



"I Never Felt Like There Was A Place For Me:" Experiences Of Bisexual And Pansexual Individuals With A Christian Upbringing

By: **Denise L. Levy** and Jennifer Harr

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“I never felt like there was a place for me:” Experiences of Bisexual and Pansexual Individuals with a Christian Upbringing

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ABSTRACT

Popular and scholarly literature describes the conflicts experienced by some gay and lesbian Christians, but less is known about the unique experiences of bisexual and pansexual populations. The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing resolved conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Grounded theory analysis of 17 interviews revealed a fluid and multidimensional process of resolution, which was influenced by community and relationships as well as experiences of isolation, secrecy, and shame. This study took place in the Bible Belt and was the first of its kind to explore the experiences of bisexual and pansexual individuals who continue to identify as Christian as well as those who have left their religion. It has implications not only for bisexual and pansexual individuals experiencing faith conflicts, but also for the faith leaders and helping professionals who support them.

KEYWORDS

bisexual; pansexual; religion; spirituality; Christian; identity conflict

Although the number of religiously unaffiliated individuals in the United States is rising, it “remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world, and a large majority of Americans – roughly seven-in-ten – continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith” (Pew Research Center [PRC], 2015a, p. 3). People identifying as religious are participating more than ever before in religious life, from praying and studying scriptures to sharing their faith with others (PRC, 2015b). In fact, more than 40% of religiously affiliated individuals turn to their religion to answer questions about morality and life’s everyday decisions (PRC, 2015b).

But what happens when an individual’s religion conflicts with his or her sexual orientation? The conflict between faith and sexuality is an identity dilemma that happens “when people possess identities that conflict with one another and both

are potentially stigmatizing” (Dunn & Creek, 2015, p. 261). Although support for same-sex sexuality and same-sex marriage is increasing among people of faith, especially in younger individuals who know someone who is gay or lesbian, there continues to be less support from Evangelical Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Mormons (Keleher & Smith, 2012; PRC, 2015b). As such, many lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals leave their faith communities with more than 40% identifying as religiously unaffiliated (PRC, 2015a). But how do they get to this point, and what about the 48% who still identify as Christian (PRC, 2015a)?

Despite the negative messages they receive from their faith groups, many gay and lesbian individuals continue to hold onto their faith to cope with life’s challenges (Murr, 2013). In fact, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people of faith report that religion and spirituality can enhance their lives, and it is important to look at potential conflicts between sexuality and religion in a nuanced way (Rosenkrantz, Rostosky, Riggle, & Cook, 2016). A number of studies have explored these conflicts between sexual identity and religious beliefs experienced by some gay and lesbian individuals (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Hansen & Lambert, 2011; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Murr, 2013; Rodriguez, 2010; Subhi & Geelan, 2012). Rodriguez’s (2010) review of the literature found that various extrinsic factors (stigma) and intrinsic factors (personal religious beliefs) ignite conflicts between religion and sexual identity. As part of these conflicts, gay and lesbian Christians may face family issues; condemnation, and rejection from others, including faith communities and, in some cases, attempts to make them straight (Murr, 2013). Internally, conflicts between sexual orientation and religion can cause depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, guilt, and alienation (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Subhi & Geelan, 2012).

As they seek to resolve these identity conflicts, many gay and lesbian individuals go through a fluid and multidimensional process (Levy & Reeves, 2011) that includes cognitive dissonance (Rodriguez, 2010), grief and loss (Hansen & Lambert, 2011), self-determination, and assistance from peers (Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011). Critically reflecting on their religion, scripture, and theological beliefs is typically an important part of the resolution process (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Lalich & McLaren, 2010; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Murr, 2013). In addition, Foster et al. (2015) learned that many individuals attempt to find or create safe and affirming congregations and transform their communities through social action. We have discovered a great deal about the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing, but less is known about the unique experiences of bisexual and/or pansexual individuals (Toft, 2009).

Theoretical frameworks of bisexuality and pansexuality

To explore the research with bisexual and pansexual individuals, it is helpful to first define and understand the history of bisexuality and pansexuality. In Alfred Kinsey’s (1948) landmark study, he outlined a 7-point scale of sexuality ranging from 0

(*exclusively heterosexual*) to 6 (*exclusively "homosexual"*). By the 1970s and 1980s, bisexual individuals were lobbying the primarily gay and lesbian organizations to include their perspectives in decisions (Callis, 2014; Eaklor, 2008). During the 1990s, bisexual individuals were speaking out politically, and with the publication of *Bi Any Other Name: Bisexual People Speak Out* (Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991), they were challenging the historically and powerfully dichotomous view of sexuality (Callis, 2014; Elizabeth, 2013). More recently, the objection to dichotomous thinking has been doubly echoed by pansexual individuals as they challenge Kinsey's Scale (and the subsequent Klein Sexual Orientation Grid) as well as notions of duality in both sexual orientation and gender identity (Balsam & Webb, 2017; Galupo, Davis, Gryniewicz, & Mitchell, 2014; Galupo, Mitchell, Gryniewicz, & Davis, 2014). Further, though models of sexual identity explain that sexuality encompasses sexual attraction, behavior, and identity (Robinson, 2015), these aspects of sexuality do not always correspond to one another. For instance, someone who identifies as bisexual and is attracted to men and women may be celibate or may only have had sexual and romantic relationships with women.

More recently, sexuality has been discussed in the context of queer theory (Blasius, 2001; Erickson-Schroth & Mitchell, 2009; Jagose, 1996) and grounded in notions of postmodernism and fluidity (Callis, 2014; Clark & Dirkx, 2000; Elizabeth, 2013). Queer theory challenges and deconstructs categories and normative definitions of "sexuality" and instead provides a politicized identity that has no clear definition (Kemp, 2009). Further, queer theory defies the notion that one cannot be bisexual or pansexual and Christian, and it highlights the importance of self-identification for sexuality and faith. It is important to note that identities are not held in a vacuum but rather intersect with one another (Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013), and this is particularly important when considering religious and sexual identities. Intersectionality recognizes that individuals are not simply made up of their individual identities but instead are made up of an intersection of those identities. As individuals negotiate their sexual identity and religious beliefs, they live in the inbetween spaces where labels and assumptions fail to encompass the richness of their experiences.

Stigma and myths

In addition to defining sexuality and understanding the history of bisexuality and pansexuality, it is important to review experiences of bisexual and pansexual people in today's society. These individuals face a great deal of stigma from straight populations as well as gay and lesbian populations (Callis, 2013), and stigma sometimes varies based on gender (Wandrey, Mosack, & Moore, 2015). Society in general, and religious groups in particular, tend to dichotomize sexuality and label an individual's sexual orientation as either straight or gay/lesbian. In fact, "bisexuality is erased and silenced in both the dominant heteronormative culture and mainstream lesbian and gay communities" (Goodine, 2015, p. 111), and there is even less recognition of

pansexuality. Even the most outspoken antigay and lesbian faith groups often do not mention bisexual individuals in their policies (Daniels, 2010). As bisexual and pansexual individuals challenge binary notions of sexuality and gender, they often experience isolation and invisibility (Hutchins & Williams, 2012).

In addition, there are numerous myths associated with bisexual and pansexual populations in today's society. For instance, because some individuals initially identify as bisexual before coming out as lesbian or gay, bisexuality is often viewed as simply a phase (Goodine, 2015; Robinson, 2015). Bisexual and pansexual individuals are also "stereotyped as promiscuous" (Robinson, p. 643), hypersexual, deviant, and untrustworthy (Callis, 2013; Goodine, 2015). Some believe that "to be bisexual is to be confused, ambiguous, undecided" (Lingwood, 2010, p. 34). Due to this stigma, coming out to faith groups and gay and lesbian populations as bisexual or pansexual "is an act of bravery repeated over and over again" (Goodine, 2015, p. 108). In fact, bisexual individuals who authentically come out to others can develop a positive sense of belonging in their communities (Pascale-Hague, 2016). Further, the literature shows positive factors associated with identifying as bisexual (Rostosky, Riggie, Pascale-Hague, & McCants, 2010), including living authentically, being an advocate, finding a community, understanding privilege, avoiding labels, having a unique outlook on life, being reflective, and being free to explore relationships and sexuality.

Review of the literature

Just as definitions of "sexuality" and experiences of stigma have changed over time, so too has research with bisexual and pansexual individuals. Although general research with bisexual individuals has increased over the past 40 years, much of it has focused on HIV or simply included bisexuals as an additional sexual category rather than the primary focus (Rust, 2009). Some research on faith and sexuality has included bisexual individuals as part of the population of study (Brennan-Ing, Seidel, Larson, & Karpiak, 2013; Buser, Goodrich, Luke, & Buser, 2011; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Hampton, Halkitis, Perez-Figueroa, & Kupprat, 2013; Page, Lindahl, & Malik, 2013; Rosenkrantz et al., 2016; Woodell, Kazyak, & Compton, 2015), but the percentages of participants in these studies who identify as bisexual range from 8% to 27%. Most do not include pansexual participants. These studies typically report results for all participants rather than addressing unique experiences of bisexual individuals. From these studies we learn that LGBTQ individuals with a Christian upbringing experience identity conflict (Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Page et al., 2013; Woodell et al., 2015). To resolve this conflict, they tend to modify their religious beliefs or their places of worship in order to find acceptance (Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Gold & Stewart, 2011; Woodell et al., 2015). Supportive and affirming counseling can be helpful as part of this process, but some LGBTQ individuals have also had negative counseling experiences (Buser et al., 2011). As they resolve identity conflicts, some individuals find that being LGBTQ and spiritual or religious is a positive influence in their lives

(Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). Other demographic factors such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity can also influence LGBTQ individuals' spiritual/religious experiences (Brennan-Ing et al., 2013; Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Hampton et al., 2016; Rodriguez, Lytle, & Vaughan, 2013).

Only a handful of studies specifically review the unique religious and spiritual beliefs of bisexual individuals alone (for instance, Jeffries et al., 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2013). These studies find that though faith communities often focus negative messages on gay and lesbian individuals, bisexual Christians may also face condemnation by their faith communities that may lead to identity conflicts and secrecy (Jeffries et al., 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2013). Those who grow up in affirming religious and community environments are often buffered from these challenges (Rodriguez et al., 2013), and many bisexual individuals identify as spiritual rather than religious (Jeffries et al., 2008; Rodriguez et al., 2013).

Only two studies focus specifically on understanding the process by which bisexual individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve identity conflict (Toft, 2009, 2014). In 2009, Toft analyzed 60 surveys completed by bisexual men and women and some follow-up, semistructured interviews in an effort to collect exploratory data on their sexuality and spirituality. He learned that participants had varied and changing definitions of "bisexuality," participants adapted either their sexuality or their religious beliefs to make them compatible with one another, and some believed that reconciliation of religious and sexual identities was simply not feasible. Toft's (2014) analysis of 80 questionnaires and 20 interviews with bisexual men and women living in the United Kingdom revealed that these individuals are forced to reshape and reimagine their faith and their sexuality. Toft reported that rather leaving Christianity, participants embraced a flexible and different kind of Christianity. Similar to his 2009 findings, Toft (2014) explained that some participants desexualized their own sexuality and placed religious identity at the forefront, others remained celibate, and a third group came to believe that bisexuality was compatible with their faith. In sum, Toft's (2009, 2014) studies reveal that bisexual Christians manage any conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs by adapting their religious beliefs and/or their sexual identity.

Emerging research seems to point to some similarities between experiences of bisexuals and gay and lesbian Christians. For instance, personalized faith and critical reflection on scriptures and church teachings are important aspects of resolving conflict for these populations (Toft, 2009). Many seek new churches or denominations that are affirming (Toft, 2014). However, bisexual men and women have unique experiences that differ from those of gay and lesbian individuals. Notably, some bisexual individuals take a "don't ask, don't tell" approach (Jeffries et al., 2008); may keep their sexuality a secret, particularly if they can pass as heterosexual (Toft, 2014); and are told they should simply choose to be straight (Toft, 2009). Because of these unique experiences, it is important to specifically explore the process of conflict resolution for bisexual and pansexual individuals who grew up as Christians. Including both populations allows "researchers to

garner samples large enough to assess important issues that may impact nonmono-sexual people as a whole” (Flanders, LeBreton, Robinson, Bian, & Caravaca-Morera, 2017, p. 40). It can also be helpful to include bisexual and pansexual individuals in studies because of the limitations of these labels. In fact, researchers have found that definitions of pansexuality and bisexuality often overlap, many individuals use multiple labels, and pansexuality is frequently categorized as part of a larger bisexual umbrella (Belous & Bauman, 2017; Galupo, Ramirez, & Pulice-Farrow, 2017).

Purpose of this study

Although much is known about experiences of gay and lesbian individuals who grew up as Christians, there is less information regarding the experiences of bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing. The existing studies are important and certainly add to the literature on sexuality and faith. However, Toft (2009, 2014) and Rodriguez, Lytle, and Vaughan’s (2013) research does not include pansexual individuals or individuals who no longer identify as Christians, and Jeffries et al.’s study (2008) reviewed the spiritual and religious traditions of a particular subgroup: bisexual Black men. Given that conflicts between sexual identity and religion are common and can lead to depression, anxiety, guilt, and rejection (Levy & Reeves, 2011; Murr, 2013; Subhi & Geelan, 2012), it is critical to learn more about the unique experiences of bisexual and pansexual individuals who experience and resolve these conflicts.

The purpose of this study was to understand the process by which bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. Four research questions guided the study:

1. How do participants define conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?
2. What personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?
3. What is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict?
4. How do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

Method

Qualitative research is “pragmatic, interpretive, and grounded in the lived experiences of people” (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 2). It helps us understand complex identities and processes, such as the process of resolving conflict for bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing. This study utilized grounded theory, a particular type of qualitative inquiry well suited to social justice research (Levy, 2015). Using this grounded theory approach, the first author completed semistructured, in-depth interviews; simultaneously collected and analyzed data; employed constant comparison; generated initial, intermediate, and advanced codes; and identified a substantive theory and core categories (Charmaz, 2006; Levy, 2015).

Participants

We recruited participants through LGBT organizations and support groups, welcoming churches, community centers, and word of mouth. Participants completed a prescreening by phone to ensure they met the study's criteria: be at least age 18 years; have at least a high school education, General Educational Development (GED), or equivalent; live in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, or Tennessee; identify as bisexual, pansexual, or someone who is attracted to people of all genders; have a Christian upbringing; have experienced and addressed conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity; and be willing to participate in the interview and, if needed, a follow-up interview.

The 17 participants ranged in age from 19 to 64 with an average age of 36. They lived in Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. Thirteen identified as White, one as African American, one as Asian American, one as Mexican American, and one as White, Jewish, and American Indian. Four identified as cisgender male, nine as cisgender female, one as agender, one as mostly cisgender male, one as nonbinary, and one as transgender. Seven described their sexual identity as pansexual, seven as bisexual, two as attracted to people of all genders, and one as bisexual and queer. Their faith upbringings included Baptist, Catholic, Church of Christ, Episcopal, Methodist, Mormon, Nondenominational, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Salvation Army, and Southern Baptist. During the interviews, these participants identified as Atheist, Agnostic, Christian, Episcopal, Jewish, Quaker, and spiritual. Additional identifications included believing in God or a Higher Power, being a follower of the teachings of Jesus Christ, not identifying with any one religion or term, and being a spiritual person with Christian faith and Buddhist practices.

Data collection and analysis

Face-to-face interviews with participants lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were conducted over the course of 14 months. The first author traveled to meet participants, and interviews occurred in various locations, including her office, participants' offices, participants' homes, a library study room, churches, and LGBT centers and organizations. Open-ended interview questions were created for background information and for each of the research questions. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and transcripts were coded using initial and intermediate codes by the authors and an additional research associate. The first author trained the second author and additional research associate in grounded theory analysis and coding and provided a guide with detailed instructions and examples of how to code the transcripts. After completing initial and intermediate coding individually, the research team came together to finalize these codes and develop the advanced codes, core categories, and the substantive theory. Although there were initial differences in words used for intermediate codes, all three researchers

identified the same general themes and eventually agreed upon the words to describe those themes.

Results

Grounded theory analysis led to a substantive theory of the process by which bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs. This process is fluid and multidimensional and should not be interpreted as a linear, stage model. In fact, participants described their process as ongoing and fluid, even though they reporting having coming to a resolution. Alex said “it’s still a journey for me.” Jessie explained that our experiences bring us to where we are today, and “we are our past, but we dictate our future.” Some participants found themselves occasionally “moving backwards” and experiencing various aspects of the process in the same moment.

As shown in [Figure 1](#), the process began as participants encountered dissonance between messages from others and personal experiences. Participants then harvested internal and external resources; experienced a turning point; accepted themselves and came out to others, paying particular attention to labels; and lived authentically through advocacy, combating myths, and acknowledging cultural and identity intersections. The entire process of conflict resolution was influenced by community and relationships as well as experiences of isolation, secrecy, and shame.

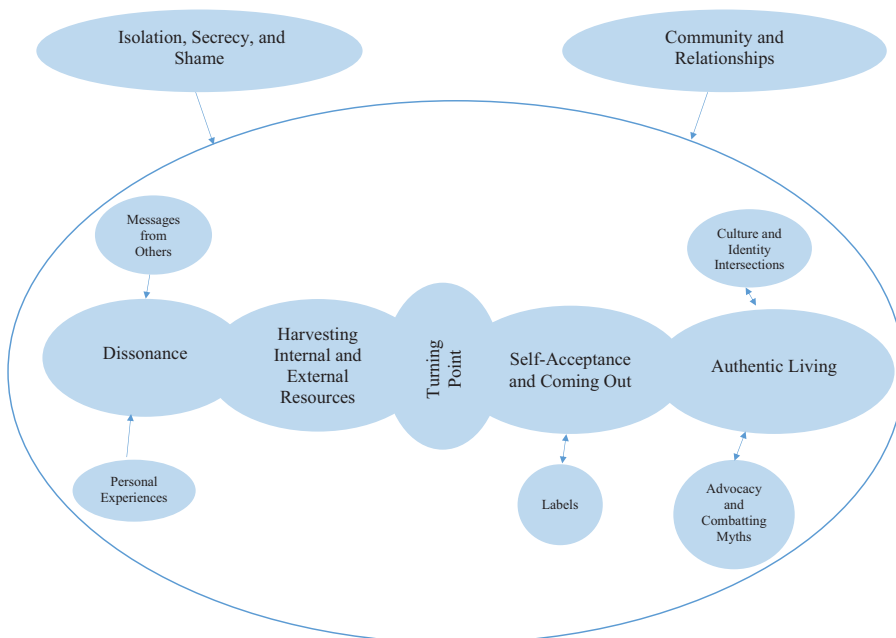


Figure 1. Process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Dissonance

Participants experienced dissonance between the messages they heard from others about sexuality and faith and their own personal experiences. None of the participants heard positive messages about being bisexual or pansexual. In fact, they were often told that “you can’t trust” bisexual or pansexual people. Grey, a 45-year-old whose religion changed from Catholicism to Judaism, explained:

It’s weird being bisexual. This is the other important thing, and maybe I’m overemphasizing this point. I almost feel like it can’t be overemphasized enough. I feel like people just are not going to trust me in either quote unquote “camp” [Christian and gay/lesbian communities] like they can’t put me in a box.

From a religious perspective, many, like Alyssa, learned that being bisexual or pansexual “is a sin, and you have to work on it and repent and try to fight the urges.” Most participants were told that they should simply pick someone of the opposite sex. In general, messages were judgmental and sometimes caused “spiritual trauma.” Several were not allowed to be members of their churches or were told that they were going to hell. Travis, a 53-year-old, pansexual male explained that this type of persecution is an “obsession” for people where he lives:

We’ve really been beat down by their persecution. And some of them feel like they are God and they are here to judge and to pass judgement on us. Even send us to the execution if they could. They would stone us.

These negative messages about bisexual and pansexual individuals stood in stark contrast to participants’ own experiences of sexual attraction.

From an early age, participants felt they were “different” than others. Grey explained that she “kind of got this certain feeling about [a friend in high school who was a lesbian]” and that “it’s really interesting now to think back on it” even though she wasn’t sure of her sexuality at the time. Several participants tried to ignore their attractions and try not to think about them. Matt, who identified as pansexual and agender, said, “I never thought about it. I never considered it ... I distracted myself with something else.” Because they were told that bisexuality and pansexuality didn’t exist and that “you’re either gay or you’re straight,” participants were often confused about their feelings of attraction to others. This confusion and dissonance lasted months for some and years for others.

Harvesting internal and external resources

In response to the dissonance between the messages they heard from others and their own personal experiences, participants harvested internal and external resources. Internal resources were critically important for participants as they faced conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. These internal resources included inner strength, resilience, and positive attitudes. Travis, for instance, explained that “we’ve all suffered. We all have our scars. We are not going to let

those impact us in a bad way. We are going to take a bad experience and turn it into a good thing in our lives.” In addition to having a positive attitude, critical thinking and reflection were important tools that assisted participants in making sense of the message they were hearing from their families and communities. For instance, Jessie, one of the oldest participants who described their life a series or process of stages and goals, noted that they simply could not accept the words of an elder in their church who said that people who had never heard of Jesus Christ were going to hell. Critical thinking and questioning religious authority were often tools that came later in life for participants. In sum, participants harvested internal resources as they reflected on and made sense of their dissonant experiences and relied on their inner strength and resilience to resolve their conflicts.

In addition to turning inward, many participants looked outward to external resources such as social media, community centers, and print materials for support. Sarah, an Asian American woman who identified as a bisexual atheist, discussed the importance of tumblr and social media for support and for finding likeminded individuals. She found a similar support network at her university’s LGBT Center. In addition to the internet and social support networks, participants found that books and other print materials were an important piece of the journey. Examples include *Why Christianity Must Change or Die* (Spong, 1998), *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* (Winterson, 1985), *God Believes in Love: Straight Talk about Gay Marriage* (Robinson, 2012), and *In the Eye of the Storm: Swept to the Center by God* (Robinson, 2008). These materials exposed them to new ideas and helped them form their own conclusions. For those who had community centers and welcoming spaces, these became lifelines for information and support. These external resources, combined with inner strength and reflection, prepared participants for what became turning points in their journeys.

Turning point

The turning point was different for each participant, but each one identified a specific situation or event that helped them move from experiencing conflict to experiencing resolution and self-acceptance. For Sarah, it was being a part of PRIDE and truly becoming proud of her identity. Although communities of support were important external resources that many participants harvested, Sarah found that joining PRIDE was a lifeline. Not only did PRIDE help her understand and discover her identity, but it crystalized her self-acceptance. For Blue, a 22-year-old who identified as pansexual and nonbinary (as it relates to gender), the turning point was finding themselves strongly attracted to a woman and realizing that they were not “strictly straight.” Blue said, “I realized, okay, this person’s body doesn’t matter to me. It’s the person who’s inside that matters to me.” That realization was an “aha” moment for Blue.

Like Blue, Nova’s and Jessie’s turning points were also associated with how they related to or were attracted to other individuals. Nova started dating his current

partner when he was 17, and their relationship was a turning point for self-discovery and understanding related to sexuality and gender. Jessie's turning point was taking the brave step to leave a marriage after 18 years. Jessie explained:

I walked away from my farm. I walked away from that and started on a different path. I started on a new path in life. It hurt to lose my home. It hurt to lose my wife, but she had asked three times for a divorce. And finally the third time I succumbed. And I left her the farm. I left her the house. I left her the car, everything. I moved back to [city] with my mother, my guitar, a typewriter, and the clothes on my back, and I started my life over again.

Whether the turning point was leaving to start a new life or officially joining PRIDE, it was a powerful experience that led to self-acceptance.

Self-Acceptance and coming out

All of the participants in this study eventually embraced their sexuality, though for some it was a long and difficult process. Veronica, for instance, says that "it took me longer to figure out who I am and to accept it ... because of this super religious upbringing." Despite exploring many religions, including Mormonism, Catholicism, and Episcopalian, Veronica found that the Episcopal Church was a place where she could be herself and perhaps even become a leader in the congregation. When Matt came out to himself as pansexual, he also found it to be "very liberating" since he had not "felt this comfortable with myself for my entire life." Trina, who identified as a bisexual Christian, explained that regardless of what other people think, "in the future, I'm going to be me."

Most came out to others when they felt it was safe to do so. Margaret, for instance, came out in a university class "for my own sense of integrity." When her professor said that the class was going to talk about sexuality and "chose his words carefully as if he expected everyone to be horrified by it," Margaret decided she could not remain silent:

And so when it got to be my turn, I said, "yes, somebody in my family is homosexual – my partner. Now me, I'm more in the middle, but she's real gay." And [the professor] just stood there for a minute and he went "Oh." I'm thinking, is this the first time he's ever had a gay or lesbian or bisexual person in his class? Really? But no it wasn't, because there was also another guy in there who was also gay.

Margaret's act of bravery helped educate her classmates and her professor, but she explained that she had done a lot of personal work over the course of her 60 years of life to get to the point of this moment in this class.

Many participants did not get the reactions they hoped for when they did come out, particularly from their family members. Seneca, one of the youngest participants in the study at age 19 years, came out to his mom who immediately burst into tears and asked (quite seriously) if his gay cousins had recruited him. Trina explained that her parents know that she is bisexual, but they still "choose

not to know.” Blue and others have decided not to come out to their parents unless they “have to” (if they find a partner who is nonbinary or who is someone of the same gender). For all of the participants, coming out is a process. Veronica described it as a daily decision. “There are times when I think, ‘How important is it for me to be out or to be true to myself?’ I have some job leads, and I have spoken to people who say horrible things. But for me, it’s been so freeing to not be ashamed anymore.”

Labels

As part of the coming-out process, labels and terms had a unique role. For some, taking on a label of bisexual or pansexual was an important part of coming out and finding connection with others who had similar identities. Perhaps this is because many, like Dave, did not “ever really know that the label [bisexual] was an option until much later in life.” Although Dave knew that he was attracted to men and women, he just thought he was confused. Many of the pansexual participants initially identified as bisexual until they learned about pansexuality. For instance, when Alex read the definition of pansexual, she started to use it because it best defined who she was and because she wanted to “bring greater awareness and education” to her community. Still, some who identify as pansexual, like Seneca, often tell people that they are bisexual since it is a more familiar term. Taylor gravitates towards the term “queer” because “queer is a whole way of being” and is limitless in a way that other labels are not.

Although most participants found that labeling their sexual identity was helpful in their process of coming out, a couple resisted labels altogether. Katie, a 64-year-old African American who identified as spiritual, noted that she has never been comfortable calling herself bisexual. She simply loves who she loves. This resistance to labeling was particularly salient for participants’ faith identities. Margaret said:

I would not give myself the Christian label at this point. I would say that my tradition is Christianity, and I may even describe myself as a follower of the teaching of Jesus Christ. But so much has come in the name of Christianity that I don’t even want to be associated with it. And, it’s not so much even that I don’t want to be associated with it, but I don’t identify with it. I don’t identify with those people.

Margaret does not want to be associated with Christianity, perhaps because many Christian groups do not affirm bisexual and pansexual identities, and she chooses instead to avoid any particular faith label. Because many bisexual and pansexual individuals are used to living “in between” the sexual orientation labels of gay/lesbian and straight, it may be easier to also reject labels related to religion and faith.

Regardless of whether it was important to participants to label themselves, many expressed disappointment and frustration at being labeled by others simply based on their gender presentation and the presentation of their partners. For instance,

Nova, who is pansexual, explained that he is never questioned about his sexuality since he has only dated individuals who are cisgender female:

Since I [started to] identify as pansexual, I've only dated someone who looks sexually like a girl so I don't ever get questioned about it. And sometimes I feel like I'm not really part of the LGBTQA community just because I am dating someone who looks like a girl.... We don't get discriminated against in restaurants or anything like that. I feel like we got a free pass in society.

Some participants explained that they are labeled as gay or lesbian because of their same-sex partners. No matter how they were labeled by others, it was frustrating for participants that these labels were assigned to them in advance of them choosing to come out or identify themselves.

Authentic living

As individuals who have resolved conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs and who identify as sexual minorities, participants find that living authentically is key. In other words, it is important to them to not only accept themselves as bisexual and pansexual individuals, but to also share their lives with others as a way to promote understanding and acceptance. Through their authentic living, they combat myths about bisexual and pansexual populations and advocate for equity and fairness.

Common myths and assumptions they face include the idea that someone cannot be bisexual/pansexual and Christian, that sexuality is assumed based on the gender presentation of someone's partner, that people who identify as bisexual/pansexual are just in the process of becoming gay/lesbian, and that bisexual/pansexual people either do not exist or cannot be trusted. In the face of these myths and assumptions, the participants in this study advocate for understanding, fairness, and equity. For instance, Katie and her former partner were invited to speak to the Department of Children's Services about being same-sex parents and were thrilled to have the opportunity to educate others. Jessie advocates every day of their life. They have spoken at community events, to Mormon missionaries, and everywhere in between. They tell a story about the time they attended a Methodist church in town that was having an open discussion about gender and sexuality, and stood up and spoke when others started calling LGBTQ individuals "freaks of nature" and "mistakes God made." Jessie said:

And I had to stand up. There [were] maybe 13 people in that room. I had to stand up. I said "Excuse me. Excuse me. Excuse me." And the third time they finally paid attention. And the moderator stopped speaking and I stood up. And everyone was looking at me. And I said "I have to say something. Not once in my life have I ever felt like I was a mistake that God made. Not once in my life have I ever felt like I was a freak of nature."

Jessie and other participants find that the more they can tell their stories and show that they are caring, kind, authentic individuals, the more others will understand and accept them as human beings.

For a handful of participants, intersections of culture and identity play a role in authentic living. Sarah, who is Asian American, noted that “gender and sexuality are constructed different in the Philippines,” and explained that she does not feel comfortable coming out to her mother because of these cultural differences and norms followed by her family. For example, her mother “calls everyone who is not straight bakla, which means gay. If she sees a drag queen on TV, she says bakla. I’m like, ‘you don’t know if they are gay or not – they’re just a drag queen.’” Because of these cultural differences and the lack of exposure to a range of sexual identities, Sarah does not feel secure coming out to her mother. Alex, who is Mexican American, also experienced strong cultural influences growing up. She explained “they wear long dresses, keep their hair up” and “you gotta make sure your daughter is in a dress, and your son cuts his hair and keeps it short. Growing up, I figured it was more of a cultural thing.” As a child, Alex wore dresses out of respect for her family, and as an adult, her mother still asks her to take her baseball cap off based on a belief that “women should look a certain way.” For Alex and Sarah, cultural traditions impact how they interact with their families of origin and whether or not they feel comfortable being their authentic selves.

Isolation, secrecy, and shame

As common in grounded theory studies, overarching core categories emerged as part of the analytic process. In this study, the entire process of conflict resolution from dissonance to authentic living was affected by two core categories. For the first core category, participants noted that isolation, secrecy, and shame surrounded their process. Individuals felt isolated from both the faith and the gay/lesbian communities. Margaret explained that she was isolated from the lesbian community, the straight community, and the Christian community. She was not trusted by anyone, and that left her “out in the cold all around, and that was a damn scary place to be – feeling like I wasn’t going to be accepted anywhere.” Similarly, although Matt felt rooted in other communities, he always felt out of place in the faith community. He concluded that “Christianity in the 1980s and 1990s had no place for queer people.” Taylor, a 29-year-old atheist who grew up attending Baptist and Pentecostal churches, explained that “I didn’t know of any gay people and I certainly didn’t know of any religious gay people.” Because of this isolation, participants often felt that they had nowhere to turn.

Negative messages from faith communities also resulted in participants keeping their identities and attractions a secret. Initially, this was one way that participants coped with their experiences. In college, Matt knew that he “needed to stay closeted or else my school friends might very well find me in a dark corner of campus and beat the shit out of me.” Dave also “learned to keep my mouth shut about it”

because he feared judgment and had been “burned in the past.” With stories of individuals being removed from their churches (like Travis was), excommunicated, and disowned by their families, secrecy seemed like the safest option.

In addition to isolation and secrecy, participants discussed how their experiences of shame influenced the process of conflict resolution. Shame was particularly apparent when they were exposed to judgment by faith groups. Veronica “had a lot of shame around sexuality and a lot of secrecy.” She said, “I tried really hard to suppress my sexuality, especially being in the Mormon environment. I tried really hard to not masturbate at all and I just had a lot of really shame and self-hatred.” Jordon, who grew up Southern Baptist, also said that there was “a lot of guilt and shame” related to sexuality, particularly coming from a church that believed in praying and casting off the “demon of femininity.” This shame led to further isolation and secrecy, which was a downward cycle and spiral for some participants.

Community and relationships

The second core category influencing the entire process of conflict resolution was the importance of community and relationships. Taylor explained that it’s important to find solidarity with others who are going through the similar situations, and she found that solidarity in the LGBT community. For many, like Travis, the LGBT community is like a surrogate family. These connections provide the “courage to stand up against the machine.” Trina recently learned about and became involved in PRIDE, and it has helped her to “become stronger in who I am and put a stamp on what I believe. Before then I was just hiding who I was and just playing along. Now I am proud of who I am.” Nova, a 19-year-old pansexual who identified as “loosely agnostic,” explained that finding a group of likeminded friends helped him relax and be himself.

Unfortunately, some communities were not accepting. Travis lived in “the buckle of the bible Belt” at the time of the interview, and explained that there are “so many dogmatic individuals in this area. That’s why a lot of people leave this town. And I don’t blame them. I encourage all the young people I know to leave.” Several participants did just that, and moved to new towns and communities in an effort to find acceptance. Sarah, for instance, moved to a new town with the mantra “new environment, new me.” In the end, all of the participants found some type of supportive and accepting community, and felt that this made a critical difference in their ability to resolve conflicts and live authentically.

Conclusions and implications

Participants in this study described their fluid and multidimensional process for resolving conflict between bisexual and pansexual identity and religious beliefs. During this process, they encountered dissonance between messages from others and personal experiences; harvested internal and external resources; experienced a turning point; accepted themselves and came out to others, paying particular

attention to labels; and lived authentically through advocacy, combating myths, and acknowledging cultural and identity intersections. The entire process was influenced by community and relationships as well as experiences of isolation, secrecy, and shame.

We utilized a variety of strategies to ensure trustworthiness, credibility, and dependability of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). These strategies included prolonged engagement with the population of interest (14 months), triangulation during study planning and data analysis, triangulation of theoretical and conceptual frameworks, peer discussion on subjectivity and reflexivity, peer debriefing, and a rich description of the findings. It was quite helpful to have a team of three researchers independently review and code the data and discuss our findings as a group. Despite these strategies, there are several limitations to keep in mind when reviewing the study's findings. Although we made efforts to recruit participants from under-represented racial and ethnic groups from the very beginning of the study, the respondents were mostly White. However, it is notable that the analysis revealed that cultural intersections were important for racially and ethnically diverse participants, and this points to the need for additional research to explore identity intersections beyond sexuality and religion. By including bisexual and pansexual individuals in this study, it is difficult to parse out the unique aspects of these two populations. In the future, researchers may wish to study specific populations in order to further develop the findings. Finally, this study includes bisexual and pansexual individuals who have resolved conflicts between faith and sexual orientation, and these participants described their process of resolving conflict to the best of their memory. The study does not include those who reported significant unresolved conflicts.

This study has several implications for theory, research, and practice. As noted in Wandrey, Mosack, and Moore's (2015) research, coming out and self-acceptance were critical components to the resolution process and to living authentically (Pascale-Hague, 2016; Rostosky et al., 2010). Access to resources and being part of a community were also important as participants resolved conflicts between sexuality and faith (Pascale-Hague, 2016; Rostosky et al., 2010). These findings highlight the importance of focusing on intersectionality to understand identity development and lived experience (Rodriguez et al., 2013). Finally, as with other studies (Rodriguez et al., 2013; Rostosky et al., 2010), participants queered their sexual and faith identities by living authentically and moving beyond labels and assumptions.

The findings in this study align with Toft's (2009, 2014) research, particularly for those participants who continue to identify as Christians. The participants in all three studies reconceptualize their faith and sexuality so that they are compatible. They express unique experiences of stigma from faith communities and gay and lesbian communities. This study, unlike Toft's, did not include participants who choose to remain celibate because of their faith beliefs nor was it limited to only those who remain Christians. As such, participants in this study were more

likely to adapt their religious beliefs or to leave their religion altogether. Even with this study and Toft's (2009, 2014) research, there is still much to learn from this population.

Future research should attend to the limitations of this study by recruiting more racially and ethnically diverse participants and perhaps interviewing individuals who are in the process of resolving conflict. Additionally, larger scale studies with individuals who live in outside of the Bible Belt will provide even more information about the experiences of bisexual and pansexual individuals with a Christian upbringing. Research with those who have backgrounds in religions other than Christianity will also build upon our current knowledge.

Finally, this study has implications for bisexual and pansexual individuals, and for the social workers, therapists, faith leaders, advocates, and others who work with them. Understanding how others have resolved conflict and the internal and external resources they utilized can be helpful for those who are actively experiencing conflict between their bisexual or pansexual identities and religious beliefs. Lingwood (2010) explains that "the sharing of stories is always the first step in meaning making, community forming and discernment" (p. 26). In sharing and hearing these lived experiences, we hope that bisexual and pansexual individuals will find commonality, community, and support. The brave participants in this study remind us that advocacy and authentic living are the first step in creating a just and sustainable society. May we all follow their lead in our words, in our actions, and in our lives.

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