

ME AND GOD, WE ARE COOL: RECONCILIATION BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND
SEXUAL IDENTITY AMONG LGBT MEMBERS

by

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Abstract

Many LGBT members are caught between two seemingly conflicting identities: their religious identity and their sexual identity as a homosexual. This study specifically examines how Christian LGBT individuals attempt to reconcile their identities. In order to uncover the lived experience of LGBT members, qualitative interviews were conducted with eleven members of the LGBT community. Using a thematic analysis, results indicate that 1) some LGBT individuals compartmentalize their sexual and religious identities through cost/benefit analysis and self-silencing and 2) others reconcile their two identities through broadening their concept of religion, emphasizing the relational connections with God, and distinguishing between Biblical literalists and God. Further, discussion of Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona as the theoretical lenses are used to draw implications of these findings. This study seeks to open up dialogue concerning sexuality and religion in order to garner a more welcoming environment for LGBT Christians.

Key terms: sexual identity, religious identity, LGBT, self-concept, reconciliation

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Holly Bell. May you one day realize the gravity of your words.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Beth (a 22-year-old bisexual female): For a long time, I just wanted to end my life because if it [homosexuality] were a sin, I just wanted to die and go to heaven and not deal with the struggle of hiding this forever.

Rhyne (a 22-year-old gay male): When it comes down to it, religion and sexuality do not necessarily have to clash you know. I mean you can still be religious and spiritual you know without having to worry about your sexuality. You know for me growing up I thought you had no choice, you just had to be straight, but that just isn't the case.

Many members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) community are caught between two seemingly conflicting identities: their religious identity and their sexual identity as a homosexual. The above remarks highlight instances of these conflicting identities among many LGBT individuals who identify as Christian. Beth, at what she considers to be her “worst times,” thought the only way to save her salvation from the “horrors” of being a bisexual was to run her car into a tree and go with her God to escape the temptation of what her religion taught her to be an abomination. Like Beth, Rhyne struggled between two identities as he was growing up, but after careful reflection and prayer, he began to live more at peace with himself. This study explores the process of reconciliation between religious and sexual identity among LGBT individuals. Specifically, it focuses on the case of LGBT Christians like Beth and Rhyne and examines how these individuals manage to transition from feeling conflicted between two identities to being at peace with who they are.

The emotional turmoil stemming from these conflicting identities is often exacerbated by societal pressures and dominant ideology that suggests an individual cannot be both homosexual and a good Christian. Literalist Christians, or those that follow a strict interpretation of the Bible, argue that homosexuality is a sin and an abomination unto the Lord according to interpretations of specific Biblical scripture (Karslake, 2007). For example, Leviticus 18:22 is often cited in debates regarding sexuality, as it states, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; it is an abomination." The message is prevalent in political arena as well. In the recent Republican primary campaign, the Texas Governor and former Presidential hopeful Rick Perry openly bashed members of the military who were LGBT by implicitly mocking the repeal of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy in his campaign video. Perry states, "there's something wrong in this country when gays can serve openly in the military but our kids can't openly celebrate Christmas or pray in school" ("Strong," 2011). Due to religious interpretations and social pressures by the dominant ideology, many LGBT individuals forsake their religious identity entirely.

LGBT individuals who choose to hold on to their religious identity, however, face what is called a "double stigma" from both sides of the spectrum: the conservative religious groups and the secular LGBT community (O'Brien, 2004). After completing an ethnographic study on three pride parades in America (Seattle, San Francisco, and Chicago), O'Brien (2004) found one common element in all three parades: the crowd's negative reaction to openly homosexual Christians marching in the ranks. While most groups (e.g., PFLAG, AT&T Queer Allies, US Bank LGBT Employee Support, etc.) were greeted joyfully, the marchers representing religious organizations were met with silence, and in some cases, boos from their fellow pride parade attendees. O'Brien (2004) explains that the rejection of religious ideals is not uncommon in a primarily secular community. She states, "religion was the enemy...good queers are not

religious” (p. 181). Under these contexts, how do Christian LGBT members maintain and reconcile the conflicts between religious and sexual identities?

Scholars have examined the controversial relationship between religion and sexuality from various perspectives. For instance, Mahaffy (1996) explored the “coming out” process of LGBT evangelical Christians. Based on qualitative interviews with 163 self-identified lesbians, Mahaffy (1996) examined their coming out process through the lens of cognitive dissonance. In her study, each individual was coded as having internal conflict (i.e., participants experiencing great cognitive dissonance because of internal factors such as discomfort with identity integration), external conflict (participants experiencing cognitive dissonance caused by external factors such as pressure from reference groups) or no conflict (participants experiencing no cognitive dissonance at all). Mahaffy (1996) found that when religious ties to evangelicalism existed in the women’s backgrounds, their level of dissonance was greater than those who had no religious affiliation. To alleviate this discomfort (both external and internal), many of the lesbians either altered their belief systems or separated from their evangelical church. These findings align with Singh’s (2011) notion of reconciliation: the process individuals go through to reach a “resolution of the contradiction[s]” (p. 401).

Rodriguez and Ouellette’ study (2000) provide the framework of how LGBT individuals reconcile between their religious and sexual identity. Based on a survey of 40 people at a gay-positive church in New York, they found that there are four ways LGBT individuals resolve the conflicts between their sexual and religious identities: 1) by rejecting religion, 2) by rejecting sexuality, 3) compartmentalizing their sexual and religious identities, and 4) by integrating the two identities. While Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000)’s study laid out important categories of

reconciliation, they suggest that more qualitative studies are necessary to understand the process of reconciliation (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Lately, there has been a yearning for more studies exploring the relationship between sexual and religious identity in the field of communication. Former editor of the *Journal of Communication and Religion* Sterk (2010) writes, “one area that remains relatively undeveloped in the *Journal of Communication and Religion* is the intersection of gender, communication and religion” (p. 207). She then lists several areas of studies that need be explored in order to broaden the scope of gender and religion studies:

How do faith, sexual identity, and communication come together? Just as religious language and practices set expectations and communication about gender, so, too, do they for sexual identity. There may be no greater controversy within contemporary faith traditions than how to communicate with and treat gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual persons. While gender and feminist analyses may be seen as underrepresented, this discussion is invisible within the journal.

(Sterk, p. 213)

By analyzing the reconciliation process of LGBT Christians, this study specifically looks at the intersection of religious and sexual identity through a communicative lens. This study ultimately hopes to provide a better understanding between the church and the LGBT community and help individuals within the community make sense of their religious and sexual identity.

Further, this study extends Rodriguez and Ouellette’s (2000) foundational work on the stages of reconciliation and examines how LGBT members attempt to negotiate their religious and sexual identities from a communicative perspective. In order to better understand the process of reconciliation between sexual and religious identities, a series of interviews examining how

Christian LGBT individuals were conducted to make sense of participant's religious identities. In analyzing these texts, the theories of Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona were employed as theoretical lenses. These theoretical lenses provide an understanding of how rhetoric affects groups that are oppressed and also help explain the use of language by members of fringe groups. The next chapter reviews the literature on the concept of identity, including self-concept, sexual identity, religious identity and the negotiation of the two identities. Then a discussion of scholarship surrounding Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona establishes the theoretical underpinnings of this research. Chapter three provides the researcher's standpoint, lays out the method of qualitative interviewing, and explains the explication process in detail. Chapter four reveals the findings from the thematic analysis of the interviews. Chapter five discusses the implications of these findings and explores the depths of the theoretical applications. Finally, chapter six reviews the findings, describes the limitations of this study, and proposes areas for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Identity and Self-Concept

The concept of identity is broad and complex (Hall, 1996). Identity is not just one idea; it is comprised of several parts and separate identities (Goffman, 1963; Hall, 1996; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Sherwood, 1965). Sherwood (1965) suggests, “a self-attribute is a cognition (used in perceiving oneself and others) which the person assigns to himself. Self-identity (SI) is defined as the totality of the person's self attributes at a given moment in time” (p. 67). Because we build our identities based upon the smaller building blocks of self-attributes, it is only natural to consider that our identities are constructed rather than being innately in us. Essentially, they are more of an intangible essence as opposed to a tangible entity.

Mead (1934) asserts that identity is created through interactions with others; therefore, socially constructed. To understand this idea further, we can look to the idea of the looking-glass self. The looking-glass self is “a metaphor for the idea that the individual sees self in the ‘reflected appraisals’ of others” (Turner, 1999, p. 14). These reflected appraisals are how we perceive ourselves through the eyes of others (Mead, 1934). The “significant other” in our lives (e.g. family, friends, partners) plays a large role in determining how we see ourselves and construct our own identities.

Mead (1934) also argues that language plays an important role in our identity construction. Through language, humans are able to internalize thoughts about situations that arise from being a part of a social group. Hall (1996) continues this idea by stating that identity is constructed “within, not outside, discourse” and “within, not outside, difference” (p. 4), meaning it is through questioning why we do not fit in to certain groups created by society that helps us to

find where we do fit within society. These thoughts lead to control over our internal thoughts, which in turn leads to self-consciousness through social interaction.

How an individual constructs his/her identity also depends on their concept of self. According to Winchester (2009), working self-concept “is linked to, yet distinct from, identity in that it may be revealing of an individual’s identity *claims*” (p. 64). People can claim to have one identity, and yet linguistically show no ties to that particular identity. These concepts can be accessed through self-declarations or sharing one’s narrative with someone else (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Therefore, when examining a person’s self-concept, it is imperative to look at not only what they share in personal interactions, but *how* they share their narratives and what they choose *not* to share.

Once individuals begin viewing some characteristics as being ‘normal’ and ‘not normal,’ discourse naturally separates individual identities into collective identities (Cerulo, 1997; Ghaziani, 2011; Gamson, 1996; Pearson & VanHorn, 2004). The purpose of forming collective identities is to fulfill an interpersonal need to be with likeminded individuals and to “stress likeness and similarities” in membership coalescence (Cerulo, 1997). According to Cerulo (1997), these similarities can vary greatly depending on each group; some are based on outward attributes (physical location and demographic information), while others are based on inward personality traits (sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.). Once membership has been established, it is not unusual for the group to develop a “we-ness” mentality, which could lead to ostracizing individuals who do not exist in that realm (Cerulo, 1997; Gamson, 1996; Harper & Schneider, 2003; O’Brien, 2004; Pearson & VanHorn, 2004).

Identity is by itself a very complex entity (Hall, 1996), furthermore holding multiple identities that are conflicting in nature becomes a challenging task. LGBT and Christian

identities can be in conflict with each other, forcing some individuals to feel as if they belong to neither group. If someone finds they are outside of both of their collective identities, how do they function interpersonally with members of the collective identity? To answer this question, this study explores existing literature on religious and sexual identity, then considers how individuals negotiate or reconcile conflicting identities.

Religious Identity

Sociologist Emile Durkheim (1995) posits that religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices oriented to sacred possessions. Alwin et al. (2006) build upon this definition by asserting that religion “is organized around collective identities that motivate and maintain beliefs and behavior” (p. 531). Essentially, this explains why there is such a variety of religious identities as well as affiliations within those religious identities (i.e. the large amount of denominations within Protestant Christianity). These in denominations differences rely on social cues to segregate religious groups and showcase their doctrinal dissimilarities.

While holistic identity is not created in a vacuum, making it susceptible to a variety of changes, religious identity is much more resistant to change (Mol, 1976). Mol (1976) explains that this is because religious identity is directly related to religious doctrines that “tend to promote the stabilization of individual and group identity by favoring the preservation of old content” (Seul, 1999, p. 558). However, it is this stabilization effect coming from the anchor of religious doctrine that many individuals find comforting, and allows religion to become central to identity formation (Seul, 1999).

Lichterman (2008) suggests that it is religion that aids in defining collective identities, not the other way around. He writes, “public groups, for instance, commonly use religious language to understand who they are, and how they relate to insiders and outsiders, apart from

justifying opinions on specific issues or group goals” (Lichterman, p. 83). Empirically, this is evident in the grassroots political movement of the Tea Party. Through the rhetoric of their website, the overall values encouraged by the Tea Party are a reflection of conservative ideals stemming from “a strong belief in the foundational Judeo-Christian values”; the core of those values being rooted in the 10 Commandments featured in the Bible and professed in the Constitution (About us, 2011). This organization has utilized religious doctrine as a way to establish themselves as a separate political entity, as well as alienate certain groups that do not belong to their group based on their way of thinking (primarily homosexuals and others who advocate same-sex marriages).

Attempting to combine religious identities with other identities (such as political identity) by using language can be problematic, as religious identity tends to be based in a solid religious doctrine that does not easily adapt to new ideals (Lichterman, 2008). Based on his study on the use of “pro-life” rhetoric in a small town debate, Lichterman (2008) concludes that inserting religious rhetoric into everyday speech maintains a culture war mentality that generalizes American religion as a whole. Empirically, this explains why extremely conservative political figures have garnered the nickname “religious right.” This is inherently regressive, as one religion can prove to become more dominant as that religion’s language is predominately used, and therefore discriminate against individuals who do not use that same language (individuals who do not hold the same religious beliefs).

Hierarchies exist not only between religions, but also within the religions. Many religions are notoriously patriarchal constructs that are dominated by men (Adams, 2007; Stark, 2002; Turner & West, 2006). “Yet, women’s participation in religious services outpaces men’s participation” (Turner & West, 2006, p. 321). Stark (2002) claims that women have been more

successfully recruited by religions in the past, and are still a large part of religion in its more contemporary settings despite their lack of representation within clergy positions. The justification for keeping women out of official positions is linked to Biblical interpretations, with one side arguing that the Bible advocates gender equality and indifference, while the other side claims that women should be submissive to their husbands (Adams, 2007; Turner & West, 2006). Because of the work of religious feminists, change is happening. Turner and West (2006) state that U.S. Catholic bishops have “endorsed a gender-neutral language policy” in hopes of discouraging sexist behavior in services (p. 322). Terms such as “mankind” and “brethren” have been abandoned in order to achieve their goal of a more gender-neutral atmosphere.

Much like women, LGBT members who are struggling with their religious identity tend to fall outside of the dominant rhetoric, and are therefore unable to share in the collective narrative of the Christian doctrine holistically. Teresa Marciano (1987), as well as other religious feminists, has called for “reinterpretations of theology that will lead to equal shared access to opportunities for action, leadership, sacramental participation, and church policy formation” (p. 304). While this initial yearning for reinterpretations was geared towards women in religion, understanding the LGBT narrative could encourage a push towards alternate interpretations for Biblical verses that are more accepting of LGBT community as well.

Sexual Identity

While not explicitly present, there is a connection between religious identity and sexual identity. Some scholars believe that strict Christian doctrines led to the discussion of sexuality. Foucault (1986) claims that it was the Christian duty of confession that first led to talks of sexual identity. While confessing erotic desires, Christians were forced to begin analyzing their own sexual feelings, which led to discourse linking sexual desire and morality. As sexuality is an

integral element of an individual's identity (McKenna, Green, & Smith, 2001), these discussions slowly developed further outside of the church; yet, this foundation in the church can help explain why sexual identity can be a very difficult entity to “express, explore, or validate” (McKenna et al., 2001, p. 302). Due to the social taboo nature of sexual discourse, many individuals feel the need to hide aspects of their sexuality for fear of embarrassment or negative reactions from society. This has led to an emergence of Internet websites, chat rooms, and other arenas that advocate anonymity, which leads sexual minorities to feel free about expressing their sexuality without the fear of “real world repercussions” (McKenna et al., 2001, 302).

For many societies, heterosexuality is the norm or ideal sexual identity (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Seidman, 2003). This was not always the case, at least not in the way we view heterosexuality currently. Today, we define heterosexuality as having sexual attraction for the opposite sex, not necessarily linked to reproduction. In nineteenth century America, scientists and scholars believed it was innate in human nature to have a sexual instinct, which was “*heterosexual and oriented to procreation*” (Seidman, 2003, p. 46, italics original). Therefore, individuals who committed sexual acts with members of the opposite sex simply for pleasure would have been considered a perversion, much like homosexuals or adulterers. Freud helped to change this definition of heterosexuality by insisting that sexual preferences derived more from a pleasure seeking desire as opposed to a desire to procreate (Seidman, 2003).

At the turn of the twentieth century, society began to question the roles of the sex and gender as women began to heading to work to fulfill the jobs left by men who were sent to war. Seidman (2003) claims that two critical responses came from the result of this gender blurring: a new emphasis on the norm of heterosexuality, and the creation of homophobia. By claiming that heterosexuality was the norm, androgyny could be explained away as a celebration of the

difference between men and women and no longer challenge normative gender roles. “As heterosexuality became an important way to demonstrate a normal sexual and gender identity, homosexuality represented a deviant status” (Seidman, 2003, p. 49).

Harper and Schneider (2003) specifically name members of LGBT as a group who experiences stigma and oppression in society for their sexuality. Unlike other stigmatized groups, however, “LGBT people often cannot find support in their family and community of origin” due to internal discrimination from the “closeted effect” (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p. 247). The “closeted effect” is where certain individuals within the community fight for the right to retain their privacy in regards to sexual orientation (Harper & Schneider, 2003). Harper and Schneider (2003) suggest, “while the ‘closet’ is safe, it has its own problems—the increased stress of hiding” (p. 247). Individuals who are closeted must be vague when speaking about their private life in order to keep from revealing their sexual identity. Some choose to simply compartmentalize their public life and their private life. “Managing a double identity can become a preoccupation, and some people report finding it so stressful that they become introverted and lose their spontaneity for fear of slipping and inadvertently revealing their sexual orientation” (Harper & Schneider, 2003, p. 247).

Ghaziani (2011) suggests that the gay culture may be moving “beyond the closet” due to the “heterosexualization of gay culture” (p. 100). This new era, known as “post-gay” is “distinguished by an increasing assimilation of gays into the mainstream alongside rapid internal diversification” (Ghaziani, 2011, p. 103). The overarching theme of “diversity” encourages the idea that LGBT members have varying ways of living and are not collectively anchored to the previously held stereotypes of the “coming out” era (which depicted all homosexuals to be promiscuous, drug induced heathens). While the “post-gay” mentality may seem to be heading in

the right direction (away from such misinformed stereotypes), the question of assimilation or diversity causes tensions within the LGBT community (Ghaziani, 2011). Advocates for assimilation believe adapting to societal “norms” of behavior could lead to more acceptance of the LGBT community in the predominantly heterosexual culture, while diversification advocates believe assimilation is social homogenization that could stifle the LGBT civil rights movement (Ghaziani, 2011). There is heated rhetoric coming from both ends of this spectrum, leaving many LGBT members struggling to find their footing in their own community and within their own identity (O’Brien, 2004).

Another area of contention occurring within the LGBT community is the individual’s attempt to sustain their religious identity, especially when the religious doctrine that provides the foundations for their identity is directly in conflict with their sexual identity (O’Brien, 2004).

Negotiating Religious and Sexual Identity

The difficulties of holding religious and sexual identities become even more problematic when the two identities diverge from one another. In instances where individuals hold two conflicting identities, they experience cognitive dissonance and seek to either purge one of these identities or reconcile the two identities (Goffman, 1963; Kaufman & Johnson, 2004; Lucas & Steimel, 2009; Mahaffy, 1996; Thumma, 1991). Cognitive dissonance refers to the idea that individuals become uncomfortable when their beliefs and attitudes are in conflict. To avoid this conflict, individuals will change their belief or attitude in order to restore the balance between the two (Festinger, 1957).

Lucas and Steimel (2009) examined how female mine workers of IMI Mining Corporation negotiated their feminine identity with the masculine “blue collar” stigma. Through talking with both men and women workers, Lucas and Steimel (2009) found that due to the

negative discourse surrounding female workers (e.g., “mines are no place for ladies,” “women are too weak to mine,” etc.), these female workers distanced themselves from their feminine identities. This trapped them in a double bind of being viewed as too masculine by the community (for fulfilling their job requirements completely), and too feminine by their male coworkers (for their feminine traits outside the workplace) (Lucas & Steimel, 2009, p. 342). This example highlights the role language and discourse can play when individuals feel the need to negotiate identities.

Gender is not the only identity that potentially conflicts with other identities. Any identity that does not fit with societal norms has the probability of clashing with other forming identities (Goffman, 1963, Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). For example, individuals living with certain personality stigmas (anything not deemed the norm in society) experience cognitive dissonance within their identity constructs. “Individuals faced with stigmatized identities may seek to become ‘normal,’ that is, become like the dominant group using techniques such as therapy” or other mechanisms that will cause them to feign normalcy (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004, p. 812).

In the LGBT community, the act of feigning normalcy can begin with negotiating several parts of member’s identities. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) lay out four different ways of how individuals reconcile their religious (specifically Christianity) and sexual identities: 1) by rejecting the religious identity, 2) by rejecting the homosexual identity, 3) by compartmentalization of the two identities, and 4) through identity integration.

According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), “as many as 62% of gays and lesbians feel that religion is not an important aspect of their lives,” making the rejection of the religious identity the most common negotiation among members of the LGBT community (p. 334). This process can be done on a grand scale (identifying themselves as an atheist or other religion that

does not negatively perceived members of the LGBT community) or more subtly (no longer attending worship or praying to God and/or Christ).

As another mode of rejection, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) contend that individuals can reject their homosexual identity, typically through a type of conversion therapy. This therapy, while highly controversial, is said to be able to rid an individual of their homosexual tendencies through a rigorous search for God's love and a determination to overcome their "sin" (Keysor, 1979). Thumma (1991) states that abstinence could also be a part of this rejection, as some denominations believe that as long as individuals are not engaging in the act of homosexuality, they are not committing a sin.

Some individuals experiencing cognitive dissonance, or internal discomfort, between their sexual and religious identities may attempt to compromise by compartmentalizing the two identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). "[Compartmentalization] requires that the two spheres be kept rigidly separate in order to avoid conflicting prescriptions for behavior" (Baumeister et al., 1985). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) warn that compartmentalization can only be achieved by keeping the two identities completely separate, and "if the barriers between the two identities are breached, a slide back to identity dissonance could result" (p. 335).

Finally, identity integration may occur. As people's identities grow over time, they can adapt to potential threats through creating a new identity (Deaux, 1991). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) contend that this could happen within the LGBT community when reconciling their sexual and religious identity.

Such individuals hold a positive gay identity, a positive religious identity, and do not feel conflict between the two. To differentiate integration from compartmentalization, we assume that gays and lesbians who experience

integration combine their two identities rather than keeping them in separate spheres of their life. Such people have no self-imposed walls between their homosexuality and their religious beliefs, and perceive societally imposed barriers as surmountable. This creates a new, complex and yet coherent identity: Gay or lesbian Christian. (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 334-335)

He suggests that because “many gay and lesbian Christians feel very strongly about their religious beliefs and about their homosexual identity,” these individuals could find a way to alleviate dissonance by integrating their identities as opposed to living with two separate identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 346). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) close the article by stating that “future research is needed to better understand the phenomenon of achieving identity integration from both a history of conflict, and from a history lacking any conflict between one's Christian religion and one's sexual orientation” (p. 346), specifically calling for qualitative methods to provide a lived experience to support their findings.

In an attempt to look at how identities intersect, Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, and Brooks (2009) studied African American males who identified as Christian and gay. When asked about the relationship between their multiple identities, participants responded that various tensions occurred between the different identities. Many responded that this was due to the “taboo” of homosexuality within the black church (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Only one participant out of twenty six stated they had reconciled the multiple aspects of their identity: The participant revealed, “The older I get the more I can reconcile it [sexual and religious identity] and be more emotionally healthy” (Yarhouse et al., 2009). In this instance, the participant referred more to living at peace with the two identities as opposed to the reconciliation process. The participants were also asked which identity was their primary one. The majority (11 out of 21) of the

participants stated that Christian was their primary identity, while only one claimed that being gay was his primary identity (Yarhouse et al., 2009).

Yarhouse et al. (2009) also found that while most of the African American men felt hurt from the tensions in their identity, they believed it was the people within their faith system that hurt them, not the religion itself. This religious homophobia is echoed in Miller's (2007) study. Miller (2007) also examined African American males who considered themselves to be both gay and Christian, but these participants also had AIDS. While the participants described the homophobia as "demeaning and painful," "the religiously sanctioned homophobia was not the factor that extinguished their church affiliation; the churches' response to the AIDS crisis made all the men sever their church affiliation" (Miller, 2007).

There are some ethnographic studies that have explored the "coming out" process of religious LGBT members in a greater detail. For instance, Mahaffy (1996) examined the "coming out" process of evangelical lesbians. She discovered that women who reported to have an evangelical upbringing were more likely to struggle than other Christian lesbians. These women seemed to have internalized more of a conservative mentality towards religious affiliation and had a harder time recognizing and accepting their sexual identity, therefore, experiencing greater cognitive dissonance. Additionally, Mahaffy (1996) found that the earlier in life a woman accepted her sexuality, the more apt she was to developing self-affirming beliefs that led to a combining of both identities. Likewise, lesbians who chose to become Christians as an adult also seemed to develop ways of "living with external pressure" which, in turn, "melded their two identities" (Mahaffy, 1996, p. 400). Mahaffy (1996) contends that a more in-depth study of the relationship between Christian and sexual identity is needed in order to confirm these findings.

While Mahaffy (1996) believes her findings support the dissonance model, she also states other factors might contribute to the women either abandoning their religious self or their sexuality. “Identity synthesis,” she states, “may be an important predictor of whether a person withstands the pressure to conform to societal norms” (Mahaffy, 1996, p. 401). That is, if the strength or personal connection of one identity is greater than another, then the individual will choose that identity over the other in the mind’s natural fight to synthesize internal conflict. Mahaffy (1996) notes specific strategies could be used to reduce the tension between these two identities, including: “reinterpreting problematic Bible verses, becoming acquainted with other gay Christians, and distinguishing between spirituality and religion” (p. 401).

Thumma (1991) also studied the “coming out” process of religious evangelicals, but specifically looked at cases of evangelical gay men. Based on his study of a gay-positive church, Good News, Thumma (1991) found that “74 percent of potential members [of Good News] expressed a strong desire to resolve the felt tension between being a conservative Christian and having homosexual feelings” (p. 335). He then lists some shared characteristics among individuals experiencing the tension. Many LGBT members who grew up in Christian homes reported, “being different from the other kids,” and experienced “rejection from a church congregation because of his or her homosexual desires” (Thumma, 1991, p. 339). One member in particular stated, “I heard more and more sermons condemning homosexuality. Knowing that if I was ever found out, I might be thrown out of the church. I was in such a confused state” (Thumma, 1991, p. 339). To answer this and several similar questions posed by LGBT narratives, Good News created an advertisement campaign centered around the question, “Gay and Christian, is it possible?” in the hopes of appealing to an audience that often expressed “a

desire to serve the Lord and become ‘good, whole’ Christians, while hoping to live out authentically what they perceived to be their God-given sexuality” (Thumma, 1991, p. 339).

Thumma (1991) found that the amount of identity negotiation that occurred within an individual depended on a few personality attributes: “degrees of commitment to Christianity, openness to [their] homosexuality, and willingness to change [their identity]” (Thumma, 1991, p. 344). Out of those Thumma (1991) interviewed:

A few persons whole-heartedly accept both the new identity and the group, becoming core members [of the church] (roughly 5%). More often people seek out Good News to resolve the identity dissonance; once the dissonance is resolved or reduced, they disappear (almost 65%). Sometimes a person accepts the identity and continues to maintain a surface relationship or affiliate membership with the group for occasional support and fellowship (25%). A small percentage (5%), upon hearing the message of Good News, reject it and quickly sever their connections with the group. The only possible solution they find to be viable for them is one that maintains both identities [separately]. (p. 344)

Thumma (1991) suggests that those who rejected the message of Good News left the church because they were unable to negotiate their sexual and religious identities.

Previous studies examined the “coming out” process of LGBT members and the potential ways of negotiating two conflicting identities. The question of *how* LGBT members reconcile their sexual and religious identities, however, needs further investigation. Therefore, the following research question is posed:

RQ: How do Christian LGBT members reconcile their sexual and religious identities?

Just like Lucas and Steimel (2009) found discourse to be a mechanism for women to negotiate their work identity with their feminine identity, the same could be true for LGBT members and their religious identities. In the next section, the theories of Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona are reviewed to illuminate how language affects the relationship between a culturally dominant group and a fringe group that is oppressed.

Theoretical Background

When studying marginalized groups, it is important to analyze what is unsaid. To uncover the process or reconciliation among LGBT Christians, this study employs the Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona as theoretical lenses. Each of these theories deals with the rhetoric of silence – what is not being said within a given culture – in a different way. While silence may appear to be one dimensional at first glance, it is in fact multifaceted. In this study, the rhetoric of silence is examined in three dimensions: 1) on a social level with Spiral of Silence, 2) on a linguistic with Muted Group Theory, and 3) on a personal level with Null Persona. To capture the multiple facets of silence in the interviews, all three theories are utilized to explicate silence.

Spiral of Silence

The Spiral of Silence deals with the social ramifications of silence. The Spiral of Silence theory posits that individuals live in perpetual fear of isolation and constantly self-monitor their opinions and actions in order to conform to societal norms. It explains that when an individual deems themselves a minority, or holds a minority view, they will cease to express that identity or view (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). While discussing the connection between morality and sexual freedom, Mosher (1989) explains that a spiral of silence has been created within society in order to control acts of “sexual deviance.” He claims many Americans view anything outside of a

Judeo-Christian definition of what is considered sexually appropriate is too taboo to discuss. Mosher (1989) argues that by making sexuality a taboo subject to discuss, the absence of discourse has led to a lack of information circulating among the public, resulting in a rise in sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancies, and antiquated sexual laws. Once dialogue ceases, individuals do not get the information they need in order to protect themselves from disease, unwanted pregnancy, and outdated laws. Increasing discourse about sexuality would aid in these problematic areas by providing the necessary information.

The Spiral of Silence has been linked to many regressive actions against women and members of the LGBT community (Seidman, 2003). Acts of violence against women and those who appear to be members of the LGBT community are verbally justified by words like “whores” or “sluts” that paint victims as those who were asking for the offense and coming on to the aggressor in some way (Seidman, 2003, p. 50-51). Women afraid of negative stigmas associate with rape or LGBT members worried about the ramifications of being labeled as homosexual rarely report the violent acts committed against them. This spiral of silence leads to more acts, creating a horrible cycle of violence. In the LGBT community, youth bullying and hate crimes are underreported because of the stigma associated with non-heterosexuality (Wong, 2011). Careful analysis of participant interviews could reveal a spiral of silence among LGBT individuals as they attempt to reconcile their religious and sexual identity. Understanding a relationship between sexual and religious identity is the first step towards uncovering an opening for dialogue to cease the spiral of silence associated with the violent acts LGBT members face.

Muted Group Theory

Muted Group Theory also provides a rhetorical explanation for the reconciliation process, as it deals with language construction. This theory is utilized to explore the linguistic aspect of

silence. After conducting field research and observations of societies, anthropologists Shirley and Edward Ardener (1975) discovered some individuals within the society were given privilege above others, especially in regards to discourse. This discrepancy in equality of power leads to those without privilege in the society to become constrained, or what Ardener (2006) refers to as “muted.” Ardener (2005) suggests “Muted Group Theory (MGT) includes the question whether everyone in society has participated equally in the generation of ideas and their encoding into discourse” (p. 51). The use of the term “muted” was utilized to describe these groups that seem to lack power in society due to the term’s polysemous nature in the English language. “In English, we mean it be both ‘dumb’ and ‘of a reduced level of perceptibility,’” so “muted” suggests both an inability to communicate, as well as an incomplete perception to the world holistically (Ardener, 1975, p. 22).

Essentially, not only are muted group members incapable of engaging in the dominant discourse, they are often unaware of the fact that they are not operating within the dominant discourse. Ardener (1975) argues that speech is typically male-dominated because language has been “encoded by males, [and] women may be at a disadvantage when wishing to express matters of peculiar concern to them” (p. ix). Axiologically, MGT works to establish a balance of power in language to prevent the sexist (or racist, depending upon the group) implications of connotatively negative language from existing within muted groups by bringing to light those terms that oppress the muted group. Ardner (1975) makes the comparison between muted groups and black holes, which he implicitly defines as a region characterized by complete darkness where one cannot escape.

Groups that are considered to be muted, however, are not completely silent. Despite being “muted,” women might “nevertheless find a way of expression in forms other than direct

expository speech, possibly through symbolism in art, myth, ritual, and the like” (Ardener, 1975, p. ix). Because more artistic forms of expression are not dominant (Ardener, 1975), they often go unheard or misunderstood in the dominant culture.

While the majority of work on MGT in the field of communication has focused on gender differences (i.e. how women are traditionally seen as the muted group) (Kramerae, 1992; 2005), it is imperative to apply this theory to the LGBT community as what constitutes as a muted group in our field needs to adapt to different groups that are muted in society.

Null Persona

To capture the personal aspect of silence, more specifically how individuals personally communicate silence, Null Persona is utilized. In analyzing how a fringe group mutes themselves, Cloud (1999) explicates the importance of silence when studying historically persecuted groups. She defines rhetoric of silence as “a discursive pattern in which speakers gesture incompletely toward what cannot be uttered in a context of oppression” (Cloud, 1999, p. 178). This can be seen when an individual shows signs of self-editing/censoring, diversion, or direct refusal to address a certain topic during an interview.

Black (1970) claims that the rhetor (First Persona) has an obligation to craft a rhetorical message specifically for the audience (Second Persona). Wander (1984) extends this line of argumentation, but contends that rhetorical critics should look at what is not present within the discourse (or, what he refers to as the “Third Persona”), because by being silenced, the missing factor is negated. If this is done correctly, the audience then becomes a part of the rhetorical read. Sometimes parts of the rhetorical message are missing, but those missing elements add meaning to the overall message and should therefore be analyzed (Wander, 1984). Cloud (1999) also emphasizes the importance of listening to what is *not* included in one’s discourse. Cloud (1999)

suggests, “the process of being negated, or the formation of a silenced silhouette, can also apply to the speaker or rhetor,” which is referred to as the “Null Persona” (p. 200). According to Cloud, this absence of voice is just as important as what is actually being said, as it reveals implicit oppression on the part of the rhetor.

The reasons for rhetorical silence are often topics of scholastic papers and discourse. For instance, Brown and Gilligan (1992) examined how young girls from ages 7-18 at Laurel School for Girls in Ohio fundamentally identified themselves and how this added to their sense of self. Based on a series of interviews with approximately one hundred girls, they unveiled rhetorical signs of oppression among these girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). Specifically, they found that when discussing relational conflicts, these girls avoided the term “I” in their stories. The authors suggest that that the girls felt too oppressed to include themselves within the conversation and the absence of the “I” language suggests that the girls rhetorically distanced themselves from the topic of discussion.

Through listening to rhetorical silence among LGBT individuals as they reveal their negotiation between religious and sexual identities, it may be possible to shed light on where the power lies in the LGBT community and aid in opening dialogue among LGBT members as well as organizations wishing to reach out to LGBT Christians. In the next chapter, the methodological details employed in this study are discussed.

Chapter 3 - Method

Qualitative methodology was specifically chosen for this study for several reasons. First, qualitative interviews allowed for collection of in depth information and emotions. Unlike survey research, which asks the exact same questions from each participant, qualitative interviews tend to be unique and personalized for each participant involved (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Through this, “qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought process, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods” (Strauss & Corbin, p. 11). Due to the emotions that are connected with personal issues like sexual and religious identity, the qualitative approach was utilized for this study.

Second, the purpose of this study is to specifically focus on the language used (or omitted) by the participants in discussing religion and sexuality in order to best address the research question. “Qualitative interviewing is predicated on the idea that interview talk is the rhetoric of socially situated speakers,” meaning that the words used by interviewees reveal the “truth” as they see it at the time the interview was conducted (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 172). Because close-ended survey questions limit participant responses, an open-ended interview method is more appropriate to explore participant experiences.

Maxwell (1996) believes that several benefits stem from utilizing qualitative methods, including easily understandable results and the development of sense making processes. While scholars may argue that qualitative methods do not provide a large enough sample or stringent validated results (Bostrom & Donohew, 1992), these are not the goals of the current study. Rather, in order to better understand, qualitative methods allow the interviewer to “elicit the interviewee’s views of their worlds, their work, and the events they have experienced or

observed” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 28). This method is appropriate to gain knowledge and understanding from individuals experiencing the communicative phenomena surrounding the relationship between sexual and religious identity.

Finally, the aim of this study is to understand and make sense out of participants’ experiences through analyzing their rhetoric and language choices. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) posit that qualitative interviews are not only “well suited to *understand the social actor’s perspective*” but they also “enable researchers to *elicit the language forms used by social actors in natural settings*” (p. 173-174, italics original). Therefore, it was decided that qualitative interviews were the best approach to address the research problem. In the following section, I first share my own perspective as the researcher, then describe the participants that took part in the study before finally explaining the interview and explication process.

Researcher Standpoint

This study stems from my personal experience with the reconciliation of my own sexual and religious identity as a white, bisexual, Christian woman and wanting to make sense of identity choices of myself and others through this research process. In order to connect with the participants and encourage a sense of reciprocity, I shared that I was a member of the LGBT community, as well as the fact that I identify as a Christian religiously. I also disclosed that I was from a small Southern town to demonstrate a connectedness based upon physical location with some of the participants who also came from smaller towns. Any other information regarding how I am reconciling these two identities was kept from the participants in order to prevent influencing their answers to specific questions.

Because of my experiences as both a member of the LGBT community as well as my religious affiliation, I was able to understand the LGBT and religious vernacular used in some of

the interviews that I gathered in a way that someone who did not hold these specific identities could not have done. Also, my past experiences helped me empathize with the participants' noted struggles. As a result of this empathy, I "do not simply learn what happened to participants," but I am able "to glimpse participants' feelings, motives for action, world views, and constructions of self" which helps draw a clearer picture of the reconciliation process in identity (Foss & Foss, 1994, p. 41-42). Due to this close connection to this study, I took careful measures to ensure the integrity of my results by continually consulting with scholars who were not members of the LGBT community.

Participants

Qualified participants were defined as members of the LGBT community who had grown up in a religious household; specifically religions stemming from the Christian doctrine. These guidelines were established to ensure interviews with individuals who would have had to deal with both a religious and sexual identity. The specification of Christian doctrine was decided in order to add to the conversation within the literature that was reviewed. Also, these qualifications were deliberately chosen to increase participant comfort and rapport with me as the interviewer because of the sensitive nature of both religious identity and sexual identity. As noted earlier, I identify as a member of the LGBT community who grew up in a Christian household, so I assumed this connection would help the participants feel more comfortable; and therefore, more willing to share their experiences.

Random sampling is a difficult option when conducting research in the LGBT community (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), however, a demographically diverse sample was sought after within the parameters of the participant requirements. Out of the 11 individuals interviewed, six were male and five were female. Eight people identified themselves as either

white or Caucasian, two as black, and one as Mexican. The ages ranged from 18-48, with the average age being 26. Their occupations also varied, from instructor to student, sales associate to waitress, demonstrating a range of occupational standpoints (Appendix B).

Participants interviewed were gathered through personal connections within the LGBT community after careful consideration. It was understood that potential risks could develop from having connections with the participants, but because the process of finding participants posed a challenge due to the sensitive nature of sexual orientation and the discrimination discussed earlier, these risks were deemed minimal. Also, “the method of narrative interviews often depends on a close, long-term relationship with participants. It is not unusual for the researcher to study colleagues, friends, acquaintances, or relatives” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 181). After the first few interviews were conducted, participants began suggesting individuals to talk with about this topic, leading to snowball sampling. Lindlof and Taylor (1998) suggest that snowball sampling “may be the only way to reach an elusive population...or to engage people about a sensitive subject,” so interviews with many of the respondents that were suggested by initial participants (p. 124).

Qualitative Interviews

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with LGBT members in order to engage participants in a dialogue with the goal of retrieving their narrative of reconciliation between sexual and religious identity. Rubin and Rubin (2005) define qualitative interviews as “conversations in which a research gently guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion” (p. 4). This format allowed interviews to seem less like a survey and more like an extended discussion in which participants were encouraged to “freely articulate their interests and experiences” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 170). Qualitative interviews were the best

methodological option for this study as they resemble talks between acquaintances or friends (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Further, interviews are naturally more accommodative to each experience, allowing personalization for each participant as well as adjustments to unexpected situations (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In depth interviews began by participants answering open-ended questions, such as “When do you feel it is safe to talk about sexuality?” (see Appendix A for full listing of questions) in their own words. In response to the answers of the initial open-ended questions, probing questions were asked to allow for clarification of particular terms or phrases. Interviews with the participants were conducted for approximately 30 minutes to an hour and a half, with the average interview lasting 52 minutes. Overall, 11 interviews were conducted; seven through telephone, and four face-to-face interviews. In order to minimize discomfort on the part of the participant, interviews were conducted at a location and time decided by the participant and agreed upon by the researcher. Nine interviews were audio recorded and detailed field notes were taken during each interview for future reference. I personally transcribed each interview and noted nonverbal cues including vocal pitch, rate, and hesitations that added meaning to the data. Each participant was identified as a number and a pseudonym known only to the researcher so as not to tie them to their interview responses and protect their identity.

In order to obtain thick descriptions in qualitative interviews, “researchers work out *main questions, probes, and follow-ups*” (Rubin & Rubin, p. 13). For this study, main questions (see Appendix A) were created with three purposes in mind: 1) to put the participant at ease, 2) to create a logical sequence of events that helped tell the participants’ stories, and 3) to address the research problem. First, to put the participants at ease the interviews began by separating discussions surrounding sexual and religious identities to prolong the questions that were

assumed to create more cognitive dissonance for the participants till the end of the interview. Specifically, questions one through eight focused on the background of each identity held by the participant. For example, question 2 asked, “When was the first time you remember feeling that way [in regards to your sexuality]?” in order to determine if the participant’s past led to how they currently reconcile their sexual and religious identity. Question order was cumulative to enabling participants to create a logical sequence of events through referencing earlier questions as a basis for expanding later responses. Finally, specific questions were geared towards exploring the research question of this study in depth. In particular, interview questions nine and 10 asked, “Has anyone from a religious standpoint confronted you about your sexuality?” and “Has anyone from the LGBT community confronted you about your religious identity?” in order to address interpersonal conflict that participants experienced from social constructs of their personal identities. Further, questions 11 and 12 (“Are you open to talk about religion? Sexuality?” and “When do you feel it is safe to talk about religion? Sexuality?”) were designed to expose internal conflict held by participants by revealing an unwillingness to discuss their identities. Throughout the interviews, additional probing questions were tailored and asked for each specific interview to increase the depth of information shared and explore explanations when needed. For example, probing questions included asking “Why do you feel more open to talk about (either religion or sexuality)?” “How did you feel when (whomever) confronted you about your sexuality?” and “How do you differentiate between what is ‘religious’ and what is ‘spiritual’?” After the initial interviews were conducted, follow-up messages were sent via email or asked through telephone conversations in order to further clarify words (such as alternate definitions of the term “religion”) within the transcriptions.

Explication Process

Analysis began once all of the participant interviews were transcribed, resulting in 63 single-spaced typed pages of data, as well as 60 pages of handwritten field notes. A thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994) was performed on the data collected. Thematic analysis consists of a series of reflective steps in which the researcher pulls out certain repeating patterns from the interviews in order to better understand the phenomena that is taking place within the data.

Memos were written in pages of the notebook that contained field notes after the third interview and continued to expand on the memos for each subsequent interview. The memos contained common ideas that were emerging from the interviews, as well as reminders to contact previous interviewees if new questions were discovered. These field notes allowed initial responses to the interviews to be discovered and explored, which created an internal dialogue regarding personal emotional connections to the data, familiarization with the data to be continued, and to further develop a more detailed interpretation of the interviews while recognizing central categories rising out of the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In reference to qualitative data, category is a “covering term for an array of general phenomena: concepts, constructs, themes, and other types of ‘bins’ in which to put items that are similar” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 214).

In particular, these memos and emerging categories became a helpful reference later when transcripts were completed and coding began. Rubin and Rubin (2005) explain that coding involves “systematically labeling concepts, themes, events and topical markers so that you can readily retrieve and examine all of the data units that refer to the same subject across all your interviews” (p. 207). Initially, the coding process began by “perusing the entire document” for overarching themes by asking the questions: “What is going on here?” and “What makes this document the same as, or different from, the previous ones that I coded?” (Strauss & Corbin,

1998, p. 120). Later, line-by-line coding was performed (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where individual themes were identified for each line of the transcription. In coding participant interviews, it is important to remember that:

You cannot code for everything that is in your data, nor would you want to. Instead you look for those items that are most important for understanding your research topic by looking for those that you have already noted in your memo file or those that are suggested by published literature and speak to your research concerns (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 209).

Because of this, areas of the interviews that were relevant to the research question were examined closely and notes were made of possible codes for future directions of study.

In order to help visualize the relationship between themes, the themes were written on a large white board. Individual sections of the transcripts were placed within the appropriate thematic group, based upon the previous coding. From these listings, similar ideas were linked to each other within the lists. For instance, responses to the questions, “Has anyone from a religious standpoint confronted you about your sexuality?” and “Has anyone from the LGBT community confronted you about your religious identity?” were separated into two lists labeled “LGBT” or “Religious”. Responses were then collapsed into the category of “reference groups.” After creating and reflecting on these lists, audio recordings as well as the transcriptions were revisited to ensure that the themes identified truly reflected the analysis of the texts.

Constant reflection occurred throughout the analysis process in order to determine the relationship between themes to completely answer the research question. Interviews continued to be collected until category saturation was reached. “A category is considered *saturated* when no new information seems to emerge during coding, that is, when no new properties, dimensions,

conditions, actions/interactions, or consequences are seen in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 136). Strauss and Corbin (1998) grant that this is subjective, as there is always something new that can be read in the data, but when collecting data becomes counterproductive, then it should not be pursued further (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In regards to this study, interviews were conducted until the interviews became almost predictable and echoed responses from other participants.

Lindlof and Taylor (1998) suggest that a way to check the research for interpretive validity is to engage in a process called member validation. “*Member validation* means taking findings back to the field and determining whether the participants recognize them as true or accurate” (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 242 italics original). To check for validity in the research, a meeting was arranged with a queer identifying Episcopal priest with over 12 years of experience with a gay-positive church in a mid-western town after all of the interviews were completed. Part of his job details as a missionary include meeting with other members of the LGBT community in order to counsel them through the reconciliation process. Therefore, he deals with individuals going through the same process as the participants involved in the study. He has also worked with dioceses all over the United States, including New York, Kansas, Boston, and Los Angeles, even working overseas in London. This diversity of locations has given him a wide breadth of knowledge and perspectives in dealing with the topic of sexual and religious identity integration. During the conversation, the findings were shared with him, and he agreed with the findings of this study and provided additional insights and future directions. In addition, two of the participants were asked to read the results in order to validate the findings. They, too, found the findings to ring true to their personal experience, and believed the interpretations of their

narratives to be correct. As a final check for scholastic validity, direct quotations are included in the results to allow for direct support of the claims gathered from interviews (Clarke, 2005).

The research question calls for a method that allows the researcher to have a more personal connection with the participants and adapt the questions specifically to the individual due to the sensitive nature of sexual and religious identities. Because of the openness and the flexibility of qualitative interviews, they are an appropriate method for this study. In the next chapter, the findings of the study are revealed and the implications are discussed.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Christian LGBT individuals are often caught in a dilemma between their sexual and religious identity. With internal conflicts and external pressures associated with these identities, how do they reconcile these two identities? Through a series of interviews with Christian LGBT individuals, two themes emerged. First, Christian LGBT individuals compartmentalize their identities by engaging in cost/benefit analysis and self-silencing. Second, Christian LGBT individuals reconcile their sexual and religious identity through broadening the concept of “religion,” emphasizing the personal relationship with God, and separating religious people from God. In this chapter, the themes are revealed and the ways in which Christian LGBT individuals attempt to reconcile their conflicting identities are unpacked.

Before delving into the process of reconciliation, however, it is important to elucidate the gravity of the struggle Christian LGBT individuals’ experience, both internally and externally. Mead (1934) suggests that identity is constructed through interactions with others and those who are closest to us (i.e., the “significant other” or reference groups such as family, friends, and partners) play a large role in the formation of our identity. The following paragraphs illustrate how “significant others” self-identified by participants reacted to their sexual orientation, all negatively and some violently, and how those interactions affected their relationship with those closest to them and ultimately their identity.

Confrontation with the “Significant Other”

A majority of the participants (10 out of 11) discussed their confrontation with their mother and how painful their experience was. Gregory, a 21 year-old gay male recalled:

My mother initially was very calm and she said that she still loved me. And then a few nights later she calls me back into her room and uh she had her bible... She

quoted a lot of scripture out of the Bible and used a lot of religious rhetoric. She told me that it was wrong, that God does not approve, that I am just listening to what people are telling me as opposed to deciding who I really am. And of course I was bawling my eyes out the whole time and super upset, so I tried to remind her that “You will always love me,” and she said, “I will always love you, but she said this isn’t something that I have to love.”

Gregory added that he and his mother were “very close” at one time, but this confrontation became the catalyst for a slow deterioration of their relationship. Regardless of what happened, Gregory still feels as if he is loved by his mother, and reciprocates those feelings.

For some of the participants, the encounter with their mother was much more traumatic. Mia, a 31 year-old Mexican bisexual female, said:

I remember what it was like when I had two big confrontations with my mother. The first one was when she thought I was having a relationship with one of my professors [who was female]. She said I was a worthless disgraceful whore that was going to *burn in hell* and that she would rather me be dead than gay. Shortly after that, I continued to withdraw from the family and almost 2 years later my brother decided to share my cell phone number with my mother and she left obscene messages on my phone that she hoped I would *rot in hell* and that her health decline was because I had brought disgrace to the family and that my poison was going to kill anything in my life *that was not of sin*. After a message like that, you don’t really want to call someone back.

Unlike Gregory’s experience, Mia’s experience was completely devoid of motherly concerns and love, and religious phrases like “burn in hell” and “rot in hell” were used as a rhetorical weapon

of damnation. Mia no longer has contact with her mother, and feels as if her entire family is against her due to her sexual orientation. She claims that this is due in part to her strong Catholic upbringing as well as her Mexican cultural roots.

Four out of 11 participants reported having confrontations with their father. In those instances, reactions were more physical rather than verbal. For Samuel, a 26-year-old gay male, the confrontation with his “strict, religious” father and brothers ended very “violently,” while Rhyne’s (a 22-year-old gay male) father avoided verbal confrontation and immediately went out and purchased whiskey and drank heavily upon hearing about his son’s sexuality. Both participants did not want to discuss these interactions in great detail. However, terms such as “violently” and the prolonged pauses surrounding this part of the conversation revealed that these confrontations were as painful as the confrontations with their mothers, if not more damaging.

Three of the participants reported that their relationship with close friends severed because of their sexuality. For Gregory, his friendship ended when he told his friend that he was gay:

[He] actually terminated our friendship over it because he felt that it was *wrong in God’s eyes*, and I was doing wrong, he didn’t want that to be a part of his life through me. It hurt like hell, it hurt a lot, it was bad.

Gregory revealed that it was very emotionally distressing for him to be told by his best friend that part of his identity was “wrong in God’s eyes,” especially when he was struggling with “trying to figure stuff out” and “make it work all together.”

A few other participants mentioned that pressures came from places that once represented religious stability for them. Beth (a 22-year-old bisexual female) and Rhyne (a 22-year-old gay

male) felt as though they were being targeted for their sexual identity from such religious external forces, specifically their “church homes”. In both of these instances, the situations with their fellow church members led to the participants leaving their respective congregations because they did not feel “welcome” any more. Beth explained:

I was a youth leader for a few years while I was in high school and as I was starting college, and I was really good friends with my best friend at the time, and we did everything together. Well the rumors started going around at the church, and people came up to me and started asking - no telling me that they were worried about my questionable behavior around this girl. And that I was a role model and what was I doing, that I was at danger being around this girl. So I was very hurt by that.

In this case, members of the church cautioned Beth directly about her behavior. A similar experience was expressed by Rhyne:

Three different Sundays in a row our Sunday school teacher would uh relate different things to uh homosexuality in her Sunday school teachings. And the reason that I knew that there was something wrong is uh because before that they uh had never touched on that subject. But after he did that, I came to realize that uh, this isn't really a place that I can go to without being discriminated against. And uh after those three Sundays, a bunch of kids from the church started telling me, “Oh, you don't need to come back. We don't want you here.”

This lack of support from their “church homes” was disheartening to both participants, as both expressed love and familial connections to the members of their church. Both had grown up in

the church, and were not sure exactly how to react when individuals whom they had considered family harassed and then rejected them due to their sexuality.

Not only did the participants face homophobia from their family and friends, they also faced prejudice from their fellow LGBT individuals. Three of the participants discussed having conflicts with their romantic partner because of their religious beliefs, and ultimately religion acted as the catalyst that forced these relationships to end. Gregory shared how his partner ridiculed him and made him feel “dumb” because of his religious beliefs.

In a lot of ways it was very difficult for me because in a lot of ways he would demean me and almost make me feel dumb for what I believed. And like one time he told me, and it turned into a big fight later, he said something and I was like, don't say that and he was like, “I am sorry I have never been with a Christian boy before.”

Beth, also had difficulty with talking to her girlfriend about religious identity. Her girlfriend detested the fact that she had grown up in a church, and while she “didn't have a problem with the spiritual aspect,” she did not like Beth's belief in the Christian perception of God. Her girlfriend could not comprehend how she could “identify as part of a religion that hated who [she] was” (and perhaps who her partner was). Because significant others have a large impact on identity formation (Mead, 1934), having a partner who is antagonistic to a part of their identity was very emotionally painful for these participants.

Mia's comment underscores the double stigma of being a Christian LGBT member:

A few of my friends think that being gay and Christian is like being poor and a republican it just doesn't make sense. I get made fun of a lot especially by my gay male friends. My best friend actually claims that I can't really be Christian that I

am just taking Pascal's Wager, believing in God so if He doesn't exist that I have nothing to lose. He also thinks that me being gay and spiritual is like having Stockholm's syndrome: that as a community, gays are so persecuted by the church that those that are gay that think they can still love God are in denial, just unable to leave their abuser. It hurts having those conversations, because I feel that because I have these two identities I don't really belong to either.

Even though Mia suggests these rhetorical jabs are delivered jokingly, her nonverbal reactions revealed that she was distraught by her friend's mockery. When she shared this story, she became physically tense and her voice began to quiver as if she was going to cry. She said she remains friends with this individual, but wishes that this issue was not a topic of conversation every time they meet.

Justin, a 30 year-old black gay male, referred to being gay and Christian as "the stereotype within the stereotype":

People within the community don't really appreciate those that are religious, because if you want to be stereotypical and start stereotyping our community, most people in our community aren't religious. I mean they expect with our situation, that all people that are part of the community, the LGBT community, um must either be atheist or agnostic, and that is just not the case. It is kinda like *the stereotype within the stereotype*.

To sum, LGBT members raised in religious homes experience struggles on a variety of levels: confrontations with family and friends and ridicules from sexual partners and LGBT acquaintances, resulting in their exclusion from places where they once felt at home. Because interpersonal relationships are important to the formation of identity (Hall, 1996; Mead, 1934;

Noelle-Neuman & Petersen, 2004), these conflicts have a large impact on how LGBT members form their identity. Individual clashes with interpersonal reference groups help to understand why LGBT members reject religion and compartmentalize their sexual and religious identities.

Due to the external pressures and internal pain, many LGBT members who grew up with a religious background decide to reject their religious identity entirely. According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), rejecting the religious identity is the most common way of eliminating the conflict between their sexual and religious identity. In the interviews, four out of 11 participants responded that they rejected their religious identity. These reactions are not surprising given the internal and external struggles LGBT members go through.

While all four stated that they rejected a religious identity, Samuel (a 26-year-old gay male) was the only participant to state explicitly that he rejected God completely, stating, “I don’t feel that there is any evidence to support the idea that God exists.” The other three, while claiming to have no religious affiliation, gave answers that suggest they do not completely reject a religious identity. For example, Grace (a 19-year-old bisexual female) explains, “If anything, I um feel like the way that I am not that way is because I kind of have a *bad taste in my mouth about it*.” Further, Casey (a 29-year-old gay male) struggles with his dual identity, stating, “Nowadays, I would probably identify as agnostic. For me I believe that there has to be something out there greater than us, but I *can’t organize that into a belief system* really.” Julia, a 25-year-old female who identified as queer, also claimed that she does not hold any religious affiliation now, despite wanting to attend seminary before she began college. She added that she is fascinated by spirituality, and yearns to know more about how people practice and conceptualize faith.

Some LGBT members who grew up in a religious home experience severe intrapersonal hurt when attempting to reject their religious identity, but feel as if they have no choice because rejecting their sexuality is “not an option”. Because religious identity formation is a core aspect to a holistic identity (Mol, 1976), individuals who reject this identity continue to experience dissonance to the extent that they feel “something is missing” from their life. Those who feel they cannot reject a core component of their identity attempt to compartmentalize the two identities.

Theme 1: Compartmentalizing Identities

While not entirely rejecting religion and religious identity, some participants managed their conflicting identities by separating the two. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) argue that when compartmentalizing sexual and religious identities, individuals keep the two identities separate in order to avoid cognitive dissonance. This can be done by acknowledging the conflict between the two identities, and only allowing one to be featured as the presenting self at a time. When the two identities are not immediately present at the same time, cognitive dissonance is avoided. This leaves a feeling of living two separate lives for the individuals who experience it. During the interviews, I found two ways in which individuals would compartmentalize their two identities: through cost/benefit analysis and self-silencing.

Cost/Benefit Analysis

Cost/benefit analysis surfaced as the reasoning behind compartmentalization when LGBT members explained how they would weigh the costs and benefits of revealing both identities in a given situation and choose which identity best suits the situation. Language explicitly revealing cost-benefit analysis surfaced in five of the interviews. For instance, Julia, a 26-year-old female, revealed that her younger sister came out to her when she was 18 and asked her if she should

come out to their parents when she was still at home. Julia advised her sister not to come out because the strain that would put on the relationship with her mother was not worth the momentary relief associated with coming out. Mia also spoke of risk when addressing her sexual identity. She said, “I don’t want to become a target... I don’t think in most relationships that sharing my sexual preference *is worth the risk.*”

Sasha, a 48-year-old lesbian, utilized the cost/benefit rhetoric throughout her interview. In one instance, she talked about a moment where the subject of dating came up while she was having lunch with a friend whom she described as “delightful,” but also “very religious/close-minded/intolerant.” In an attempt to prevent “devastat[ing] her,” Sasha did not bring up her sexual identity. She said, “I just thought yea, I don’t even...*I don’t even want to go there.*” When I asked if she would openly talk about her sexual or religious identity, she said, “It all depends on my *level of investment*, if you will, whether or not I approach the subject.” She feels that the potential external conflict from whoever asks her and internal discomfort she would experience is not worth clarifying her sexuality to anyone who asks. She claims she would potentially deny her sexual identity if it meant being harassed about it.

Casey, a 29-year-old gay male, described a time where not only did he feel as if he had to weigh the costs and benefits, but witnessed the same situation with his mother and step-father who knew about his sexuality while visiting their church with them:

I went to their Sunday school class with my folks and it pretty quickly devolved into how our country was falling apart with morals, and it didn’t help that proposition 8 had just passed that weekend. One man kept bringing up gay marriage as an example of the deterioration of morals and family etc. I didn’t speak up because I think, I don’t know for me, dealing with religion and

spirituality and sexuality in interpersonal relationships are always trying *because you are always trying to weigh the cost and the benefits*. So having that type of conflict in a place where they are finding family, although I disagree with some of the rhetoric of that new family, um it is just *not a fight worth fighting* a lot of times. Because having that conflict *isn't worth going through all of that* when you get back home from church.

For Casey, his family too compartmentalized when having to approach their son's sexuality among members of a religious congregation.

In probably one of the more dramatic examples of cost/benefit rhetoric, Beth, a 22-year-old bisexual female, revealed that she had considered suicide as an option because the strain between her religious and sexual identity had gotten very hard to bear:

So my thought was that I was going to crash my car into a tree and it would just look like a normal car accident that a typical teenager would have. Yeah, it was during the time that I started having feelings for a friend of mine at church, and it just became very difficult and I could never tell her. And I was just at her house late one evening and I was like, *it would just be easier* to drive into a tree right now, and I thought that almost every single time that I left church. I would be like on a very big emotional or spiritual high, but then on the way home was like, I can never commit to this because I was one way and they wanted me to be another. And I was just scared they would be like Beth always looked like such a happy kid, so why did she kill herself. So I tried to figure out how it wouldn't look like that in my mind.

Beth felt as though the cost of living with these conflicting identities was not worth the benefits of life itself. This mentality could help explain why so many LGBT youth choose to end their lives as opposed to seeking the help they need to get through such a difficult time. Due to the internal/external costs of the situation, the participants felt the need to separate their two conflicting identities.

Self-Silencing

One way to demonstrate cost/benefit analysis is through self-silencing. Self-silencing is a way of separating the two identities, by rhetorically keeping one of them from fully being displayed to society. Many LGBT individuals engage in self-silencing through avoiding the subject of sexuality with religious family members. Seven out of the eleven participants did not explicitly disclose their sexual identity to those who are closest to them (but whom they considered “religious”), an act that can be interpreted as rhetorically silencing themselves. While most of them stated that they felt free to live life openly as a LGBT once their parents knew about their sexuality, Justin, Julia, and Sasha never brought up the subject with them. Justin never explicitly told anyone about his sexual identity. Instead, he claimed it was just “understood” because of the type of people he chose to associate with. Justin talked about the instance when he was attending a friend’s wedding in New Orleans. He said:

It came down to, which group do you want to hang out with: everyone on Bourbon Street or do you want to go with the gay guys to the gay bar? And I had migrated there [to the bar] because *that is where you feel comfortable*, so I guess that decision or action was like coming out, but to that group it wasn’t really anything, because it was already understood, or already known I guess but not explicitly known, but it was implied.

Justin inherently felt more comfortable around those individuals who shared his sexual identity, and never felt the need to explicitly tell others about his sexuality. He later revealed that he also does not explicitly tell anyone his religious affiliation, suggesting that he does not like to talk openly about his Christianity nor his sexuality.

Julia has never told her parents about her sexuality and stated that she never will due to her family's faith and membership in a Baptist/Evangelical church. She tries to avoid the discussion altogether, even though it comes up often because her sister is also homosexual.

Sasha's circumstances were a bit different than any of the other participants. While she eventually told her mother and her brother (her closest living relatives) about her sexual identity, she waited until after her father (a Church of Christ pastor) had passed away:

In 2001 my dad died very suddenly. And I was in a relationship with this last one and I had not told my brother or my family, and when my dad died, it was at that point that I thought, "Well, he [my dad] knows now," and um, I need to...I need to tell my family. So that too was a catalyst to coming out strangely enough.

The phrasing of "well, he knows now" seems to imply that Sasha feared telling her father more than the other members of her family. When asked later why she waited to tell her family, she expressed "My dad was a preacher, and I didn't want to disappoint anyone. And I hadn't been pushed to the point of having to tell them. So, without a doubt, it was fear of disappointment and those kinds of things."

What is implicit in those remarks is the consequences of disclosure. Whether it was losing comfort for Justin, family support for Julia, or Sasha's father's approval, each participant felt they had something to lose by discussing their sexual identity with those close to them. Because of the fear of this loss, some participants explicitly used the cost-benefit analysis to

describe their decisions to tell or not to tell. These participants were fully aware of the costs associated with bringing their two identities together. Participants not only revealed compartmentalization through demonstrating cost/benefit reasoning and self-silencing, but they also displayed compartmentalization in the way they responded.

Analysis of Hidden Discourses

The moments of self-silencing through pauses, self-interruptions and humor during ordinary solace disclosures hint that there is a “truth – a hard reality – constraining discourse from outside the text” (Cloud, 1999, p. 193). In the interviews, several participants showed a sign of these self-silencing. For instance, Sasha often took long pauses before she answered questions (starting with brief pauses at the begin of the interview lasting 3-5 seconds, and progressively getting longer with questions that were believed to cause more dissonance; roughly 8-10 seconds), as if she was trying to self-edit her interview as she was responding. When initially answering questions, she would try to make claims about the community holistically or justify her answers before she gave them. Typically, probing questions that led to personal answers as opposed to universal assumptions triggered pauses before responses. She did this immediately in the interview, starting with the first question about labeling her sexuality:

Um, I don't have any pushback necessarily from the phrase sexual identity and I think it's a way to, um, categorize the perspective people may have. There are sexual identities that I don't necessarily understand because I wouldn't identify obviously as that. [pause] I would say I am a gay woman.

She also consistently spoke in small phrases that did not always create full coherent sentences, suggesting that she felt the need to edit her answers. For example, when asked if anyone in her life had ever confronted her about her sexuality from a religious standpoint, she initially stated

that her mother “continues to struggle with it,” and then quickly added short phrases about how her mother thinks she is “the definition of perfection,” “how lucky and blessed” she is to have her, and how her mom is her “life’s richest blessing.” Then she revealed:

Worst thing she has ever said to me is you know, “Please don’t get married to another girl when I’m alive because *I just cannot take that.*” Um, so *she loves and supports me.* She’s fully supportive of all of that. Um, she’s trying...she’s trying.

And I guess I praise her for trying.

Once again, she followed up a difficult disclosure of her mother feelings towards her sexuality with small phrases that almost seem to contradict what she just revealed. In this instance, they *directly* contradict her mother’s statement, as “I just cannot take that” does not seem to be “supportive” of her daughter’s life.

Casey seemed to use another tactic to evade more emotional answers: humor. While describing the situation in which his stepfather came to know about his sexual identity, he laughed excessively, although the story was fairly serious:

Well, they [my parents] had a friend over and they were talking about gay people and he said, “Well, you know all gay people are child molesters.” My step-dad just let it go and my mom just hit the roof. [Big Laugh] Kicked this guy out of the house, and it was kind of neat to hear that story. And after he left my step dad asked what the big deal was and my mom said well you know Casey is gay right?

And so that is how my step dad knew.

Casey told jokes when addressing how frightening it was growing up in a small town as a member of the LGBT. He said, “I didn’t know what gay was, so um, when I was a teenager my first crush was on Aladdin, which was really silly. I hope that goes in your paper, please.” He

also laughed while revealing how he lost what he felt was his religious foundation as a child: “I think it was when I went on a mission trip which was interesting [laugh] because the purpose of that is to strengthen your faith.” Casey’s use of humor was an attempt to rhetorically separate himself from the discussion directly, and to attract attention away from the serious subject matter that was being discussed in order to avoid the discomfort that would come from fully connecting to the conversation.

Another indicator of self-silencing/separation is a lack of “I” language. Cloud (1999) suggests that removing “I” language is an attempt by the rhetor to disassociate themselves from the subject being discussed. This idea echoes Mead’s (1934) assertion that the use of “I” centered language shows a consciousness of that particular identity. Essentially, by not using this language, individuals rhetorically segregate themselves from the group in which they are referring. During the interview, Justin, a 30-year-old black gay male, did not use much “I” language. Instead, he constantly referred to collective groups or use the term “you,” while avoiding the term “I”. He even spoke in the short phrases like Sasha while referring to “you.”

The following are typical responses given by Justin:

I also think, on a separate note, the reason for the late acceptance; basically because of where *you* come from. Like *your* background as far as race and religion and even as far as where *you* grew up. The town *you* grew up in, the community that *you* are involved in... I mean, as *you* start to grow and get older, *you* start to think about different things. *You* use more logic and reasoning, because *you* are learning and growing as a human being and becoming more knowledgeable. But I guess when *you* are smaller like in elementary, that *you* are

going to this church and doing this religious thing because *you* are told that that's what *you* are supposed to do...

Even when he talked about his own experience about contemplating on discussing sexuality with his aunt, he was quick to switch from the "I" language to "You" language and avoided directly talking about his sexuality:

Justin: I have thought of the idea, of discussing sexuality with my aunt that is a preacher. I have thought about asking her certain things because *you* always think in the back of *your* mind, like what does the family believe or what do *you* all believe knowing that this is here and there is like no way to change it. *You* are going to have to deal with it.

Me: By this conversation with your aunt, do you mean your sexuality?

Justin: Um, I'm not sure I really specifically mean my sexuality, but more like *the community in general* I guess you could say.

Based on Cloud's (1999) assumptions, Justin's verbal dissociation with Christianity and the LGBT community suggests that he may have felt the need to rhetorically silence his true, "hard reality" (Cloud, 1999, p. 193). Perhaps, it was his way to keep the two identities separate to avoid cognitive dissonance. By keeping the two identities rhetorically separated, he did not have to explicitly face the fact that they were in conflict.

An analysis of the texts suggests that LGBT individuals compartmentalize their sexual and religious identity by engaging in a cost/benefit analysis and through self-silencing. Some individuals will even dissociate themselves from their own rhetoric by utilizing rhetorical tactics such as pauses, self-editing, and humor. Compartmentalization may have helped some

participants avoid cognitive dissonance, but others felt the need to find a way to negotiate the two identities in order to achieve an internal balance and peace.

Theme 2: Broadening the Concept of Religion

While some participants reject their religious identity or compartmentalize their identities, many tried to negotiate their religious and sexual identity. Based on the interviews, three ways LGBT Christians reconcile their identities were discovered: 1) by redefining the concept of “religion,” 2) by emphasizing the relational, and 3) by distinguishing between religious people and God.

Redefining “Religion”

One of the consistent themes during the interviews was general dislike of the term “religion” among the participants (e.g., Lorel, a 19-year-old black gay male, even associated the term “religion” with Westboro Baptist Church and their notorious message of hate associated with God and Christianity). Out of eleven participants, only one used the term “religious” to describe herself, while others used terms that were deemed more appropriate as they rhetorically provided a connection to God. Seven participants used the term “spiritual,” one used the term “faith,” and one used the term “non-denominational.” When asked about the distinction between “religion” and the terms they chose, all of the participants referred to “religion” as an organization with strict rules and regulations that are to be followed by the congregation. For instance, Mia explained that she disliked the term “religious” because of its connection to institutions (“To me Religion, is a foundation that was *man made*... and it tends to be *institutionalized*.”) Samuel also believed religion was more of an organization as opposed to a spiritual entity:

To mean religious is, well it may not be the denotative, but definitely the connotative term is to include a major religion or some dogmatic specificity or vision, whether that be evangelic Christian or Jehovah's Witness a religion to me, *an organized form*.

Casey believed the rules of the faith did not meet what he thought "religion" should be:

I think it depends because, to me religious has more ritual tied to it where you go to services or you have holidays tied to it. And along with that, religious, comes the *rules to of belonging to that faith*.

Gregory correlated not following these rules to not being accepted by the congregation:

Religion is this *book of rules* that people say. And, feel that it is just this determined set of things that must be practiced *and must be followed* and must be the same every time and if you don't conform, or see eye to eye with somebody then you are wrong, and according to some Christian doctrine, you are then going to hell.

Beth reflected that religion left "no room for error," which to her is problematic and emotionally distressing:

I think *religion is a structure* and in religion it *leaves no room for error*. There is no room for I guess, for people to be able to be themselves. I guess. Religion is set up, there is no fun, I don't know what the word is... it just holds us back. *I mean if I hear the word religion, I just cringe*.

Participants' views of religion justify their need to disassociate from the term and seek a term that best suited their rhetorical needs, or a word that they identified with more. While certain

rituals of his previous religion (such as prayer) appealed to him, Gregory felt like he was better served by the term “spiritual” to describe his identity. He said,

I view myself as more spiritual than religious, and I do have faith in a God. And I believe and I pray to that God. *I do I pray, and I think that is why I choose not to use the term religion to describe my faith and what I do.*

Rhyne believed “spiritual” was a term in which he could easily identify:

To me there are just too many different things that goes on with that kind of organized religion, that I feel like I can't consume to anymore. I um, again this sounds stereotypical, I am more uh *spiritual* than I am um *religious*. Uh I don't consider myself Baptist anymore. *I don't need uh you know a certain church to tell me how I am supposed to interpret different scriptures or interpret you know different feelings that I feel like I am getting.*

Mia explained that “spirituality” is rooted more in Christ:

I think it was going through and finding that this struggle [between religious and sexual identity] wasn't just something that I was going through because I was attracted to men and women. It was a struggle that we are going through socially because of not really understanding what Christianity means outside of the church. Um, and there being this misconception between spirituality and religion. *Spirituality is rooted in like the moral teachings of Christ.*

Beth went into further detail as to what it means to be “spiritual” as opposed to just “religious” as she described how she grew in her “spiritual walk”. For her, it was more about relying on her own “faith” in God:

What began as my religion searching I guess you could say, started in college. I got to begin opening my mind a little bit and realized that more things were out there. Because previously I was very sheltered and close minded. And I found some things that make me into I guess a *spiritual Christian*. I believe in God and Jesus. I accept some things like the Bible was written by mortal men and interpreted by mortal men. And so I had to remember that with certain areas of my religion and I had to *rely on faith*.

Sasha, a 48-year-old lesbian, was the sole participant to identify as religious, but also felt as if she needed to differentiate between what she considered to be “religious” or “spiritual.” She associated religiosity with “God’s Wrath,” whereas she saw spirituality being based in “God’s Grace”:

Those people that are religiously spiritual or spiritual religious or live a spiritual life are far more tolerant, they recognize others beliefs, and support people who have a higher being if you will. They are not as afraid to explore other options, they have *a more breathable interpretation of God’s Grace* and their faith is based more on a fundamental notion of God’s Grace, whereas *a strictly religious person is kind of basing it on God’s Wrath*.

A structural view of religion did not provide the relational connection that LGBT members wanted, so redefining the term became the best option for them. This leads to the next theme that surfaced from analyzing the interviews: the emphasis on the personal relationship with God.

Emphasizing the Relational

Throughout the interviews, most participants (nine out of 11) were very aware of how they used the term “religious” and consistently used another term to describe how they felt.

When asked about why, they claimed that the other term provided a sense of connection to God. In other words, their identity seemed to come down to a loving relationship with a deity rather than a “man-made construct” filled with “rigid rules” that are “impossible to follow.” For example, Mia used “spiritual” to express a need for her “personal connection” with God:

The way that I conceptualize religion and spirituality is that where spirituality is rooted in like the moral teachings of Christ, *the personal connection* that I feel there is a higher power than me that I feel like my life is worth saving.

Casey also expressed a need for a relationship within his religious conceptualization:

Spiritual to me is much more a relationship for me. So it is whatever *relationship you have with a higher power*.

Beth expressed that not only was her connection relational, but more emotional than just being “religious”:

But when I hear the word spirituality, and I perk up and want to know what kind of spirituality that you have, because I believe that you can have this *really emotional connection* to something spiritually. I mean you have got, not with religion anyway. I feel very spiritual. And um, me and Jesus, well we are cool we are alright, we are good.

Justin, the participant to use “non-denominational” saw identifying with specific doctrines as preventing individuals from having a closer connection with God.

Non-denominational Christian, just because I don’t feel that you have to be labeled a specific, subset of the Christian faith. I’m Baptist, I’m Methodist. I am one of those people that if you believe that is all that really matters. It *is between you and God*, you and Jesus that little connection that you have.

Almost all (10 out of 11) of the participants felt as if there was a difference in the way they viewed a relationship with God, and what they viewed as being religious. This broadens how they view their religious identities to something more interpersonal, as opposed to institutional.

A relational view of religious identity also explains why participants were very open to talk about religion despite the seeming contradictions between their religious and sexual identity. Most of the participants (8 out of 11) revealed that they were comfortable talking about religion and their religious identity. Sasha felt very strongly about her Christian faith. She said:

Never once in my life have I and I hope would I deny my Christian faith ever um, and I would certainly and have been in situations where I have denied my sexual identity by omission. But I would never even by omission not identify my religion and my religious affiliations.

Mia revealed that she not only discusses her religious identity openly with others, but also considers it her duty to do so as a Christian. Mia says, “I always feel safe talking about my spiritual identity; I mean I feel like part of my obligation as a Christian is to witness to individuals when I am given the opportunity.” These findings suggest that Christian LGBT individuals attempt reconcile their religious and sexual identity by broadening the concept of religion and emphasizing their relationship with God. This seems to help participants deal with their internal conflict. But, how they do deal with external forces that chastise them for being both Christian and LGBT? How do they reconcile the conflict? The interviews reveal that LGBT Christians address this issue by differentiating religious individuals and their relationship with God.

Problem with People, Not with God

Four participants expressed that their problem with religion was not an issue with God, but rather the people who represented the Christian faith. For instance, Mia made this distinction while discussing how religious individuals treated her after a break up with her female partner:

The conflict that occurred wasn't necessarily a conflict that I had with God, but was *a conflict between me and different people socially* and different people in the church that had already labeled me and deciding my fate because of them feeling that salvation is finite.

Sasha feared her families' interpretation with God when she wanted to disclose her sexuality, but felt as if God accepted her for who she was:

I wasn't afraid of God, and God's wrath of judgment or anything like that. I never was afraid of, I never questioned in terms of my faith. *I questioned my parents' interpretation of Biblical teachings. That's what I fear.*

Casey claimed it was Christians' actions that he viewed as problematic due to their contradictions with Christian doctrine:

It is not that I don't identify with Christianity *I have more problems with how individuals act out Christianity*. It is not that I believe this of all Christians, but in the Baptist church it was as if they had these set of standards and if you did not adhere to them, you did not belong. *Ignoring the great parts about the Bible that are about love and acceptance.*

Beth stated she felt "good" about her relationship with God because she believes He created her "perfect just the way [she is]," but that other religious individuals might not see things that way:

I mean for a while I thought, "Why would God create something that He hated?"

And I believe God did create me this way, but I feel that God made me perfect

just the way I am. And what I have a difficult problem with is Christians, like close-minded Christians. Like you can be Christian, you can preach Jesus all you want, that is wonderful. But correct your own life you know before you are going to correct mine. Because if God looks at all sin as the same, then we are all on equal levels here and I don't want your man made measuring system to decide that is what makes my sin greater than yours. *So Jesus and I, we are good.*

Sometimes Christians and I not so much.

Participants did not feel as if they could connect to Christians per se, but felt they could have a connection with God. By separating the problems with people from God, Christian LGBT individuals manage to keep their spiritual ties with God.

To sum, whether it was clearly setting a perimeter for what religion is and what is not, or whether it was distinguishing Christians and religious organizations from God, each participant found a way to situate themselves outside of a strict definition of religion and reconcile their religious and sexual identities through emphasizing the personal relationship with God. In the following chapter, the implications of these findings are discussed on a theoretical level.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

One of the dominant narratives told in our society is that an individual cannot be LGBT and a good Christian. Because of this stigma, many LGBT Christians are left asking the question: “Is there a place in religion for me?” This study reveals that LGBT Christians manage to reconcile their religious and sexual identities by broadening the concept of religion. This chapter discusses the theoretical and practical implications of the study.

Theoretical Implications

The theories of Spiral of Silence, Muted Group Theory, and Null Persona help explain how and why LGBT Christians compartmentalize or reconcile their two identities, and investigate further the multidimensional nature of the rhetoric of silence.

Spiral of Silence

The social impacts of the rhetoric of silence can be explored using the Spiral of Silence. According to Noelle-Neumann and Petersen (2004), once an individual senses a possibility of isolation from the dominant culture, the individual will “issue their own threats of isolation” (p. 349) and suppress their voices. This self-silencing was evident during the interviews, especially among those who compartmentalized their sexual and religious identities. Through their narrative, participants shared how they avoided the topic of sexuality and kept their sexuality from people around them. Other signs of self-silencing were observed including self-editing, reversion to humor, and avoidance of “I” language through their nonverbal communication. Noelle-Neumann and Petersen (2004) suggest that people acquire a “*quasi-statistical sense*” to gauge opinions of others and monitor their environment in order to fit the dominant ideology (p.

351, italics original). This self-monitoring signals the presence of spiral of silence, and ultimately prevents an important issue to be discussed openly.

Not only does the self-silencing happen between the majority and the minority groups, it also occurs *within* the minority groups. As revealed in the interviews, those who uphold their religious identity often face ridicules from non-religious LGBT members. As a result, they engage in self-monitoring and self-silencing within their own community. For instance, Mia, who was raised Catholic, reported that she intensely struggled with her religious and sexual identity. When she witnessed her partner who “grew up with no spiritual background” not struggling when she was coming out, she thought the easiest way to deal with her cognitive dissonance was to “just step away from [her] spiritual background,” implying that she would leave the identity before she felt complete discomfort. This, however, did not end her internal pain:

I realized that I uh, that relationship would eventually come to an end because there was just a resentment there that while she hadn't explicitly asked me to pick her over Christ, the relationship not having any prayer in it or nurturing in it or any dialogue even about spirituality um became an issue and a state of resentment for me and uh, when I would try to express that *it was always just shut down*, that it was just me you know being nonsense.

Having a unique position as a minority in both of the collective identities, LGBT Christians represent a muted group *within* a muted group. This discovery of an internal hierarchy within a fringe group could pose problematic implications. A question to ponder, then, is: how can the LGBT community unite and raise their voices to gain civil rights such as gay marriage and

healthcare reform for the LGBT members when the voices of their own community are being silenced?

The use of cost/benefit rhetoric merits further attention. Intriguingly, by employing the cost/benefit analysis, many participants justified their act of self-silencing as a “rational choice,” rather than the result of external forces. Essentially, to deal with the dissonance that inevitably comes from not revealing true identities to their loved ones, the participants developed cost/benefit rhetoric and internalized the mechanism of self-silencing. This active rationalization and justification of self-silencing could contribute to furthering the spiral of silence among LGBT individuals by leading to a slippery slope of keeping their true identities hidden.

Muted Group Theory

As an attempt to reconcile their religious and sexual identity, a majority of the participants broadened the concept of “religion” and distinguished what is “religious” and what is “spiritual.” Muted Group Theory suggests that there is a language disconnect between a dominant group (Christians) and a muted group (LGBT Christians), helping to illuminate the linguistic aspect of the rhetoric of silence (Ardener, 1975; Kramer, 1992). Groups that are considered muted have a difficult time connecting to the dominant narrative because the experiences they have do not fit the dominant narrative being told in society (Griffin, 2011). Since the term “religious” is used to refer to the ideology of the dominant group, it is not surprising that LGBT Christians would not define themselves as such.

Muted Group Theory also offers an insight into why LGBT individuals emphasized the relational aspect of their religious identity. Ardener (1975) explains that muted groups are not necessarily silent within society, but tend to use a less direct approach to communication. In many instances, this includes the use of artistic means of expression, or seeking to develop a

relationally oriented communication as opposed to the masculine communication approach of content or task oriented expressions. This may help explain LGBT Christians' yearning for a relational term, such as "spirituality", to describe what the dominant group calls "religion."

In addition, LGBT Christians managed to reconcile their dissonance between religious and sexual identity by separating the issues with religious people (dominant groups) from their relationships with God. Because they considered religion as a "man-made" entity and dissociated the dominant group (i.e., the source of the most dissonance between their conflicting identities) from their spiritual relationship with God, they were able to reconcile their sexual and spiritual identity.

This relational approach seems to be a potential way to reach LGBT Christians, or those who are reconciling these two identities, as the participants sought a more relational (as opposed to institutional and strict) way to connect with their faith. Less conservative members of the religious community claim that strict interpretations of Biblical scripture are "outdated" and that the Bible can be used as a "justified weapon" against those who are labeled "other" in our society (Karlsruhe, 2007). The findings that LGBT members chose to redefine religion and self-identifying with a more relational term for their religious identity, should give religious feminists who seek new interpretations of problematic scriptures a sense of hope. A call for reinterpretation of current Biblical scriptures was a common cry among those who were negotiating their two identities. Interpretations of the Bible, coupled with the fear of the enforcement of those interpretations were the most common reasons that the participants rejected Christians, but still felt that they had a spiritual relationship with God. Also, their ability to modify their rhetoric from "religious" to "spiritual" proves that changing terms in religious

rhetoric can work to prevent negative connotations associated with the initial term (Turner & West, 2006).

Null Persona

The way people communicate can illuminate their hidden discourse (Cloud, 1999). In the instance of LGBT Christians, the way they communicate can help shed light on contradictions between what they say and what they actually think about a certain issue.

While a few participants stated that they did not hold a religious affiliation, an analysis of how they answered questions suggest that they truly identify to a religious identity, just in more of a relational manner. For other participants, they stated that they felt at peace with both their sexual and religious identity, yet further explication of their Null Persona revealed more of a compartmentalization of the two identities. In both instances, participants either related more to their sexuality (those that had no religious affiliation) or their religion (those that stated they were more comfortable with both identities). This suggests that a part of reconciliation is getting to know both identities better through various ways. Several participants stated they visited different churches in order to “get a feel” of how the church views sexuality before settling on a church home. Others, spent many hours reading and researching sexuality and theology until they found the necessary words to help them negotiate the two identities.

The Null Persona helps explicate both Muted Group Theory as well as Spiral of Silence as it provides a way to check how oppressed groups communicate. Through listening at what is not being said, it was inferred that LGBT Christians recognized that they were in fact a muted fringe group, and attempted to silence themselves through humor, self-editing, and refraining from the use of “I” language. Cloud (1999) argues that in her study, which specifically looked at struggles faced by black mill workers in the documentary Uprising of ’34, the Null Persona

revealed strong racism within the labor force and discrepancies of “power, economics, and social control” in labor movements (p. 201). She claims understanding hidden racism (and sexism) uncovered by explicating Null Persona is crucial for analyzing power within social movements holistically. Viewing the LGBT community through this lens is imperative, as a civil moment is occurring that will determine such rights as gay marriage, adoption laws, and healthcare reform for LGBT. A group cannot hope to garner these rights if it is split into different sections. This also relates to the discovery of silencing of LGBT Christians discussed previously. Through Null Persona, and with the explanation of Spiral of Silence, this imbalance of power was discovered within the LGBT, and can now be remedied.

Reconciliation as a Process

Previous studies indicate four distinct ways of how LGBT individuals reconcile their religious and sexual identity: rejecting religious identity, rejecting sexual identity, compartmentalization, and integration (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). This study illustrates that these categories may not be so clear-cut. During the interviews, it was discovered that all of the participants, regardless of how they described themselves, fit into more than one category. For instance, there were moments in Sasha’s interview where she oscillated between compartmentalization and integration of two identities. She initially claimed that she was very “strong” in her religious background and it is that background that “continues to give [her] the strength to live without stress and struggle concerning [her] sexual identity.” Despite this, she exhibited signs of compartmentalization by not explicitly telling her religious loved ones about her sexuality. However, when asked how she dealt with her sexuality and religious identity discomfort, she revealed, “I looked up religious theological definitions for the use of words that people just incorrectly use. The word abomination means to do something different than what

has been done in the past.” Her analysis and attempts to reinterpret problematic scripture suggest that she is trying to fully reconcile the two identities. This was manifested in not just what they say, but what they did not say during the interviews. Indeed, some participants stated that they felt at peace with both their sexual and religious identity, yet further explication of their null persona by carefully watching their nonverbal communication, listening for their subtle change in tone, and being sensitive to their silences, revealed signs of compartmentalization between the two identities.

These findings suggest that reconciliation is more of a process rather than distinct categories. Mia’s narrative suggests this process of reconciliation. Mia was raised Catholic and intensely struggled with her religious and sexual identity. She once rejected her religious identity, but this did not end her internal pain. She then tried to compartmentalize the two identities, but felt as if she was living “two different lives.” She soon realized she could not live like that either. Eventually, through research over sexuality and theology, she found a place where she could reconcile her religious and sexual identity through redefining her views of religion, and claiming a spiritual relationship with God. This suggests that a part of reconciliation is getting to know both identities better through various ways. Several participants stated they visited different churches in order to “get a feel” of how the church views sexuality before settling on a church home. Others, spent many hours reading and researching sexuality and theology until they found the necessary words to help them negotiate the two identities.

Rhyme referred to the process as a “philosophical journey.” When asked about the relationship between his spirituality and sexuality, he said:

The way that I am now in terms of spirituality... I guess it could almost be considered that I am still going on my philosophical journey with it. *I am still learning* day after day exactly how I feel about certain things.

In claiming that he is “still learning how he feels,” he acknowledges that integrating the two identities is a process that will change over time as he learns more about himself. While identity formation is a very subjective and personal experience, the discoveries made in this study bring to light some intriguing revelations for the LGBT community. Along this “philosophical journey,” is there a place in religion for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals? These findings suggest, yes, there is.

Practical Implications

On a practical level, these findings provide implications for three areas: organizational, professional, as well as personal. On the organizational level, churches can use this information to better reach members of the LGBT community. Like any organization, churches seek to reach those who would benefit from their services and aid in their organizational identity. The discovery that LGBT individuals yearn for a more relational connection to their spiritual deity provides religious institutions with a way to communicate to this group. Emphasizing the relational, while acknowledging the previous pain felt by LGBT members coming from religious entities, may be a way to reach out to those seeking spiritual guidance in the LGBT community.

Professionally, counselors and therapists who work with LGBT individuals could benefit from this study. Knowing the gravity of the situation as well as being aware of mechanisms that have helped other LGBT members struggling through the reconciliation process would be helpful in offering advice to those who are currently struggling. For instance, participants in my study referred to literature and documentaries that have helped them reconcile their identities by

showing them how sexuality and theology come together. Being aware of these resources and their content could provide counselors with a way to explain the relationship between sexual and religious identity to LGBT Christians who come to them for advice.

On a personal level, this study can help LGBT individuals by making these narratives publicly available. According to the Episcopalian priest who validated the findings of this study, the questions LGBT members often ask are, “Is it ok to be both LGBT and Christian?” and “Is this normal?” Making these individuals aware of how other LGBT Christians reconcile their religious and sexual identity should provide them a sense that they can reconcile their identities and that this is a normal process. Hopefully, this study inspires other LGBT members to speak up and let other members know they are not alone.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (2008) found that roughly 30-40% of LGBT youth attempt suicide. Bishop Gene Robinson (2010) claims that the recent surge of suicides among LGBT youth could be attributed to dominant religious (sometimes homophobic) rhetoric in society. In the current climate surrounding the LGBT community, it is crucial to understand how LGBT Christians reconcile their religious and sexual identity and provide guidance to those who are struggling with their identity. Based on the interviews with 11 LGBT individuals, the issue is real and it is affecting more individuals than some might think.

This study reveals that LGBT Christians manage to reconcile their internal conflicts through fostering personal connections with God. In light of this, religious organizations wishing to reach LGBT members should nurture that connection and demonstrate a more relational approach to religion. While the dangers stemming from stricter doctrines are obvious (through constant barrage of messages that suggest homosexuality is an “abomination on to God”), being silent on matters of religion and sexuality is also problematic because silence can be a disconfirming message (Robinson, 2010). Interpersonally, silence is used as a punishment (Wood, 2007), so remaining silent on the topic of sexuality and religion is further exacerbating the issue (as seen with the social ramifications discussed in *Spiral of Silence*), rather than providing the help that LGBT Christians seek. However, as seen by explicating conflict created by these identities using Null Persona, the sole responsibility for communication should not be blamed on the church or other external forces. If LGBT Christians wish to reconcile, they must tolerate the conflict within themselves long enough to communicate to those who would help them. It will take both sides of the narrative to speak out against the silence. It is my hope that

this study will help open up a dialogue between LGBT members and religious groups in dealing with religion and sexuality.

Limitations

This study, however, is not without its limitations. The first limitation pertains to the sample of the study. While a diverse group of individuals within the LGBT community was desired, a transgendered individual to interview for this study was not included. This is not surprising due to the taboo nature of religion and sexual identity and also the difficulty in finding participants in the LGBT community (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). However, future research needs to address this issue and examine how transgendered individuals negotiate their religious and sexual identities when treating the LGBT as a community. The lack of scholarly attention on this particular sub-group may contribute to keeping a muted group within a muted group unheard.

The second limitation deals with the time frame of this study. This study presents only a snapshot of Christian LGBT members' reconciliation process. Because identity formation is a process, a longitudinal study should be conducted to follow the development of their reconciliation process. Along with the limitation of the time frame, it should also be noted that the comfort level of participants (especially when answering tougher questions) varied greatly when comparing those who had been "out" as LGBT for a longer period of time with those who were "newly open/gay." The participants who were "out" for a longer time exhibited more comfort when discussing the topic of their sexual and religious identity than those who were "newly open/gay." Because of the sensitivity of the subject and the comfort level of "newly open/gay" individuals in particular, follow-up interviews should provide more in-depth understanding of the reconciliation process.

The third limitation is the number of participants who were going through the integration process, the last stage of reconciliation suggested by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000). The participants for this study consisted of individuals who were at different stages of reconciliation process. Although this diversity helped understand the spectrum of reconciliation process, arguably, by recruiting more individuals those were successful in integrating their sexual and religious identity could contribute to finding ways to reconcile and provide recommendations to those who were struggling to live with conflicting identities.

Future Research

Future research should expand the scope of this study and explore how LGBT individuals with other religions beliefs negotiate their religious and sexual identities. As a case study for this issue, this could further open up communication based on sexuality in multiple faith traditions and their congregations.

Future studies should also examine specific characteristics of LGBT individuals that may help or hinder the process of reconciliation. In the study, two participants identified themselves as black and one as Mexican. Lorel and Justin both noted their “black church” experiences to be both a positive and negative influence on how they viewed their religion. While they feel their background gave them strong religious “roots,” both cited an inherent homophobia they feel exists within their ethnicity as to why their families struggled with their sexuality. Mia believed it was her strict Catholic/Mexican heritage that influenced her family’s backlash against her sexuality and prevented her contact with them now. Traditionally, there is a higher level of homophobia within black culture (Miller, 2007), which could make coming out as a LGBT Christian even more difficult. Within the Mexican culture, the machismo (male dominated) influence also affects how LGBT Christians reconcile their identity (Calvert, 2007). Research on

how the ethnic and cultural background influence LGBT individuals' reconciliation process could increase our understanding of the intricacies of reconciliation process.

In addition, more research should be conducted on the impact of environmental factors on the formation of LGBT Christian identities. In the study, all of the participants who claimed to be from small towns and one participant that was home schooled (six out of the 11) stated that they initially had trouble accepting their sexual identity due to not having the words or a way to describe how they were feeling; they just knew it was wrong because of what they learned in church. Perhaps a follow up study that strictly looks at individuals from smaller populated areas could explicate how these individuals expressed their sexuality and add to the literature on sexual identity formation.

Furthermore, it is particularly important to examine the struggles facing LGBT youth. It is during the impressionable years of adolescence that LGBT individuals are most vulnerable. All of the participants were over the age of 18, but many expressed tough situations growing up as a LGBT. One interesting, yet sad story came from Rhyne and his confrontations with a fellow student who harassed him for his sexual identity. The student started sending him "death threats" via voice mail, warning Rhyne that if he "didn't change his ways, [he] would be beaten up after school." This greatly "terrified" Rhyne, who explained:

I was afraid to walk in the hallways by myself, I had to have people around me.

You know I was a big guy, I am not supposed to be afraid of stuff like that, but I was, I was literally terrified.

While none to this extreme, other participants shared their fear of ridicule while growing up as a LGBT youth. To make matters worse, states, such as Tennessee, are now starting to create laws which would allow bullying to occur as long as the bully cites religious beliefs as their reasoning

for targeting LGBT students (Wong, 2012). As Bishop Robinson (2010) suggests, many LGBT youth suicides are in some way related to religious forces and their struggles between religious and sexual identity. Conducting a study of a younger population would help provide deeper understanding of their struggles and could offer them sense making mechanisms in overcoming their suffering.

On a theoretical level, this study begs for an extension of Muted Group Theory. While Muted Group Theory suggests that women are “muted” within society, the interviews with LGBT individuals revealed that women (specifically mothers) were quite vocal and tended to be the biggest gatekeepers of religious rhetoric. This was true of men and women, bisexual and gay/lesbian participants. In fact, the majority of participants (10) were confronted by their mothers about their sexuality. Kramer (2005) admits that MGT is potentially becoming an outdated theory due to the progressive movement. The results, specifically in dealing with LGBT individuals’ relationships with their mothers, suggest muted groups should be examined in terms of power distribution as opposed to strictly gender-based assumptions. In order to keep up with how scholarship is changing, it is imperative that feminist communication theorists make the necessary revisions to include a perspective of power structures. Research that applies these feminist theories to a variety of oppressed groups is needed in order to validate this claim.

The purpose of this study was to examine how LGBT individuals make sense of their religious and sexual identity through their personal narratives. By listening carefully to their narrative, this study contributes to providing a more welcoming environment for LGBT Christians. Sterk (2011) calls for more scholarship on how religion, communication, and gender come together so that faith traditions can discover new ways to communicate with the LGBT community. It is the hope that this study adds to the field of communication between religious

studies and gender, and ultimately, helps the members of LGBT community to live freely, with the knowledge that being LGBT and Christian does not have to be in conflict.

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Appendix A - Interview Guide Questions

- 1.** How would you identify your sexuality?
- 2.** When was the first time you remember identifying that way?
- 3.** Are you currently “out” or “open” with your sexuality?
- 4.** If so, to whom? How long?
- 5.** Was there anyone that you were afraid of/ or worried about coming out to?
- 6.** How would you identify religiously?
- 7.** Did you grow up in a church setting?
- 8.** Did you feel the religious part of your identity growing up?
- 9.** Has anyone from a religious standpoint confronted you about your sexuality?
- 10.** Has anyone from the LGBT community confronted you about your religious identity?
- 11.** Are you open to talk about religion? Sexuality?
- 12.** When do you feel it is safe to talk about religion? Sexuality?

Appendix B – Demographic Information

Mia: 31, Mexican, bisexual female, instructor

Julia: 25, white, queer female, instructor

Lorel: 19, black, gay male, student

Sasha: 48, white, lesbian, professor

Casey: 29, white, gay male, instructor

Samuel: 27, white, gay male, marketing/sales

Justin: 30, black, gay male, instructor

Gregory: 21, white, gay male, server/student

Grace: 20, white, bisexual female, waitress

Beth: 22, white, bisexual female, pharmacy technician, teacher, caretaker, and student

Rhyme: 22, white, gay male, student