me when I was sort of trying to
discover what my anxiety about being gay was about. She also told me that it was possible to be gay and still keep on being religious that I didn’t have to separate the two. That was a game changer for me. I never really thought about it like that. I think her telling me that it was ok to be feeling conflicted. She never once said my religious views were wrong, or that me being Catholic and gay was ridiculous. She opened the door to allow me to have a safe place to explore why I was being conflicted. I think if she had spoken negatively about my religion I would have been put off and would not have gone back. That’s why when I saw that the therapist was also gay and religious it was so great because he was living proof I could be gay and very religious. So talking to someone that either had gone through that or was religious but openly accepting gays was really helpful for me.

Another respondent echoed other participants’ responses by saying that his values and beliefs needed to be validated in the counseling setting. The idea that a safe space to explore the conflict, while keeping the clients’ value systems and religious beliefs in perspective, despite those two identifies appearing to be at odds with each other, was something participants felt was important.

He would ask some things like why do you consider yourself religious right? Why does it mean to be Catholic to you or Muslim or…? Why is that and what does it mean to be gay right? Because these things may seem incompatible. Just to explore what is important to the person coming for counseling. Not to put their values or ideas or beliefs about being religious or being gay on the person. They have a right to believe what they want. I wouldn’t have wanted a counselor to tell me my religion was crazy, even though in my
case I came to that conclusion, I think that conclusion was mine to figure out in my own time with their help.

A client-centred approach seemed to be essential for working with this client group. Participants all endorsed key facets of this approach, while adding that their experience, their values, their beliefs were their own, and only their own to reconcile with the help of the mental health professional.

I am not sure I could pinpoint exactly what helped when I went to speak to a therapist. She just explored with me what it meant to me to be gay. She focused on my personal experience, which I really appreciated. At no point did I feel judged, and I felt like she knew what she was doing. I think what really helped is that the therapist helped tease apart some of the misconceptions I still had about being gay. Like I never thought about the fact that I could be gay and have children. That thought just never entered into my mind.

Exploring what the clients’ experiences has been, and how that has translated into conflict, appears to be an important aspect of resolving such a conflict. Being non-judgmental, neutral and creating a safe environment for clients to explore and understand how their conflict has arisen, as well as the mental health professional pointing to the possibility of being gay and religious, appear to be central in this type of conflict resolution.

**Negative counseling experience.**

Six participants in the current study indicated that they did experience several counseling settings that were not helpful. Experiences during counseling that participants described as
negative were particularly distressing. Many of these negative experiences were related to participants seeking help from someone inside of their religious community.

Despite one respondent understanding the viewpoint of the particular therapist, the respondent still sought their help. He said, “The first therapist I saw was part of my religious community and school. I knew what she was going to say or at least what her personal beliefs were so I felt like whatever she said was going to be biased so I didn’t really trust her to talk about that.” Another respondent spoke to about their therapist as having a clearly biased and religious viewpoint, and not understanding what being gay meant to him. He stated, “Well with the first therapist yeah, she was clearly biased and solely approached therapy from a religious viewpoint, she didn’t really get the whole gay thing.”

One reoccurring finding was related to the opposite of what respondents previously indicated was a component of a positive counseling experience. The mental health professional exploring that client’s personal experience, in terms of their religious upbringing and beliefs, was considered to be a key component that made up a negative counseling experience. One respondent said, “She could have maybe understood better what the Baptists taught about being gay. Like understood more how religion really affects you. I think we could have talked a bit more about the shame and guilt I was feeling and worked on how to reduce that.”

**Current Negative Emotions About Being Gay**

**Current guilt and shame.**

When participants were asked if they currently felt any negative emotions about being gay, each participant interviewed stated that feelings of guilt and shame were something that they still
encountered. While some participants indicated that these emotions were not constant, they indicated that from time to time they felt uncertain. Some respondents reported that these emotions were more prevalent when they attended mass or a religious service, while others stated that feelings of guilt and shame were related to when their religious leaders released statements condemning being gay. One respondent indicated that the feelings of guilt were related to the feeling of doing something wrong in the eyes of God. He responded by saying:

Yeah that- I think it’s something that I don’t know if it has completely gone away. I don’t know if it’s because of the policies that come from the Vatican or because of me feeling that I might be doing something wrong in the eyes of God, right? There is a little bit of shame. And when you go to church, and or to Mass or wherever, you see all the straight couples and with their kids…you feel a little bit like, well where’s my place? So I am not necessarily included, not excluded either, but yeah, I am stuck in this weird point in between, so yeah…

The response of feeling stuck in the middle was a reoccurring statement. Respondents felt that they were neither included nor excluded in their religious community. Some respondents pointed to their religious community not outwardly stating their dissent towards being gay; however, not being accepting either. Respondents indicated that this was extremely frustrating. One female respondent, when talking about current guilt and shame said:

It is like a frustration kind of thing, it is frustrating. As you said there is guilt, I don’t know where the guilt comes from. You always think about the fact that, and you know, this hard to say, you always think maybe, might they are right, you could think about that, maybe
not whole heartedly, but sometimes you do think about that and then you say… and then you feel bad. Then you feel really bad, because then, what are you doing, you know, what are you supposed to do? Not act on these things? But when you start to think about it more then you realize that there are a number of things that are in the same, sort of in the same category and yet perfectly acceptable, right?

For some respondents, feelings of guilt and shame were elicited when they read passages in the Bible that condemned homosexuality. Other respondents felt that their guilt and shame were related to a more general feeling that God might not accept them as LGB people. One respondent described this by saying, “well what if God didn’t accept me? Not only would I clearly lose my church community, but also I wouldn’t have been able to deal with God turning his back on me.”

Notably, the results indicated that each participant currently struggles with feelings of guilt and shame. Although respondents indicated that these feelings were not as reoccurring as they once where, they all felt that these were emotions that will still distressing. When asked what has helped dissipate these feelings, some respondents pointed to the passing of time and becoming more comfortable with heir sexual identity as major ways in which feelings of guilt and shame were mitigated. Other respondents indicated that finding a both religious and gay community were ways in which they could talk about their guilt and shame. All participants also indicated that their religious upbringing, although a major driver of their feelings of guilt and shame, was also a source of strength when dealing with their guilt and shame.
Religion as a Source of Strength.

Desire to be gay and religious

One of the interesting findings that each participant indicated was the feeling that they desired to be both gay and religious. Nearly all participants (n=8) indicated that they currently attended some sort of religious service; while others (n=2) indicated that they no longer attended any religious service. The feeling of needing to reconcile bother their gay identities and their religious identities was something that the majority of respondents indicated was a strong desire.

There was this part of me that wanted to reconcile these two pieces of me that I was told for so long couldn’t exist together, but there was this part of me that knew deep inside that needed to be gay and religious.

Respondents were then asked how they were able to reconcile their sexual identities and their religious identities, respondents pointed to finding a religious community that was accepting. Not one respondent who was attending a religious service indicated that either one of their identities were more important than the other, however since each participant attending a religious service that was gay affirmative, and that religious service was attended at a church other than their self identified religious affiliation, the results may indicate that respondents sexual identity was a more prevalent indicator and force than their religious identities. Nevertheless, the majority respondents were all adamant that they had a strong desire to reconcile these two identities.
Gay affirming church.

In spite of the internal conflicts, religion was a source of strength in the lives of participants. The same religious teaching that caused negative feelings about being gay was in turn, additionally something that respondents could rely on in times of strife and challenge. The majority of respondents (n=8) indicated that they currently attend a church that they considered to be gay affirmative, even though it was a denomination that was different from their own denomination. They explained that attending a gay affirmative church was essential to their religious beliefs. Some participants indicated that attending a gay affirmative church allowed them to find a community of people who had a similar life history, while others stated that their gay affirmative church had a different interpretation of those passages in the bible that their past religion had used to condemn being gay.

Faith.

Faith became a prevalent statement participants indicated was a source of strength that helped to mitigate feelings of guilt, shame and fear. There was a notion that faith was something that could be relied on, as something that participants felt saved them from further harm. Participants indicated that their faith also helped them in times of their life when they were dealing with suicidal ideation.

Eventually, in times of crisis, because of how you’re raised, or whatever you fall back on faith. Who’s to say if I was Muslim I would be different, but as a Christian that’s kind of what I fall back on. I feel like that’s kind of saved me, saved me from killing myself because there were some bad patches, for sure. I feel like I was not damaged in any way
and feel mentally very healthy, and I credit that to God...I really feel like it’s my religious faith that probably brought me through that conflict.

The above participant indicated that faith acted as a protective factor, and created a barrier from further mental health or anguish. When participants were asked to describe what having faith looked like, one respondent said,

“You know, religion made it harder because there was a lot of guilt, anguish and blah, blah, blah, but sometimes you have to have faith and “go through the fire,” like another Biblical thing, you have to go through the fire to be refined as, as you know, gold has to do that, you know? You have to go through some hard times to kind of come out on the other side, and I feel like I did.

Additionally, participants were asked what faith meant to them. Five participants pointed to the Biblical accounts of God’s love, while three participants stated that they just had to believe that having faith was sufficient to go to heaven. Moreover, the notion of being a good person was an additional statement participants made.

I realized that it doesn’t really matter what other people think. What matters is what God sees in you, and if God sees you as a good person, knows your heart, and sees your heart, I can’t imagine being gay and not being religious and my way of being religious is by being gay. So my gayness is an expression of religion for me, it’s an expression of God’s grace, it’s an expression of unconditional love, [and] it’s an expression of the goodness of creation. So it’s not even—it’s sort of sub-rational at some level because it’s really who I am in the world.
Unconditional love was one way nine participants stated was related to their faith and related to being able to be religious and gay, in addition to reconciling their gay and religious identities. These participants believed that God’s grace and love were not limited based on sexual orientation, but was something that was granted to all. Although these participants stated that it was hard to quantify or define what faith was, the notion that faith was a belief in being saved and or granted entry into heaven based on their life, and the believe that judgment was reserved to God and God only, were facets and ways of describing faith.

**Summary**

Individuals who face a conflict between their sexuality and their religion experience many negative consequences and life events. Respondents experienced suicidal ideation, fear, guilt and shame that negatively affected their lives. Additionally, respondents indicated that these negative experiences were ones that made the reconciliation of their religious and sexual identities much more difficult.

Respondents all indicated that the counseling setting made a positive difference in their lives despite some respondents indicating that they experienced some negative experiences. Respondents who indicated that they had a negative experience still sought out another counselor to resolve their conflict. Being in a setting that allowed for exploration of their two competing identities, in addition to not feeling judged, fostered an environment in which respondents felt safe to confront incongruence. Interestingly, although the counseling experience was described as helpful, respondents indicated that it was other life events that truly made a difference.
Respondents all indicated that meeting other gay individuals, finding a gay affirmative church, and being in a new environment in which they felt safe to explore their gay identity were helpful. These life events were ones that helped with the reconciliation of the previously competing identities. Additionally, respondents indicated that an internal faith acted as a protective factor. This internal faith made respondents feel that despite the struggle, that God loved them.
CHAPTER 4
DISCUSSION

General Remarks

The experiences described by participants provide a better understanding of how difficult the conflict between sexual orientation and religious beliefs can become in the lives of LGB individuals. It was the intention of the current research to not only provide a voice to such individuals, but to provide mental health professionals clear ways in which to help with such complex issues. Rosser (1991) reported that 84% of participants in his study drawn from the general population were raised in some sort of religious community. This finding suggests that it is likely that a mental health professional will certainly encounter LGB individuals who are struggling with the reconciliation of such a conflict.

The psychological toll that a conflict between two competing, and seemingly incompatible identities, can exact are illustrated in the current research. Some participants indicated that they currently still deal with feelings of guilt, shame and fear. This conflict between religion and sexuality undoubtedly results in emotional and psychological consequences for LGB persons.

Emotional scars, and the potential isolation that may occur when having to leave one’s religious community due to incongruence between their two identities, can reduce emotional supports in the lives of LGB persons. Additionally, it is possible that in the face of homophobic church teachings, some LGB individuals may continue to repress and remain closeted. While the
majority of respondents had found a supportive and gay-affirming religious community; they continue to deal with the scars of past messages of homophobia. The results indicated that there are currently long lasting feelings of guilt, fear and shame. This finding suggests that these emotions need to be considered by mental health professionals, when faced with a client who indicate that they currently, or previously, have dealt with such a conflict.

The current study hypothesized that therapy could play a major role in those LGB persons who face a conflict between their sexuality and their religion. Respondents however did not support this assumption. Although many indicated positive outcomes in seeking therapy, and pointed to attributes that fostered a strong therapeutic alliance, it was experiences outside of therapy that played a major role in mitigating their conflict. This appears to be supported by the many models of sexuality development that indicate the stages and/or milestones that LGB individuals go through (i.e. meeting other LGB individual, finding a LGB accepting church, exploring their gay identities by entering into a new environment that allowed for exploration) (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979; Coleman, 1982). This also suggests that individual therapy is less relevant than group therapy and support groups in resolving the client’s conflict. While an empathetic ear is helpful, positive experiences with LGB people in LGB-positive settings were the most significant factors in resolving conflict between religious identity and a LGB identity. Beckstead and Morrow (2001) have proposed a group therapy model that seeks to help clients achieve identity congruence (As cited in Haldeman, 2002). In the model group members are encouraged to explore aspects of their own identity in an environment that is open to all possibilities and which does not have any therapeutic agenda. Behavioural strategies are then
used to help group members explore their identity conflicts, which are then evaluated, from the clients’ own identity and ethics. What stands out from this model and supported by the current study is that the model does not assume to know with what direction the conflicts LGB person will take as respondents indicated that it was essential that the felt like their therapist was unbiased.

Eight participants indicated that their faith was an aspect of their lives that made a difference in the reconciliation of their LGB and religious identities. The current study points to therapists needing to be supportive while clients explore their conflict in and safe and welcoming environment rather than lending itself to a specific therapeutic technique. As such, it may be important for licensed mental health professionals to explore with their clients what faith means to them. Therapists will need to work with their clients and facilitate the explorative process in an unbiased and non-judgmental fashion so that LGB individuals can feel comfortable discussing such a personal aspect of their lives.

Previous research has indicated that LGB individuals often are dealing with internalized homophobia, sexual repression, shame and guilt (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). Since religion and spirituality can be an extremely important factor in a person’s development and well being it will be important for therapists to understand the difference between spirituality and religion. The majority of respondents pointed to religion a major source of their conflict and conversely pointed to their own person faith (spirituality) as a strength factor. As such, future research should explore how the internal feeling of faith specifically helps in dealing with religious and sexuality conflicts.
Given the current study’s findings, therapists should make themselves aware of: the current literature; books on the coming out process for LGB persons; as well as, support and networking groups that are available in their area so as to be able to relay this information to their clients.

**Concluding Remarks**

Previous research has shown great variance in the effect a conflict between religion and sexuality has on individuals (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). This may provide some evidence to clergy and religious communities that devalue or condemn homosexuality, that homophobic teachings and sermons from the pulpit may not have the desired outcome. Although the majority of participants in the current study are currently attending a gay affirmative church, they are doing so in a different religious denomination than that in which they were raised. These participants are leaving churches and religious communities to find ones that are more congruent with their identities. These gay individuals are potentially losing a huge source of love and support in their lives; all due to hate speech in the pulpits.

Additionally, previous research has indicated that many persons who are at odds with their sexuality and religion decide to leave the church altogether. Moreover, many of the homophobic teachings that religious communities and clergy espouse, leave long lasting scars in the lives of individuals who face such a conflict. Participants describing guilt, shame, fear and suicidal ideation should be enough to cause a change in the way some religious communities treat LGB or questioning individuals.
Conclusion

Limitation of the Study.

The current research study had several limitations. The recruitment process, as previously indicated in the methods section, was limited in its ability to recruit participants who identified as bisexual. Since only one participant identified as bisexual, it is possible that the results are not indicative of their experience.

All respondent were over the age of twenty-five, self identified as Christian, and were currently attending a LGB positive church. This may cause results to not be generalizable to those individuals who decided that religion was no longer something they wished to pursue or to those do not currently identify as Christian. It is also possible that those individuals attending a gay-dissenting congregation may have a completely different experience. It is also possible that an individual drawn to participate in such a study could influence the results making it difficult to ascertain if the results could be generalizable to the entire LGB population who may be dealing with such a conflict.

Due to the sampling criteria of wanting participants to have sought counseling services while they were trying to resolve their conflict, it is not possible to ascertain how this may have affected results. It is possible that there may have been variability in the results had the study included the experiences of those who did not attend counseling. Additionally, the population sample may be biased as all participants in the study identified themselves as being raised in a Christo-centric religion. It is difficult to ascertain how this religious upbringing influenced participants and therefore may have influenced the results.}
Suggestions for Future Research.

The results indicated that resolving a conflict between both a sexual and religious identity could be quite distressing. All participants in the study indicated that they experienced suicidal ideation, self-loathing, guilt, fear, and shame. Given that these emotions can have long standing negative consequences in the lives of LGB individuals, and given the lack of research in the area of sexuality and religion, more research undoubtedly needs to be conducted.

Additionally, since participants in the current study indicated that meeting other LGB individuals was paramount to their acceptance of their sexuality, this may point to looking at the impact that gay and lesbian support groups and/or group therapy settings play in the lives of those who face conflicts such as represented in the current study. Furthermore, participants in the current study all indicated that they currently, at one time or another, were associated with a Christo-centric religion. Future studies should try and recruit a more heterogeneous sample to see what the impact different religions may have.

Implication for Mental Health Professionals.

The current study has several implications for mental health professionals. First, therapists need to create and foster an environment for their clients in with which they feel safe to explore aspects of their sexual and religious identity. It is important for therapists to remember that they are not exempt from bringing their own biases into the counseling setting. Therapists need to examine these biases so as not to influence how clients may conceptualize themselves. Moreover, therapists need to not be afraid to incorporate discussion about religion
and or spirituality in session. Such a discussion can foster a strong therapeutic alliance, but it can give the therapist insight into if religion and or spirituality to their presenting issue.

Secondly, respondents in the current study all indicated that the context in which they lived in played a huge role in their conflict. Respondents further elaborated that it was changing this context (i.e. moving away to school or finding a LGB positive church) that mitigated the conflict. This suggests that changing the context in which the conflict occurred is an essential component in the resolution. Therapists therefore may need to shift how they conceptualize a client facing such a conflict as a mental health issue and focus on helping their client change their context by helping them find a LGB positive church and or group. It is then paramount that therapists become conversant with what LGB resources are available in their community for their clients
References


Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Department of Adult Education and Counseling Psychology

University of Toronto/Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Have you ever felt conflicted between your religion and your sexual orientation?

We are looking for volunteers to take part in a study that focuses on a conflict between your sexuality and your religious affiliation.

As a participant in this study, you would be asked to respond to questions that focus on your experience in reconciling your sexuality and your religion during therapy.

Your participation would involve ONE session, lasting approximately 1 hour in length.

In appreciation for your time, you will be entered into a draw to win one of two $100 cash prizes. For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

David Hurst

Program in Counseling Psychology

At Email: dave.hurst@utoronto.ca

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Appendix B: Informed Consent

Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to understand during therapy what works when a client has a conflict between their sexuality and their religion.

Procedure:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to respond to questions that focus on your experience of your religion and your sexual identity. The interview will take approximately 60 minutes.

Benefits/Risks to Participant:
There are no anticipated risks to the individual, although it is possible that the interview may raise uncomfortable issues.

Voluntary Nature of the Study/Confidentiality:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any point during the interview, or refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable. You may also stop at any time and ask the researcher any questions you may have. Your name will never be connected to your results or to your responses on the questionnaires; instead, a number will be used for identification purposes. Information that would make it possible to identify you or any other participant will never be included in any sort of report. The data will be accessible only to those working on the project.

The information you provide will be kept confidential with the following exceptions:
1. If I have good reason to believe that you will harm another person,

2. If I have good reason to believe that a child is at risk.

3. If I believe that you are in imminent danger of harming yourself.

Contacts and Questions:
At this time you may ask any questions you may have regarding this study. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at University of Toronto at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or (416) 946-3273

If you have questions about the study please contact:
David Hurst, M.A. Candidate (Lead Investigator) at: dave.hurst@utoronto.ca
Margaret Schneider, Ph.D. (Supervisor) at: margaret.schneider@utoronto.ca
Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. I have asked any questions I had regarding the experimental procedure and they have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in this study.

Name of Participant:  __________________________  Date:  __________
(please print)

Signature of Participant:  ____________________________________________

Age:  ____  (Note: You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.)

Thanks for your participation!
Appendix C: Interview Guide

1. Can you tell me about your religious experience being gay or lesbian?

2. How did your religious beliefs impact your coming out process?

3. Can you tell me if you have ever had a conflict between your religion and sexuality?

4. Has your religious affiliation changed or helped your experience being gay or lesbian?

5. Do you consider yourself to be spiritual or religious?

6. How has your spirituality or religion been influenced by your home life, clergy, sexuality, other (specify)?

7. How has your religious beliefs impacted your sexual experiences?

8. How has your past sexual experiences affected your religious experience?

9. Can you tell me about how your religious and or spiritual affiliation affected your sexuality?

10. What does your Church say teach about being gay or lesbian?

11. Can you tell me how your Church's teachings may have influenced your spiritual life and sexual lifestyle/orientation?

12. Have you ever sought counseling during your coming out process and can you tell me about it?

13. What did you find was the most helpful during counseling?

14. What did you find was the most unhelpful during counseling?

15. Was there anything that you can remember the counsellor saying that really made a difference?

16. What did you struggle with the most during your coming out process: your sexuality or religion?
Appendix D: Information Sheet

You are invited to participate in a study looking at conflicts between sexuality and religion.

This research explores how individuals who have a conflict between their sexuality and religious affiliation navigate such a conflict. More specifically, we are looking at what therapeutic responses during therapy are helpful when an individual faces such a conflict. David Hurst, a Masters student at OISE/University of Toronto, is conducting this study.

You will be asked a series of questions relating to your experience being gay or lesbian and being religious. This will include questions pertaining to your sexuality, your coming out process, and what you felt were helpful responses during given during therapy.

Sometimes people become uncomfortable talking about their sexuality. However, you are welcome to decline to answer or skip over any question that you do not feel comfortable answering. Additionally, if you wish to stop participating during the study, you are free to do so without any consequences. If requested, a resource list of available counseling resources will be provided.

All information you supply during the research will be held in confidence. Your name will not be associated with any part of the study. Your data will be safely stored in a locked facility and only research staff will have access to this information.

The length of this study is approximately one hour. To thank you for your participation you will be entered into a draw to win one of two $100 cash prizes.

If you have any further questions at any time about the study please feel free to contact the researchers. D. Hurst, Researcher, Department of Counseling psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto dave.hurst@mail.utoronto.ca

Dr. M. Schneider, Faculty Member, Department of Counseling Psychology, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto mschneider@oise.utoronto.ca

You can also contact the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics at [416-946-3273] or email at ethics.review@utoronto.ca