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Abstract

Many lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals raised Christian in the United States experience an identity conflict between their religious beliefs and values and sexual orientation. This may at least partially be due to the fact that non-heterosexual identities have been viewed as deviant within the field of psychology until recently and many Christian organizations. Negative social stigma and discrimination often makes this identity conflict challenging for individuals. Participants are five college students that identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual, and were raised Christian. Interviews and a general thematic analysis were used to illuminate common themes of their life experiences. Main issues explored include a) identity conflict between sexual orientation and religious values and beliefs and b) resolutions. By examining the experiences of LGB individuals raised Christian, the goal of understanding religious and sexual identity conflicts can lead to a greater awareness of diverse populations and an understanding of the experiences of these individuals.
Religious and Sexual Identity Among LGB Individuals Raised Christian

Religion and sexuality are two areas of life that have shown emotional and health benefits for many individuals across cultures (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Mahaffy, 1996). Religious commitment is usually associated with less depression and greater subjective well-being (Richards, & Bergin, 2000). For some individuals, however, religion can also be a source of great pain and suffering. One population in America that may be more vulnerable to negative experiences within the context of religion is lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals raised Christian. While religion and spirituality are important aspects of life for many LGB individuals (Bock, Jannarone, Love, & Richardson, 2005; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000), many experience a conflict between their religious beliefs and values and sexual orientation (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). A review of history suggests that within the field of psychology and the Christian religion, social stigma and prejudice against homosexual and bisexual identities may play an important role in facilitating identity conflicts experienced by LGB individuals raised Christian in the United States.

Historically, individuals that identify with homosexual and bisexual orientations have been and continue to be plagued by prejudice and discrimination. Just forty years ago, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) removed homosexual and bisexual orientations as a diagnosis of “sexual deviation” from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM-II) (Mendelson, 2003 as cited in Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008). Before this time, it was believed that gay and bisexual identities indicated a mental disturbance. The DSM-II retained “sexual orientation disturbance” as a diagnosis to describe individuals who were not satisfied with being homosexual or bisexual. It was not until 1987 that the diagnosis was removed altogether. Even after the APA acknowledged that LGB individuals were not mentally disturbed
due to sexual orientation alone, many LGB individuals still often face discrimination and prejudice that leads to negative consequences (American Psychological Association, 2008).

The context of religion is another area in which issues of sexuality and sexual orientation have been controversial. Among issues of sexuality within Christianity, the topic of sexual orientation has received a great amount of attention. Christianity is practiced by most people within the United States, making up 85% of the national population (Richards, & Bergin, 2000). According to Ellison (1993) and Mahaffy (1996), most mainstream Christian denominations do not view homosexuality and bisexuality in a positive light (as cited in Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008). One study by Melton (1991) showed that “72% of surveyed churches and organizations condemned homosexuals and homosexuality as being an abomination in the eyes of God (as cited in Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), some conservative Christian denominations have even referred to homosexual and bisexual identities in hostile terms.

Homosexual and bisexual identities are not seen as being valid or acceptable within some Christian communities that are generally more conservative (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). However, it is important to acknowledge that there are Christian churches accepting of non-heterosexual orientations such as United Church of Christ and Metropolitan Community Church (Bock et al., 2005). This information suggests that the views of many Christian organizations regarding non-heterosexual identities may influence the self-concept of many LGB individuals raised as Christians. The intersection of Christian and homosexual or bisexual identities may produce feelings of confusion and discomfort, leading to an identity conflict.

This discussion is based on literature that approaches the concept of identity conflict between religious and sexual identities among LGB individuals. The field of psychology and the
Christian religion have in the past both been unsupportive and rejecting of homosexuals and bisexuals. This suggests that LGB individuals raised Christian may have a difficult and challenging experience forming their identities in environments that reject their sexual orientation. The feminist standpoint theory (FST) (New, 1998) provides an effective framework for understanding the relevancy of the intersection occurring between sexual and religious identities. Next, important terms will be operationally defined. The importance of the college time period as a developmental stage is examined, leading into a discussion of identity interaction and conflict. This section will conclude with an examination of the concept, resolution, as a developmental stage for LGB individuals experiencing a religious and sexual identity conflict.

Theoretical Basis

The present study aims to bring the experiences and interpretations of LGB college students raised Christian and their religious and sexual identities to light. Anchored in feminist standpoint theory (FST) (New, 1998), this study is supported by the theory because it assumes knowledge is perspectival and influences an individual’s view of social relations, individual experiences and interpretations. Following this theory, research considerations of a person’s location in multiple social groups produces a more subtle and complex understanding of their experiences. LGB college students raised Christian often experience simultaneous identity domains of religion and sexuality. A closer examination of this ‘standpoint,’ is relevant for multicultural research in academia and appreciation for diversity. This project aims to address this goal by exploring participants’ locations in two important identity realms – religiosity and sexuality.

Terminology
Definitions of terms should be clarified in order to provide coherence and consistency. Sexual and religious identity, as well as religiosity and spirituality, will be defined. *Sexual identity* refers to how individuals understand their own identity and communicate it with others (Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005) and is based upon self-identification of sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is determined by an individual’s sexual and emotional attraction to a person of a given sex (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008), which may or may not be consistent with sexual behavior (Schneider at al., 2002 as cited in Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008). Only individuals that identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual are included in the present study, regardless of sexual behavior.

It is important to gain a clearer understanding of religiosity and spirituality, as proper operationalization of these terms has been an issue of scholarly debate. I will adopt definitions provided by Ho and Ho (2007), which explain, “Religiosity refers to beliefs, sentiments, and practices that are anchored in a particular religion; its expression is often institutional and denominational, as well as personal” (p. 64). Ho and Ho (2007) clarify that spirituality may not have any connection with a particular religious institution or denomination, but instead deals with universal concerns about life and death, existence and nonexistence. Chandler, Miner, Holden, and Kolander (1992) and Love (2002) explain that spirituality is often considered to be the same thing as religion (as cited in Bock et al., 2005) because people often used these terms interchangeably.

*Religious identity* is defined by the researcher as self-identification of affiliation with a religious organization, or the absence of a religious denomination. However, religious identity may appear to be inconsistent with beliefs and/ or values that represent the beliefs and/ or values consistent with a particular religious organization. For instance, an individual may identity as having no religious affiliation but may believe in the existence of God. The present study
focuses on LGB individuals raised Christian that have at one point in their lives identified as Christian. A more specific population, LGB college students, will be explored to better understand their experiences with religious and sexual identities.

*College*

College is a time period of identity exploration, personal growth and development, during which individuals are influenced by society and their own perceptions. College presents individuals with opportunities to explore the meanings of various identities, values, beliefs, and life goals. Socialization may have an important influence on religious and sexual identity formation, as encouragement and discouragement can influence one’s self-concept (Cates, 2007; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). Opportunities to explore previously nonexistent sources of support and affirmation from others may be beneficial for identity development and confirmation. College presents individuals with new opportunities to explore identities and find communities of shared values and beliefs. This time period of *emerging adulthood* is also characterized by less parental surveillance and little or no pressure to marry, which help to make romantic pursuits and sexual identity exploration possible (Arnett, 2004).

Issues of religion and spirituality are also aspects of life that may develop, change, and mature during the college years.

Both spirituality and religion are important components in the lives of college students (Bock et al., 2005). Religion and spirituality are considered essential to a person’s overall identity (Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005), and this may be true for many LGB college students. Love (1997) found spirituality to be a very important concept for LGB individuals (as cited in Bock et al., 2005). However, religion can also be a source of strain and conflict for LGB individuals (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Bock et al., 2005; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000).
Challenges arise when a person perceives that their own or other people’s religious values and beliefs do not support their sexual identity, and they may face a greater challenge in negotiating these conflicting identities than their heterosexual peers (Bock et al., 2005). An understanding of the experiences of this minority group may be beneficial to all individuals in a university setting.

There has been research that focuses on religious and spiritual identity concerning the experiences of gay men and lesbian women, but religious bisexual individuals have been ignored in academic research. Studies have examined the experiences of LGB Christians from a range of age groups. Sexual and religious identity interaction has been applied to the study of adolescent populations (Cates, 2007; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005), college students (Bock et al., 2005), and middle-aged adults (Mahaffy, 1996). One study examines the spiritual development of college students, but does not examine the influences of religious affiliation as a factor (Bock et al., 2005). The present study will examine the potential identity conflict faced by LGB individuals during college; a time marked by a great deal of social and psychological change.

**Identity Interaction and Conflict**

When two or more aspects of identity are in conflict with one another, individuals may face a number of psychological and social challenges negotiating these identities (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Bock et al., 2005; Cates, 2007; Mahaffy, 1996; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). Sexuality and religious beliefs and values are two aspects of identity that interact with one another, producing conflicts for many LGB individuals (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Cates, 2007; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005; Mahaffy, 1996). According to Schuck and Liddle (2001), this conflict may produce feelings of “depression, shame, and suicidal ideation” (as cited in Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005, p. 531). Sexuality and religiosity do not interact exclusively, as other aspects of an individual’s identity may also be salient or experiencing change. Other
identities such as ethnicity, gender, club or team, age group, for example, may influence sexuality and religiosity, which contributes to the complexity of living with an identity conflict.

Thirty-eight percent of participants in one study reported a conflict between their personal religious beliefs and lesbian identity (Mahaffy, 1996). Christian lesbians may experience difficulty in accepting themselves as lesbians because homosexuality is perceived to be incongruent with their religious beliefs (Mahaffy, 1996). Mahaffy (1996) explains that lesbian women from conservative religious backgrounds may be more prone to experience a conflict of religiosity and sexuality than lesbians from liberal backgrounds. Research on religious lesbian, bisexual, and gay individuals assumes that any reconciliation of sexual and religious identities always involves a conflict (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000), but in fact not all people experience this conflict (Shokeid, 1995 as cited in Mahaffy, 1996). Research findings imply that individuals from more conservative Christian backgrounds may experience more difficulty with this identity conflict than those from less conservative religious backgrounds.

Factors related to the Christian religion have been cited as main sources of religious and sexual identity conflicts (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000; Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). For some LGB individuals experiencing this conflict, struggles are said to be centered around God allowing pain and suffering to exist, perceived good and evil in the world, and personal sacrifice, according to Exline and Rose (2005) (as cited in Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). Anger towards God is another reaction to this identity conflict (Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). In a study by Schuck and Liddle (2001), the majority (two-thirds) of participants claimed that doctrinal teachings and interpretations of biblical passages were two main factors contributing to their conflicts (Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). Resolutions have been
discussed in the literature as methods of reducing the conflict faced by many LGB individuals, many of whom have been raised Christian and still hold a Christian identity.

*Reaching a resolution*

Dissonance linked with personal responsibility leads to a motivation to reduce the conflict (Mahaffy, 1996). Motivation to reduce the conflict leads to coping with these conflicting identities and resolution techniques and strategies. Depending on the individuals and how their sexual and religious identities interact during life, the types of resolutions used may vary (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008). There are a number of resolutions offered in discussions of religious and sexual identity conflicts. Many resolutions in the literature imply that an individual pursues them with the goal of reducing the conflict.

Schuck and Liddle (2001) explain that individuals experiencing this identity conflict turn to a number of ways to relieve religious strain (Tan, & Yarhouse, 2005). Distinguishing between spirituality and religiosity, interpreting scriptural passages differently, and leaving original religions were three approaches discussed. Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) offer four resolutions that individuals reach to help them relieve conflicting identities; (a) rejecting the Christian identity, (b) rejecting the homosexual or bisexual identity, (c) compartmentalization (kept completely separate), and (d) identity integration. However, some of these techniques have not been supported by research in reference to ever actually leading to a resolution; for example, rejecting homosexual identity has been shown to create greater conflict for individuals (Cates, 2007). Individuals often try to deny one identity, but transformation and integration of identities should be the focus for healthy functioning (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008). The overall physical and mental health of individuals with this identity conflict should be a central concern for therapists with a goal of relieving strain and reaching resolutions.
Many studies discuss LGB individuals that have integrated (reconciled and synthesized have also been used) both religious and sexual identities (Bock et al., 2005; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). Identity integration has been expressed as the ability to hold both positive religious and gay or bisexual identities with no feelings of conflict between the two (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). Participants in one study reported their own experiences of “achieved integration” between their religious and sexual identities with the assistance of the gay-positive Metropolitan Community Church of New York in Manhattan (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). Similar in definition, identity synthesis has been said to be an important predictor of whether or not an individual is able to come to terms with her or his religious and sexual identities (Mahaffy, 1996).

The process of coming out is discussed as an important, yet challenging, stage that may have an influence on resolutions reached. Bock et al. (2005) points to the coming out process as a possible stimulus for spiritual development. Coming out has mainly referred to acknowledgement of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity, and is often not an easy developmental change for LGB individuals. Coming out can be even more complicated when one aspect of an individual’s identity is unsupportive of another aspect of identity, as shown with the experiences of many LGB individuals experiencing a conflict between religious beliefs and sexual orientation (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000).

*Purpose*

Prejudice and social stigma in the field of psychology and Christianity may influence the fact that many individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and were raised Christian experience an identity conflict. It is important to note that great variety exists between Christian denominations as well as individual experiences, and many may never actually experience an
identity conflict. However, for those individuals that do experience a conflict, important questions need to be addressed. When religious beliefs and values and sexual orientation do not support one another, how do individuals experience this identity conflict? What resolutions are reached for reducing the conflict, and how can this concept be understood more clearly? This study’s close examination of the experiences of LGB individuals raised Christian contributes to an emerging understanding of the intersection of sexual and religious identities.

Method

Data Collection

Participants were recruited from the Ball State University organization, SPECTRUM. This multicultural organization provides college students with an environment that is accepting of all sexual orientations. Basic information and requirements for participation in the study were announced at two group meetings, and participation was voluntary. Participants had to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and had to have been raised Christian. Interested participants who met these criteria approached the researcher after the meeting and agreed to be interviewed. However, one participant was contacted through an acquaintance of the researcher. Each participant agreed to one interview consisting of eight questions.

Interviews were conducted at the Ball State University library in a private room reserved by the researcher. Interview questions were primarily concerned with experiences with religious and sexual identities throughout the life and in the present day (See Appendix). Data collection was completely confidential, and participants chose a pseudonym prior to the interview for later identification, and only this name was used in data collection and analysis. Responses to interview questions were gathered using a tape recorder, and each interview was approximately 40 minutes in length. Of six total interviews conducted, five interviews were produced because
one interview did not record properly onto the tape recorder. Interviews were transcribed for further analysis.

Participants

Of these five participants, four are Ball State University students and members of the SPECTRUM organization, and one is a student at Ivy Tech Community College. Two individuals identify as gay, two as lesbian, and one as bisexual. Two participants are women and three men, and two are black and three are white. All participants identify as being raised Christian and holding a Christian identity at some point in the past. One individual indicated that he was raised in the Baptist tradition; one indicated that she was raised in a non-denominational tradition of Christianity, and three did not specify in which denomination of Christianity they were raised. Three participants identify today as belonging to no religion, one identifies as Christian, and one identifies as Atheist. Spirituality is not a determinant for participation in the present study, however individuals often used the term, spirituality, to describe their current religious identity.

Analysis

A general thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Topics were clustered using codes and that emerged from the interview data. The use of codes is useful in expressing main topics, events, and similar experiences across interviews. Common experiences were labeled and recorded. Three major codes that emerged include identity interaction, coming out, and resolutions. These broad codes were revealed through numerous readings of the interviews, and through further reading, specific codes emerged. They also express common experiences of individuals under the canopy of a particular code. An example of this process is demonstrated with one broad code, identity interaction, in a chart format (See Figure 1).
Within the code, *identity interaction*, codes included *conflict, negotiation, and exploration*. Within the code, *conflict, first awareness of conflict and severity* were specific codes that helped to illuminate the experience of conflicting identity interactions. *Questioning identity or identities* and *hiding identity or identities* emerged as common experiences and became codes within *exploration*. *Emotions* and *reactions* emerged from within the code, *negotiation*. *Coming out* was a significant experience for each individual and as a developmental change did not produce more specific codes. Under *resolutions*, codes included *leaving Christian identity for no religious affiliation*, *leaving Christian identity for Atheist identity*, and *embracing Christian identity*. The codes under resolutions were later found to be problematic, and will be discussed with greater detail in the discussion.

Quotes from the interviews were placed into separate documents for each code, which were used to reveal common experiences between participants. Memos were kept as documentation of the researcher’s definitions for and understandings of codes in order to clarify their meanings and to distinguish one code from another. Stages that emerged will be discussed in greater detail in the results. Through organizing these stages in a chronological order, a preliminary model was created to explain the experiences of LGB individuals experiencing an identity conflict.

**Results**

The preliminary model for religious and sexual identity conflict demonstrates a common progression of the experiences of participants (See Figure 2). The first stage is *awareness of conflict and severity*, the second stage includes *negotiation and exploration*, the third stage is *coming out*, and the last stage is *resolution*. The boxes and lines within the model do not represent a particular length of time, and individuals varied in reference to the way they reached
and experienced the stages. The model does not assume that each individual reaches a resolution, or goes through it in the same sequence. Following through the model, each stage is explored below with selected quotes to support and expand upon the meaning of each stage.

Awareness of conflict and severity

All five of the participants reported an awareness of a conflict that they previously or were currently experiencing between their religious and sexual identities. This stage is described as a time when participants recall initially experiencing feelings of tension or discomfort. It indicates acknowledgement of the two identities interacting with one another, and through participants’ descriptions, this interaction was viewed as a conflict. Conflict is defined as a negative experience of living with two interacting identities. This conflict was frequently described as a struggle, a challenge, and a difficult experience. Perceived severity is an individual interpretation of the intensity of the identity conflict, which was variable across participants.

Willow realized that her sexual identity was lesbian at a young age and acknowledged that her religious beliefs were not supportive of the lesbian identity early in life.

I first knew I was gay in sixth grade. It first dawned on me, “Hey, I’m gay.”

Then, I fought with it myself because of my religious beliefs all the way up until [the] end of freshman year of high school.

Lauren describes a salient experience during puberty, in which she acknowledges a conflict between Christian beliefs and values and a lesbian identity.

I was thinking about the time when my parents, my brother, and I were all sitting at the table. I was probably about seven. We were talking about sexuality, and my dad was like, “It’s Adam and Eve,” not “Adam and Steve”. [Then, my brother and
I] were chanting, “Adam and Eve, Adam and Eve!” [That memory] came to me, and I remember thinking that when I was thirteen. [I said to myself.] “Don’t you remember? You’re not supposed to be doing this. This isn’t the person that you’re supposed to be, as far as religion goes, because it’s Adam and Eve.” I just had this little voice chanting in my head for the longest time.

Bob explained that he always knew he was gay and acknowledged that he was always open about being gay. His experience was based more on the external conflicts of physical and verbal discrimination and abuse.

I just remember always getting picked on and stuff as a child. Like always being called like horrible names…I remember like getting hit and beaten. And beat up all the time. And then, I don’t know, I just always felt like really horrible.

Negotiation and Exploration

Negotiation is defined as reactions and emotions associated with dealing with the conflict and exploring identities. Exploration is characterized by behaviors such as questioning and hiding either or both sexual and religious identities. Participants often experienced reactions and emotions and questioned and hid religious and sexual identities simultaneously during this second stage. Negotiation and exploration are paired together because the behaviors of questioning influence emotions and reactions, which in turn are going to influence future behavior. Individuals questioned and hid their lesbian, gay, or bisexual orientations and changing religious beliefs and values that they became aware of during the awareness of conflict stage. Individuals’ descriptions of hiding and questioning identities and reactions and emotions associated with these behaviors illuminate this stage.
David acknowledged that his sexual identity was bisexual, even though he had not expressed this openly with anyone else. He hid his sexual identity as he questioned it, and he questioned his Christian beliefs and values, and those held by his church.

Before, when I started to become attracted to men, women, guys, girls, I used to try to block it out, and [I would say,] “That’s not right, that’s against God.” When I was ready and comfortable enough to put a label on it, [to tell people] that I was bisexual, I was still a little attached to the church. I didn’t want to completely like, “What if I made a mistake? I don’t want to end up in hell for this.” The whole time I was pouring through verses trying to find, you know, that homosexuality is bad…for a long time I was really confused.

All of these little things just compound and compound and it is kind of hard to believe in [the Christian beliefs and values] when nobody around you is seemingly practicing what they’re preaching. The hypocrisy of it all kind of got on my nerves [over time].

Lauren explored her religious identity by questioning the existence of God during times of praying alone in her room. She also explains that she hid her religious identity of Atheist from other people.

When I was praying at night over [my religious identity] when I was about 13, I would think to myself, “You’re talking to yourself. That’s all you’re doing is just talking to yourself,” and that’s what I believed. I just thought, “No, I’m talking to God.” I had this whole internal struggle [about] who I was talking to. And I just came to the conclusion that it was me. [I realized that I am] going to have to live
Willow struggled with her sexual identity from the time she was in sixth grade until coming out with a new religious identity, no religious affiliation. She discussed hiding her lesbian identity from others for several years, and questioned her sexual identity prior to and after coming out.

I [said to myself], “Maybe [the church and my parents] really are right. Maybe I was right to fight it for so long. Maybe I should continue trying to fight it.

Maybe Satan is involved and I am really not supposed to be gay.”

**Coming Out**

An important shift in this model from previous literature is the re-classification of experiences classified as resolutions as coming out. Coming out included new sexual identities and also leaving the Christian identity for no affiliation and leaving the Christian identity for an Atheist identity. This reorganization was made because some participants experienced coming out with a new religious identity as a challenging and important development occurrence in their lives. I felt that this change illuminates their experiences more effectively. In many cases, individuals had internally acknowledged a new identity but did not personally or publicly come out. A decision to change an identity was a gradual experience for participants due to varying lengths of time spent in the negotiation and exploration stage. The experiences of participants during this stage contradict with previous research that says leaving the Christian identity was the least likely outcome for participants of one study (Mahaffy, 1996).
Leading to new awareness of conflict

Lauren’s experiences demonstrate that coming out with a religious identity can be difficult and contribute greatly to religious and sexual identity conflicts. Coming out with an Atheist identity was necessary for her to accept herself as a lesbian. However, external conflict regarding her Atheist identity was increased after coming out, especially regarding her relationship with her mother.

[Coming out as Atheist] was really hard. I struggled with it a lot. I mean I grew up in a home where everything was based on whether or not you were doing the right thing because of religion because God was telling you to do it this way and go about it that way. … When I came out, when I told [my Mom] I was an Atheist, she really did not accept it. To this day, she really doesn’t accept it.

Turning to coming out with a new sexual identity, Willow said that when she came out as a lesbian, she experienced emotional and social rejection from the church she attended. Her youth and head pastors actually told her that she had no choice but to come out as lesbian after they saw her holding hands with a girl. They threatened to tell her mother she was a lesbian, unless she agreed to attend “Pray Away the Gay” Christian counseling. She experienced a new awareness of conflict after her experience with coming out as a lesbian, which brought her back to the beginning of the model. She then moved into the second stage of the model, negotiation and exploration, in which she questioned both lesbian and Christian identities.

Even within my own consciousness, the Christian religion played a factor in my life for four years before I was able to say, “Okay, this is how this is going to be.” When I did come out, I was met with more opposition.
[The church] was a safe place to grow, and then there was a certain point where it no longer became safe because I started to realize the homophobia within the church. So, it was safe physically, but then from that point on it was no longer emotionally safe.

E.G. experienced difficulty when he came out as gay, especially from family members. He thought that his father was going to disown him for being gay.

I sent my Dad an e-mail [telling him I was gay], which is a bad idea that I don’t recommend. [He] called me up and was yelling at me. This is when he was in Maryland. And like it was really, like he was saying some harsh things.

E.G. explained that he has not reached a resolution because he is still struggling to feel comfortable with his identities. He was the only participant to remain Christian. Perhaps most importantly, he is a black, gay, Christian male, which is one example of multiple identities interacting with one another. This may have made his experiences even more complicated and difficult. He described experiencing conflict still today. This may be due to the fact that he is a member of a few minority groups and may experience more prejudice and discrimination than other participants.

I feel like I’m still trying to be comfortable, trying to be comfortable in my own skin.

Leading to a Resolution

David experienced his bisexuality with some confusion and questioning at first. Eventually, coming out as bisexual was a resolution for him that produced positive experience of both sexual and religious identities.
I shouldn’t be afraid that God’s going to kill me or I’m going to go to hell because I think men are attractive and women are attractive. That’s kind of a little out there. So, for a while it was back and forth. I didn’t know if I knew [that I was bisexual]. I just wasn’t ready to come out and say it. [When I did come out,] it freed up my heart. I didn’t have to make fun of anyone anymore.

After Willow came out with a sexual identity, lesbian, she experienced another period of negotiation and exploration, in which she questioned her religious beliefs and values. This is her second time through the model, after a new awareness of conflict between her lesbian and Christian identities. She describes her experience of coming out with no religious denomination.

I’ve been able to meet people who are at harmony with their sexuality and religious beliefs, and it has really helped me become balanced. Especially in some of the early years when I was really searching for that balance because I really needed to make peace and move on instead of just being angry at the church.

**Resolutions**

Resolutions were originally coded as *leaving Christian identity for no religious affiliation, leaving Christian identity for Atheist identity, and embracing Christian identity*. This was found to be problematic because often upon reaching a “resolution”, participants recognized an increase in conflict. After reflecting on the use of the term, resolutions, the definition for identity integration provided by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) was used. This definition basically explains that a person holds both positive religious and sexual identities and has no conflict between them (Rodriguez, & Ouellette, 2000). What is unique about a few participants in the present study is that they had reached this definition of resolutions even though they had
left the Christian religion. The definition of identity integration functioned well for them, even though they left the Christian identity.

Today, Willow experiences her affiliation with no religion and lesbian identities positively, and does not experience a conflict between them. She was able to find other gay people who believed in God, which helped her to become balanced.

  My beliefs are much more spiritual than religious now. I’m going to live my life as a good person, and I’m going to take what I’ve learned from the Christian religion to help me do that. I’ve been able to meet people who are at harmony with their sexuality and religious beliefs and it’s really helped me become balanced.

David experienced a resolution through coming out with a bisexual identity. Prior to coming out, he discriminated against people who identified as homosexual or bisexual. He became more accepting of others as he acknowledged his bisexual orientation publicly and personally. Today, he experiences no conflict between his bisexual and no religious affiliation identities.

  [My friends] accept me for who I am, and I accept me for who I am. So, there is nothing else I could want.

Discussion and Directions for Future Study

The present study illuminates the concept of resolutions as it is discussed in the literature and provides greater insight into its future use and meaning. The use of resolutions in the literature relating to the experiences of participants in the present study was found to be problematic because the researcher’s conceptualization of resolutions changed upon analyzing the data. Codes originally used for, resolutions, included leaving Christian identity for no religious affiliation, leaving Christian identity for Atheist identity, and embracing Christian
identity. These codes did not function well as resolutions experienced by participants in the present study. Within the participants’ stories, this often led to a new awareness of conflict and further exploration and negotiation was usually the next step. Resolution techniques that demonstrated rejection of sexuality or religiosity were not supported by the participants in the goal of reaching a state of no conflict. These were not techniques that individual’s pursued with the hope of reaching a resolution; rather, they represented a developmental change necessary for internal acceptance.

Previous studies have emphasized the idea of identity integration as a possible resolution technique for LGB individuals experiencing a religious and sexual identity conflict (Bartoli, & Gillem, 2008; Rodriquez, & Ouellette, 2000). Integration implies that individuals have to embrace both their sexual and religious identities to reach a state of no conflict. Identity integration means to hold both positive religious and sexual identities, with no experience of conflict between the two, according to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000). This definition provides a sound explanation of what resolutions should mean, but research on resolutions has excluded the voices of LGB individuals who have left the Christian identity, thus invalidating this as a viable solution. This definition should be applied to resolutions experienced by all LGB individuals raised Christian, whether or not they remain Christian. Based on the definition of integration, participants must integrate both religious or spiritual and sexual identities in order to experience no conflict. However, the definition for identity integration should encompass the experiences of LGB individuals that affirm a Christian and Atheist identity and those that affirm no religious identity.

This study helps to broaden the understanding of resolutions and coming out as stages of development. Coming out has been discussed in the literature as an important and difficult
change in the lives of many LGB individuals. However, participants in the present study show that coming out can lead to a resolution and should not only be limited to sexual identities. David’s experiences of coming out as bisexual led to a resolution, which was never mentioned as a resolution technique in the literature. One study examined coming out as a path for spiritual development (Bock et al., 2005), but not as a resolution. Lauren’s experience of leaving Christianity and coming out with an Atheist identity was equally, if not more, difficult than coming out with a lesbian identity. This shows that coming out should include the acknowledgement of new religious identities, as well as sexual identities. Therefore, the researcher would like to stress the importance of changing religious identities as a coming out stage that may lead to a resolution or new awareness of conflict. Coming out with a new religious identity changes may be more complicated than has previously been shown in the literature.

Strength and Limitations

Strengths of the study include the diversity of participants, a new understanding of resolutions, and an in depth examination of the experiences of LGB individuals raised Christian. Participants were black, white, gay, lesbian, and bisexual, which produced a wide range of individual experiences and interpretations from a variety of backgrounds and cultures in America. The analysis of resolutions as a stage of the model produced new insight into its use and meaning that challenges its current use in the literature. The model shows the importance of each stage in managing this identity conflict by showing common experiences of LGB individuals, while each participant’s data demonstrates the complexity of this identity conflict. The findings of this study are grounded in the experiences and interpretations of participants, and unique perceptions are important in the study of identity formation and navigation.
Limitations of the present study have been examined and should be addressed. The volunteer method of recruitment may have created a situation in which individuals participated because they had more personal experiences of conflict relating to religiosity and sexuality than other LGB individuals raised Christian. All participants in the study had or were currently experiencing a conflict, which varied on levels of severity. Due to their willingness to participate in the study, they may have experienced a greater amount of conflict than other members of SPECTRUM.

The small sample size, the interview questions, and structure of the study could also have produced less than ideal results. The small number of interviews may have created a situation in which one or more stages of the model are sparsely understood, which will be addressed by further data collection and analysis. The preliminary status of the model implies that more information needs to be gathered to produce greater detail and depth of the model. The interview questions were broad in order to gain an overall understanding of participants’ experiences. With this in mind, specificity regarding certain stages of the model was limited due to the small amount of data produced. Interview questions that pertain to individuals’ experiences as they occur would illuminate stages with greater detail. Participants discussed their experiences retrospectively, but a longitudinal study might increase the depth and accuracy of the stages as they occur. In order to create a more solid model that demonstrates the experiences of all LGB individuals raised Christian with more clarity, a larger number of interviews will be conducted.

Directions for Future Study

Future research on this topic should include an examination of all LGB individuals raised Christian and their experiences remaining Christian or leaving the Christian identity. A significant amount of research produced on this topic has focused on the experiences of LGB
individuals who remained Christian, implying that those who left the Christian identity were less likely to reach a state of resolution. A closer examination of the concept resolutions, as an experience of no conflict and holding both positive religious and sexual identities, should be examined further. Coming out with a new religious identity is a topic rarely discussed in the literature and could also use greater investigation. The challenges of coming out should extend to acknowledgment of new religious identities, as well as sexual orientation. Identity conflicts between religious and sexual identities are shown through this research study as a complicated process, one that is unique for individuals that experience it.

By illuminating the experiences of LGB individuals raised Christian, it is likely that individuals experiencing a religious and sexual identity conflict can begin to feel more comfortable coping with it and reaching a stage of resolution. The findings of this study may motivate or encourage individuals to help themselves, or someone close to them, through the often difficult and complex experience of identity conflict. Heterosexuals and Christians should be open to the benefits of this research because it can serve as a step towards tolerance and appreciation for diversity and an understanding of the experiences of minority groups. Exposure to the experiences of LGB individuals raised Christian enhances the current knowledge regarding how religious and sexual identity conflicts are managed and resolved by this social group in American society.
References


Figure 1 Caption

*Figure 1. Example of Coding Method used for Data Analysis*
Identity Interaction

- Conflict
  - First awareness
    - Severity
  - Reactions
- Negotiation
  - Emotions
- Exploration
  - Questioning one identity or both
  - Hiding one identity or both
Figure 2 Caption

*Figure 2. Religious and Sexual Identity Conflict: Preliminary Model*
Awareness of Conflict and Severity

Negotiation  ↔  Exploration

Coming out with new identity

Resolution
Appendix

Interview Questions

1. What was it like for you growing up Christian?

2. How have your religious values and beliefs changed over time?

3. Can you describe what it was like to change your religious identity?

4. Can you describe your experience with Christianity as an adult?

5. What was it like for you as you experienced your sexual identity?

6. Can you describe a time when your sexual identity interacted with your religious beliefs?
   - Can you describe a time when they were harmonious, or reinforced each other?
   - Can you describe a time when they were conflicting?

7. Is there anything we have not discussed that you think I should know concerning your experiences as a person who is lesbian, gay, or bisexual?

8. What was your experience like participating in this project?

Probes for each question:

- Emotional reactions

- Details

- Meanings