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To cite this article: Angie L. Dahl & Renee V. Galliher (2009) LGBQQ Young Adult Experiences of Religious and Sexual Identity Integration, Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling, 3:2, 92-112, DOI: 10.1080/15538600903005268

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15538600903005268

Published online: 19 Jun 2009.

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LGBQQ Young Adult Experiences of Religious and Sexual Identity Integration

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It is often assumed that the process of navigating an LGBQQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning) sexual identity in a religious context is difficult and conflicting. However, only a few studies have empirically examined LGBQQ experiences of religion and identity integration. One-hundred five LGBQQ participants (age 18–24) were surveyed to examine their experiences of religious and sexual identity integration. While LGBQQ young adults do not report a high degree of sexual and religious identity integration, factors such as self-acceptance and increased knowledge were instrumental for those who reported integration. Suggestions are provided for counselors working with conflicted LGBQQ young adults.

KEYWORDS sexual orientation, religiosity, identity integration

Amid the challenging developmental transitions of adolescence and young adulthood, individuals work to define self-concept through increased emotional independence as well as increasing autonomy in decisions regarding sexual behavior and relationships (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). For some youth, the demands of adolescence are magnified by an additional set of challenges as they work to create a positive same-sex attracted identity within a heterosexist culture (D’Augelli, 1998). Traditional essentialist theories of sexual identity development asserted a linear process, where one “achieves” a coherent sexual identity through a series of stages (Cass, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1979). However, contemporary theorists have suggested otherwise. Rooted in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) social constructionist perspective, scholars suggest sexual identity development is a fluid process, gaining meaning within specific contexts and cultures (Horowitz

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Thus, the same-sex attracted youth’s experience during the adolescent and young adult years is individual and unique, shaped by myriad contextual variables (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Savin-Williams (2005) described early sexual identity models as “seduced by the intuitive appeal of conceiving of development as a simple, lockstep formulation” (p. 70), such that even more recent models of sexual identity development based on social constructionist principles (e.g., Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001) do not account for the fluidity and uniqueness of sexual identity development. Instead, Savin-Williams (2005) suggested a differential developmental trajectories framework for understanding the sexual minority adolescent experience. Essentially, a differential developmental trajectories conceptualization acknowledges both similarities and differences in the developmental pathways of same-sex attracted and heterosexual youths. Additionally, the differential developmental trajectories framework attends to the varied contextual and individual factors that impact the sexual minority adolescent’s developmental pathway. Rust (1993) stated that self-identity “is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs” (p. 44). Despite the importance of social context, D’Augelli (2006) asserted that recent scholarship still does not have a good understanding of the social contexts influencing adolescent and young adult sexual minority development. In fact, he called for researchers to gain a wider understanding of these “crucial contexts.” One of these crucial contexts and a major socializing force within the United States is religion.

**LGBQQ Religiousity**

Rosario, Hunter, Yali, and Gwadz (2006) stated that 90% of adults and nearly 60% of youth say religion is an important facet in their lives. Thus, the social context of religion emerges as an important milieu for adolescent sexual development (Coyle, 1998; Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2007). Sherkat (2002) suggested those who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual have been criticized and rejected by nearly every major religious denomination in the United States, stating, “there are only a handful of the more than 2,500 American religious denominations that ‘affirm’ homosexuality as a valid and morally supportive lifestyle. Virtually all condemn homosexuality as a sin” (p. 315). Due to intolerant denominational positions and/or social structures, LGB individuals often feel alienated and disillusioned within religious organizations.

As a result of denominational doctrine, many assume that those who self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual must reject religion in order to accept their own sexual identity. Sherkat (2002) did find that gays, lesbians, and
bisexuals were more likely to disidentify with religion than female heterosexuals. Rosser (1991) also demonstrated this finding: while 84% of the 159 adult gay men surveyed were raised religious, only 16% attended religious services after self-identifying. However, Sherkat (2002) noted the probability of disidentifying with religion was equal for both male heterosexuals and male and female LGB participants. Recognizing the heightened interest in Wiccan and neopagan religious movements by female bisexual and lesbian communities, Sherkat (2002) had hypothesized female bisexuals and lesbians would be more active religiously than male bisexuals and gay participants. Interestingly, he found gay men to be more religiously committed than heterosexual men or lesbian or bisexual women. He concluded that lesbian and bisexual women’s understandings of organized religion as an institutionalized patriarchal system may negatively influence participation. Furthermore, Sherkat (2002) hypothesized that gay men may choose to be more active religiously because they attend willingly, unlike many heterosexual men whose church attendance is linked to marital and family commitments. These studies offer preliminary insight regarding sexual minority religious affiliation.

Integration of Religious and Sexual Identity

When considering the intersection of religion and same-sex attraction, some researchers have focused on the process of sexual identity development and religious integration. Schuck and Liddle (2001) studied the lives of 66 adults who had self-identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Two-thirds of the respondents noted conflicts between their religious and sexual identities. Specifically, the individuals reported depression, suicidal ideation, and shame in the midst of the perceived conflict. As a result, many individuals reported changing affiliations or abandoning religion altogether. Other participants choose to self-identify as spiritual rather than religious. While there is no universal definition of religion or spirituality presented in the literature, religion is often defined as the organizational communal and individual search for the holy and/or sacred while spirituality often refers to an individual search for deeper meaning (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

Schuck and Liddle (2001) also noted that social supports among LGB friends, family members, and religious connections were helpful in resolving conflict. Overall, those who experienced higher levels of religious conflict rated their coming out process as more difficult than those with less religious conflict. Additionally, both Schuck and Liddle (2001) and Newman and Muzzonigro (1993) reported that the age of coming out was different for those who experienced religious conflict, noting a wider spread of ages in the process of self-identification. Specifically, Schuck and Liddle (2001)
found that some individuals from conservative religions self-identified earlier. They stated, “homophobic preachers ensure that awareness of LGB behaviors come early, and hearing sermons on this topic might force LGB youth to consciously consider their own same-sex attractions, as they try to decide whether these sermons apply to them” (p. 78). Ream and Savin-Williams’ (2005) LGBTQ participants who reported conflict with their religious and sexual identities had higher levels of internalized homophobia than those who experienced no conflict. Those who left the church in response to the conflict exhibited not only lower levels of internalized homophobia but also lower levels of general mental health. While these individuals did not internalize negative religious messages about same-sex attractions, Ream and Savin-Williams (2005) noted these individuals did suffer psychologically either within the religious context or as a result of making the choice to leave their religious affiliations.

While the religious context often complicates the coming-out process, researchers have suggested some individuals develop a positive religious identity while still affirming their same-sex attraction. Konik and Stewart (2004) found same-sex attracted individuals are forced to analyze their own identity in a variety of social milieus in the overarching context of a primarily heterosexist society. As a result of this advantage, they scored higher on an identity achievement measure than heterosexuals. Rosario and colleagues (2006) suggested the process of “successful” religious and sexual identity integration may be linked with a potential for religion’s protective benefit. In a study of 164 self-identified lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescents, Rosario and colleagues (2006) found religious participation served as a protective factor for male sexual minority adolescents but not female sexual minority adolescents. Specifically, they found reduced suicidal ideation, less alcohol use, less binge drinking or marijuana use, and lower numbers of sexual experiences for male, religiously affiliated, gay and bisexual adolescents in comparison to female bisexual and lesbian adolescents. They found that male adolescents had “sat with” their sexual identities longer, accepting and self-identifying earlier than sexual minority females. As a result, they hypothesized that males had achieved better integrated religious and sexual identities, thus profiting as a result of religious affiliation. Alternatively, this difference may have emerged as a result of the patriarchal nature of most mainstream religious doctrines, and, as Sherkat (2002) stated, the focus on a “loving male god (Jesus)” may resonate better with males than females (p. 321). Regardless, Rosario and colleagues (2006) suggested future research should consider how sexual minority adolescents integrate their religious and sexual identities, because when there is a successful integration protective factors may emerge. As differences by biological sex emerged for both Sherkat (2002) and Rosario and colleagues (2006), additional research is also needed to examine gender differences in the LGBQQ experiences of religiosity.
SUMMARY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Though recent research has advocated for the examination of the LGBQQ experience in relation to various contextual variables, research is needed to understand the process of sexual and religious identity integration. Traditionally, the religious context has been characterized as a difficult and discriminatory social context for LGBQQ individuals due to both theological claims and organizational structure. While previous research has documented that religion does not fully serve a protective role for sexual minority individuals similar to heterosexual youth (Rostosky et al., 2007; Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2008), Rosario and colleagues (2006) stated religion may serve a protective benefit for those who have successfully integrated their religious and sexual identities. Furthermore, researchers have noted differences for male and female LGB individuals in their religious experiences. As a result, research is needed to understand the process by which LGBQQ young adult males and females manage the potential conflict between maintaining a religious identity and developing a positive same-sex attracted sexual identity. The current study asked the following questions about the religious experiences of LGBQQ young adults (18–24 years):

1. To what degree do LGBQQ young adults experience conflict between their religious and sexual identities while coming out?
2. To what extent are LGBQQ young adults able to integrate their sexual and religious identities? What factors are associated with their experiences of integration?
3. Are there any differences in the experience of religious conflict or degree of integration by biological sex?

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 105 LGBQQ young adults (18–24) recruited from electronic mailing lists of community LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) affirming groups, university LGBTQ centers, and gay-straight alliances nationwide. A recruitment letter was sent to the National Consortium of LGBTQ group directors requesting forwarding to appropriate electronic mailing lists. Using the same method, additional electronic mailing lists (not members of the National Consortium) were contacted by the first author. The number of electronic mailing lists accessed with recruitment letter is unknown, as directors were not asked to report whether or not they had forwarded study information to their respective group(s). The recruitment letter outlined the nature and length of the study and invited interested LGBTQ individuals aged 18–24 to complete a survey about LGBTQ religious
TABLE 1 Sample Characteristics (N = 105)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
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<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asexual</td>
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<td>Class/Work</td>
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<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Group</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

experiences. All individuals who identified as LGBTQ were invited to participate in the study. While 106 participants completed the survey, only one participant identified biological sex as transsexual and sexual orientation as transgender. This participant was excluded from the current analyses, leaving 105 participants who identified as LGBQQ. Although all recruitment and survey materials utilized the acronym LGBTQ, the term LGBQQ is used throughout the manuscript to maintain consistency with the obtained sample characteristics.

The overall mean age for the sample was 20.1 (SD = 1.8) years. Table 1 provides a summary of the sample’s biological sex and sexual orientation label. Thirty percent of the sample described their gender as male, 63% as female, and 7% listed “other,” providing gender labels including femme, genderqueer, and no label. The racial background of participants was self-identified as 74% non-Hispanic White, 10% biracial/multiracial, 9% Latino/a, 4% Asian/Pacific Islander, while 2% self-identified race as “other.” No participants identified as African American. Fifty-three percent of the sample reported living in suburban communities, 30% urban, and 17% rural. When asked about the highest level of education received, 81% of the sample reported having some college, 6% were college graduates, 6% reported they were currently enrolled in high school, 5% had a high school degree, and 2% had some graduate-level education.

Obtaining a random sample of LGBQQ young adults is extremely difficult due to the sensitive nature of the study and the known difficulties in accessing a stigmatized and marginalized population. Certainly, the online, anonymous survey format of the current study may be considered a limitation to the current study due to concerns with generalizability to the larger population of LGBQQ young adults in the United States. Additionally, since the participants were aware the survey contained questions about the religious experiences of LGBQQ adolescents and young adults, bias may have been
introduced, as individuals with strong feelings about religion (positive or negative) may have been more motivated to complete the questionnaire. Due to difficulties obtaining a true random sample with the LGBQQ population, leading scholars recommend gaining increased understanding of the developmental trajectories through multiple sampling methods rather than being derailed by questioning whether the sample is “typical” (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams, 1990; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). As a result, the aim of the current study was to offer one more sampling and study methodology toward developing a wider understanding of LGBQQ young adult experiences of religious and sexual identity integration. In the current sample, both self-identified (“out”) and non-self-identified young adults were included from college and community electronic mailing lists.

Procedures
Participants completed the questionnaire through the use of a secure online survey software package (PsychData). Upon access to the survey, the letter of information was presented first, outlining the scope and nature of the study as well as inclusion criteria. By clicking on a button labeled “continue” at the bottom of the letter of information participants indicated informed consent to participate. Online survey tools have the potential to target participants from more diverse geographical locations and provide participants with greater anonymity as they complete the measures.

As part of a larger study, the survey included questions assessing demographic information, sexual orientation history, experience of minority stress, religious affiliation, and religious experiences. In order to capture both breadth and depth in participants’ experiences, a combination of quantitative measures and open-ended questions was utilized. The survey required approximately 25 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the survey, a list of national and online resources and referrals were provided for participants who may have experienced distress as a result of participation.

Questionnaire Measures

Demographic information. Participants were asked to report their biological sex, gender, age, race, sexual orientation, current religious affiliation, educational classification, and community type (rural, urban, suburban) using multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank response options.

Sexual orientation history. Seven items were developed for the current study to gain information regarding the participant’s process of coming out and self-identification. Participants reported their sexual orientation histories by responding to questions regarding their age of first awareness, self-labeling, and disclosure. For example, participants were asked “how old were you when you first labeled yourself as LGBTQ?” and were given the
option to report their age or respond “never experienced.” Participants were also asked to separately rate their degree of self-disclosure to family, friends, classmates/coworkers, and people with whom they are religiously affiliated on a scale from 1 (not told anyone about my sexual orientation) to 5 (I am totally open about my sexual orientation). Finally, participants reported their total openness regarding their sexual orientation on a scale from 1 (have not disclosed my sexual orientation to anyone) to 4 (am totally open about my sexual orientation).

Religious experience. Items addressing religious experience were developed for the current study, and each was analyzed individually. Participants were first asked to provide their religious affiliation during childhood and while coming out by choosing from a list of 13 common U.S. religious affiliations or by listing a different affiliation using a fill in the blank “other” option. Participants also reported on degree of childhood family religious emphasis (i.e., “none,” “low,” “moderate,” “high”). To assess conflict between religious and sexual identities, participants were asked, “Which of the following best describes your experience with religion while coming out?” Response options ranged from 1 (“I didn’t/haven’t experienced any conflict”) to 5 (“I was extremely conflicted regarding my sexual identity and religious beliefs and/or experiences”).

Religious and sexual identity integration. To assess the process of religious and sexual identity integration, several items were developed for the current study. Participants were asked to report on their degree of integration using two different questions. First, participants were asked, “Have there been times when you have been able to be both openly religious and openly LGBTQ at the same time?” and given three response options; “never,” “sometimes,” and “always.” Participants who noted some degree of integration (“sometimes” or “always”) were asked to describe their experiences being religious and LGBTQ in responses to open-ended questions. Second, participants were asked, “To what extent have you combined your sexual orientation and your religious beliefs?” with options to respond, “not at all,” “somewhat,” or “completely.” All participants were asked to describe their experiences combining their sexual orientation and religious beliefs in responses to open-ended questions.

Next, participants were asked to report on factors aiding integration using a “check all that apply” method. Eight options documented by previous qualitative research (Schuck & Liddle, 2001) were provided, which included “family support,” “friend support,” “knowledge of biblical and religious readings,” “clergy support,” “therapist support,” “membership in an affirming religious organization,” “accepting oneself and having a sense of completeness,” and “spiritual reasons.” Participants also had the opportunity to write in additional responses. Finally, participants reported on changes made to their religious participation. Participants were asked to “check all that apply” from the following: “I now consider myself spiritual rather than
religious,” “I have reinterpreted previous religious teachings,” “I changed my religious affiliations,” “I left my previous religion and currently do not identify with any religion,” “I did not change my religious beliefs but I stopped attending a religious institution,” “I remained in my religion and did not change my participation,” and “I remained in my religion and attempted to change existing attitudes of my religion.” Participants were also able to write in additional changes made to their religious participation.

RESULTS

Preliminary Descriptive Analyses

Participants were asked a number of questions about their sexual orientation histories. When asked what age they first thought they may be LGBQQ, participants reported a mean age of 13.4 years (SD = 3.1). The mean age for self-labeling as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or adopting another label of personal meaning was 16.2 years (SD = 2.7). The mean age for disclosing this label to another individual was 16.9 years (SD = 2.2). Degree of disclosure within various social contexts is provided in Table 1. When asked to rate overall openness of sexual orientation, 39% of participants had told more than half of the people they associate with, 30% less than half, 29% described themselves as totally open, with 2% reporting they had not told anyone. A chi square analysis was conducted to assess for differences by biological sex on reported sexual orientation label. There was a significant difference by biological sex on reported sexual orientation, $\chi^2 (2, N = 105) = 15.05, p = .001$. Male participants were more likely to describe their sexual orientation as gay, whereas female participants were more likely to use a variety of labels to define their sexual orientation (see Table 1).

Religious Experiences and Identity Integration

Table 2 presents participants’ current religious affiliation, religious affiliation during childhood, and religious affiliation while coming out. Twenty-one different religious denominations were reported by participants. These 21

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Coming Out</th>
<th>Current</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainline Protestant</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Christian</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Religions</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic/Atheist/None</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Self-Identified</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*n = 104.
categories were collapsed into one of five widely accepted and utilized categories: Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant, Other Christian, Other Religions and Agnostic/Atheist/None (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008; Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007). The Mainline Protestant group was comprised of several denominations including the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and Episcopal traditions. The Other Christian group included the Latter-Day Saints and Jehovah’s Witness faiths. The Other Religions group included participants who identified as Jewish, Hindu, Wiccan, and/or Shinto. Finally, participants who listed a Roman Catholic affiliation were grouped together, as were those who reported no religious affiliation or self-labeled as Agnostic or Atheist. Across the categories of childhood, coming out, and current reported religious affiliation, there was a tendency for participants to disidentify with religion.

Participants were asked to rate the degree of family religious emphasis while growing up, defined by participation in religious services and/or organizational activities. Forty-two percent of participants reported growing up in a family with high religious emphasis (weekly attendance), 21% reported moderate emphasis (attendance approximately half of the time), 23% reported low emphasis (attendance for special occasions), and 14% reported no religious emphasis. An independent samples t-test was performed to examine differences on family religious emphasis by biological sex. There were no differences between males and females for degree of family religious emphasis while growing up, \( t(103) = -0.18, p = 0.86 \). Participants also rated their perceived degree of conflict with religion while coming out. Of those who had disclosed their sexual orientation (\( N = 100 \)), 37% of participants reported no conflict, 13% minor conflict, 16% some conflict, 15% reported being conflicted, 16% extremely conflicted, and 2% chose not to report their perceived degree of religious conflict. An independent samples t-test was performed to examine differences on degree of conflict by biological sex. There were no differences between males and females for degree of conflict, \( t(102) = -1.46, p = 0.15 \).

Participants were asked to report on their experiences of religious and sexual identity integration. Two measures of integration—degree of identity integration and frequency of experience simultaneously being openly LGBQQ and religious—are presented in Table 3. Many of the participants reported not integrating their religious and sexual identities. Chi-square analyses were conducted to assess for differences by biological sex on these two measures of identity integration. There were no differences by biological sex on degree of reported identity integration, \( \chi^2 (2, N = 105) = 0.41, p = 0.81 \) or experiences being simultaneously openly LGBQQ and religious, \( \chi^2 (2, N = 105) = 1.5, p = 0.47 \).

Participants were given the opportunity to describe their experiences integrating their religious and sexual identities. Sixty-nine participant statements were read for emerging themes and coded using methodology.
TABLE 3 Degree of Religious and Sexual Identity Integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of integration (N = 105)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>42 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat</td>
<td>42 (40%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completely</td>
<td>21 (20%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experiences being both LGBTQ and religious (N = 105)</th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>57 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>39 (37%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>9 (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

outlined by Glesne (2006). The first author read each participant statement, grouping similar statements into seven different groups. Statements were analyzed a second time, and five final predominant themes emerged, including having a spiritual rather than religious identity, having no religious identification, experiencing no conflict, compartmentalizing identities, and currently experiencing conflict. An advisory committee of individuals from a local LGBTQ support organization was consulted for theme verification. Twenty-three of the participant statements focused on the theme of spirituality. These statements described either no religious history, a decision to leave a religious affiliation, or did not reference a religious affiliation. For example, one participant stated, “my spirituality involves accepting and loving everyone who should be loved and accepted. . . . In my former religion I was loved as long as they thought I was straight and chaste.” Another participant stated, “I began to integrate what I knew of the similarities of several religious teachings to draw on the most common moral elements within them all to mold my beliefs/spirituality.” One participant stated,

I completely altered the way I look at religion. I feel that religion can be very dangerous, due to people being overzealous or worse. I have become very spiritual and accepting of all people’s individual beliefs. Through that, I know that each person’s spiritual needs are different, and it is a personal thing, and I have no shame in believing what I do, including homosexuality, and my being so.

Seventeen of the participants stated the integration of their religious and sexual identity was not an issue because they did not identify with religion. Statements included in this category reported a lack of religious identity and no report of spiritual beliefs. Statements included “I don’t believe in God or any sentient creator . . . good and evil do not exist outside of human construct” and, “as I sexually identified myself my religious beliefs broke down . . . as I thought about it more the possibilities of God being real seemed to disappear.”
Thirteen participants reported no current conflict while continuing to maintain both a religious and sexual identity. Responses highlighted the role of self-acceptance and/or affiliation with a LGBQQ–friendly religious denomination. Statements included, “Once I accepted I was not heterosexual, it was complete acceptance. The two identities have never clashed” and “it had more to do with finding an accepting church and pastor.” Another participant stated,

I just know that God made me how I am and I accept myself. I would not have felt conflict if other Christians wouldn’t have told me all about the conflict with religion and homosexuality. Christians, not Christ, are the ones that caused my conflict. My religious and spiritual identities have finally come back together after realizing that their beliefs are not mine and hold no power in my life.

Eight participant responses reported nonintegrated, compartmentalized identities. Statements included reflected the experience of living two separate lives, one as a religious person and the other as self-identified LGBTQ individual. Statements included, “I think they are separate issues. Out of respect for my family, I’m not ‘out’ atheist. Nor am I ‘out’ to the family in the queer sense, because they have enough to deal with” and, “HA. Um, what experience? When I’m in the religious part of my life, it’s like I just don’t have sexuality. That’s the only way it ever worked.” Another participant responded:

Because my life at home and at school is very separate from my life at my synagogue I have no reason to mix the two together. I am not very religious and don’t have a big social connection at my synagogue. I see it was [as] a part-time job, and that’s about it. Especially since I’m still very uncertain about my sexual orientation it would be pointless to combine the two parts of my life.

Finally, eight of the participant responses centered on a theme of unresolved conflict without mention of compartmentalized identities. In describing religious and sexual identity integration, one participant stated, “It’s a huge conflict. I so want to experience religious integration with my sexuality, but without ‘dumbing down’ my religious beliefs or theology. I’m not sure it’s ever going to be resolved.” Another participant described the tension between sexual and religious identities:

In hearing and being able to accept that it is okay that I have feelings of attraction to those of the same gender, I have been able to start accepting those feelings and know I didn’t choose them. To hear that it may be possible to have these two seemingly opposite points of view come together inside me gives me hope to bridge this gap I have, I have not
accomplished this yet, but I am working on it . . . . I hear that there is hope, so I will hold onto that.

Of the 105 participants, 46% reported having at least some experiences being openly LGBQQ and religious at the same time (Table 3). These participants were asked to report on their experiences simultaneously being openly LGBQQ and religious. Of the 49 participants who reported some experiences being both LGBQQ and religious, 37 participants described their experiences in responses to open-ended questions. Participant statements were read and analyzed by both the first author and individuals from the local university LGBTQ support organization for emerging themes and categorized into four groups: having either left religion and/or identified as atheist, valuing one’s own spirituality and relationship with God, engagement with a supportive and accepting faith tradition, and choosing to live with both identities. Although they had reported some ability to be openly LGBQQ and religious simultaneously, six responses were categorized as having left religion or self-identifying as atheist. Participants in this category acknowledged conflict within their religious communities resulting in their religious disidentification and/or reported self-identifying as atheist. One participant reported, “I’ve lost my faith. It seems hopeless to me. Why should I go to church and worship a God when I’m going to hell anyway?” Another participant responded:

I had a difficult experience growing up in the LDS [Latter Day Saints] church. Being a regular participant, in fact a priesthood leader, I was ridden with guilt and confusion. I also had a sense of my worth as a human being and never really believed the negative attitudes that I was taught about gays . . . . I eventually became an atheist.

Twelve responses centered on the theme of one’s own spirituality and relationship with God. Participant responses included those that suggested a belief that God made them and/or accepted them as LGBQQ and/or a decision to become more spiritual rather than religious. One participant stated,

My religious experience exists outside of any specific community, and I see a personal relationship and communication with my God. I’m able to do this privately with myself with no need for approval from others or expression of my beliefs to others . . . . The God that I have found loves all things equally and infinitely, and does not condemn or judge our actions.

Other participant reports centered on this theme of spirituality, including “I believe I was made gay for a reason; if anything we don’t need more people. We are overpopulated. So God made me gay.” One participant described the way her spirituality benefited the process of self-acceptance, “I’m not really
religious. I’m pretty spiritual, though, and that has helped me deal with hardships faced partially as the result of being gay.”

Eleven participants reported engagement in an accepting and supportive faith tradition. Statements included, “I’m a reform Jew. My first synagogue was lay-led by a lesbian. The synagogue I grew up at has performed gay marriages” and, “the Episcopal church is really good to the LGBT community.” Finally, 8 of the 37 participants reported working to integrate identities, reflecting a desire to accept both parts of their identities without denying either. One participant stated, “there is discrimination in each sphere against the other. I don’t boast either my spirituality or sexual orientation really in any aspect in life, but I don’t deny either one.” Another participant responded, “I feel that I cannot help but be bisexual, and I cannot imagine not being religious, so even though these two elements of my life conflict I live with the duality to the best of my ability.”

The participants who reported somewhat to completely integrating their religious and sexual identities were asked to select from a list the factors, documented in previous literature (Schuck and Liddle, 2001) that facilitated integration. The list of factors and frequencies are presented in Table 4. Two-thirds of participants stated that accepting oneself and having a sense of completeness were important, while one-half of participants noted that “knowledge of biblical and religious readings” were instrumental in their identity integration. Additionally, participants were asked to report on changes made to religious participation in relation to their sexual identification. Seven changes reported in previous literature were listed; participants were asked to “check all that apply” (Table 4). Over half of the participants reported considering

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 4 Religious and Sexual Identity Integration</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Factors aiding in religious and sexual identity integration (N = 63)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting self and having a sense of completeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of biblical or religious readings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of friends involved in the church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual reasons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affirming religious organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clergy support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Therapist support</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Summary of changes in religious participation (N = 105)</strong></th>
<th>N (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consider myself spiritual rather than religious</td>
<td>48 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinterpreted religious teachings</td>
<td>44 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No longer identify with any religion</td>
<td>23 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed religious affiliations</td>
<td>19 (18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not change my participation</td>
<td>16 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not change religious beliefs but stopped attending</td>
<td>13 (12%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stayed and attempted to change attitudes</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
themselves as more spiritual while just under half of the participants reinter-pretated religious teachings. Additionally, 22% of participants chose to no longer identify with religion in relation to their sexual identification.

DISCUSSION

The social context of religion emerges as an important milieu for adolescent and young adult sexual development (Rostosky et al., 2007). Multiple studies using diverse samples of LGBQQ individuals have suggested that two-thirds of LGBQQ individuals experience some degree of conflict between their religious and sexual identities (e.g., Schuck & Liddle, 2001); the religious experience and process of identity integration can be troubling and wrought with difficulty and stigmatization for many LGBQQ young adults. The purpose of the current study was to examine the experiences of identity integration in a small sample of LGBQQ young adults and to gain an increased understanding of the process by which LGBQQ young adults manage the potential conflict between maintaining a religious identity and developing a positive same-sex attracted sexual identity. Research suggests LGBQQ individuals often experience religious and sexual identity conflict and have a propensity to disidentify with religion. While LGBQQ young adults do not frequently experience being LGBQQ and being religious concurrently, individual factors are instrumental in successful religious and sexual identity integration. Contrary to previous findings that have suggested sex differences in LGB religious experiences (e.g., Rosario et al., 2006; Sherkat, 2002), the experiences of religious and sexual identity integration do not differ for male and female participants.

These findings are especially pertinent for counselors, as 13% of the sample who reported somewhat to completely integrating their sexual and religious identities described counselor support as beneficial for identity integration. As the majority of LGBQQ individuals experience some degree of religious and sexual identity conflict while coming out, counselors may find themselves interacting with LGBQQ individuals in the midst of religious and sexual identity conflict. By gaining an understanding of some of the intricacies of the conflict, while being careful not to overgeneralize documented experiences, the counselor might achieve increased insight into clients’ situation and therapeutic goals.

LGBQQ Religious Experiences and Identity Integration

Previous research with LGBQQ adults has suggested the religious context may complicate the process of identity development (Coyle, 1998; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Thus, one purpose of the current study was to aide in the understanding of religious and sexual identity integration. While many LGBQQ individuals choose to leave their religion in response to the conflict,
others remain active within their religious groups, although they may experience increased tension and conflict. An understanding of factors that aid integration may provide knowledge of not only religion’s beneficial influence as suggested by Rosario and colleagues. (2006), but also the possible avenues by which these LGBQQ individuals can seek to alleviate the experienced tension.

Eighty-seven percent of self-identified participants \((n = 100)\) reported a religious membership during childhood, while 56% maintained a religious affiliation while coming out. At the time of the study, 47% of those self-identified maintained a religious affiliation, while the other 53% identified as agnostic, atheist, or reported no religious membership. While not as pronounced, these findings are consistent with both Rosser’s (1991) research with gay men that found while 84% of participants were raised religious, only 16% of participants remained religious after self-identifying. Similarly, Sherkat’s (2002) sample noted a 15–19% rate of religious disidentification after self-identification in a sample of LGB individuals. Consistent with the high rate of religious disidentification, findings suggest LGBQQ young adults do not frequently experience being concurrently LGBQQ and religious, nor do many LGBQQ individuals report a high degree of sexual and religious identity integration. In the current sample, 54% of participants reported “never” having experiences being concurrently LGBTQ and religious, and 80% of the sample reported having “not at all” to “somewhat” integrating their religious and sexual identities. In fact, LGBQQ young adults may choose to leave organized religion to better facilitate identity integration. The conflict and tension due to theological claims and organizational intolerance experienced by LGBQQ individuals may be a crucial deterrent for identity integration.

Of those who do integrate their religious and sexual identities, certain factors were described as instrumental in integration. The two most frequently indicated factors represent processes that happen at a personal level. First, 67% of the subsample \((n = 63)\) stated that accepting one’s self and having a sense of completeness aided in integration. The diffusion of the tension between the different identities may have emerged as participants viewed God as someone who made them to be LGBQQ. Another factor important to 49% of the subsample was the participant’s own increase in “knowledge of biblical and/or religious readings.” This may allow participants to gain new perspectives that further aid identity integration. Additional factors instrumental in identity integration for over one-third of the subsample included both the support of friends (31%) and family (30%) as well as spiritual reasons (30%). Both quantitative data and experiential descriptions suggest that many LGBQQ adolescents and young adults rely on supportive faith communities to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. Thus, the process of successful identity integration between the religious and sexual identities for LGBQQ individuals likely occurs on a personal, individual level albeit complimented by social support.
In relation to their sexual self-identification, LGBQQ young adults appear likely to report changes in their religious participation. A large shift was observed toward no religious affiliation, and 22% of participants specifically attributed their religious disidentification to their sexual identification. Developmentally, adolescents and young adults regardless of sexual orientation have a propensity to reduce or discontinue religious participation (Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007). More research is needed to understand the processes of religious disidentification and differences in rates of apostasy for LGBQQ as compared to heterosexual adolescents and young adults. For LGBQQ young adults, this trend toward disidentification may be an adaptive, health-promoting move for people whose faith communities are condemning and/or nonaccepting. As LGBQQ individuals in the current study chose to consider themselves more spiritual rather than religious and/or reinterpret religious teachings, such a move from religious organizations to self-seeking may further enhance their own process of identity integration.

Implications for Counseling

Having an increased understanding of the process of young adult religious and sexual identity integration can aide both mental health counselors and school counselors. As two-thirds of LGBQQ participants identified some conflict between their sexual and religious identities, the religious context can be a source of conflict and frustration. For many, the “consequences” of a same-sex attracted identity may include being ostracized from family and friends, potential loss of an “afterlife,” and the requirement of a complete shift in understanding of morality and one’s own life purpose (Haldeman, 2004). In response, some clients’ religious identity will emerge as the primary source of coping and comfort in times of stress and be experienced as more important than one’s own sexual orientation. However, as evident in the current study, other LGBQQ individuals may either understand their sexual orientation to be shaped by a deity or reject the concept of “God” to live an authentic and genuine life as a LGBQQ–identified individual.

Mental health counselors. When working with sexual minority individuals, Lemoire and Chen (2005) suggested counselors serve as a “person-centered facilitator, an information provider, and a supporter and advocate” (p. 154). Specifically, when engaging in therapy with a conflicted client, mental health counselors should first “table” their own biases, creating an open environment for identity exploration. Second, the mental health counselor should identify goals for treatment and engage in a detailed assessment of the clients’ motivations for treatment as well as develop a common understanding of the clients’ perception of the conflict, same-sex attractions, and religiosity (Beckstead &Israel, 2007; Haldeman, 2004). Treatment should include empowering the clients by normalizing same-sex attractions and allowing the client to safely explore and accept his or her own identity. Next,
based on results from the current sample, the authors suggest in order to “deal” with the tension and conflict, LGBQQ individuals may want to seek out additional knowledge about both their own religious and faith teachings and gain an empirically valid understanding of same-sex attractions. Additionally, mental health counselors should encourage clients to seek supportive communities that may also aid in the reduction of the tension associated with integrating an LGBQQ and religious identity. By connecting with LGBQQ–affirmative organizations, groups, or churches, their sexual attractions can be normalized and explored. Finally, counselors must realize that the process of integration happens uniquely and individually. “Successful” identity development for one LGBQQ individual may include abandoning a religious identity, while another individual may find greater solace in the integration of both a LGBQQ and religious identity.

School counselors. While we recognize the majority of school systems do not support the exploration of a student’s sexuality and/or religiosity within the school counseling setting, the findings of the current study highlight an area of potential conflict and distress that may be expressed by LGBQQ students. Researchers elsewhere have recommended school counselors lead schoolwide educational programs and staff in-service trainings to dispel myths, encourage a safe school climate, and provide support for LGBQQ students (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett & Koenig, 2008; McFarland, 2001; Varjas et. al, 2007). In providing schoolwide educational programs, school counselors can use the information from the current sample to highlight LGBQQ experiences of religious conflict, possibly normalizing the experiences of adolescents who have recently “come out” or are questioning their sexual orientation. Similarly, information from the current study can compliment parent and educator training, offering further insight into the difficulties that may emerge in unsupportive environments and the process of successful identity integration. Finally, school counselors should work to provide support for LGBQQ students. To foster optimal identity development in conflicted LGBQQ students, counselors can encourage LGBQQ students to seek additional knowledge, provide opportunities for self-acceptance, and offer information about LGBQQ friendly groups and organizations.

Summary and Limitations
While research with LGBQQ adolescent and young adult populations can be challenging (e.g., recruitment difficulties, informed consent challenges), understanding LGBQQ identity development within various contexts is necessary for both researchers and clinicians. This study provides additional insight into the LGBQQ young adult experience of religious and sexual identity integration. As nearly two-thirds of LGBQQ individuals surveyed noted conflict between their religious and sexual identities, the religious context can be difficult for LGBQQ individuals. To manage the apparent conflict, many
LGBQQ young adults choose to disidentify with religion, which may be a healthy and adaptive step toward identity development. For those who do stay active in religious organizations, the process of sexual and religious identity integration occurs largely on an individual level. For many, reinterpreting religious teachings and focusing on one’s own spirituality and relationship with God proved instrumental in the successful integration of religious and sexual identities. These findings offer valuable “steps” for counselors to consider when engaging in therapy with conflicted LGBQQ individuals.

We acknowledge limitations to the current study. First, due to difficulties in sampling LGBQQ individuals, the current sample is not a random sample and should not be considered representative of all LGBQQ young adults. Rather, we offer yet another method of sampling to enhance our understanding of the differential developmental trajectories of LGBQQ individuals (Savin-Williams, 1990; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Second, our sample was racially and religiously homogenous. Additional research is needed to examine the unique religious experiences of LGB individuals from racial backgrounds other than non-Hispanic White. Similarly, consistent with American religiosity, our sample predominantly endorsed Christian denominational affiliations. Future research may consider the religious experiences of LGBQQ young adults from other religious identifications. Third, our anonymous survey methodology was selected to ensure that participants were comfortable disclosing personal aspects of their sexual orientation and religious histories. However, as a result, we are unable to calculate a response rate or verify the age and sexual orientation of our participants. This ubiquitous limitation of self-report survey methodology may be even more relevant to the online survey methodology, as there is no face-to-face interaction between researcher and participant using an online survey. Fourth, while we analyzed our data by biological sex, we were unable to analyze differences by sexual orientation and biological sex simultaneously (e.g., male bisexual, gay, female bisexual, lesbian) due to our small sample size. Larger samples of LGBQQ individuals are required to gain further insight into the different experiences of identity integration for LGBQQ participants. Finally, we have targeted a young adult population asking them to offer retrospective accounts of religious experiences during childhood and early adolescence. Of course, longitudinal work addressing the interacting influences of developmental contexts over time will be necessary to further delineate the role of religious experiences in shaping sexual identity development. We look forward to additional contributions in this area.

REFERENCES


