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Megan Elaine Browning
Christianity, Familial
Acceptance, and Current
Spirituality among LGB
Individuals: Blessed Be the
Tie That Binds?

ABSTRACT

This study explores LGB individuals' perceptions about how acceptance by their Christian families of origin has impacted their current religiosity and/or spirituality. A qualitative semi structured interview with a demographic survey was conducted with fifteen self-identified LGB individuals who were raised in a variety of Christian households in the Southern United States. The participants were selected through a snowball sampling method and were representative of the surrounding metropolitan area. The methodology allowed for the study to be flexible and inclusive of people from diverse religious, spiritual, sexual, and cultural backgrounds.

The participants discussed receiving messages as children from their church and families, whether explicit or latent, which implied that homosexuality was sinful and wrong. As youth the participants reported often feeling that religiosity was something that was socially influenced and laden with hypocrisies. Participants mentioned that when coming out to their families, their sexuality was associated with Christian ideology and was used as a wedge issue against their stated sexual preference. The majority of participants described separating themselves from their families' Christian beliefs and acceptance in order to find a personally self-fulfilling path to spirituality and religiosity that was not contingent upon remaining Christian. Parental acceptance or rejection was significant not in the outcome of the individuals' religious and spiritual affiliations, but in

the narrative and personal meaning that individuals assigned to their journey. This research provides clinicians with considerations for practice and highlights further areas of research within this field.

CHRISTIANITY, FAMILIAL ACCEPTANCE, AND CURRENT SPIRITUALITY
AMONG LGB INDIVIDUALS:
BLESSED BE THE TIE THAT BINDS?

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

Megan Elaine Browning

Smith College School for Social Work
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063

2007

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In 2001, approximately 76.5% of the United States population identified as Christian (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar, 2001), whereas, an estimated 5% of the population is believed to be gay or lesbian (Smith & Gates, 2001). Although these two statistics seemingly might not have anything in common, they are in fact related. Inevitably, a large portion of those who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals (LGB) are or once were Christian. Popular, literalist interpretations of Christian scriptures suggest that to be a Christian and to be a homosexual are contradicting, negating concepts. According to these interpretations, to be a Christian means that one cannot be a homosexual and vice versa. Recent research and social movements, however, demonstrate that these assumptions are not explicitly true.

In fact, many people who identify themselves as LGB proclaim to be Christians and were raised in Christian families who adhered to Christian doctrines (Perlstein, 1996). Interpretations of the Bible that support homosexuality as a sin and the condemnation of homosexuality within mainstream churches, often impacts LGB individuals role in their family of origin. This causes those individuals raised Christian to experience psychological wounds, consisting of feelings of isolation, guilt, and shame due to familial, social, and religious persecution (Haldeman, 1996; Perlstein, 1996). Little research has investigated how LGB individuals who were raised in Christian households (which comprise approximately 60% of the households in the United States

population) were impacted religiously and/or spiritually by familial acceptance once they came out (Kosmin et al., 2001). Thus, research must be conducted in order to identify how LGB individuals have been impacted, religiously and spiritually as a result of the acceptance or rejection by their family of origin as it could have severe implications for mental health, well-being, and familial relationships.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Christianity and Homosexuality

Within fundamentalist, mainstream Christianity, the ideology has long been held that Biblical teachings condemn homosexuality. Scriptures of the Bible that are taken literally suggest that homosexuality is sinful, unnatural, and punishable with death (Griffin, Wirth, & Wirth, 1996; Haldeman, 1996). It could be argued that these scriptures are taken out of their historical context. Examination of surrounding passages and the cultural climate of the time could suggest an entirely different reading altogether. For instance, Leviticus 20:13 states that if a man lies with a man like a woman, that it is detestable and both shall be put to death. Leviticus 20 also calls for the death of adulterers and those who curse their mother and father, neither of which cause a heated debate today as to their current relevance. The theological debate surrounding homosexuality can be reduced to differences in interpretation, as ambiguities and inconsistencies exist. Thus, the Biblical stance on homosexuality might not ever be clearly understood; instead, emphasis can be placed on the ways that the Christian community creates meaning and uses these texts (Locke, 2004).

Based on scripture, Christians commonly draw many conclusions that they believe hold applicable meaning for life today. Due to references encouraging purity and condemning lust, it is often upheld that the primary purpose of intercourse is to produce

offspring; thus, any act like homosexuality in which procreation cannot occur is seen as an abomination against God (Griffin et al., 1996). The two life paths that receive support within the Bible and in turn are upheld today in society are marriage/family or celibacy/virginity, not same-sex partnerships (Rittter & O'neil, 1989). Thus, it is often further concluded that homosexuality, as it does not serve reproductive purposes and is not the Biblical example of romantic intimacy, is solely based on pleasure and is sinful (Clark, Brown, & Hochstein, 1990; Haldeman, 1996). As the act of same-sex relationships are seen as an abomination and unclean, homosexual individuals are vehemently excluded from mainstream churches on various levels.

The meanings that Christians have derived about homosexuality from select readings of scripture have had far reaching influences within modern day society. Outspoken fundamentalist theologians, like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell and their organizations, support the view that homosexuality is sinful and also believe it is responsible for world evils (Robertsons Redux, 2005; Tobias, 2001). It is this message that many Christians and non-Christians receive from popular media sources and Christian leaders. Fundamentalist, conservative views pertaining to Christianity espouse and perpetuate many of the negative stereotypes, virulent attacks, and rejection towards LGB individuals (Griffin et al., 1996). In essence, the church has sanctioned many of the homophobic sentiments that are prominent in our society today due to their nonaccepting stance, causing the overall social attitude towards homosexuality to be rooted in a religious debate (Clark et al., 1990).

This harsh stance against homosexuality is being reconsidered, however, by some theologians and lay people because of two major changes within the understanding of

theology and homosexuality (Griffin et al., 1996; Haldeman, 1996). First of all, as stated earlier, with a more in depth study of the Bible it is revealed that some negative interpretations of scriptures pertaining to same-sex encounters could be based on historical, cultural, and narrative contexts (Locke, 2004). For instance, within the Biblical time period, the encouragement of procreation was an assurance that tribes would continue and confirmed that males would remain the dominant gender as women's focus would be on childbearing and care (Griffin et al., 1996; Locke, 2004). Secondly, biological evidence suggesting that homosexuality is not a choice, but a genetic, natural condition has caused churches to reexamine their position regarding LGB individuals (Griffin et al., 1996). The genetic factors pertaining to homosexuality are still being studied and further evidence to support a biological predisposition is currently being pursued. These changes are a beginning point for churches to look at their institutional ideology and church policy regarding same sex practices and partnerships.

Currently, churches' stances on homosexuality vary depending on denomination. While shifts in thought and practice appear to be occurring, there is still ambiguity. Many churches have adopted a qualified acceptance approach to homosexuality, meaning that most mainstream protestant churches and the Roman Catholic Church seem to be moving to a stance in which the act of homosexuality is condemned, but the individual is not (Davidson, 2000; Griffin et al., 1996; Haldeman, 1996). Throughout the 1980-1990's denominations including, The United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian Church (USA), Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, The United Church of Christ, and The Episcopal Church began to reexamine their policies pertaining to homosexuals (Griffin et al., 1996). A smaller number of denominations, such as The United Fellowship of

Metropolitan Community Churches, a nondenominational church for gays, the Quaker Church, and The United Church of Christ, are fully accepting of those who are LGB. Some churches have taken public stances welcoming LGB individuals into their folds, while others take a more passive approach, neither welcoming nor denying LGB individuals' membership.

Although changes pertaining to LGB issues are occurring in various Christian denominations this is not a peaceful, undisputed process. Some churches are going through internal turmoil and factions are occurring within their denominations. For instance, the Episcopal Church is currently determining whether to renounce gay bishops and same-sex unions or withdraw from the Anglican Communion (Goodstein & Banerjee, 2006). In November 2005, the American Baptist Churches USA Pacific Southwest Region, comprised of over 300 churches, began to withdraw from the American Baptist Churches, the largest of such movements that has occurred due to issues of homosexuality (Moll, 2005). The tension in these decisions is amplified because even though denominations as an entity can take public stances and struggle with their relationship to the issue of homosexuality, it does not guarantee that individual churches or congregants will share the same opinion. Discord can lead to drops in church attendance or congregants leaving for another denomination that shares their personal views.

Given this dynamic, LGB individuals do not often have a welcoming or secure place within the majority of mainstream churches because of either the lack of acceptance or the dual nature of acceptance (i.e. the act is condemned but not the individual). Yip (1998) found that gay males believe the institutionalized Church to be homophobic, but

individual congregations to be compassionate and understanding, which they perceived as hypocritical. On an individual level, they feel included, but on the institutional level they feel ostracized. Whereas, Olson and Cadge (2002) report that among mainline protestant clergy the majority did not take a firm stand on homosexuality within their individual congregations, but discussed it pragmatically on a denomination level. It seems that in some arenas LGB individuals are recognized as members and valued as individuals, but in others they are ignored and shunned. Due to the divide and perceived hypocrisies of the Christian church, LGB individuals receive messages that encourage them to remain either in the closet or out without full acceptance, resulting in potentially personally challenging situations that can impact self-acceptance and self-esteem (Clark et al., 1990).

LGB Experience with Christianity

Even though organized religion is unsupportive and sometimes hostile, that does not mean that spirituality and religion do not serve meaningful, important roles in the lives of LGB individuals. In order to discuss the role of religion and spirituality within the lives of LGB individuals, the two terms must be fully understood. Although religiosity and spirituality are similar and overlapping concepts they are vastly different. For the purposes of this research, *religiosity* signifies adherence to beliefs and practices of institutional, organized religion. On the other hand, *spirituality* represents a personal, subjective connection to a higher power or a deep sense of purpose that is upheld through beliefs, experiences, or practices. Thus, someone might be religious and spiritual or just spiritual with no religious identification.

It seems likely, due to the significant numbers of Christian households in the United States, that many LGB individuals were raised within the Christian church. Thus, from a young age they would have received messages about what behaviors are acceptable and encouraged according to Christian doctrine. According to Barret and Barzan (1996), the struggle to honor one's sexuality and spirituality often begins within adolescence. Commonly, churches incorporate or send latent messages about sexual development and its connection to Biblical teachings within their youth curriculum. Adolescents that have same-sex feelings might receive messages that cause them to either fear or be ashamed of their sexuality. Failing to receive support from their families, society, and religious institutions might cause questioning youth to compartmentalize their sexuality. This could lead them to experience the conscious or unconscious struggle of how to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality, whether through oppressing their sexual orientation or leaving the church (Barret & Barzan, 1996). LGB Christian youth often take these conflicting messages with them into adulthood, being unable to reconcile their beliefs within largely unsupportive environments.

Areas in which LGB individuals experience conflict in regards to reconciling their spirituality and sexuality vary. Teachings of homosexuality within the Bible and the church that uphold same-sex relationships as a sin and state that LGB individuals would go to hell for their practices are a significant source of conflict (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Some LGB individuals may feel that their congregations judge them. Other LGB parishioners might feel pressure from the church to change their homosexual orientation, to ask God for forgiveness and healing, or to remain celibate (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). There are some LGB individuals who seek ex-gay or conversion therapies from clergy or

ill-informed therapists, which have proven to be not only noneffective, but also drastically harmful (Haldeman, 1996). All of these solutions, supported by a fair amount of denominations, cause LGB individuals to deny who they are as sexual beings and do not allow them to feel like a whole person who is worthy of spirituality or religion. This ambiguity and dissonance between their identity and the church can lead to a splitting of the self and the need for reconciliation (Haldeman, 1996).

The messages of homophobia that are perpetuated within society, the media, and the church can have drastic effects on LGB individuals. It is possible for LGB individuals to internalize the homophobic, hostile messages leading to a fragmentation of self (Haldeman, 1996). This fragmentation or dissonance within their personal identity is only heightened by the antithetical understanding of their religious, spiritual selves and sexuality. Mahaffy (1996) found that lesbian women raised within evangelical churches who were deep within an evangelical Christian identity before coming out struggled more with sexuality and religious beliefs than women who became Christians later in life. Moreover, they seem to have internalized conservative views of the Church causing them to relieve the inner conflict by changing their beliefs as opposed to leaving the church (Mahaffy, 1996). Thus, being raised in a Christian home and internalizing a Christian identity at a young age could be related to experiencing dissonance between one's sexual and spiritual self and the need for reconciliation. Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) found that the age at which gay men raised Catholic accepted being gay and had their first long-term relationship was positively correlated with greater internalized homophobia or feelings of guilt, depression, and worthlessness. When trying to come to terms with the seemingly contradictory aspects of their spirituality and

sexuality, LGB individuals might experience an array of emotions ranging from guilt, shame, isolation, rage, fear, depression, and self-loathing (Haldeman, 1996; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). The overwhelming sense of these feelings can cause an individual to seek wholeness and reconciliation within themselves and to a religious/spiritual body.

Although LGB individuals are often made to feel invisible within the church and are not fully embraced, they can be devout participants. According to Sherkat (2002), gay and heterosexual males have similar rates of church attendance. In addition, gay males pray more often than heterosexual males (Sherkat, 2002). Studies also demonstrate that lesbian and gay individuals have rich and meaningful spiritual lives (Tan, 2005; Walton, 2006). In fact, it has been suggested that religion is a way to cope with, and can even be an act of defiance against, the negative stigmatization and discrimination within the world (Haldeman, 1996; Wagner et al., 1994; Walton, 2006). Moreover, LGB experiences with affirmative faith organizations have been found to be beneficial for mental health in that they counteract feelings of internalized homophobia and increase spirituality (Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Wagner et al., 1994). Therefore, religion can provide an accepting and affirming community for LGB individuals with many personal benefits. In order to reach a place where one can be active within Christianity and have positive experiences, however, can require reconciliation of one's sexuality and spirituality.

According to Walton (2006), reconciliation is possible through critical examination of scripture (including a nonliteralist approach), accepting the differences between organized Christianity and God, as well as viewing sexuality not as a choice, but as a part of God's will. Thus, lessons of compassion and unconditional love from

teachings within the Bible can bridge the rift and lead to healing (Haldeman, 1996; Mahaffy; 1996; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Yarhouse, Brooke, Pisano, & Tan, 2005). This theme of differentiation between organized religion and the actual messages of God is prominent within lesbian and gay individuals (Mahaffy, 1996; Shallenberger, 1996; Tan, 2005; Walton, 2006). In taking from scriptural messages their own interpretative meanings, LGB individuals are able to find confirmation and assurance as spiritual beings. Moreover, viewing sexuality as an innate characteristic allows the individual to contribute their identity formation to God, not as something that they need to be ashamed of or need to change.

As mentioned, one way in which LGB individuals are able to heal their emotional wounds and piece together their spiritual selves is through acknowledging the differences that exist between a personal spirituality/relationship with God and that of organized religion and doctrine. According to Yip (2002), homosexual Christians preferred to describe their Christian faith as “spiritual” as opposed to “religious.” It has been demonstrated that lesbian and gay individuals look beyond organized religion to within themselves in order to find answers pertaining to religion and faith (Tan, 2005; Yip, 2002). According to Tan (2005), existential well-being, a sense of internal purpose and satisfaction, leads to higher self-esteem, acceptance of one’s own sexuality, and a sense of belonging. Thus, one does not necessarily need to be religious, but to have a sense of spiritual, existential well-being to be an adjusted, healthy individual. Ironically, in experiencing disconnectedness and separation from societal affirmation, often from the church, the search for approval is turned inward, causing an enhancement of the spiritual self (Haldeman, 1996). Interestingly, it seems that while parts of spirituality, such as

organized religion, can cause an individual pain it is also spirituality and religion that can lead to healing.

Another factor contributing towards the reconciliation process is involvement in a supportive community. According to Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), participation in a gay positive church helped lesbian and gay individuals integrate their sexuality and religious beliefs, which was positively related to one's openness about sexual orientation. Schuck and Liddle (2001) found that among LGB individuals a helpful resource that allowed them to resolve religious and sexual conflict was people, with the majority mentioning LGB friends. Other resources that individuals found helpful were books that specifically dealt with religion and homosexuality and LGB organizations, such as Dignity (organization for gay and lesbian Catholics) and PFLAG (Parents and Families of Lesbians and Gays). Having supportive communities, specifically an LGB community, can counteract the isolation and shame that the Christian church often projects.

There are multiple identity variables that can impact the reconciliation process for LGB people. Geography is one aspect that can impact the religious and spiritual well-being of LGB individuals. According to Barret & Barzan (1996), those lesbian and gay individuals who live in rural southern towns or cities have different experiences than those who live in urban centers because they do not have the same active gay communities and systems of support. As mentioned previously, gender affects those reconciling their sexuality and spirituality differently. Often lesbians have to deal with not only the homophobic innuendoes of the church, but also teachings that support patriarchy. Race and ethnicity are two important factors that constantly impact LGB individuals. LGB people of color often do not feel accepted by their own racial/ethnic

group or the homosexual community (Loiacano, 1993; Espin, 1993). These individuals can end up living with their identity divided between the Anglo homosexual community and that of their culture. Adding religion to this already complex identity structure can cause further division of the self.

Reconciling one's sexuality and spirituality is a long process that is ever changing. Shallenberger (1996) found that as individuals discovered that they were lesbian or gay they moved from mainstream religious groups to the homosexual community. Once they were comfortable with their sexuality they were then able to integrate their two identities and move towards involvement in some type of spirituality. Some LGB individuals are able to reconcile their spiritual and sexual identities through Christianity, whereas, others find new religions and spiritual practices or move beyond organized religious practice to a sense of personal spirituality. This dynamic can take place in many different forms. For example, Perlstein (1996) reported that LGB individuals often belong to six categories: closeted mainstream, comes out in religious group and then joins religious subgroup, joins mainstream religion openly homosexual, joins gay/lesbian church, formation of own personal relation to higher power, part of an extended family/community active in ritual holidays. Similarly, Schuck and Liddle (2001) found that LGB individuals either left religion completely, stopped temporarily while coming out, began attending gay positive denominations or specific congregations within their denomination that were affirmative, or maintained their faith privately. There is no clear journey towards reconciliation of spirituality and sexuality, with many different paths being appropriate for different people.

As stated, not all LGB individuals are able to reach a point of reconciliation with the church or their spiritual selves, resulting in their abandonment of all aspects of religion and/or spirituality. Schuck and Liddle (2001) found that the most common way to relieve conflict between sexuality and spirituality was to no longer attend the religious institution. Wagner et al. (1994) also found that 69% of a sample of gay men that were raised in Catholic households and who were not affiliated with gay church organizations were no longer practicing. This is further supported in that, gay men and lesbians are significantly more likely to leave the church than heterosexual men or women (Sherkat, 2002). Thus, many have tried to overcome the continuous rejection and the ensuing pain through prayer and adaptation, but have lost trust and interest (Barret & Barzan, 1996). While rejecting religion allows one to accept their sexuality, it can lead to psychological damage for some and feelings of self-confirmation and acceptance for others (Wagner et al., 1994). Thus, the impact that conservative Christianity has on LGB individuals who leave the church can be long lasting.

Leaving Christianity, although having differing effects on homosexual individuals, is a viable option for many as it allows them to not only move forward as sexual beings, but also provides an opportunity to find other practices that meet their spiritual needs, providing affirmation for their whole being. Other belief systems that LGB individuals have gravitated to since leaving traditional Christian denominations are far ranging: Taoism, Siddha Yoga, Unity, Buddhism, Metropolitan Community Church, Wicca, 12-step programs, and many more (Shallenberger, 1996). Those raised Christian often find their way back to spirituality, but it might not manifest in the same form as it did before coming out.

LGB Individuals, Family of Origin, and Christianity

LGB individuals do not go through this process of reconciliation alone, but act either in conjunction with or in response to the families in which they were raised. The majority of gay men and lesbians were raised by heterosexual parents and were taught traditional male and female gender roles, as well as their families' cultural and religious norms (Laird, 2003). Spirituality and religion manifest themselves in different forms in the lives of LGB individuals and the environment in which they were raised or are surrounded by can impact the type of religious and/or spiritual environment that an LBG person gravitates to (Perlstein, 1996).

Coming Out

Coming out is commonly understood as the process that LGB individuals go through to inform their family and friends of their homosexual identity, but can also be a time of self acceptance and discovery. It is during this time that the worlds of individual sexuality and spirituality collide with the beliefs of one's family of origin. Ben-Ari (1995) found that lesbian and gay individuals' biggest fear of coming out was rejection by their parents. This is understandable given the social stigmas and homophobia perpetuated within society, which can be further amplified if one was raised within a Christian family. It has been demonstrated that lesbian and gay individuals predominantly come out to their mother and that mothers are more accepting than fathers (Ben-Ari, 1995). This might seem counter-intuitive as women have been proven to be more religious than men and would seem to have more strict view regarding sexual orientation. Thus, coming out to Christian parents could add a layer of complexity, especially with fathers. Most research conducted about familial acceptance of LGB

individuals involves parents and perspectives of other family members, such as siblings and grandparents are under studied (Strommen, 1993).

Explicitly implied in the coming out process to families is not only the LGB individual's disclosure, but the familial response. Oswald (2000) found that communication, whether talking, arguing, or questioning, was beneficial for lesbians and bisexuals and their families because the issue was not being ignored. According to Oswald (2000), a lesbian or bisexual identity is not based only on the internal orientation of an individual, but is negotiated within relational systems. During this negotiation process many LGB individuals and family members question or change their beliefs about homosexuality and their family roles. The negotiation process of coming out to family members and its religious implications, however, remains largely unclear.

Families' Religious Beliefs

The home environment that LGB individuals were raised in could range from more conservative to more liberal in the families' adherence to religious and cultural values. The type of religious beliefs that a family holds are crucial in developing an understanding of the self and acceptable cultural behavior. A family's Christian denomination or values might affect the way that LGB individual are received by the family. For instance, Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) found that although adolescent males' race has no effect on their coming out, traditional family values like adherence to religion and importance of marriage and procreation does, as families with these values were less accepting. Oswald (2001) found that religious liberalism and religious variation within familial relationships proved beneficial for LGB individuals because it caused them to not feel like outsiders and encouraged family cohesion. Thus, religious

beliefs, whether traditional or liberal, are shown to directly impact the level of familial acceptance of an LGB individual.

A family's religious beliefs are of importance because they can affect the emotional and spiritual choices that they will have to make, which will have direct consequences for their LGB family member. When family members find out that their family member is homosexual they will go through a process of mourning that is value laden, in that they have to come to terms with knowing that their homosexual family member will not be married or have children in the socially sanctioned, traditional manner (Strommen, 1990). If families are unable to adjust their values and expectations, it leads to rejection, with which come feelings of anger, disappointment, and resentment (Strommen, 1990; Wells-Lurie, 1996). According to Wells-Lurie (1996), coming out in families who have rigid religious views is extremely challenging and can result in families harboring an exorbitant amount of guilt for the sexuality of their child and sometimes responsibility for changing them. Interestingly, parents feel more guilt for a child of the opposite sex who comes out as homosexual, than one who is of the same sex, possibly due to feelings of responsibility for socializing the child of the opposite sex (Ben-Ari, 1995). The religious beliefs that family members hold are not necessarily concrete, but can change as they work through feelings of disappointment or guilt towards acceptance or rejection.

Family Reconciliation Process

The understanding of a family member's homosexuality is a process in which families can work on a range in between acceptance and rejection. Aligning one's religious, spiritual beliefs with the sexual identity of a family member is not an easy

process, and can be confusing and painful (Lease & Shulman 2003; Griffin et al., 1996). Many family members might not choose to or are able to go through the process of alignment. Families of origin receive messages from the fundamental church, hostility and secretiveness, which discourage them from accepting their lesbian or gay family members and their lifestyle (Clark, et al., 1990). Therefore, the LGB individual might be ostracized and rejected from the family system due to the family's inability to reconcile their beliefs about homosexuality and religious arguments (Davidson, 2001). Thus, those LGB individuals' whose family members are nonaccepting due to religious beliefs might have an ambiguous or negative relationship to Christianity.

Finding out that one's family member is homosexual is perceived as distressful and as a disturbance to the normal flow of the family system. Families have to not only come to an understanding of their LGB family member's sexual orientation within their familial system, but also have to understand it in relation to the communities in which they exist, such as the church. Families might be condemned by their church or rejected by their systems of support due to the sexual orientation of their family member, causing them further pain and confusion (Laird, 2003). Therefore, it can lead to switching denominations or leaving religion all together (Lease & Shulman 2003; Griffin et al., 1996). According to Strommen (1990), social stigma is the basis for the negative outcomes in acceptance of a homosexual family member. The direct role that religion plays in the construction of these social stigmas cannot be denied. LGB people are often seen as social deviants, whether as carriers of AIDS, pedophiles, or perverts. When people find out that their family member is homosexual they might revert to these social stigmas and homophobic mindset. Thus, family members must not only confront these

stigmas and create new beliefs towards homosexuality, but also accept their family member as an individual and re-conceptualize the role that they believe their family member has played (Oswald, 2000; Strommen, 1990).

Little research has been conducted examining the role that religion and spirituality play in family members' acceptance of LGB individuals. It seems that the process of reconciliation that LGB individuals go through in order to reconcile their spirituality and sexuality is similar to that of family members, in coming to terms with their loved ones sexual orientation in relation to their commonly held religious and spiritual beliefs. According to Lease and Shulman (2003), families of LGB individuals separated organized religious doctrine from the spiritual messages of unconditional love and acceptance that their religion upheld. The separation between religious doctrine and the overall understanding of a loving God allows family members to align their feelings for their LGB family member and their religion (Lease & Shulman, 2003).

Impact of Familial Response

Traditionally, families are a close network that stay connected throughout the lifespan; thus, it seems that family members' response to finding out that their family member is homosexual could be important because it could either result in feelings of isolation or support from a vital system. The importance of familial response and ensuing process of acceptance or rejection for the LGB individuals is debated. There is research that demonstrates that familial support and acceptance of same sex practices is significant to the psychological adjustment of gay men (Elizur & Ziv, 2001). Conversely, Green (2000) reported that support and acceptance from friends is more important to lesbian and gay individuals' mental health and quality of partnerships than that of family

members, such as parents (Kurdek, 1988; Laird, 2003). These contradictory findings in combination with previous findings leave to question whether or not acceptance within Christian families impacts the current spirituality and religiosity of the LGB family member.

As demonstrated, both LGB individuals and their family go through some type of process of reconciliation, whether it leads to acceptance or not; one that is filled with intense emotions and personal implications. None of the aforementioned studies looked specifically at the relationship between religion and spirituality in familial acceptance and the impact that it has on LGB family members and their religiosity and/or spirituality. Therefore, this study seeks to understand and explore LGB individuals' perceptions of how acceptance or rejection into their Christian families of origin has impacted their current religiosity and/or spirituality. Given the demonstrated tense relationship between homosexuality and religion, the importance of religion and spirituality in the lives of LGB individuals, and the possible mental health consequences due to familial acceptance for this population, suggests that there could be viable, life altering effects for the LGB family member. As such, the purpose of this study is to increase understanding within mental health for this marginalized population through the examination of Christianity, familial acceptance, and current religiosity and/or spirituality among LGB Individuals.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This study was a flexible, qualitative methods study that sought to explore the relationship between Christianity, familial acceptance, and current spirituality. The study question being explored was what are LGB individuals' perceptions on how acceptance into their Christian families of origin has impacted their current religiosity and/or spirituality? There is a necessity to provide research that examines how LGB individuals' current religiosity and spirituality is impacted by familial acceptance, as exemplified within the literature review. Given the lack of previous research and measurements pertaining to this specific issue, a qualitative, semi structured interview with open-ended questions was conducted so as to explore the experiences of this population. As a social worker, who is concerned about the mental health and services offered to the LGB community, I seek to find ways that will improve clinical practice for LGB individuals.

Sample

Demographic information was requested in order to detail the various characteristics of participants that were relevant to the study. Participants were asked for their age, gender, sexual orientation, race and/or ethnicity, age of coming out, geographic location/s while being raised, religious denomination/s while being raised, frequency of church attendance of self/family, and current religious denomination or spirituality of self

and family. Participants rated how religious and spiritual they thought their families of origin were before and after they came out on a scale from 1 (*not religious/spiritual*) to 10 (*very religious/spiritual*). Participants also rated how religious and spiritual they thought they were before and after they came out on a scale from 1 (*not religious/spiritual*) to 10 (*very religious/spiritual*).

Fifteen individuals participated in this research study. Thirteen participants identified as Caucasian and two Hispanic; eight identified as male, six as female, and one as queer. Participants ranged in age from 22-40 (mean age = 33.13 years). Eight participants identified as gay males, three as lesbian females, two as gay females, one as a bisexual female, and one as queer. While the study was initially not set up for individuals who are queer, this person was included for pragmatic purposes and the ensuing data was compounded with the rest of the study population results. Eleven participants identified Protestant Christianity as their primary religious affiliation while being raised. Protestant denominations represented within the sample are as follows, with some participants listing more than one: Methodist (5), Episcopal (3), Baptist (2), Lutheran (1), Pentecostal (1), and Nondenominational (1). Four participants identified Catholicism as their primary religious affiliation while being raised. Twelve participants reported current religious and spiritual identifications. Current religious denominations and spiritualities reported among the sample are as follows: Christian (2), Catholic (2), Methodist (2), Nondenominational (2), Agnostic (1), Episcopal (1), Hindu (1), and Pagan (1). Three participants did not currently identify with any religion or spirituality.

The sample consisted of individuals from a large metropolitan area in the South who self identified as LGB individuals from Christian families. Participants for this

study were gathered through nonrandom, snowball sampling methods. After the Human Subject Review Board (HSRB) at Smith College School for Social Work approved of the design for this project (Appendix A), contact was made with various gatekeepers within the LGB community, through an informative project e-mail (Appendix B) or telephone calls, requesting their assistance with identifying participants who met the research requirements. Individuals were required to meet the following criteria to qualify for participation: 1) individuals must be lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 2) individuals must be between the ages of twenty and forty years old, 3) individuals must be from Christian families of origin, 4) individuals must be out to their family, and 5) individuals must live in the Houston area. The contact person then sent the informative e-mail or gave this researcher's phone number to potential participants. The e-mail briefly explained the purpose, requirements, and expectations for participation in the study. Potential participants were also informed that there would be no financial gain for participation.

Potential participants then contacted the researcher via e-mail or phone for more information and if they were interested an interview was scheduled. Following an interview, participants were asked to suggest other potential participants who they believed met the requirements and they were then contacted by email or phone by this researcher or the former participant passed on this researcher's contact information to them. The snowball sampling method was chosen so that the results would not be biased towards a subgroup of the sample that was affiliated with any organization or faction. Furthermore, due to the oppressed nature of the LGB population it might have been difficult to gain access to or participation from members unless it was through individuals who were already a part of the community.

Data Collection

Qualitative, exploratory methods were utilized in the design of this research. This methodology was chosen due to the lack of research in this subject area and because there were no viable measurement instruments. Further, interviews allowed the flexibility necessary to obtain information required to answer research questions. The measures used in the study included both a demographic survey and a list of open-ended questions. The demographic survey (Appendix C) was comprised of fifteen questions at nominal and ordinal levels of measurement. The interview guide (Appendix D) was comprised of nine open ended questions that were divided into three categories: Christianity in family of origin, coming out in the family, and current spirituality and religiosity of self and family. These instruments were developed specifically for this study and were informed by previous research. Thus, they do not have validity or reliability outcomes. The interviews were slightly modified if need be as information was gained and as patterns emerged. Moreover, religion, spirituality, and sexuality are often complex and sensitive topics that could be further explained through a descriptive demographic survey and accommodated within an interview setting.

When participants arrived at the interview they were given an informed consent form to sign. Participants were required to sign the informed consent (Appendix E) form which detailed participant expectations and possible risks or benefits to participation in order to proceed with full participation in the interview. After signing the consent form participants were asked if they had any questions before proceeding. Upon answering any further questions, participants filled out the brief demographic questionnaire. Once the questionnaire was completed, the open-ended question portion of the interview began.

The audio of each interview was digitally recorded and written notes were taken to document any behavioral or outstanding observations. Interviews took place in a neutral location, amenable to the participant, such as coffee shops and tea houses, which were relatively private and not connected to any formalized organization.

As stated earlier, after the consent form was signed interview participants were asked to complete a brief survey (Appendix C). This survey, constructed specifically for this research, consisted of short answer questions and scales determining participant demographics and religious/spiritual behaviors of family and self. The survey was given to better understand the background of the participant and to further conceptualize their religious and spiritual environment. After participants completed the survey the in-depth, face-to-face interview began. A semi structured open-ended interview strategy was utilized to construct questions (Appendix D) so that participants received the same questions in similar order, but also allowed for flexibility and individualistic responses. Open-ended questions sought to conceptualize the role of Christianity within LGB individuals' families of origin and to describe their current religious and spiritual practices in relation to their familial influence. Probes were also used to elicit more material from participants when necessary. The open-ended question portion of the interview varied in length, from 10-53 minutes with the average participant talking for approximately 28 minutes.

In order to preserve the confidentiality of the participants, their names were omitted from taped interview transcripts. Furthermore, names were not stored with any interview data. In addition, any possible identifying information within the transcripts or data was altered to disguise and protect their identities. In adherence with the consent

form and in accordance with Federal Regulations, the digitally audio recorded interviews will be stored in a secure and locked location separate from the consent forms and will be destroyed in three years time.

Data Analysis

The audio recordings were reviewed and transcribed word for word by this interviewer and one volunteer assistant. The assistant transcriber signed the volunteer transcriber confidentiality form (Appendix F) and was made aware of the procedures to maintain confidentiality. The interviews were saved in their entirety within a computer folder. Next, the answers to corresponding questions were grouped together in individual word documents. Thus, all the answers for each, individual question asked in the interview were categorized and compared.

The data was then examined for themes, whether in the usage of similar phrases, words, or meanings. Codes or labels were assigned to encapsulate all the responses that pertained to a particular theme; some statements were assigned to more than one coding category as applicable. Once coding was completed, patterns within the data were identified. Data from the initial demographic survey was entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet and computed for mode, mean, and median or organized manually depending on whether it was an interval or nominal variable. These findings were taken into consideration when comprehending the outcomes of the theme analysis.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study sought to examine how familial response, ranging from acceptance to rejection, towards an LGB family member after coming out impacted the LGB family member's spiritually or religiously. In doing this, various family dynamics pertaining to religiosity and sexuality before and after the individual came out were explored. This chapter contains the findings from the fifteen LGB individuals' interviews who met the research criteria. Within this chapter, the data from the demographic portion of the interview was used to describe and provide a comprehensive picture of the level of religiosity and spirituality within the individuals and their family systems and the data from the open-ended question portion was used to demonstrate the overall major findings of personal impact for the LGB individuals.

Demographic Data

Data collected from the questionnaire demonstrated that the average number of times that participants' families attended church growing up was 3.13 times per month. Slightly over half of the participants (53.3%) reported that their families attend church weekly, whereas, only one participant reported that their family attended church once a month. Participants also rated how religious and spiritual they thought their families of origin were before and after they came out on a scale from 1 (*not religious*) to 10 (*very religious*). On average, participants reported the religiosity within their families of origin as 5.4 (range = 1-9) before and 5.6 (range = 1-9) after coming out. On the spirituality

scale, participants on average rated their families of origin as 5.0 (range = 2-9) before and 5.46 (range = 2-9) after coming out. The average level of religiosity and spirituality within families did not significantly change after the participant came out. Taken individually, 60% reported that the religiosity and 66.6% reported that the spirituality of their families' did not change after they came out. Of those who reported a change, two (13%) reported that their families' religiosity decreased, four (26%) reported that their religiosity increased, and four (26%) reported that their spirituality increased. No one reported that their families' spirituality decreased after they came out.

The average number of times that participants reported that they attended church growing up was 2.89 per month. Participants also rated how religious and spiritual they thought they were before and after they came out on a scale from 1 (*not religious*) to 10 (*very religious*). On average, participants rated their religiosity as 4.46 (range = 1-9) before and 3.06 (range = 1-9) after coming out. On the spirituality scale participants on average rated their spirituality as 4.8 (range = 1-10) before and 5.6 (range = 1-10) after coming out. Overall, 40% reported that their religiosity and 20% reported that their spirituality did not change after they came out. Of the participants who reported a change in their religiosity, eight (53.3%) reported a decrease in their religiosity, where as, 2 (13.3%) reported an increase in their religiosity. Of the participants who reported a change in their spirituality, five (33.3%) reported a decrease in their spirituality, whereas, seven (46.6%) reported an increase in their spirituality.

Major Findings

In looking at the demographic data in relation to the qualitative open ended questions there did not seem to be any clear differentiations between the experiences of

the participants in regards to religious background before coming out, age, gender, or sexual orientation. Therefore, common themes were looked for across all demographic variables and compounded. Through thematic analysis of the open ended question portion of the data trends could be identified and several themes became apparent. These themes can best be understood by looking at the way that Christianity was expressed within the family and the individual before and after coming out in relation to their understandings of homosexuality. For organizational purposes themes were placed into categories in relation to before and after coming out 1) Christianity within the family before, 2) Christianity within the individual before, 3) homosexuality within the individual and family before coming out, 4) homosexuality within the individual and family after coming out, 5) Christianity and spirituality within the family after, 6) Christianity and spirituality within the individual after.

Christianity within the Family Before

When discussing the relationship between Christianity and their families of origin when growing up the most common responses centered on the way in which attending church was a social and familial obligation. It was seen as a way of being involved in society at large and following socially prescribed norms. The most common ways that people expressed this was by mentioning family obligation, church attendance and participation, and social influences.

Familial obligation

The importance of family heritage as a reason to be involved in the church was a theme within participants' reports of their families' Christian religiosity. Many participants mentioned early on in the questioning process that they went to church with

their parents because it was how their parents were raised and was what their family was accustomed to doing. It was common for participants to mention that their grandparents were active in the Christian church and that the reason their immediate family went to church was because of expectations set up by family elders. The following quotes from a gay female and gay male, prospectively, speak to the family heritage component of Christianity:

I know that they went to church because my Dad was raised going to church every Sunday, so was my step-mom. So, I think that had something to do with it. I think that is why they went to church, it was something they were used to doing.

They were just, they were both raised Catholic. They went to Catholic school all the way through high school and so, they kept with Catholic tradition. I guarantee that neither one of them could speak and say from Romans verse something.

Multiple participants mentioned that being Christian was a piece of their family heritage and a way of understanding and identifying themselves, but beyond that it held little overall meaning in their lives.

Church attendance and participation

Another theme that became evident was that a large number of participants described their families' relationship to Christianity as strictly an activity that occurred weekly. The majority of participants, such as the following gay female, discussed how their families attended church weekly, whether going to Sunday services, attending Sunday school, or volunteering in church programming:

It was central; I would call it a central role in our lives in that we attended church every week. Both of my parents sang and still sing in the choir from the same church that I grew up in. So, it was a very central role. My brother and I when we were young attended Sunday school, regularly, maybe not weekly, but certainly regularly, at least twice a month. It was always a part of our life.

These participants discussed their faith as an activity or a ritual that once conducted was over and done with when they left their place of worship. Participants spoke to the way in which the Christian influence in their lives came from church attendance and activities and ended when they got home. One gay male had this to say:

We went every week and we were involved in the church, but I guess in a contradictory way we didn't talk much about religion. We didn't pray before meals, we didn't have to pray before bed, so I think in the manner of many American Catholics, religious practice was centered on just that, the practice. The act of going to mass, the act of going to confession, and being observant of fasting and so forth, so that was kind of the role religion played in our lives.

Participants reported that activities and rituals were a means to be involved in the church and were how they understood their relationship to Christianity as something that you externally did.

Social influence

Similar to the themes of family heritage and attendance/participation, the majority of participants mentioned that Christianity was a socially driven construct within their families of origin when they were growing up, in that there was a strong sense of obligation and outward concern. Throughout the interview the majority of participants mentioned that Christianity was practiced within their families for social reasons when they were growing up. Thus, multiple participants discussed how they attended church more for appearance purposes than for spiritual and religious reasons or that it was the socially acceptable norm in their community. A few participants perceived that their families were involved in Christianity as a religion not for internal purposes, but for outward purposes or gain. For instance, a gay male stated that, "They wanted it to be

where their family was showing that they were one unit.” Another lesbian female mentioned,

I think it was more about appearing Christian probably; my parents went to church like it was an obligation thing... but, it wasn't real, it was more like appearance based, I felt it was appearance based in growing up.

Although some recognized how social influence was used to display a common front within the family, others believed that their families were involved in the church for purposes of social bonding and community building. A large portion of participants discussed how the church was a way to be active in a structurally defined community and were able to list many activities and social circles that they were involved in through the church. A few individuals mentioned not having extended family near by, so the church became a pseudo-family support system for them. Therefore, the majority of participants mentioned that Christianity and going to church was a social outlet and a connection with others that they might not have had otherwise. One gay female and one lesbian female, respectively, commented on this with the following:

I think it was a way for them to be a part of the community and also to have my brothers and sisters and I to be part of the community with other people. Most of the kids I went to Sunday school with I actually went all through school with too, so I think that was kind of a way to integrate us into the community.

The church was a big part of our social life. I went to Bible camp during the summers. I went to vacation Bible school. I did all the things the church offered and those people were, I guess, part of our social fabric, probably more so than our neighbors or anybody else.

As demonstrated, participants reported that the overall role of Christianity in their families was that of continuing and maintaining familial and community involvement and continuity. This was upheld in the way that they discussed their family heritage, church attendance and participation, and social concerns. The overwhelming majority discussed

church as function that allowed their families external meaning, as opposed to being internally driven.

Christianity within the Individual Before

LGB individuals reported having varying relationships with Christianity as they grew up that followed several different themes. Some of the themes that were evident when LGB individuals discussed their families' relationship with Christianity were similar to the ways that they personally understood Christianity.

Social influences and familial obligations

One of the sentiments that participants echoed of their family was that of social connection and concern. Participants discussed how when they were growing up they also saw their religion as something fun to be involved in and it was where their friends were. Participants discussed going to youth groups, Bible camps, and Sunday school. One lesbian female participant said, "Christianity to me was a group to identify with and it was my social framework." They mentioned that it was something that they found outwardly fun, but not something that they connected with internally.

Also, in similar vein as to that of their families, some participants reported that they understood it as something that they were required by their parents to do as an obligation and it was not something that they felt connected with or touched by.

According to one gay female:

When I was young it didn't mean that much to me, more than, it was something I had to do every Sunday because we had to go. I certainly would have rather slept later, not gotten dressed up in my patent leather shoes and my Sunday dress. I learned, sort of memorized, all the quote unquote proper things that I needed to memorize, but it was not a central focal point when I was young.

This was further supported in that participants mentioned that when they reached a certain age that their parents gave them the choice as to whether or not they wanted to attend church. The following gay male participant spoke to this when he said, “So, it was required by their rules that we go to Sunday school, and at 9th grade we could then decide and only my brother decided to continue on.” Thus, when the family no longer expected the individual to attend they stopped going.

Many of the participants viewed their faith as something that they did for others, friends or family, so that they would be accepted by their social systems and receive secondary gains, like keeping the peace in the home or having an activity to be involved in. Those who spoke to social reasons did not mention having an internal motivation for being involved in Christianity while they were young.

Personal acceptance

A number of participants did mention that they had an internalized understanding of themselves in relation to Christianity growing up that included accepting God or Jesus into their lives, which might have occurred during a ritual time of confirmation or baptism or as an understanding that they reached on their own. When participants discussed accepting God into their lives, a few mentioned it as being an emotionally connected relationship. Such as one female bisexual who stated that, “To me it has always been wanting to be close to God and do the right thing, and to have that approval and that love from God.” These participants discussed the need to have God and the means of prayer as maintaining that connection.

Other participants who reported accepting God as their higher power when they were growing up referred to it as a practical, logical decision that was not ruled by

emotions. A gay male participant stated matter-of-factly, “Well, you know, it meant we worshiped God and that there was Jesus and you know there was Easter and there were holidays and things like that.” Another lesbian female participant stated the following:

It was basically that I believed in Christ and that I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins and that was it. It was very much of a more head level thing. Like I knew what the Lutheran church believed. I could tell you about Luther’s small catechism.

Many of these participants reported understanding their relationship to God as hierarchical; meaning that they believed God to be punitive and rule driven. Furthermore, participants mentioned receiving the message that they needed to be “good” and to do the right thing according to what was laid out in Biblical scriptures in order to win favor with God and their family. “Jesus was kind of the year round Santa Claus to me. You always had to make sure you were behaving yourself because Jesus was always watching or God was always watching,” stated one female lesbian participant. Some participants, like the following gay male, commented that they understood this to be a function of the Christian denomination that they were raised, such as Episcopal, Catholic, or Lutheran:

I think I probably, interpreted it as a real father /parent relationship. Having grown up Catholic you sort of see God as a punishing God and a vengeful God. So, I think that’s how I interpreted it as a child, sort of a strict father sort of role. So your job was to be good or you would be punished.

Whether on a more emotionally driven level or a practical level, these LGB individuals recognized that in the acceptance of God as their higher power it was a give and take relationship in which something was expected of them.

Hypocrisies

The overwhelming majority of participants discussed how as they aged their relationship with Christianity began to change. LGB individuals reported that as they became older and started to understand more about how the church worked and were involved in more aspects of the church, like youth group or confirmation, that they began to notice double standards or hypocrisies within the church teachings and actual practices of the church and its congregants. Many of these participants cited that it was at the time that they noticed the hypocrisies that they distanced themselves from the church or quit going altogether. A lesbian female participant made the following comment:

It was only as I got older that I realized, that a lot of the people that I was going to Sunday school with and going to church with were leading two separate lives, they led their party life at night and then they'd come to church and say all the right things. I think it was about when I was 16; I was like this is nuts. Why am I doing this? I wasn't emotionally strong enough I guess to say, screw it I don't believe in any of it, all I did was distance myself from the people and the place.

Most participants mentioned noticing the contradictory dynamics of the church, but did not state that it was because of the churches stance on homosexuality specifically which led them away from the church initially. Instead, their relationship with the faith began to deteriorate much earlier because of other reasons and the churches stance on homosexuality was an additional breaking point.

Homosexuality within the Individual and Family Before Coming Out

The participants' experiences and understandings of homosexuality before they came out varied from a culture of silence to a culture of value laden disapproval.

Silence

The majority of participants reported that their parents never directly discussed homosexuality while they were growing up. Many participants mentioned that there was a culture of silence in their homes regarding sexuality. When discussing how he understood his sexuality growing up a gay male participant stated, “They just...I didn’t receive any...we just never discussed sex period. It was no stranger than anything else.” Another gay male stated the following when discussing the messages about sexuality that he received in his home, “No, my parents were not and are not comfortable talking about that sort of thing. So, there was really no explicit linking of like Christianity with moirés or norms about sex.” Approximately half the participants reported that there was no open understanding about homosexuality within their families of origin before they came out.

Of those who did mention receiving messages about sexuality, a portion mentioned that they were not blatantly spoken. Participants reported that homosexuality was not explicitly addressed with them, they did mention that latent messages supported by society and the Christian church were embedded in the home environment that their parents fostered. A gay male stated the following, “So, then the way I think that Christianity plays into that whole thing, is that even though it wasn’t a question of religious morality I think that those rules were somehow unspoken and sort of underlying it all.” Whereas homosexuality might not have been addressed specifically within some of the participants’ homes, they did sense a societal, structural force that was influencing the commonly held beliefs regarding sexuality around them.

Social and Christian influences

Most participants reported knowing that homosexuality was culturally wrong and unacceptable. They might have received this message from things that their parents said, occurrences in their social environments, like church and school, or from the media. The following two lesbian females reported the following:

Well, yeah, because we would watch TV every night so it would be like if there was a show that had a gay person on it, you know, she (mother) wouldn't want to watch it. She wasn't very outspoken about it.

That was the most emphatic I had ever seen my mom about anything religious. Basically, a friend of hers, their child, had recently come out and she said, that is just absolutely sinful and I had never even heard my mom use the word sinful before, but it just made it this very black and white issue.

Some participants reported having the understanding from a young age that the reason that homosexuality was wrong was because of Christian teachings. They mentioned knowing that homosexuality and Christianity were opposed and incompatible. Participants discussed that as they aged that they understood homosexuality to be a sin against God and that if they did have same sex feelings they were not socially supported. One gay female spoke to this when she stated:

So, as far as there being...Christianity was on one end and homosexuality was on a total opposite end. As far as, yeah, homosexuality was a dark and dirty thing you know, it was immoral and you know it just didn't, it didn't coincide with being a Christian.

Participants discussed knowing that Biblical teachings did not agree with their sexual feelings as they were teenagers. Many participants reported that leaving the home and going off to college or separating from their church was a way in which they handled the dissonance and were able to come to terms with who they were as sexual beings. Several

participants discussed always knowing that they were homosexual and that they were able to explore these feelings as they aged in environments that were more supportive.

Homosexuality within the Individual and Family After Coming Out

Participants reported coming out to their parents in a variety of different ways and times in their lives. A few individuals mentioned that their parents found a journal or a letter that they had written, which revealed that they were gay. Other participants reported that life events led them to disclose to a parent their sexual orientation. The majority of participants reported coming out to their parents after they had left the home and created independent lives for themselves.

Emotional response

Familial reaction to finding out that their family member was homosexual ranged on a spectrum from being supportive to disbelief and confusion to outright anger. Some participants mentioned that their family members reacted in anger. They discussed how their family members displayed their anger by yelling or punishing them. The following statements were made by a bisexual female and gay male, respectively:

I just said well Dad because I love her and he said what do you mean love her, love her like a queer and I said well yeah I guess. He got very angry. He said he didn't raise a queer and this, that, and the other. After that, there was always anger or we just didn't talk about it, it wasn't there.

They flipped their shit; it was a big deal... I was 15 years old and I had a very limited idea of what it meant to be gay but I knew I liked boys. So I told my father this and after about 30 minutes of their yelling or whatever, my dad says well, sort of apropos of nothing, well what do you want them to do to you? And I was like what because I didn't understand.

Some individuals discussed how their parents didn't respond in anger, but were saddened and hurt by the recognition that their child was homosexual. Some participants

discussed how their parents thought that they were responsible for making their child gay and felt guilty. These participants reported going through a process in which their parents struggled with understanding their responsibility, causing the individual to reassure and comfort their parents. This is demonstrated in two remarks from a lesbian female and gay male, respectively:

I was on the phone with her and she wouldn't let it go and so I told her, I said, Mom I am a lesbian and that is never going to change. She's just crying you know and said that it was the worse day of her life.

Actually, he started crying over the phone...he said, "What did I do wrong? Did I do anything wrong when I raised you, what did I do?" He started blaming himself and I said, "No, Dad you didn't do anything wrong, you did everything as perfectly as you could have, actually you're a really good Dad" I told him and I remember he was just sniffing on the phone, just crying, I mean he was really hurt...

A few participants reported having positive experiences in which their family members embraced them and were fully supportive. These participants reported that they thought their family reacted favorably due to their age and parental recognition that they already suspected that they were gay. The following quotes from a gay male and gay female demonstrate favorable family reaction:

One night, god I don't remember what it was we were talking about, something, I told my mom, and I did all the crying and she didn't and it was very much you know, you know we still love you no matter what.

Extremely supportive, extremely supportive and that was only about a year ago. I believe by that time, that they had clearly already knew and had sent me plenty of signals that were waiting for me to respond in kind and extremely supportive.

The majority of participants discussed how their parents had some type of emotional response to their coming out, with fewer receiving a supportive response than those who were met with anger or sadness.

Christian influence

When discussing coming out and familial reaction participants did not delineate their coming out stories and the involvement of Christianity as separate issues, but often commented on how the two were intertwined. Some participants commented on how when their families found out that they were homosexual, they referenced Christian influenced concepts, such as sex being for procreation. Others mentioned that their families referenced prayer and the Bible. The following lesbian female discussed how her mother referenced Christianity when she came out:

Finally we get off the phone for a little bit and she calls back saying do you know where your Bible is, so she's pointing to certain scriptures and I can't remember which ones they were. I wasn't really ready to come out to her because I hadn't done that research yet, I wanted to be ready because I knew she was going to come at me with all this stuff.

Many participants mentioned that their family members would turn to third parties to help them negotiate or come to terms with their family member's sexuality. Often people referenced having their parents take them to a therapist. Some mentioned that their families went to specifically Christian sources, such as their pastors or popular Christian figures, for support and to have them speak to the LGB family member. A bisexual female and lesbian female, respectively, made comments to support this:

So, I think now how they handle it, they try to get me to listen to Dr. Ed Young's CD's, on what's right and what's wrong. My dad tells me that he is praying for me all the time, just throwing that bit at me.

The first thing I was taken to was a minister, I had to go talk to the minister, who I probably had not talked to in 10 years by that point...but they never tried to take me to a minister again, they slapped me into therapy instead.

These individuals commented on how they resented the therapy or consultations that their family pushed them into and that they found the experiences to be negative.

When examining the role that Christianity played in parental response to their coming out the majority of the participants felt like it was a strong factor. A significant portion of LGB individuals discussed how they felt that Christianity was used as a wedge issue to their family's disagreement over their sexuality. Participants conveyed not having heard Christianity inform their parents' beliefs before this issue was raised, then when they came out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual their family turned to Christianity for answers, such as this comment by a bisexual female participant:

But, I can't say ever hearing you know that if you are gay you are going to hell, until now, until I have come out. But, what I did know was that Christians believe, or that God thought that was bad, that that was wrong and that is not the way he meant it and I can't remember where exactly that came from.

A theme that was apparent was how Christianity was used by families as a way of demonstrating their disapproval and moral concerns about homosexuality as they did not have another way of coping with or understanding their family members' sexuality. A queer identified individual experienced this reaction from her parents and stated:

I think it gave them something to argue with, I don't think it meant anything. I didn't get it as a teenager...that she could say, this is my religious belief and I will put it to the side, she was more like this is all I know, this is done.

LGB individuals discussed how their family members felt that it was wrong, based on Christian teachings and commonly held cultural beliefs, and decided to use those beliefs against them as they did not have any other way to reconcile the opposing messages that they were receiving. A bisexual female and lesbian female, respectively, made the following statements:

I think that it gives them a reason to try to talk me out of it. I think their true reason behind it is their own insecurities... I think that they stand; I think that is what they do, they stand behind it. They hide behind it. They hide behind what the church has said, without taking any incentive to read between the lines, they

are very close minded. They use that very much to say you are wrong and we are right.

I think that, that was the first way for them to deal with it without them having to deal with it. I think it was very much a socially oriented decision it was kind of a way of them not having to dirty their hands. They could pass me off to the church, but I didn't pass off very easily.

The few participants who were unsure about the role it played commented on how even though their parents did not directly mention Christianity that they saw their reaction as imbued in a Christian informed background. One gay male individual spoke to this when he stated:

Umm...I think it played something...despite the fact that I don't think Christianity ever came out in daily life. I have a feeling, especially my parents probably struggle with the fact, because my parents they believe in heaven and hell and you know I am sure they struggled initially at least with the fact that, does this mean I am going to hell. I don't think they would ever come out and tell me that if they think that because they probably know I would throw a fit.

All the participants believed that Christianity was influential in their family member's reaction and understanding of them as a homosexual person. No one believed that it did not play any role at all, it just varied by degree.

Silence

Currently, a portion of the LGB individuals believe that their sexuality has become a mute point and that it is mostly ignored and overlooked by their family members. A few mentioned that they are still confronted with religious arguments against their sexuality and feel uncomfortable with some of their family members. However, many individuals discussed how the subject is just not discussed with their family of origin. Two gay males reported this in the following:

I went away to college and they did not want to talk about it. It wasn't until after college that I was able to be like hey, I am still gay, which was literally how I said

it. They just didn't want to talk about it with me and they didn't want to hear about it.

I never really talked about it with my dad and I still don't really talk about it with my dad at all, so nothing really changed much. I kind of felt uncomfortable, you know, initially the first couple of times I came home, but it was never brought up. Well, if I am ever in a relationship things will have to change, so the subject's never really been forced.

The participants reported that for the most part there is not blatant, total rejection of them and their sexuality, but that there is not outright acceptance either. Participants in essence reported feeling tolerated by their families, not embraced.

Christianity and Spirituality within the Family After

Religious beliefs

When considering if their homosexuality had impacted their family members' Christianity, half of the participants believed that it did not, whereas, half believed that their family's faith changed. Those participants who reported that their families' faith has not changed discussed how their family members still attend and participate in church as they did previously and that their beliefs have not changed. A gay male participant reported the following when talking about the impact of his sexual orientation on his family, "I don't think it changed for instance, they were maybe a little more involved in church, but I don't think it drove them to be involved in church, and it certainly didn't drive anyone away or change anyone's beliefs." Although these participants reported that they have not seen a change, a few commented that they could not be completely sure and felt that it was something that they were interested in talking to their family members about.

Participants who reported that their families' religiosity has changed since they came out reported that they saw this happen either in conjunction with or because of their coming out and the religious implication that it holds. Some participants discussed how they felt that their family had become more liberal since they came out. They mentioned that their family members had switched or tried new churches and that their beliefs regarding sexuality are not as strict. A gay male participant mentioned the following about his mother's religiosity:

I don't know, she might be a little less caught up in the religious dogma because she now knows that part of it was based on a false premise because I am a perfectly good child, perfectly decent person. So, I don't know, I don't know if she is any less spiritual, but she might be less caught up in the rules of a particular religion.

While some felt that their family became more supportive while maintaining their Christian faith, others felt that their families' religiosity became increasingly conservative. These participants discussed how the church provided these family members a reference and support system for beliefs that opposed homosexuality. Some of these participants mentioned things such as, that their family members discussed religion more within the home and that their church attendance increased. This comment is from a lesbian female who discussed her mother's religious change:

I think she got stronger religiously, not in practice. I think through it, she was more verbal, God made it, it is more natural for man to be with a woman because that's how God made it. So, I mean her religiosity got stronger, but now...they don't go to church, they don't do...she would probably say she is Christian, but I wouldn't think so.

Thus, participant's family moved towards both more liberal and conservative forms of religiosity after finding out that their family member was homosexual.

Social influences

As social influences and concerns were mentioned as present within family's practice of Christianity, it was likely that this theme would continue to be present once participants came out to their families. Multiple participants mentioned that after they came out to their families that their parents were concerned about what their friends would think about them having a gay child. "They still refer to it as a choice and mostly they are concerned of how it will reflect to their friends, it really hasn't changed," said one lesbian female. Moreover, as many of the parents' friendship circles were at church they were concerned about the judgment that they might experience due to Christian doctrine regarding homosexuality. A lesbian female said the following about her mother:

I think her reaction is as much, "Oh no, that's not right, it is not right to be a lesbian," as much as it is, "What will my friends think?" So, it is Christianity, but it is more a sense of social concern because all of her friends are part of a church and what are they going to say because their church says it's wrong too. So, I think it is social embarrassment as much as anything.

Another sub-theme that became apparent when participants discussed being out to their families and the need for social acceptance by others, especially extended family members, was that of secrecy. A couple of participants, such as the following quote from a lesbian female, mentioned coming out to one or both of their parents and having that person tell them that they were not to mention it to others and that it would be a secret:

Yeah, it (homosexuality) was always wrong, still, she doesn't want me to tell my grandmother because my grandmother is 77 and will be 78 this year. She is like, it will probably give your grandmother a heart attack. I am like mom, I think my grandmother probably already knows, I don't know about the rest of my family, but I think my grandmother is actually pretty smart.

The ways in which society dictates the understood norms of culture, whether going to church or being heterosexual, was notably apparent in participants' responses pertaining to the way in which Christianity was present within their families before and after coming out. The practice of Christianity as socially motivated and dictated was demonstrated in multiple ways and was a continuous theme that appeared throughout questioning.

Christianity and Spirituality within the Individual After

The religious and spiritual identification of LGB participants was a full spectrum, from practicing Christian, to Christian identified nonpracticing, to various spiritual identifications, to nonreligious or spiritual identification altogether.

Religious and spiritual beliefs

The majority of participants identified themselves as spiritual, some identifying with Christianity and others not. LGB participants who reported themselves as spiritual made a clear distinction between being spiritual and being religious. Those who see themselves as spiritual, but not religious mentioned believing in the goodness of all people and honoring yourself and all creatures. These individuals believe that their spirituality has increased since they have come out and that their Christian religiosity has decreased or is nonexistent. This was supported in the following quote from a lesbian female:

I always say that I am a spiritual person and absolutely that increased probably about threefold after coming out. I do not define myself as a religious person. I prefer to go with kind of a wider scope, you can do good things and you can do bad things, but you cannot be defined by being who you are, it cannot be evil to be who you are, of course there are exceptions, but to be gay is not to be evil. Because of that I always say I am a naturalist, like I see beautiful landscapes and to me that is evidence of a higher power.

Participants who stated that they are no longer religious, specifically Christian, cited the reasons as the hypocrisy in the church and its stance on homosexuality. These individuals mentioned that it is not that they do not believe in God or some of Jesus' teachings, but that they could not identify with a group that did not accept them for who they are and holds double standards. A gay male and gay female, respectively, made the following statements:

Non-Christian, by rule, that is definitely it, but only because I still hold on to that idea that the people who are in that building, with that book are hypocritical about it. I could be Christian on my own without involvement of anyone else. Because I think that as a faith and as a religion that it is perfectly valid and it is a great idea. You can't get past the fact that there are a lot of things about me that the Bible hates; you can try, but I think that is hypocritical in itself. So, my tendency is to go towards things that sort of feel right.

You know religiously especially with what is going on with the media right now as far as evangelists and the Christian right, that has been their foothold, anti-gay to kind of boost other conservative candidates in the political scene. I couldn't say right now that I am a part of that group.

The nine participants who identified as being Christian were divided with some being active in the church, others following their faith outside of any organized denomination, or only nominally identifying themselves as Christian. Those who were not a specific denomination reported that at that time in their lives they did not feel it was needed, but that it might be an option in the future if they could find a place where they felt welcomed. One gay male spoke to this when describing why he is not active in a church:

Well, I still consider myself a Christian. I always...I still try to do the Christian thing. I don't attend church, although I do wish that will change in the future. I think I'm still young right now, I don't know if it's because I'm not ready yet. I still need to find that part of my life, that chapter of my life, and I haven't gotten to that chapter yet.

Four of the fifteen participants reported being active in or regularly attending a church. Those individuals discussed attending churches that they found to be open and welcoming to LGB individuals. A gay male reported the following about his church:

I currently attend a church called ----- Methodist, which it is a church that is really welcoming to lesbian, gays, transgender and I know that I had a real hunger to find a church that I could make a connection with. I think I have grown as a, in my religious understanding and as a spiritual person. I think I am a better person now than what I was 9 years ago when I came to the church and I know that my moral compass is stronger.

These individuals reported that they have not always felt this way, but that it had been a process to understanding their spirituality and finding a church. They mentioned feeling like their church was an integral part to their understanding of themselves as not only religious and spiritual beings, but also homosexuals.

Outer influences

The participants reported that different factors led to the place where they are spiritually and religiously. Approximately, half of the sample reported that their families had nothing to do with their current spirituality or religiosity. Instead, they reported that they reached their current understanding of themselves alone or with the help of others, like friends or partners. They discussed believing in the overall goodness of people and if they did believe in God, that God created them this way and that it was not wrong. The following quotes are from a gay male and lesbian female, respectively, who believe that their families did not influence their current spirituality and/or religiosity:

Umm, I am not sure they (family) did. I think I got there on my own. Going off to college was a good thing for me, getting away from everyone and being able to kind of develop my own thoughts and everything else like that. But, you know, I think mostly friends helped me come to where I was at more than family.

I think it is more...accepting myself, just like I said, feeling like there is no way that God could have made me any other way and that even being taught that it was always wrong. I mean I have always questioned what I was taught. I have to come to my own realization and actually take ownership of it, so working through that with myself.

The LGB individuals in the sample, who reported that their families had impacted their understandings of themselves spiritually or religiously, felt that they were impacted positively for the most part. Those who felt that they were impacted positively experienced a range of reactions from their families some accepting and some rejecting; either way, these individuals believe that their families' response has caused them to question more and to understand themselves better, even if it was painful. A queer identified individual stated:

And I think now their dismissal of stuff and their refusal of stuff has caused me to be more spiritual, than I think if it was just there because it is about who I am as a person and what is my sexual orientation, like I think that if it had come easily to me, I wouldn't have questioned everything so much.

Others who found it to be positive reported that their families were more liberal in their spiritual and religious beliefs prior to their coming out, so they felt affirmed to follow their own paths sexually and spiritually. "So, it (family) had a very big impact, and as far as the religious side of that, because we weren't particularly religious, I felt like, you know, I didn't have to fight past that, and that was a good thing," said a gay man. Thus, it was not so much how their families reacted that allowed them to have a positive experience.

Self

Participants who experienced rejection, acceptance, or neither from their family members seemed to have similar experiences in the ways that their spirituality has been

affected, in that all the groups felt like they found a place in which they were content with themselves and in which their spirituality was stronger. Those individuals who felt accepted by family reported being able to freely discover who they were as spiritual and sexual people without pressure, whereas those who felt put off by their family members were led to find what they believed on their own. A gay male who had an accepting family made the following comment:

It has made my faith probably even deeper because they have been so accepting. I would say because it gives me great comfort, it makes me realize or believe that God does have a hand in all of this. Really it doesn't matter what faith you are, really he has a hand in all of it and he does not discriminate.

Whereas, a Lesbian female whose family is critical about her sexuality and unsupportive stated this:

Because they kind of abandoned me in this time I have to define my own spirituality. Instead of looking for answers in the church as I did in junior high I started looking for answers outside of myself, but on my own terms.

These quotes demonstrate how both acceptance and rejection can cause individuals to look within themselves for spiritual and religious guidance.

The majority of participants stressed the significance of being an independent and self-fulfilled individual who was able to find their own path sexually and spiritually, either with or without the assistance of family. The theme that is most evident is that LGB individuals had to reach a place on their own, in which they felt that they were right with in themselves and their spiritual understandings, regardless of what society or familial standards dictates. A lesbian female made the following statement about this:

I think it is more accepting myself. I have to come to my own realization and actually take ownership of it, so working through that with myself. I had to separate the family and the past thought and the past teaching and come to my own realization my own. I don't know what you would call it, my own, my own

life, making my own life instead of trying to live up to their expectations or whatever. I had to figure out that this was real.

Multiple LGB individuals mentioned being on a journey, that where they are now is not where they will be in a few years, that they are continually growing as spiritual and sexual human beings. Life experiences with their families and church have impacted their journeys, but that they are the ones who are in control of their pathways.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Although previous research has looked at the religious reconciliation process for the LGB individual and their family members there was still insufficient evidence about whether familial dynamics surrounding religion and coming out held religious or spiritual implications for the LGB family member. The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions from the collected data, providing possible outcomes for the research question, and to suggest future courses of research.

In gathering information on the research question, many of the past research findings were confirmed within the individual stories of this population. For instance, it was reported that adolescence was the period in which LGB individuals began to struggle with and separate themselves from Christian influences. The participants in this study spoke to how as they aged and went through high school they became disenchanted and turned off by the contradictory teachings within the church and the hypocrisy that they saw. Some mentioned knowing the church's stance on homosexuality and that this complicated their relationship with the Christian church even further. Previous research (Haldeman, 1996) suggests that LGB individuals feel split between being religious/spiritual beings and sexual beings, many often deciding to explore their sexuality. The majority of participants described leaving the church, some returning and some not. Thus, it seems that the concept of reconciliation was applicable to this

population; although it was not specifically addressed in those terms, as it was not the sole focus of the study.

The ways in which the LGB individuals who participated in this study understood themselves to be religious or spiritual beings also aligns with past research. Previous studies demonstrated that Christian LGB individuals go through a reconciliation process in which they recognize that sexuality is not a choice, but a part of God's will. Multiple participants mentioned that because God created them as they are, their sexuality could not be wrong. Furthermore, past research found that LGB individuals differentiated between the Christian church and God. Some of the participants in this study mentioned that they did or could believe in God, but that they did not agree with the church. Instead, as past research demonstrates, some LGB individuals recognize and uphold the teaching of a compassionate and loving God, but not the images of Christianity as punitive and oppressive.

A substantial finding of this study is how LGB individuals looked to themselves in order to reach a place of reconciliation or common understanding of themselves as religious/spiritual and sexual human beings. Previous research supports that LGB individuals recognize the difference between a personal spirituality/relationship with God and organized religion. This study confirms that LGB individuals, both those who identify as Christian and those who do not, look beyond organized religion, societal expectation, or familial wishes to within themselves in order to determine their spiritual/religious path. The majority of participants differentiated between religiosity and spirituality, almost all calling themselves spiritual and a portion of those classifying

themselves as also religious. This differentiation has been proven to be important for the LGB population in previous research and this study upholds that finding.

This study provides much needed research into the importance of the family of origin's response to LGB individuals as they try to understand their spiritual and sexual selves. Past research showed dual results in that some findings demonstrated the significance of familial acceptance and support for LGB individual's psychological well being, while other research indicated that support from partners and friends was more significant for psychological well being. This research demonstrates that while parental acceptance or rejection is a dynamic in the way in which LGB individuals become spiritual or religious it is not the determining factor. In essence, it could be considered an influence, but it does not determine the end result. Instead, it seems that LGB individuals are able to put the acceptance or rejection of their family aside to an extent, in order to arrive at a spiritual or religious state of being that is self determined. In addition, a few participants did mention that friends within their LGB community were of greater support than their family, but this was not mentioned as much as looking to oneself.

There are various aspects to the results that tend to support that the spirituality and religiosity of LGB individuals is more self-defined, than determined by parental acceptance or rejection. Allport (1966) defined two types of religiosity, extrinsic and intrinsic, that can be used to better understand this dynamic. According to Allport (1966), people who prescribe to an extrinsic way of being do not integrate religion into their life, but use it as means of preserving their social standing or way of life. The results suggest that those who participated in this study were raised in families who tended to have extrinsic religiosity influences, meaning that these families were more

motivated by outer influences, such as maintaining familial and social obligations, as opposed to being religious for more spiritual purposes within themselves.

This dynamic was evident in not only the family of origin's way of relating to religiosity, but also in the way they dealt with moral issues, such as homosexuality. For instance, the results demonstrated that LGB individuals believed that their families used religion as more of a wedge issue, not as something that they genuinely believed or had previously supported. Many participants reported that their families were more concerned about what their friends would think or used religion in a way that they had never personally embraced before. It seems that as families had previously related to religion as a way of meeting their own needs that they felt like it was something they could turn to for reinforcement and guidance on a personally challenging issue, such as learning and understanding a child's homosexual orientation.

As these LGB individuals were raised in extrinsically oriented environments, it was likely that they would be impacted in such a way that would cause them to want to move into a more personally, self-driven way of spirituality in understanding themselves. According to Allport (1966), intrinsic religiosity is a way of being that recognizes religion, or taking it more liberally spirituality, as a valid means in its own right and not for self-gains. This type of spiritual orientation provides people with deeper meaning and motivation in their lives (Allport, 1966). It seems that the way in which religion was used as a wedge issue and was often coupled with the hypocrisy of the church led the LGB participants to an internally driven way of being, that at the same time was not selfishly based. As LGB individuals are often ostracized by the church or made to feel excluded, they believe they do not have to live up to the traditional social and familial

obligations, especially as their sexuality already separates them from the culturally accepted norm. Therefore, it seems that those individuals who are further rejected by their families leave their families' way of thinking to find the type of spirituality that they are comfortable with; whereas, those individuals whose families are accepting are given them the freedom and support to be who they are as spiritual and sexual beings.

Familial response to LGB individuals seems to be significant in the way that LGB individuals go about orienting themselves to spirituality or religion, but not necessarily their ultimate decision, which is more of an individualistic choice. As the data showed, there was no single pattern that led people to be more or less Christian or spiritual. Instead, the participants had both similar and differing experiences across a range of outcomes. What did seem consistent was the way in which LGB individuals had to separate themselves from familial and social expectations in order to reach a way of being spiritually and religiously that was self-led.

This research study had many strengths in that it looked at an understudied issue within the field of research in a way that met the participant where they were. As far as this researcher is aware, the presented research question within this study, to explore LGB individuals' perceptions on how acceptance into their Christian families of origin has impacted their current religiosity and/or spirituality, has never been studied before. While familial response and Christian dynamics within the LGB individual and family have been studied they have not been combined in such a way as to see how they impact the individual as a spiritual/ religious being. As such, this researcher was able to create instruments, the demographic survey and interview guide, and set up the methods in a

way that was flexible and open, so that this population could be best studied while feeling comfortable.

Other strengths of this research are based in the population that was studied, one that is underserved and often not fully represented within sampling methods. This study used a snowball sampling method that was not based on any religious organization or community center. Therefore, the population included both those people who were raised Christian and remained Christian and those who were raised Christian and no longer identify and were not biased to any particular ideology, unlike much of previous research. This study also included data from lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer participants, which being exploratory in nature provides a start for future research which might isolate findings based on gender. Overall, the sample was very diverse in that there was representative numbers in those who identified as gay and lesbian and that they were raised in a variety of different Christian denominations.

Limitations to this study could be considered within the overall design and methodology. The research question sought to explore LGB individuals' perceptions on how acceptance into their Christian families of origin has impacted their current religiosity and/or spirituality. This research question, while viable, did not completely grasp the participants' experience in that many did not experience either absolute acceptance or rejection, but something in between. The question might have better been posed as exploring familial response to their coming out, but because it was a semi structured open interview participants were able to answer as their experiences dictated. While the study instrument was flexible, qualitative in method, and created by this researcher, it does not have any validity or reliability measurements. Given this

researcher's desire to produce results that benefit the LGB community, findings could be biased towards producing supportive, productive themes. Moreover, as no valid measures were used within the study; results were based on subjective interpretations by the researcher.

Further limitations of this study apply to the population sampled. The sample is not generalizable to all LGB individuals as it is small and subjective, solely representative of those LGB individuals living within a large metropolitan city in the South. Moreover, Christianity within the South tends to be impacted by strong conservative, fundamentalist influences. This study cannot be applied to those individuals who were raised in other religious bodies besides Christians, who are Christian but not out to their family, or to LGB individuals who are over the age of 40. Generational differences may have also affected the findings as the population age spanned 20-40 years of age, but it was limited for this reason. The population was mostly comprised of Caucasian participants; thus, findings should not be extrapolated to individuals from other racial backgrounds. Lastly, as there was one bisexual and one queer participant the data collected from their interviews was compounded with that of the lesbian and gay participants; thus, findings should not be taken to be fully representative of bisexual or queer populations.

In addition, certain biases or distortions may have impacted study results. Participants were requested to remember material that happened within the past, whether from childhood or age of coming out. This could have caused individuals to respond inaccurately depending on their state of recall or current relationships to family or religious/spiritual institutions. Volunteer bias may also have played a role in that those

who chose to participate in the study might be more religiously or spiritually inclined and interested in the topic, causing the sample to be unrepresentative of those LGB who feel isolated and ostracized from religion or spirituality given their marginalized status within popular Christianity. LGB individuals who have had negative experiences with their families of origin due to Christianity might not have wanted to participate given the painful, emotionally charged research topic. As it was a snowball sample, those who participated either knew someone indirectly through this researcher or knew someone who had already participated; thus, they could have been biased to participating and to giving a favorable response.

The findings of this study suggest that an area of pursuit for future research would be to include the variable of extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity. The Allport-Ross religiosity measurement or other instruments measuring the amount of extrinsic or intrinsic religiosity might be helpful in better understanding the ways in which LGB individuals and their families orient themselves towards a religious way of being before and after coming out. Further research in this area would help to determine whether or not families of LGB individuals are approaching religion from an extrinsic perspective when their family member comes out and if LGB individuals incorporate an intrinsic way of being religiously and spiritually into their way of being. It would be helpful to not only use this research approach with the LGB individual, but with their families as well. This research is only from the perspective of the LGB family member and it seems that they might be biased about their families' use of religion. It could also be unfair to assume that the LGB individual would be able to speak accurately about such a personal

issue for their family members. Using the extrinsic and intrinsic paradigm as a means for future research would provide much needed clarity and consulting data.

An interesting area for future research would be whether or not the level of attachment to parents impacted the level of emotional anguish tied to the process of coming out and reconciling spiritual or religious differences with family. Although, not significant enough to report on in the findings, it seemed that those individuals who were closer to their parents had more emotionally painful experiences. A few participants became tearful throughout the interview and they reported having closer relationships with their family, specifically their mothers. Past research demonstrates that mothers are more accepting of their LGB offspring than fathers, but this research suggests that when you add a religious dimension, this might not be the case. Other participants took pride in being independent individuals as they were growing up and they did not seem to have as much of an emotional attachment to their parents. These individuals' experiences of coming out in relation to the understanding of themselves spiritually seemed to be less emotionally charged as opposed to a matter of fact issue. It seems that an interesting line of research would be to examine the attachment relationship between offspring and their parents in relation to their coming out experiences in Christian families.

The majority of participants discussed their coming out experiences and reactions by family members from the perspective of their parents. Initially, it was conceptualized that this study would be able to include relationship dynamics of other family members, but of those participants who mentioned siblings or other extended family members there was not enough data draw any substantial conclusions. Future research focused specifically on siblings or extended family members would be both a much needed asset

to the field and vital for accurate representations of LGB individuals' relationship experiences after coming out in Christian families.

This research holds valuable implications for the field of social work and clinical mental health workers that have not been previously explored. Just as homosexuality and Christianity seem contradictory, so too does the relationship between religion, spirituality, and psychotherapy. Traditionally, spirituality has neither been a familiar nor highly utilized area within mental health (Haldeman, 1996). The need to reconcile conflicting identities, of sexuality and spirituality, in relation to their family of origin often leads LGB individuals to seek mental health counseling. However, there is not much research that pin points how to best serve the population that is dealing with this situation. Thus, implications of this study serve to enhance the quality of mental health treatment for LGB individuals. The more clinicians are aware of Christian identity dynamics within LGB individuals and their relationships to their families the better that treatment can be shaped to meet their needs. This research suggests that some LGB individuals may need support in finding their own self-led spiritual paths and in separating themselves from social and familial obligations.

Family dynamics and counseling tend to be areas of interest for social workers. Social workers also provide services to underserved and oppressed populations such as, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer individuals. It could be concluded that research which examines the intersection between familial acceptance and rejection and its impact on LGB individuals' spiritual beings is of utmost importance to the vitality of the field. Religion and spirituality have long been subjects that the mental health arenas have

somewhat avoided; however, the sociopolitical environment of the times and its undeniable impact on individuals' lives is forcing the issue to be increasingly addressed.

As this study found that familial acceptance or lack thereof can affect the way in which LGB individuals gravitate to and position themselves within their religious and spiritual understandings it is vital to include this concept within individual and family work. Subsequently, when these individuals or family members present themselves in counseling social workers will have research that begins to highlight the complicated dynamics at hand and the potential ways in which LGB individuals could be affected. The more social workers appreciate these issues, the more they can help families and individuals reach a healthy understanding between and within themselves as pertaining to the dissonance between sexuality and spirituality.

Finally, the findings of this study serve to provide further research for a population, LGB, which has experienced much discrimination and prejudice. The religious beliefs and family dynamics of LGB individuals need to be brought to the forefront, instead of remaining stigmatized or invisible. The participants within this study commented on how they felt like there was a culture of silence within their families and that they were often ostracized from being completely accepted within the church. Thus, through this study and further exploration the feelings and experiences of this population can be honored. According to the social work Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 1996), social workers should challenge social justice and respect the worth of all persons. As social workers, it is our duty to look at the intersection of social issues, such as spirituality and sexuality, and the ways that they might be oppressing people, so that the oppression might be reduced or eradicated.

Although having some limitations this research is a starting point for understanding how family dynamics within Christian families affects those LGB individuals on a spiritual and religious level. Future research can take the findings of this study and expand upon them and clinicians can consider them when treating LGB clients and their families. This study demonstrates that what is important is how the LGB individual comes to an internal understanding of who they are spiritually and religiously. This understanding occurs either in conjunction with or in opposition to their families' level of acceptance. Now clinicians can have a better understanding of what this process might look like and how social and familial interactions impact LGB individuals.

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Appendix A

Megan Elaine Browning
(address removed)

Dear Megan,

The Human Subjects Review Committee has reviewed your final revisions. All is now in order and we are glad to now give final approval to your project.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project. I hope you are able to recruit a good compliment of participants, as it is a very interesting topic and I would imagine one that will discover a fair amount of stress and conflict for many of your folks.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

Appendix B

Project E-mail

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Megan Browning and I am a second year master's student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a research study that explores the connection between sexuality and spirituality. The purpose of my study is to explore the impact of Christian familial acceptance on LGB individuals' current spirituality.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study if you meet the following criteria:

- You identify as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual
- You are from a self-identified Christian family of origin
- You are out to your family of origin
- You are between the ages of twenty and forty-years-old
- You are currently living in Houston, Texas

Participation in my study would entail your involvement in a one-on-one, approximately hour long interview at a mutually convenient location. I will maintain strict confidentiality throughout the study. The data collected will be used for my MSW thesis at Smith College School for Social Work and in any resulting publications or presentations. If you would like to participate in the study or have any questions, please e-mail or call me so that we can set-up an interview. Before the interview takes place you will need to sign an informed consent form that details your rights as a participant. If you do not meet the criteria for this study, but know someone who does I would appreciate it if you could please pass this information on to them.

Thanks,
Megan Browning
(email address and phone number removed)

Appendix C

Demographic Survey

What is your age? _____

What gender do you identify as? _____

What is your sexual orientation? _____

What race and/or ethnicity do you identify as? _____

At what age did you come out to your family? _____

In what geographic location/s were you raised? _____

What religious denomination/s were you raised? _____

On average, how often did your family go to church (days/month)? _____

On average, how often did you go to church (days/month)? _____

How religious would you consider your family of origin before and after coming out on a scale from 1 (not religious) to 10 (very religious)? Before: _____ After: _____

How spiritual would you consider your family of origin before and after coming out on a scale from 1 (not spiritual) to 10 (very spiritual)? Before: _____ After: _____

What religious denomination or spirituality is your family of origin presently, if any?
(may list) _____

How religious would you consider yourself before and after coming out to your family on a scale from 1 (not religious) to 10 (very religious)? Before: _____ After: _____

How spiritual would you consider yourself before and after coming out to your family on a scale from 1 (not spiritual) to 10 (very spiritual)? Before: _____ After: _____

What religious denomination or spirituality are you presently, if any?

Appendix D

Interview Guide

Christianity within Family of Origin

- Q1. What was the role of Christianity in your family of origin?
- Q2. Growing up, what did Christianity mean to you?
- Q3. How did you understand your sexuality within your Christian home?

Coming out in Christian Family

- Q4. How did your family of origin react when you came out?
- Q5. What role do you think Christianity played in their reaction, if any?
- Q6. How do you believe that your families' religiosity/Christian faith has been affected by your coming out, if at all?

Current Religiosity and Spirituality

- Q7. How have you come to currently identify/understand yourself spirituality and/or religiously, if at all?
- Q8. How did family impact the reconciliation process of sexuality and spirituality, if at all?
- Q9. In what ways has familial acceptance/rejection of you and your sexuality affected your current spirituality, if any?

Possible Probes

Anything else?

How so?

Could you explain that a little more?

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Megan Browning, and I am a student at Smith College School for Social Work. This research study seeks to explore lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals' perceptions on how religious beliefs impacted their acceptance into their Christian family of origin and how, if at all, it has impacted their current spirituality. The data collected will be used for my MSW thesis at Smith College School for Social Work and submitted in partial fulfillment of the Master's of Social Work degree requirements. This data will also be used for any resulting publications or presentations.

Nature of Participation

You are being asked to participate in this study because you identify as a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual who is out to their Christian family of origin, are between the ages of twenty and forty, and currently live in Houston, TX. If you agree to participate in this study, an approximately hour long interview pertaining to your experiences surrounding Christianity, familial acceptance, and current practices will be conducted in a mutually convenient location.

Possible Risks

Given the sensitive nature of this study, issues might arise for you that could be psychologically challenging. Participation might cause you to reflect upon painful experiences and evoke feelings of isolation. You will be given a list of referral resources if you feel the need to address these issues further with a professional. In participating in the study, you will be giving of your personal time.

Benefits

Benefits of participating in this study for you might include contributing towards a body of research that supports the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals and enhancing the ability for clinicians to serve diverse clientele. Upon reflection, you might also learn more about yourself as a spiritual being. You will not receive any financial compensation for participation within this study.

Confidentiality

I will be tape-recording the interview and will maintain strict confidentiality, ensuring that the identities of those who participate and their families will be disguised within interview manuscripts and notes. I will present participant data as a group within publication and presentations and I will disguise identifying information when vignettes

are used. The data will only be accessible to myself and my research advisor. If a transcriber other than myself transcribes recordings they will have signed a confidentiality agreement. In adherence with Federal guidelines, I will store tapes and notes for three years in a locked, secure location until the completion of this project, upon which I will destroy them. If tapes, notes, and transcriptions are kept longer than three years, I will continue to keep them secure and will destroy them when I no longer need them.

Withdrawal from the Study

Participation with this study is voluntary. If you consent to being interviewed by signing this consent form, you have the right to abstain from answering any questions at any time and you may choose to end the interview at any time. In addition, should you choose to withdraw from the study, you may end participation at your discretion at any time by submitting your request to me by phone or e-mail. If you choose to withdraw from this study, all materials pertaining to you and your participation will be immediately destroyed. You may withdraw from the study until March 1, 2007, after which I will begin writing the results and discussion sections of my thesis.

If you have any questions please contact me at the number or email address below.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of Participant

Date

Sincerely,

Megan Browning

(contact information removed)

Please retain a copy of this form for your records.

List of Referrals

Gay & Lesbian Switchboard Houston (G.L.S.H.)
701 Richmond Avenue
Houston, TX 77006-5511
(713) 529-3211
<http://www.gayswitchboardhouston.org/index.html>
Fee: free

Houston GLBT Community Center
3400 Montrose Blvd.
Suite 207
Houston, Texas 77006
(713)-524-3818
<http://www.houstonglbtcommunitycenter.org/about.htm>

Montrose Counseling Center, Inc.
701 Richmond Avenue
Houston, TX 77006-5511
(713) 529-0037
<http://www.montrosecounselingcenter.org/>
Fee: sliding scale

Appendix F

Volunteer or Professional Transcriber's Assurance of Research Confidentiality

Statement of Policy:

This thesis project is firmly committed to the principle that research confidentiality must be protected. This principle holds whether or not any specific guarantee of confidentiality was given by respondents at the time of the interview. When guarantees have been given, they may impose additional requirements which are to be adhered to strictly.

Procedures for Maintaining Confidentiality:

- All volunteer and professional transcribers for this project shall sign this assurance of confidentiality.
- A volunteer or professional transcriber should be aware that the identity of participants in research studies is confidential information, as are identifying information about participants and individual responses to questions. Depending on the study, the organizations participating in the study, the geographical location of the study, the method of participant recruitment, the subject matter of the study, and the hypotheses being tested may also be confidential information. Specific research findings and conclusions are also usually confidential until they have been published or presented in public.

It is incumbent on volunteers and professional transcribers to treat information from and about research as privileged information, to be aware of what is confidential in regard to specific studies on which they work or about which they have knowledge, and to preserve the confidentiality of this information. Types of situations where confidentiality can often be compromised include conversations with friends and relatives, conversations with professional colleagues outside the project team, conversations with reporters and the media, and in the use of consultants for computer programs and data analysis.

- Unless specifically instructed otherwise, a volunteer or professional transcriber upon encountering a participant or information pertaining to a participant that s/he knows personally, shall not disclose any knowledge of the participant or any information pertaining to the participant's testimony or his or her participation in this thesis project. In other words, volunteer and professional transcribers should not reveal any information or knowledge about or pertaining to a participant's participation in this project.
- Data containing personal identifiers shall be kept in a locked container or a locked room when not being used each working day in routine activities. Reasonable caution shall be exercised in limiting access to data to only those persons who are working on this thesis project and who have been instructed in the applicable

confidentiality requirements for the project.

- The researcher for this project, Megan Browning, shall be responsible or ensuring that all volunteer and professional transcribers involved in handling data are instructed in these procedures, have signed this pledge, and comply with these procedures throughout the duration of the project. At the end of the project, Megan Browning shall arrange for proper storage or disposition of data, in accordance with federal guidelines and Human Subjects Review Committee policies at the Smith College School for Social Work.
- Megan Browning must ensure that procedures are established in this study to inform each participant of the authority for the study, the purpose and use of the study, the voluntary nature of the study, and the effects on the participants, if any, of not responding.

Pledge:

I hereby certify that I have carefully read and will cooperate fully with the above procedures. I will maintain the confidentiality of confidential information from all studies with which I have involvement. I will not discuss, disclose, disseminate, or provide access to such information, except directly to the researcher, Megan Browning, for this project. I understand that violation of this pledge is sufficient grounds for disciplinary action, including termination of professional or volunteer services with this project, and may make me subject to criminal or civil penalties. I give my personal pledge that I shall abide by this assurance of confidentiality.

Ray Altman Signature

2/20/07 Date

Ray Altman Name

2/20/07 Date