

Research

My Soul to Take: A Phenomenology of the Struggle for an Authentic Gay Spirituality

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This phenomenological study explored the “coming-out” experience of 7 gay men who were significantly influenced by conservative Christianity in their formative years and who are living as “out” gay men. Four commonalities were revealed in their experience of this phenomenon: (a) a realization and acceptance of their gay identity, (b) a reckoning that action was required, (c) a rejection of the oppressive religious authority in their lives, and (d) a reorientation in their pursuit of a healthy spirituality. The study includes a review of the relevant literature and recommendations to counselors in addressing the unique needs of spiritually oriented lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning individuals.

Keywords: gay, spirituality, counseling, religion, coming out

Two thirds of the U.S. population claims membership in a church or faith community, and 60% reports that religious faith is a strong influence in their lives (Heermann, Wiggins, & Rutter, 2007). Considering these numbers, it should come as no surprise that many individuals who enter into counseling believe that addressing spiritual concerns in counseling is critical (Steen, Engels, & Thweatt, 2006). However, researchers have found that the average counselor is less religious than the average client and that spiritual and religious issues traditionally have been neglected in counseling. This topic is also underrepresented in counselor preparation; only 25% of 341 counselor education programs reported that spirituality and religious issues were included as a course component (Young, Wiggins-Frame, & Cashwell, 2007).

Similarly, members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community seeking counseling can often encounter critical deficits within the helping profession. Lesbians and gay men have reported higher than average rates of counseling usage (Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002), yet studies continue to show significant deficits in the skills and abili-

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ties of counselors currently in practice as well as a lack of comprehensive training in counselor education programs (Matthews, 2005; Murphy et al., 2002). The absence of these critical components can result in counselor bias against LGBTQ persons and in misdiagnosis and harm to LGBTQ clients (Rainey & Trusty, 2007).

Understanding the unique dilemma of LGBTQ individuals positioned between the competing interests of their sexual identity and their religious beliefs could provide opportunities for clinicians to assume the role of advocate for an oppressed, underrepresented group of people. Additionally, counselor educators can reexamine their curricula to see if counseling students are being adequately prepared to address this critical issue.

Review of Literature

Spirituality and the Counseling Profession

The literature regarding spirituality and counseling suggests that many clients now expect an open exploration of their spirituality as part of their counseling experience. "Many people who come for counseling today bring with them a spiritual or religious worldview of some kind. . . . They expect counselors to understand and include their worldviews in the clinical process" (Morgan, 2007, p. 18). According to Myers (as cited in Morgan, 2007, p. 19), studies indicate that 96% of Americans claim to believe in God. From 1994 to late 1998, the number of Americans expressing a need to experience spiritual growth rose from 54% to 82%. Additionally, 81% of respondents in a 1992 Gallup poll preferred some integration of their beliefs and values into the counseling process, and two thirds of the respondents stated that, when faced with a serious problem in life, they would prefer to be counseled by someone who personally holds spiritual values and beliefs (Morgan, 2007, p. 19). Accordingly, the counseling profession is beginning to embrace the notion that many clients desire an infusion of religion and spirituality in their treatment, and counselors should be able to respond sensitively to the spiritual concerns that arise during counseling (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006; Steen et al., 2006; Walker, Gorsuch, & Tan, 2004; Weld & Eriksen, 2007).

A potential difficulty noted in the literature is that the use of spiritual interventions in counseling tends to correlate with the counselors' personal religious attitudes and behaviors and with their level of training in religious issues (Walker, Gorsuch, & Tan, 2005). This is problematic because other studies confirm that the religious heritage of counselors as well as their current level of church affiliation and commitment to religious practice contrasts sharply with that of the general U.S. population (Walker et al., 2005). Second, although the majority of counselors claim that spirituality is important to them, as a group, they engage in spiritual practices less frequently than the two thirds of Americans who integrate spiritual practices into their lives daily (Walker et al., 2005).

Much like the counseling profession, the LGBTQ community has a unique relationship with spirituality. Religion, although often a source of personal strength and inspiration, can also be a point of significant pain, struggle, and oppression, and this is particularly so with conservative religion and conservative faith traditions.

Conservative Christianity and the Gay Community

There are seven significant references to homosexuality in the Judeo-Christian Bible: three in the Old Testament and four in the New Testament (Rogers, 2009). Although conservative Christians interpret these references specifically as teaching that homosexuality is abnormal and therefore a sin against God, this interpretation is by no means universal within the larger Christian community (Wink, 1999). Whereas some conservative Christians are blatant in their discrimination against gay individuals, for many others, the issues are often far more nuanced. For instance, many conservative congregations call their adherents to love all people, yet they also believe that embracing the gay lifestyle or engaging in homosexual behavior is strictly prohibited. This tension is evidenced in the precept that many conservative Christians adhere to that states, “love the sinner but hate the sin” (Bassett, Kirnan, Hill, & Schultz, 2005).

For LGBTQ individuals who have come out of conservative Christian environments, it is not as simple as suggesting that they abandon their faith tradition, even when they have experienced it as harsh and judgmental. This unique juxtaposition creates a deeply personal dissonance that “can lead either to emotional growth, or if unsuccessfully resolved to despair” (Roseborough, 2006, p. 51). Traditionally dark and painful experiences for lesbians and gays are now being reframed through a spiritual paradigm and seen as healing and liberating. One example of this is through crafting narratives that demonstrate “their counter-rejection of the institutionalized Church as their moral arbiter” (Yip, 1999, p. 53). In other words, individual lesbian and gay Christians are rejecting a church that has rejected them, but not necessarily rejecting their religious beliefs and practices. In his 1996 study, David Shallenberger found that a majority of his respondents, while retaining an active spiritual life, shifted from the traditional and conservative religions of their childhood to ones that allowed and welcomed them to express themselves rather than hide their sexual identities.

Spirituality, Counseling, and Gay Men

The literature documents the progression of the mental health field’s conceptualization and treatment of lesbians and gays. Beginning with unfair characterizations and stereotypes to inaccurate and damaging clinical classifications (Bayer, 1981), the field eventually began to sensitize itself to the needs of the lesbian and gay community. Through early developmental

models, to the publication of treatment standards, and, finally, to a growing body of literature speaking directly to interventions and techniques (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), the majority of the counseling profession is now seriously addressing the needs of the gay individual. However, the unfortunate reality is that the tension between spirituality and sexuality can result in personal pain, social isolation, and mental health issues, such as shame, depression, and suicidal ideation (Heermann et al., 2007). Christian LGBTQ individuals often feel marginalized by their cultural and spiritual communities, promoting secrecy, isolation, and stigma (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005). Although feeling forced to choose between their sexuality and their spirituality is indeed a source of great anguish for these individuals, it can also be the entry point for affirmative counseling. With a growing body of evidence indicating that spirituality and religious practice is associated with physical and mental health (Wiggins-Frame, Uphold, Shehan, & Reid, 2005), counselors need not take sides but can offer solutions and collapse a polarity that, from the client's perspective, seems hopeless (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

Purpose of the Study

This study sought to understand the phenomenon of the "coming out" experience of gay men who were raised in conservative Christian environments. The need for such a study is supported in the following ways. First, history has shown that members of the LGBTQ community have endured misunderstanding, prejudice, and even oppression at the hands of groups that tend to be politically and religiously conservative (Heermann et al., 2007; Herek, 2004; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Second, studies have indicated that gay and lesbian individuals who identify with conservative religious/faith traditions can experience significant psychological, emotional, and spiritual distress in their attempts to come out, often being forced to choose between integrity to their true identity and adherence to their faith (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Nelson, 1982). Third, the research further indicates that counselors often lack sufficient training in working with members of the LGBTQ community and can show bias, potentially inflicting harm to their lesbian and gay clients based on their own personal, political, and religious assumptions regarding the LGBTQ community (Crisp, 2006; Israel & Hackett, 2004; Murphy et al., 2002; Rainey & Trusty, 2007; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Finally, to properly assist LGBTQ clients, there is a demonstrated need for enhanced, ongoing counselor training that is consistent with the best traditions of multicultural counseling (Bidell, 2005; Crisp, 2006; Israel & Selvidge, 2003; Matthews, 2005).

Method

Phenomenology is rooted in the philosophical writings of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who believed that science needed to restore its connection to

people and the deeper human issues (Morrisette, 1999). Phenomenological methods are scientific because they are methodical, systematic, critical, general, and potentially intersubjective (Wertz, 2005). However, the intent of phenomenological research is not to test a hypothesis, but rather to ask a question and allow the data surrounding the phenomenon to speak for itself (Morrisette, 1999). Ultimately, the purpose of this unique research design is to produce "clear, precise and systematic descriptions of the meaning" of the phenomenon being examined (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 45).

Phenomenology describes an experience in the truest and most accurate way possible. It is, as Husserl (cited in Mortari, 2008, p. 4) described, a "going back to the things themselves." Its focus is not on the actions or behaviors of its subjects as much as it is on the "experienced meanings" derived by them while experiencing the phenomenon (Polkinghorne, 1989). We determined that phenomenology was the ideal approach to better understand, rather than predict or measure, what gay men experienced as they sought to reconcile their true sexual identities with an authentic and accepting spirituality.

There are many approaches to phenomenological research; for this particular study, we were influenced by, and ultimately adopted, the "transcendental phenomenology" outlined by the late Clark Moustakas (1994).

Researcher Self-Disclosure

Moustakas's (1994) approach to phenomenology specifically recommends that the research question should be rooted in autobiographical meanings and values and should have social implications. He elaborated by saying: "In phenomenological research, the question grows out of an intense interest in a particular problem or topic. The researcher's excitement and curiosity inspire the search. Personal history brings the core of the problem into focus" (p. 104). Regarding this study, in addition to being an academician and counselor, I (primary researcher) am also a gay man who was raised in a conservative Christian environment. As a conservative Protestant minister, I was taught—and therefore conveyed to my parishioners—that homosexuality was a choice and a lifestyle contrary to the desires of God. These beliefs were fundamental to my faith tradition's understanding of human nature, and, consequently, I remained in the closet and living as a heterosexual man for more than 3 decades. The feelings of shame and guilt that plagued me and the consequent depression and anxiety that I experienced eventually motivated me to leave the ministry and the religion of my youth and ultimately served as the motivation for this research.

The tradition of qualitative research and more specifically of phenomenology is that researchers seek to recognize and make known one's assumptions and biases. *Bracketing* is the process of becoming aware of these predispositions and assumptions and setting them aside to avoid undue influence, and *reflexivity* or reflection is defined as "self-awareness and agency within that self-awareness" (Morrow, 2005, p. 254). This speaks to the efforts of the

phenomenological researcher to remain in a state of reflection and awareness throughout the research and to be aware of how her or his own lived experiences and emotions could potentially affect the work.

I attempted to remain aware of my own experiences and differentiate between them and the experiences that participants were relating to me. I examined all interpretations, in consultation with the secondary researcher, to ensure that participants' meanings were kept central. Further discussion of this can be found in the section on trustworthiness.

Participants

The criteria for participation in this study were the following: (a) a gay male; (b) experienced a significant, formative background in a conservative Christian environment; and (c) had already "come out of the closet" as a gay man. For this particular study, seven participants were secured who met these criteria. It was necessary to place age parameters on the desired research participants because of inherent differences in lived experiences between generations. Therefore, this research focused specifically on gay men born between 1970 and 1990. *Conservative Christian environments* were defined as denominations or movements that are part of the Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christian traditions, such as, but not limited to, the following: Pentecostals; Four Square; most Baptists; and conservative branches of the Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. Also included would be major groups such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Roman Catholic Church (Mead, 1985). *Coming out* was defined as "becoming aware of one's sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others" (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 144).

The ages of participants ranged from the late 20s to late 40s. Three participants were raised Roman Catholic, one grew up in a mainline Protestant church, two attended nondenominational Christian churches, and one attended a self-described fundamentalist Bible Church. Four participants were located in the upper Midwest of the United States and largely represented rural, small communities; two participants were from southern states, and one lived on the West Coast. Five of the participants identified as White, one as Hispanic, and one as racially mixed (identifying European, African American, and Pacific Islander descent). See Table 1.

Participants were selected through the assistance of academic colleagues, professionals who were currently working with spiritually oriented gay men, and letters sent to local gay-affirming religious bodies and LGBTQ community organizations. All potential research participants who contacted me (the primary researcher) were confirmed for their suitability for the research and provided with the basic information surrounding the project, including answers to any pertinent questions. Upon verification that the individual had met the research criteria, consent and demographic information forms were e-mailed to them directly, and, upon return, the documents were secured.

TABLE 1
Research Participant Demographic Information

PD	Age Range	Race	Region of the Country	Early Religious Identification	Time "Out"
P-1	Early 20s	White	Upper Midwest	Covenant Church (FCP)	5 years
P-2	Mid 20s	White	Upper Midwest	Roman Catholic	5 years
P-3	Mid 30s	Hispanic	Southwest	Roman Catholic	16 years
P-4	Late 30s	Racially mixed	Southwest	Lutheran	19 years
P-5	Mid 20s	White	West Coast	Nondenominational (CP)	3 years
P-6	Early 20s	White	Upper Midwest	Roman Catholic	3 years
P-7	Mid 20s	White	Upper Midwest	Nondenominational (CP)	<1 year

Note. PD = participant designation; Time "Out" = approximate time the participant had already "come out of the closet" as a gay man; FCP = Fundamentalist Christian Protestant; CP = Christian Protestant.

Procedure

I (the primary researcher) gathered data for the study through the use of two rounds of individual interviews. Interviews were approximately 60 minutes each and were conducted face-to-face whenever possible. When physical distance did not permit this, I conducted phone interviews. Because of the sensitive nature of the material, the current cultural climate surrounding LGBTQ issues, and the relative vulnerability of many within the LGBTQ community, the face-to-face interviews were conducted at a site approved by the participant and agreed upon by me. However, it was assured that the site would be relatively free from distraction and interruption. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription, and field notes were also used for later reference. The standard interview questions asked of all participants were as follows:

1. What is your ethnicity?
2. Approximately how long have you been out as a gay man?
3. Describe the spiritual or religious environment in which you were raised.
4. Could you describe the circumstances surrounding your coming out?
5. What was it like to have the spiritual/religious beliefs that you had while coming to the realization that you were gay?
6. What was it like to have had your spiritual or religious upbringing while you were coming out?
7. How did the process of coming out affect your spiritual/religious beliefs? Your religious affiliation?

After conducting the first round of interviews, transcription of the recordings, and analysis, I sent each participant a copy of the textual and structural analyses for examination. Each participant was then contacted a second time. The purpose of this second interview was to clarify issues that arose out of the initial interviews. These subsequent contacts, known as "member

checking" (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007; McWilliam, Kothari, Ward-Griffin, Forbes, & Leipert, 2009; Ryndak, Storch, & Hoppey, 2008), also addressed issues of trustworthiness by ensuring that I had an accurate understanding of what the participant was trying to convey.

Analysis

After the individual interviews were conducted and transcribed, they were examined to grasp the expressions and meanings of the participants. We used a systematic approach to analyze the data. Moustakas (1994) presented a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method that we used. A brief description of the steps follows. (a) A full description of the primary researcher's own experience of the phenomenon was put forth. (b) While pouring over the transcripts of each participant, a list was developed of the significant statements made by the participants regarding how they each experienced the phenomenon. This is known as *horizontalization* of the data. Each statement is treated with equal value, and, eventually, a list of nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping statements is amassed. (c) These significant statements were then grouped into larger units of information known as *meaning units* or themes. (d) A description was written based on these themes, of what the participants experienced—what happened—using verbatim examples. This is known as the *textual description*. (e) Next was a description of how the experience occurred. Here, the researcher reflects on and incorporates the larger setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced. This is known as the *structural description*. (f) Finally, a composite of the textual and structural descriptions was written. This is known as the *essence* of the experience "and represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study. It is typically a long paragraph that tells the reader 'what' the participants experienced with the phenomenon and 'how' they experienced it" (Creswell, 2007, p. 62).

Ensuring Trustworthiness

I (primary researcher) implemented the following strategies—modifying recommendations from both Creswell (2007) and Lincoln and Guba (1985)—in an attempt to ensure trustworthiness of the final report. First, prolonged engagement (scope) and persistent observation (depth) assisted in learning the culture of the participants and helped to guard against misinformation introduced by me. Triangulation (multiplicity), the process of gathering data from multiple sources, was also used. In this case, the study was conducted in light of the comprehensive literature review, the two rounds of interviews, and my field notes that, combined, worked to assure that conclusions were not drawn solely from any one source. Third, peer reviews allowed colleagues to serve as debriefers and devil's advocates, asking the hard questions about meaning, method, and interpretations. A minimum of two colleagues were enlisted to conduct peer reviews. Fourth, member checking, as mentioned

previously, was performed via a second round of interviews with each participant, for the purpose of clarification. Finally, a rich, thick description was provided in the final report.

Findings

Despite significant tension, pain, and, at times, even judgment and rejection, each research participant either continued to actively pursue a religious/spiritual path or remained open to exploring his spirituality in the future. This may seem surprising given the historical and contemporary tensions between the gay and conservative religious communities. However, a closer examination of the participants' narratives illustrates that spirituality and sexuality were deeply intertwined and were actually an integral aspect of their coming-out experience. Four commonalities were revealed in their experience of this phenomenon: (a) a realization or personal acceptance of their gay identity; (b) a reckoning or resolve that action was required; (c) a rejection of the religious authority they felt oppressed by, and, finally; (d) a reorientation in their pursuit of a healthy spirituality.

Realization

An integral aspect of the experience for each participant was to admit to himself that he was, in fact, gay. Gay men raised in conservative religious environments can face the dual risks of both finding themselves at odds with their own religious doctrines and suffering discrimination by the very community from which they have sought acceptance, comfort, and spiritual guidance. Therefore, even initially admitting to oneself the truth of one's sexual identity represented significant progress.

Participant 1: And that was tough, I mean, it was, because it was at that age when I was starting to kind of realize that I wasn't like everyone else. I just remember not realizing that it was a bad thing at first . . . and that's when I started to kind of realize it myself too, but that was like the furthest removed. I didn't think, like, "Oh I'm gay."

Participant 3: I think that's when I started the processing, you know, me playing with the possibility that I am gay and then that everything else in terms of being heterosexual, you know, marrying a woman, having children, started subsiding. Like, I started saying, "No, this is so much more what I feel." You know, who I am and I think that's when it started . . . and so by the time spring came around . . . I had already concluded, "Yeah, I'm gay," because I started really, I was letting myself look at other boys and everything.

Participant 7: I was kind of like, "Whoa," and something just went off in my brain I feel like or something, and there was this boy that I knew earlier, and I just started letting myself feel the way I did feel for him, but I was . . . I had been suppressing it before that.

Each participant traveled his own unique journey in arriving at the realization that he was gay. And, although this was a significant step in and of itself, each also shared a felt need to internally examine the ramifications of this newly embraced identity.

Reckoning

Following their personal realization and acceptance, the participants eventually experienced a *reckoning*—a moment in time or a season in life when they realized that they could not simply continue with the status quo. These moments were critical, because it was here that they weighed the risks and potential consequences of coming out versus continuing to live a lie. These could aptly be described as their *moments of truth*.

Participant 5: In college, I actually met with a couple different counselors and was fairly honest with, “This is what I’m dealing with,” and trying to pray through some things you know, in the midst of severe depression. So, then I kind of just hit . . . I guess for a lack of a better word, like the bottom, you know, but um, got to a place where life as I knew it was falling apart. And then at the core of everything was this ultimate issue of, “Who am I, am I horrible, like what is wrong with me? I have been trying to get rid of this; it won’t go away.”

Participant 7: Looking back on it now, I came out first to somebody I was very comfortable with and knew that wouldn’t be judgmental. She was raised in the same religious background as me, but she has always been liberal in her thinking. She didn’t go to church every Sunday, she smoked weed, she was kind of this “crazy cousin” that I had but I felt comfortable. She was safe for me, and I told her earlier that I have feelings for this guy, and she was like, “Oh that is so exciting!” And that was just what I needed at that time.

Although these personal moments of reckoning often left the participants feeling vulnerable and required of them significant interpersonal risk, they also led to a new sense of empowerment.

Rejection

Enduring the tumultuous process of admitting to themselves and then telling others that they were gay was a transformative aspect of the coming-out phenomenon. Participants experienced a *spiritual transformation* as well, a transformation that empowered them to reject the religious authority—represented by their actual religious institution, or embodied in their families or in members of their communities—and begin to recognize a new locus of authority. For some, this meant an outright renunciation of that authority, but, in other cases, it meant maintaining a relationship with the authority while reconceptualizing the relationship in such a way that would limit its power and influence, thereby diminishing its negative or harmful effects.

Participant 2: I actually do distinctly remember that I started to lose faith in Roman Catholicism when I was a senior in high school . . . and in my freshman year of college. Um, so the year before I came out, I actually stopped practicing Catholicism, so I kind of had this year of like weaning off of Catholicism.

Participant 5: All I have ever tried to do is pursue the heart of God, and I’ve always believed that he is real. I’ve tried to do this, this, this, and this to get rid of it, and it’s still there. And so, for me, it was almost like, “Okay, it wasn’t denying my faith, but it was denying the Christian heritage that I’ve come from.” And then like, “Okay, I don’t know anything, but I know God is real and this is how I feel. So, how do we reconcile those two things?”

By rejecting the religious institution itself, or the power they had granted such communities, the participants were now freed to reorient their “spiritual trajectories” in a way that would accommodate and complement their authentic sexual identities.

Reorientation

Having openly identified themselves as gay men and then having either rejected or redefined their current relationship with their faith, these men began actively writing a new chapter in their sexual and spiritual stories. Their decisions about their continued religious and spiritual practices, now openly gay, were as diverse as the men themselves, but the common factor is that they continued to desire some form of spiritual expression.

Participant 3: I’ve found that there are a lot of gay men who are practicing Catholics, and I feel comforted knowing that I’m not the only. . . . I have one friend who is a beautifully sweet guy but he is very much Atheist. From what I’ve heard, he will make snide remarks or very condescending remarks about organized religion, and, to me, that is as offensive as someone on the right wing making horrible judgment calls on people that are different from them. So, to me, you know, if we’re trying to look for a sense of a balanced society, you cannot be either/or. There is a good middle that’s respectful. I know that I’m loved, I know that I have been blessed.

Participant 4: I think of myself as Agnostic. I’m spiritual to some extent. You know I stand on my deck and I look out and I see the real beauty of nature and I have a physical reaction to it. You know like bumps, or energy running through me. And I believe that there is a balance of energy in the cosmos and such.

Participant 6: Once I was able to come out, that’s when I started to form my own ideas and insights and actually look at myself and think, “What do I believe?” You know, as of right now I believe in God, but I don’t really practice any sort of Christian religion. I have my own beliefs, and I feel like I’m a good person, and, you know, I live by the moral standards that I want to.

It speaks profoundly to the deeply held faith and religious beliefs of these spiritually oriented gay men that each maintained either some level of spiritual observance or openness to such experiences after coming out.

Discussion

The stories of each man evidenced the inherent difficulties of being gay in a heterosexual world. Their lived experiences concurred with Herek’s (2004) belief that being gay is considered inferior, and Smith, Foley, and Chaney’s (2008) assertion that affectional identities other than heterosexual are devalued through the privilege and power of the dominant culture. Initial fear and reluctance on the part of participants to speak about their emerging gay identities suggest that there was an underlying message received that it was wrong, stigmatizing, and potentially dangerous to not be heterosexual. This study also supported Iwasaki and Ristock’s (2007) research indicating

that the LGBTQ community is currently one of the most stressed groups of individuals in society. Descriptions of the physical and psychological ramifications of being gay, including depression, anxiety, affective disorders, and even suicidal behavior, were present among the current participants. For these men, the myriad factors considered in the decision to come out and the relative weight of such a decision coincided with Schope's (2002) findings that the process can be incredibly complex and oppressive. Finally, as has been mentioned, each of the participants experienced some level of stress and anxiety while seriously assessing how his life might be affected on multiple levels, as suggested by Cowie and Rivers (2000). However, every individual in this study also manifested positive outcomes, such as those suggested in McDonald's (1982) research, including the critical integration of feelings and behavior that results in a positive gay identity.

The spiritual experiences of the participants mirrored, in many ways, findings in the current body of literature. Specifically, the conservative Christian religious context in which these participants were raised reflected findings by Bassett et al. (2005), who reported that religious fundamentalism predicted homonegativism. Every individual in this study reported some level of discomfort based on the teachings of his church regarding same-sex attraction. A majority of the men personally felt pain and shame as a result of their churches stances, as well as experienced judgment and discrimination directed at them by parishioners. Ultimately, as Roseborough (2006, p. 51) suggested, it really depends on the individual as to whether this type of environment "lead[s] to either emotional growth, or if unsuccessfully resolved, to despair." In this study, each man reflected unique differences in his navigation of these turbulent waters based on his personality, the relative strength of his own psychological constitution, and the presence or lack of support.

Conversely, Yip (2003) reported that, in his sampling of 565 gay Christians, 80% found their sexuality compatible with their Christian faith. In our study, four of the seven men would still characterize themselves as Christian, but only two of those four are still attending a Christian church. Three of the participants have rejected Christianity, yet they still consider themselves agnostic and, to varying degrees, spiritual. This phenomenon of "out" gays rejecting their faith based on the perception that their faith tradition has rejected them has been recognized in the literature (Empereur, 2007; Shallenberger, 1996) and identified by Yip (1999) as "counter-rejection." Walton (2006) suggested that many gay Christians can achieve identity integration, not just despite antigay bias in the church, but also because of it, as an act of defiance and self-advocacy.

Implications

The examination of this phenomenon highlights the need for LGBTQ persons of faith to have skilled, knowledgeable, and accepting voices in their lives. The following are recommendations for counselors and counselor educators.

Counseling Practice

Our study supports the idea that LGBTQ individuals have unique struggles and needs that encompass both their internal lives and their external environments, and they might benefit from individual, group, or family counseling and advocacy. We recommend counselors be prepared to be patient and empathetic in attempting to understand the deep-seated concerns of spiritually oriented LGBTQ individuals. One need not be lesbian or gay to effectively assist LGBTQ persons in their journey; the counselor can create a safe therapeutic environment and maintain a current list of local resources that can support both the client and the counselor in the therapeutic process. Additionally, we encourage counselors to keep in mind that seeking out professional assistance may be a daunting prospect for individuals who have been conditioned to fear how they are perceived by the heterosexual majority. Despite the denunciation by virtually every major professional helping organization in the United States, there still exists a minority of faith-based counselors who continue to practice so-called reparative or conversion therapy, which seeks to change an individual's sexual orientation. Awareness of such practices would only serve to reinforce an LGBTQ individual's uncertainty about professional counseling. An open and honest discussion with LGBTQ clients about the nature of therapy and the ethical guidelines incorporated for their protection will promote trust in the counseling relationship. Finally, current research and the experiences of this study's participants suggest that there no longer exists, if it ever actually did, a strong dichotomy that would position LGBTQ individuals at one end of the spectrum and religion at the other. There are simply too many variables for such a simplistic conceptualization, and it is reasonable to expect that LGBTQ clients today may take the initiative in raising spiritual issues in therapy, and many may not necessarily hold negative associations with religion and religious practice. The desire for LGBTQ individuals to be a part of safe, mainstream religious community is an aspect of a healthy acculturation process and should be honored.

Counselor Education

Although our conclusions are not sufficient in and of themselves to make targeted recommendations to counselor education, the study provides information that might be useful for counselor educators in their own personal and professional development as well as helpful when teaching and training graduate students in working with oppressed and underrepresented groups of people. A general recommendation is that counselor educators establish or further a commitment to integrating into their programs education about the LGBTQ community and mental health issues that are unique to that community. Also, consistent with multicultural counseling standards and social justice principles, counselor educators might be well served to take

time to examine their own beliefs about the LGBTQ community, identifying any potential biases that might be expressed in their teaching and research and, likewise, encourage their students to engage in a similar level of introspection. Finally, as religion and spirituality become more evident in the curriculums and discourses of counselor education programs, we recommend that faculty and students consult such organizations as the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC) and its published "Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling" (ASERVIC, 2009). Furthermore, we recommend that faculty and students attempt to understand the unique history and relationship that the LGBTQ community has with religion and how spiritually oriented LGBTQ persons can often feel trapped and forced to make decisions between their sexuality and their spirituality.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused specifically on men who had already made the journey out of the "closet of secrecy." Research that focuses on LGBTQ individuals who remain in the closet and who grapple with the developmental struggles to integrate their sexual orientation and their faith would be a welcome addition. The variety of age and geographic locations of the participants contributed positively to the study; however, the ethnic and racial makeup of the participants was not as diverse. A more racially diverse participant base might offer insight regarding how race and ethnicity potentially affect coming out. The addition of several, more specific questions regarding the outcomes and/or consequences of the participant's coming-out experiences would likely have provided an even richer description and further highlighted the ramifications of such decisions. Although phone interviews were an acceptable pragmatic solution to the problem of geographic distance and allowed us to connect with men across the United States, the face-to-face interviews did seem richer and more comprehensive at times. Perhaps video chatting, with its growing popularity and frequency of usage, might have been a superior alternative to telephone interviews. Finally, the fact that the experiences of the participants mirrored my own (primary researcher) leaves open at least the possibility of inadvertent influence on the analysis and/or findings. The aforementioned protocols were specifically followed in an attempt to forestall this phenomenon.

This phenomenological study focused on the participants' past coming-out experiences, and their responses in the interviews ultimately produced a thick, rich description of each man's experience. Future research might include questions that solicit responses regarding how the men view their lives and the intersection of their sexuality and spirituality currently and how they are now interacting interpersonally in same-sex relationships. This might provide a vivid picture of life in the aftermath of their coming-out experience.

Conclusion

Each participant of this study was born and raised in the context of a conservative Christian religious tradition. The principles and teachings that were reflected by the participants' faith communities and fellow parishioners were then reinforced by their families at home, their friends at school, and their neighbors. All of this resulted in not just a stated religious affiliation or a mechanical adherence to a dogma or set of beliefs. This created a realized culture that they lived and dwelt within—a culture that reflected the mores and values of their religion and the teachings of their individual ministers and priests. Years later, every participant still possessed positive memories of experiences in the church, indicating that, although each would eventually break from at least his religion's teachings pertaining to homosexuality, the presence of religion in his life was a complex relationship, including both beneficial and detrimental qualities.

The participants all eventually arrived at an internal realization that they identified as gay, rather than straight. This realization came at different ages for each man, and the characteristics of their respective journeys that led them to this determination varied according to the distinctive qualities of their complex lives. It is clear, in each case, that this realization, which set them apart from the dominant culture, created both an existential burden and, ultimately, a need to act. One by one, each man made the decision to tell another individual the truth about his sexual identity, and, at this point, the coming-out process was fully engaged. In the aftermath of their disclosures, the participants continued to deal with unique issues and circumstances. For each participant, there was a tangible and personal emotional cost incurred. In some cases, relationships with family and loved ones were strained and, at times, required years to heal, if they did at all. In every case, there was a marked shift in the man's view of and adherence to the religious authority in his life. Some men completely rejected the faith traditions of their youth, eventually choosing to define themselves as religiously agnostic, but searching and remaining open to other spiritual perspectives. Others maintained distinct aspects of their religious upbringing, but altered their beliefs to allow for their homosexuality. Several remained active in the church, but allowed the occasion of their newly embraced sexual identities to free them from what they perceived to be the far-reaching constraints of the church and, in essence, shifted the locus of authority from without to within.

Each man conveyed relief and a profound personal satisfaction over the decision to come out, and none of the participants conveyed any sense that they regretted having done so. However, this is not to suggest that the pain and turmoil experienced during this process does not remain in the aftermath. For some, certainly those whose coming-out process is more recent, there are still open wounds, and some relationships damaged during this time have yet to recover. Although many have settled into their new identities and lives as gay men and entered into long-term committed relationships,

others are still discovering what being gay means to them and how to navigate relationships and even daily living.

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