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## **Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, And Queer Individuals With A Christian Upbringing**

By: **Denise L. Levy** and Patricia Reeves

### **Abstract**

Gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing often experience conflict between religion and sexual identity. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand how gay, lesbian, and queer-identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 participants led to 3 conclusions. First, resolving the discord between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution. Second, personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the resolution process. Finally, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions.

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# Resolving Identity Conflict: Gay, Lesbian, and Queer Individuals with a Christian Upbringing

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*Gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing often experience conflict between religion and sexual identity. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to understand how gay, lesbian, and queer-identified individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Analysis of in-depth interviews with 15 participants led to 3 conclusions. First, resolving the discord between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution. Second, personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the resolution process. Finally, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions.*

**KEYWORDS** *sexuality, spirituality, identity, grounded theory*

*I was mostly focused not just on what it was to be gay, but I was trying to figure out what it was to be gay and Christian. Because if I could not find some way to make the two things come together, there is no way I would have been able to come out, because it would have shattered my identity. (Mark)*

*I couldn't give up on homosexuality. I knew that's who I was. It made me give up on Christianity. . . . It's a painful process to lose your faith. . . . Trust me. Having your faith die is not easy. (Allen)*

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## INTRODUCTION

For numerous Christians, religion is the foundation and centerpiece of their lives. Religious institutions provide a social network, a source of emotional support, and a value base. Many turn to religion as they make important decisions because their belief systems help answer some of life's essential questions (Deutsch, Coleman, & Marcus, 2006). But what happens when religious beliefs come into conflict with other aspects of identity? Most Christians and Christian churches contend that homosexuality is a sin (Levy, 2009). For example, the Southern Baptist Convention (1999–2007), which is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States and boasts more than 16 million members, has taken the following position: "Homosexuality is not a 'valid alternative lifestyle.' The Bible condemns it as sin. It is not, however, unforgivable sin. The same redemption available to all sinners is available to homosexuals. They, too, may become new creations in Christ" (*Sexuality*, paragraph 1). This belief has been echoed by numerous Christian denominations.

How, then, do gay, lesbian, and queer Christians deal with conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity? In the existing research on this topic, several studies have sought to understand the ways in which gays and lesbians view their spiritual journeys (Shallenberger, 1996; Yip, 2003). As they develop spiritual and religious beliefs, many become critical of institutionalized religion (Yip, 2003), while others seek congregations that are accepting and welcoming (Rodriguez & Oullette, 2000). For those who attend gay-positive churches, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), involvement is highly correlated with the integration of sexual and Christian identity (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Unlike most denominations, these congregations acknowledge the compatibility between Christianity and same-sex attraction, thus providing a safe haven and spiritual home for gay, lesbian, and queer Christians.

Research also reveals that gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing commonly experience identity conflicts (Couch, Mulcare, Pitts, Smith, & Mitchell, 2008). Typically, individuals deal with these conflicts by doing one of the following:

1. rejecting their sexual identity,
2. rejecting their Christian identity,
3. integrating these two identities,
4. compartmentalizing, or
5. living with the conflict.

Although some studies (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000) highlight the questioning and confusion experienced by individuals during this conflict, little research examines the process of conflict resolution. Of the studies that do focus on process

(Donnelly, 2001; Mahaffy, 1996; Shallenberger, 1996; Thumma, 1991), none uses a sample that includes both Christian and non-Christian participants. In addition, the existing research on gay and lesbian individuals with a Christian upbringing does not incorporate postmodern notions of identity, nor does it frame identity development as occurring over the life span. Utilizing a postmodern notion of identity (Clark & Dirx, 2000), this study brings a fresh perspective to the existing literature by viewing the construct of identity as fluid, ever-changing, and complex rather than as fixed, unitary, and stable. Instead of trying to find a point of resolution for this conflict, the study focuses on the process, inviting participants to share their experiences of transformation thus far. In other words, resolution of the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs did not occur as a single event or moment for these individuals; rather, resolution was and will be a continual process.

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

1. First, how do participants define the conflict between their sexual identity and religious beliefs?
2. Second, what personal and contextual factors shaped their efforts to resolve this conflict?
3. Third, what is the process by which individuals resolve this conflict?
4. Finally, how do participants describe their resolution of this conflict?

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Because this study focused on both sexual and religious identity, multiple philosophical and theoretical conceptions informed the research: postmodern identity perspectives, faith development, sexual identity development, queer theory, and transformational learning theory. Historically, identity has been understood as unified, unwavering, and authentic (Clark & Dirx, 2000). In “finding ourselves,” we seek an essential, core identity that is waiting to be discovered. Conversely, Clark and Dirx posited that, in a postmodern world, the notion of the unified self is no longer applicable; it does not encapsulate the plurality of experiences and voices. Similarly, this study examined the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs with an eye for fluidity, flexibility, and plurality.

Several scholars have written about the development of religious identity, morality, and faith. The most well-known theory of religious identity development was proposed by Fowler (1981), who based his theory on interviews with more than 350 individuals. Fowler’s stage theory identified progressive periods of faith that people experience, and his linear

conceptualization included six such periods: intuitive-projective, mythic-literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative-reflective, conjunctive, and universalizing faith.

Several widely cited theories of sexual identity development exist, with Cass's (1979) theory of gay and lesbian identity development, another stage theory, regarded as one of the most influential. Based on her work with lesbian and gay individuals, Cass (1979) proposed six stages of sexual identity formation: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. It should be noted that some theorists view stage models as problematic. Rust (2003), for example, explained that "although models are developed to *describe* psychological and social phenomena, when they are used in efforts to predict or facilitate the processes they describe, they become *prescriptive*" (p. 239). Especially challenging is the tendency to view stages as linear and essential in the "normal" developmental process.

Queer theory provides an alternative lens through which one can examine faith and sexual identity as fluid and intertwined concepts. Previously used as a slur against gay and lesbian individuals, the term queer has been reclaimed in recent years by individuals who resist a dichotomous view of gender and sexuality. Incorporating a nuanced meaning, queer is considered "sometimes as an umbrella term for a coalition of culturally marginal sexual self-identifications and at other times to describe a nascent theoretical model which has developed out of more traditional lesbian and gay studies" (Jagose, 1996, p. 1). Influenced by Foucault, Sedgwick, Butler, Derrida, and others, queer theory places value in unconventional or non-normative sexualities and characterizes identity as a cultural construction (Talbert & Steinberg, 2000).

A final theory informing this study is transformational learning theory. Transformational learning theory, proposed by Mezirow (1995) and developed further by Freire and other theorists, "is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 130). Aptly titled, this theory describes the transformation that occurs through learning, which is defined as making new meanings in life. This transformation is considered a developmental progression that often begins with a disorienting dilemma such as the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs (Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor, 1998). There are four commonly recognized themes or components to transformative learning: centrality of experience, critical reflection, rational discourse, and action (Merriam et al., 2007; Taylor, 1998).

## METHODOLOGY

Although research to date has focused on the outcome of the conflict experienced by gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing,

this study, which reports select findings from a larger research project (Levy, 2009), delineates the *process* by which individuals resolve this conflict. According to Padgett (1998), researchers should employ qualitative methods when they want to “explore a topic about which little is known . . . pursuing a topic of sensitivity and emotional depth . . . to capture the ‘lived experience’ from the perspectives of those who live it” (pp. 7–8). Grounded theory, a particular type of qualitative research, focuses on generating or discovering theory (Creswell, 2007; Glaser, 2007). It includes simultaneously collecting and analyzing data, generating codes and categories from the data, constantly comparing data, writing memos, and constructing a theory based on the data (Charmaz, 2006).

This study utilized a grounded theory approach and included in-depth interviews with 15 participants who were selected using both maximum variation and theoretical sampling. We began the study using maximum variation sampling, purposefully selecting diverse participants who experienced the conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity differently. As the study progressed, we moved to theoretical sampling and identified participants who would inform specific concepts in the emerging theory. For example, we recruited two participants with very different religious upbringings, Lutheran and Free Will Baptist, to see if our theory of the five-stage process of conflict resolution would hold true for these individuals. Overall, the sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, religious background, and current faith identification. Table 1 provides demographic information about these participants, including pseudonyms. The semi-structured interviews lasted from 50 to 105 minutes and were conducted over a 12-month period in the participants’ homes or in a university office. Interviews were audio

**TABLE 1** Participants’ Demographic Information

Name	Age	Race	Sex	Sexual Identity	Highest Degree	Religious Upbringing
Mark	29	Caucasian	M	Gay	Bachelor’s	Jehovah’s Witness
William	43	Caucasian	M	Gay	Master’s	Southern Baptist
Jake	31	Caucasian	M	Gay, Queer	Associate’s	Church of Christ
Allen	39	Caucasian	M	Gay	Bachelor’s	Nondenominational Church of Christ
Sarah	29	Caucasian	F	Queer	Master’s	Catholic
Jennifer	26	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor’s	Catholic
Logan	29	Caucasian	M	Gay, Queer	Master’s	United Methodist
Allison	19	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	High School	Southern Baptist
Luke	28	Filipino American	M	Gay	Master’s	Catholic
Hannah	23	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor’s	Southern Baptist
Melanie	20	Biracial	F	Lesbian	High School	Catholic
Laura	30	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor’s	Various Christian
Trey	23	Caucasian	M	Gay	High School	Catholic
Deborah	31	Caucasian	F	Lesbian	Bachelor’s	Lutheran (ELCA)
Chad	36	Biracial	M	Gay	Bachelor’s	Free Will Baptist

taped and transcribed verbatim, and transcripts were coded using grounded theory methods of open, focused, and axial coding. In particular, this study adhered to Charmaz’s (2006) constructivist grounded theory, recognizing that data and analysis should be understood in the context of time, place, situation, and culture.

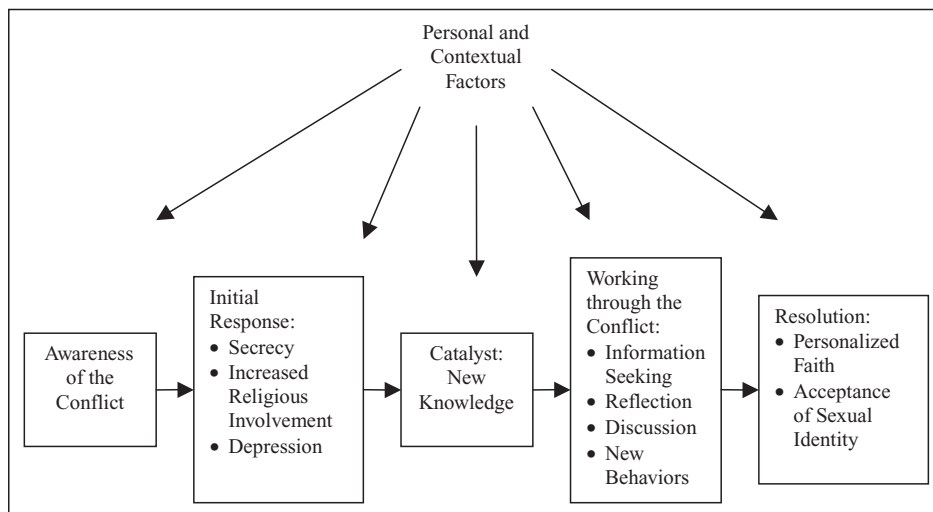
In qualitative research, reliability and validity are synonymous with the concept of trustworthiness (Merriam, 2009). This study utilized the following techniques to ensure rigor: triangulation, peer examinations, member checks, rich description, and maximum-variation sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 2009).

## FINDINGS

In grounded theory research, analysis leads to “a substantive-level theory, written by a researcher close to a specific problem or population of people” (Creswell, 2007, p. 67). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), the founders of the grounded theory approach, substantive theories are those that describe a “substantive, or empirical, area of sociological inquiry” (p. 32). The substantive theory in this study is a five-stage process by which gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs (see Figure 1).

### Five-Stage Process

This five-stage process includes an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants



**FIGURE 1** Model of internal conflict resolution.

forward, steps of working through the conflict, and resolution of the conflict. The entire process of conflict resolution was affected by two core categories: personal factors (reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor) and contextual factors (family, community resources, and church doctrine).

#### AWARENESS OF THE CONFLICT

Participants spoke at length about conflict between church doctrine regarding sexual orientation and their personal experiences with same-sex attraction. All 15 described messages from pastors and religious figures that both implicitly and explicitly condemned “homosexuality.” Several individuals, such as Logan, 29, who was the only participant to grow up attending a Methodist church, stated that the official church doctrine was to “hate the sin [and] love the sinner.” Jake, 31, who grew up in the Church of Christ, once heard a sermon characterizing “homosexuality as being a ticket to hell.” Similarly, Chad, 36, remembered his Free Will Baptist pastor saying “you could not be gay and go to church. You cannot be a Christian. You cannot inherit the Kingdom of God and be a homosexual. You will burn forever in hell.” Some churches, like Jennifer’s Catholic congregation, did not explicitly address the taboo topic of sexuality. Still, in her church “it was generally established that homosexuality was wrong and that’s about all you need to know. . . . It wasn’t really talked about much. It was assumed that you knew that it was wrong.”

Awareness of the conflict between church doctrine and same-sex attraction often left participants confused and fearful. Mark slowly and thoughtfully described his experience:

I was horrified at first because it [same-sex attraction] flew in the face of everything I believed a good Christian man should be and experience and feel. And, at first it didn’t make sense at all and then as soon as I realized it, I wanted it to go away so badly.

#### INITIAL RESPONSE TO THE CONFLICT

After participants became aware of conflict between same-sex attraction and church doctrine, they had several initial responses or reactions. All worked tirelessly to keep their sexual desires a secret. Jake, who now calls himself a clairvoyant, described how being more involved in his church helped him stay in the closet:

I felt really safe in the youth group because who was going to be gay in a church youth group? That’s where I felt safe. And it was ironic that I felt like I could hide out in this youth group and no one would pick on me or call me out or see me as being queer because I’m attending church and



I'm attending this Christ-driven event. And it worked. It worked. It was like perfect stealth in the youth group and no one ever picked on me.

Mark, who grew up as a Jehovah's Witness, had a similar reaction: "I didn't really seek help about it [same-sex attraction] because there is such a deep stigma to it, and so I was very ashamed. I would not talk about it with anyone." Several participants used the term "compartmentalization" to describe their efforts to keep sexual desires a secret. Trey, for example, explained that he "somehow compartmentalized my faith and my sexuality in my own mind."

As participants kept secret their same-sex attraction, involvement in religious activities increased. Eleven spent time in prayer, hoping that their desires would dissipate. Mark described his prayers in this way: "I prayed that I would be changed. I prayed that I would get married. I prayed that I would meet a nice girl. I prayed that this part of me would just go away." Hannah, 23, whose mother took her to a Love Won Out seminar with ex-gay speakers, also "prayed a lot that God would just take it [same-sex desires] away." In addition to intense prayer, many participants studied their bibles and spent more time at church. Melanie, for example, threw herself "more into church thinking that maybe it would help me, that I would find some sorts of tools to make it go away, and I started trying to pray it away. I did so many rosaries."

Becoming more involved in religious activities, however, did not eliminate participants' same-sex desires, and many experienced depression. William, who no longer calls himself a Christian but follows the teachings of Christ, started seeing a therapist because he "had a lot of depression as a result" of the conflict. Allen, a minister's son, also became depressed; he explained that "at night, it all came crashing in. There was a lot of crying, a lot of depression." Allison, raised a Southern Baptist and at 19 the youngest participant in this study, recalled a similar low point in her life:

I got really depressed and my brain was kind of in turmoil about what was going on because of this girl that came into my life. . . . I couldn't eat, or I couldn't not eat, and I just got the shakes. It was really crazy for a couple weeks, just trying to process everything that happened because it felt like it was so life-changing, because it was. It was just scary to think this might be who I am.

For Deborah, who went to a women's college, religion failed her when she was depressed and needed it most:

I went into a huge depression, and some of that was because of my sexuality. My mother died when I was 19, too, so it kind of coincided. But it came at a really bad time. So, when I felt like I needed the church the most, I didn't have that.

Like Deborah, Mark lost one of his parents. During the period in which he was experiencing same-sex attraction his father died, and Mark was “at times, suicidal.”

#### CATALYST: NEW KNOWLEDGE

Participants were able to break the cycle of increased religious involvement, secrecy, and depression when they encountered some type of new knowledge. This new information challenged church doctrine on sexuality ingrained since childhood and, in so doing, became a turning point or catalyst for change. William, the oldest participant at 43, described a “turning point” that “took time” to really sink in. It involved talking with a traveling preacher who had been instrumental in helping William’s parents deal with his sexual identity. Hannah, raised Southern Baptist, had her “aha” moment when the “light bulb” went off at her Christian college as she “met people who were involved with the church who *did* accept people who were gay.” She was intrigued, and consequently decided to major in religion. Like Hannah, Allison also made new friends who became “the catalyst [she needed] for getting out” of the “Christian bubble.”

In discussing various catalysts, participants also mentioned inconsistencies in church doctrine regarding issues other than homosexuality, such as divorce, birth control, and suicide.

Jake recounted his church’s harsh stance on divorce, and how this strict doctrine made him reconsider his own beliefs and learn about the imperfections inherent in the institution of religion. Laura experienced doubt in her faith when a non-Christian friend committed suicide. She described her predicament this way:

This very wonderful person that I’ve known who loved everyone and who was so tortured took his own life. My religion is telling me that he is in hell. That’s probably the first time I really started drawing lines in the sand from what people told me and what I allowed myself to believe. So that was pretty pivotal.

Summing up this type of catalyst, Logan said, “there’s a disconnect to what we’re talking about and what we’re doing.” This “disconnect” between church doctrine and participants’ experiences of the world caused them to question their faith and to begin working through the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

#### WORKING THROUGH THE CONFLICT

Once driven forward by the catalyst of new knowledge, participants began the process of resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious

upbringing. Because new knowledge was the catalyst for this process, it is not surprising that they reacted to it by seeking out additional information. Allen explained that this searching was necessary because otherwise it was too hard to “see outside of” the faith in which he was raised. He stated, “There’s one doctrine and that’s all you’re shown. You really have to search and find” other information. Through information seeking, participants investigated various Christian beliefs about sexual orientation, other religious philosophies, and the topic of sexuality in general.

In addition to seeking information, respondents took time to reflect on what they were learning, hearing, and experiencing. Although Allison “over-analyzed everything” and was “very skeptical” about religion, after reflection she eventually “came back around to it.” She attributed this change in attitude to the need to “believe in something.” Hannah also wanted to be able to define her beliefs concretely. She “just had so many questions” and wanted to learn about “the psychology of religion and religion itself.” Like Hannah, Laura “asked the hard questions” about theology at an early age. Regardless of the issues that participants pondered, reflection proved to be an important way in which they dealt with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs.

Although some participants preferred personal reflection to talking with other people, all found it helpful to discuss new ideas and information with others. Luke described the importance of these experiences: “I talked about them [my new ideas]. I did that in order to make sure what I was thinking and feeling were truly in the core of my own belief system.” Interaction with others was both formal, with therapists or support groups, and informal, with mentors and friends, and served to both challenge and support participants as they worked through this conflict.

Participants also tried out new behaviors. They visited different Christian and non-Christian churches, experimented with same-sex behaviors, and formed same-sex relationships. For example, Deborah, who grew up in the Lutheran Church, “went on a quest trying to figure out what it was that did fit” her idea of a spiritual place. She was introduced to Wicca by a friend, and went on to practice it. Similarly, Laura was introduced to a new spirituality in her visits to a Native American community. She said, “the great thing was that, within that community. . . there was a place for me as a gay person.” Interestingly, some respondents described new sexual behaviors as well. Allen, laughing when he recounted his first sexual experience, commented:

Oddly, my first real sexual experience was at a Christian college, in the dorm of a Christian college. There was a lot of turmoil. I’m supposed to be here strengthening my faith, finding my faith, becoming a minister or whatever I was going to do with my life, but homosexuality followed me to school.

## RESOLUTION

Working through the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs led participants to a point where they identified a resolution to this conflict. The first aspect of resolution was acceptance of their sexual identities as gay, lesbian, or queer. For Deborah, acceptance was a “huge life lesson.” She was able to acknowledge that “this is who I am and I need to trust it because it’s not going to change.” In addition to accepting their sexual identity, participants moved away from organized religion to embrace a more personalized faith. Mark eloquently explained why these changes in faith were necessary:

It’s difficult to emphasize how often gay people need to realign our spiritual identities. Many of us keep them, but they have to be altered because, otherwise, there’s no way that we could conceive of ourselves in a positive way.

Respondents described their personalized faith as either religious or non-religious; religious faith was defined as Christian for some and non-Christian for others. Hannah admitted that her version of Christianity today is “a lot different than what it was” before, when “it was very constricted.” Now, she is “very open to other religions” as opposed to adhering to “the straight and narrow” path like she was taught. And even though Chad “found the church, and it’s a great place to go to worship on Sunday,” he also discovered that “really, truly what Christianity is about is fully being the person that you are, that God made you.” Jennifer, who grew up Catholic, is focusing on deepening her faith and her relationship with her Catholic girlfriend.

Although some participants identified as non-religious, they also discussed having a more personalized faith. This faith, however, was in humanity rather than in God or a Higher Power. Jake, for one, believes in “karma” and tries “to be careful with other people.” Allen, an agnostic, described losing his religious faith and replacing it with faith in people. Similarly, Sarah, an atheist who identifies as queer, said:

I’m happier now and I believe in a better humanity than I ever did as a religious person. I’m more hopeful for the future than I ever was then. I push myself harder to be a good person in day-to-day life and to do a lot more service than I ever did when I believed in God.

It is important to note that participants described the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs as ongoing. Mark commented, “I don’t think that we’re static individuals.” Similarly, William remarked: “Life is a journey. . . . So, I just feel like that’s part of what I’m here for, and I’m going to be open to the journey.” Luke also captured the notion of a journey in the following remark:

It's more of a process, more of a moving target rather than [going] from having these unresolved issues to having this resolution. So it's somewhere in between, and you're always moving, hopefully, more towards a resolution. So I recognize that in my life there's parts of that conflict that I'm more at peace with and there's still other parts of it that are not as comfortable for me.

## Personal and Contextual Factors

Each stage of the process of resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs was influenced by the core categories of personal and contextual factors. Participants specifically described five personal factors: reflective abilities, strength and resiliency, anger, creativity, and humor. Reflective abilities allowed them to think critically through information regarding homosexuality and Christianity whereas strength and resiliency were important as they dealt with resistance from others. Expressing anger at organized religion and God helped them work through their emotions, and creative outlets, such as art and poetry, provided means for expression. Finally, humor enabled many to cope with the conflict.

Participants also identified three contextual factors that influenced the resolution process: family, community resources, and church doctrine. For those whose families were accepting of their sexual orientation, it was somewhat easier to resolve the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Moreover, those who lived in communities with resources for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals had less difficulty resolving conflict. Some participants even relocated to these communities so they could live as openly gay, lesbian, and queer individuals. Finally, because church doctrine can fall along a spectrum from condemning to accepting homosexuality, participants' religious upbringing impacted the resolution process. For example, those who grew up attending churches that were very condemning had more difficulty resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs than those attending more accepting churches.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this grounded theory study led to three conclusions. First, resolving the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is a five-stage process of internal conflict resolution. These five stages are an awareness of the conflict, an initial response to the conflict, a catalyst of new knowledge propelling participants forward, steps of working through the conflict, and resolution of the conflict. Second, personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the resolution process. Finally, as discussed below, faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions.

This grounded theory study contributes to the literature first and foremost by providing a substantive theory of the process of internal conflict resolution. Existing theories of conflict resolution focus on conflict among individuals, groups, and countries rather than internal, personal conflict. Furthermore, this research has multidisciplinary implications in that it adds to the growing body of literature on faith development, sexual identity development, and transformational learning, as well as conflict resolution.

The second conclusion that personal and contextual factors affect every aspect of the process of resolving conflict reinforces their centrality in a life span perspective of human development. That these factors were so influential is not surprising, given that behavior is considered to be a product of both the person and the environment (Chuang, Liao, & Tai, 2005; Vermont, 2005). Social workers have long taken a holistic view of development, acknowledging the dynamic and reciprocal relationships between personal and contextual factors. Ecological systems theory, a foundational theory in the social work profession, reflects a synthesis of the ecological perspective and general systems theory (Rothery, 2001). Further, the existence of these personal and contextual factors in the conflict resolution process emphasizes a central notion in grounded theory, that a core category, or “story around which the analysis focuses” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 92) will emerge from the data.

The third and final conclusion is that faith development and sexual identity development are intertwined and fluid constructions for gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. The participants in this study moved through Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith development more rapidly than is usually the case because of the conflict they experienced between sexual identity and religious beliefs. However, having a Christian upbringing prolonged sexual identity development. Although the model of the internal conflict resolution process, at first glance, appears to be linear and concrete (see Figure 1), the process of resolving conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs is fluid and interactive.

## Practice Implications

In addition to the three conclusions noted above, this study has several practice implications for social work and faith communities. First and foremost, it contributes to social work practice with gay, lesbian, and queer populations by providing a substantive theory by which individuals with a Christian upbringing resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. According to Merriam (2009), a “grounded theory study seeks not just to understand, but also to build a substantive theory about the phenomenon of interest” (p. 23). Because substantive theories are grounded in data and have real-world applications (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 2009), this type of theory is especially useful for social workers. Understanding the process of

conflict resolution will help practitioners who serve individuals coping with this particular circumstance. Professionals who are familiar with the process can begin by normalizing their clients' experiences, and, if they are able to identify where their clients are in the resolution process, they can introduce pertinent resources and information.

In recent years, the profession of social work has rekindled a focus on spirituality, faith, and religion. To this end, practitioners often include the spiritual dimension along with biological, psychological, and social dimensions in their multifaceted understanding of development. Understanding the interconnectedness of faith and sexuality in identity development is crucial for social workers serving this population. The participants in this study experienced depression as part of the process of dealing with the conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs—an understandable psychological response considering the position communicated by many churches. The Jehovah's Witness organization, for example, disfellowships individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, or queer. In some circumstances, as with one participant in this study (Mark), individuals lose regular contact with their family members and friends who are part of the church. This type of isolation does not have the intended consequence of bringing individuals back into the fold, as many churches hope, but instead fosters even greater spiritual disenfranchisement.

In addition, social workers should be aware that welcoming Christian churches, such as MCC, Unitarian Universalist churches, and Episcopal churches, play an important role in the spiritual development of gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with a Christian upbringing. Participants in this study expressed heartfelt gratitude for congregations such as these; however, several said that their spiritual and religious needs were not met by churches that overly attended to sexual orientation. In other words, respondents explained that these churches focused more on sexual identity than on religious identity. Helping professionals can assist clients in exploring the varied messages they receive from faith communities as they develop faith and sexual identity.

### Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As in all research, this study had limitations. Because of the small, non-random sample, the findings cannot be generalized in the statistical sense. In addition, the participants are not representative of all gay, lesbian, and queer individuals with Christian backgrounds. Finally, despite efforts to seek a maximum-variation sample, the vast majority of participants were Caucasian individuals who identified as either gay or lesbian.

This study is the first step in exploring the process by which individuals resolve conflict between sexual identity and religious beliefs. Because only

three individuals who identify as queer and three from underrepresented racial groups were included in this study's sample, it should be repeated with recruitment targeting these two populations. Furthermore, this study should be replicated with other populations in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the process of conflict resolution. For instance, the sample could comprise individuals who identify as bisexual and transgender as well as those with a Jewish or Muslim upbringing. Finally, future research should attempt to connect information learned about this process to practical interventions to be used in counseling gay, lesbian, and queer-identified individuals with a Christian upbringing.

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