How Homosexual Individuals Reconcile Sexual and Christian Identities

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Statement of the Problem

The literature review is going to focus on how homosexual individuals reconcile both sexual and Christian identities. The research being presented in this paper has been narrowed down to focus on the religion of Christianity. The case studies that were conducted within each empirical article were completed within the Western World, including Europe and the United States of America. There were limitations that analyzed all races including African American, White, and Asian. Most participants that were part of the case studies were adults ages 18 and up, for the exception of two case studies which analyzed how LBGTQ youth struggle with the integration of sexuality and religion.

The topic is important to consider because there can be an overwhelming battle that countless homosexual individuals face when encountering Christianity (Subhi et al., 2011). Most organized religions including Christianity still view homosexuality as sinful and being against their teachings (Subhi et al., 2011). Thus, many homosexual people who uphold the beliefs, values and principles of Christianity struggle with integrating these identities or feel obligated to choose one identity over the other (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016).

Personally, I have been affected by the rigid dichotomy between homosexuality and Christianity. At a very young age I knew that I had an attraction towards the same gender. However, coming from a family that is religious, it was uncommon for me to hear positive remarks made by family members and church members towards the LGBT community. I remember my father "jokingly" saying that if he ever had a gay child that he would "beat them straight." As a child, it broke my heart to hear both my family and church family express demeaning comments about a group of people that I was a part of. There was even a period of time where I tried to "pray the gay away" but to no avail. With my experience concerning my

sexual orientation and religious beliefs, I wanted to understand what research had to say for individuals to be able to reconcile both Christianity and homosexuality.

According to the Pew Research Center about 50 percent of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual people are religiously affiliated, and 48 percent belong to a group that is of a Christian faith. However, many LGB adults feel that their community is not welcomed within the major faiths. (Murphy, 2015). A 2013 survey discovered that 73 percent of LGB people viewed Evangelical Churches as unfriendly and 79 percent considered the Catholic Church as unfriendly. Twenty-nice percent of those LGB individuals that were surveyed sensed that they were unwelcome in their religious organization of choice. (Murphy, 2015)

Individuals who attempt to integrate sexual orientation and religious identity are more likely to experience personal struggle with religious comfort and mental health (Zarzycka, Rybarski, & Sliwak, 2017). The struggle of integration of identities is described as "something in a person's current belief, practice, or experience [that] is causing or perpetuating distress (Zarzycka, Rybarski, & Sliwak, 2017, p. 2164). For the majority of the respondents in a study conducted, there were five common personal consequences that resulted because of the internal conflict between both identities. 25 percent of the respondents experienced alienation, 25 percent were suicidal, 31 percent had anxiety, 37 percent felt guilty/blamed-self, and 68 percent had depression (Subhi et al., 2011). Research shows that there may be negative effects on those who do not reconcile sexuality and religiosity (Subhi et al., 2011).

Problem Exploration

Demographical differences. Results indicate that there was a demographic difference between the groups of participants. Evangelical Protestants were mainly African American,

Mainline Protestants were Caucasian, and Catholics were Latino (Wilkerson, Smolenski, Brady, & Rosser, 2016).

Mainline Protestant and Catholic men were similar in age, education level, and had related levels of religious conviction and negative attitudes towards homosexuality and towards their own sexual orientation. Evangelical Protestant men were younger in age, had lower education levels and scored higher for religiosity and internalized homonegativity (Wilkerson, Smolenski, Brady, & Rosser, 2016).

Themes. 11 young adults, ages 19-24 years old, and 8 LGBTQ adolescents, ages 15-18 were researched. These individuals were raised in a Christian household. The denominations represented in this study are Catholicism, Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Presbyterian. These individuals reported feeling in denial with their same-gender attraction (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). Many struggled with their faith in various ways, such as feeling a disconnection to their religion (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

There were reoccurring themes between both young adult, and adolescents. Both focus groups were involved with church meetings and participation of worship services or sacrament meetings from a young age. Many stated they felt "different" and did not know how to describe their same sex attraction. The participants all shared denying their same-sex attraction and became uncertain of their religious connections (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).

Results found that there were 14 reoccurring themes on how homosexual individuals reconcile both identities. Participants had to have grown in faith in the home, school, and church for identity integration to become difficult. (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). The discovery of the same-sex attraction was an experience that many found challenging as it affected participants' image of self.

Participants experienced a conflict with acknowledging sexuality and a spiritual dilemma of having to be celibate because of the Catholic Church's doctrine. They all were seeking peace to finding how they could be religious and have a gay identity. (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016).

Happiness and acceptance of self was used for these individuals to be at peace with themselves completely. Having a sense of integrity and feeling as though they were not flawed was shown to help accept both identities. Geographically distancing themselves from their families aided individuals to explore their beliefs and sexual orientation (Lassiter, 2015).

There were other methods found that these individuals used to converge sexual and religious identities. Participants stated having their personal interpretation of bible texts to affirm themselves (Lassiter, 2015). Educating themselves on same-sex orientation by reading literature concerning homosexuality. Seeking interpersonal relationships and supporting other Christian homosexual people, using life experiences to guide their actions, and incorporating themselves in affirming environments for reconciliation (Lassiter, 2015).

External interference. Many homosexual participants experienced negative religious social interactions with congregants and church leaders, including disapproval and criticism (Zarzycka, Rybarski, & Sliwak, 2017). Same-sex attracted Christian individuals may experience sexual microaggressions, which are defined as brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to LGBT people because they belong to a minority group (Wood & Conley, 2014). There are three types of sexual microaggresions that may interfere with successful identity integration.

The first type of sexual microaggressions are microassaults. Microassaults are evident forms of discrimination (Wood & Conley, 2014). An example of a microassult is when a

spiritual/religious leader comments on how the LGBT lifestyle is an abomination to their God (Wood & Conley, 2014).

The second type of sexual microaggressions are microinsults. Microinsults are statements that disrespect or belittle individuals and asserts a sense of unlikeness (Wood & Conley, 2014). An example of a micoinsult is when a church member tells a person from the LGBT community that "God still loves you" with regards to the person's sexual orientation (Wood & Conley, 2014, p 99).

The third type of sexual microaggressions are microinvalidations. Microinvalidations are statements that invalidate a part of an individual's identity. An example of a LGBT, Christian church member experiencing a microinvalidation is when a fellow community church member tells him or her that he or she "loves the sinner, but hates the sin" on the subject of the LGBT member's sexual orientation (Wood & Conley, 2014, p. 99). These factors and experiences can cause reconciling sexual orientation with religious/spiritual beliefs as challenging (Subhi et al., 2011).

Gaps in the literature. There was ample information found to answer the research question. Although, I found that most case studies conducted were limited due to the number of participants involved. This could put into question the ways individuals integrate identities. However, most articles had similar results regarding how homosexual individuals reconcile sexuality and Christian identities.

Theoretical Perspective

A theory from the textbook that helps explain the research question is Erik Erikson's stage five of development. Identity versus role confusion ages 13 to 21. During this phase, the person develops the ability to search for his or her own meanings and directions, as well as

contemplating on the role they want to obtain as an adult (Zastro & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). People

begin to have mix feelings about how they will fit into society. Some delay their identity

development into adulthood as they may not be able confront merging two conflicting aspects of

their lives (Zastro & Kirst-Ashman, 2016).

Conclusions

       Findings. Homosexual individuals who merged their sexuality and Christian identity

were found to use many aspects to make reconciliation occur. Initially, people may be in denial

about their sexual orientation, because of the tension between their sexual orientation and their

faith (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). There is tension between Christianity and homosexuality because

many denominations teach that having a same-sex attraction is sinful and that the LGBT lifestyle

is against what the bible says (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). After being in denial

about their sexual orientation, many individuals eventually, gain self-acceptance is as well as

happiness (Lassiter, 2015).

       Acceptance is facilitated by questioning and exploring religious beliefs (Pietkiewicz &

Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016). A study done on Roman Catholic gay men showed that these

participants were able to reach reconciliation by challenging the priests' interpretation of the

doctrine. The participants stated that because the anti-gay scriptures were found in the old

testament then it was irrelevant because the new testament does not contain scripture that

condemns homosexuality (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016).

       Homosexual individuals geographically distance themselves between family and home

church (Lassiter, 2015). By doing so, allows them to fully explore their identities in a city where

they feel safe to be themselves (Lassiter, 2015). Gaining education on same-sex orientation via

literature concerning homosexuality allowed these individuals to understand the issues their

community faces without condemnation (Lassiter, 2015). Many seek LGBT-affirrming religious institutions to help them integrate their identities (Wood & Conley 2014).

   Position. Based on the evidence provided by the literature review my position on the topic that I have studied is that there is a complicated process for integrating sexuality and Christian identities. My recommendations for social workers, the church, and other helping professionals or organizations involved with this issue is to obtain more knowledge on how to help homosexual Christian people. Social work practitioners may provide ways for these clients to take into account religious involvement. As well as looking for strategies that may aid the stress that comes with negative social interactions with religious people. Social workers should obtain more knowledge on how certain Christian denominations influence religious homosexual individuals' negative attitudes towards themselves and their mental health. Social workers could help homosexual individuals who are struggling to reconcile Christian and sexual identities by referring them priests who are LGBT friendly for spiritual guidance. Social workers may also help educate Clergyman about conveying an open prejudice against the LGBT community.

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