Experiences of Christian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Emerging Adults: Perceptions of Family Upbringing, Identity Reconciliation, and Meaning-Making

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ABSTRACT

Religion, and in particular Christianity, is a salient part of American culture and informs policy decisions and family life. Within the past two decades, emerging adults have become less likely to maintain a religious affiliation and attend religious services, suggesting a decline in the country’s involvement with organized religious institutions. Non-heterosexual individuals are half as likely as their heterosexual counterparts to report a religious identity. The following study contextualizes these demographic findings and considers their potential impact on family life, and more specifically the interplay of religiosity with sexual identity development. Using a Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, the current study presents data from eleven in-depth qualitative interviews with self-identified Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer (LGBQ) individuals between the ages of 20 and 25. Results are presented through three models. The first model illustrates the overlap of family and religious life, and their influence on sexual identity development. The second model depicts a three stage process through which participants made sense and meaning of the religious and familial discourses of their childhood: conflict, catalyst, and resolution. Particular attention is given to the final stage, resolution, and to the extraneous environmental factors that influenced how participants explained and made meaning of resolution. Finally, the third model described how participants constructed a LGBQ Christian identity, and how they perceive the acceptance of their identities by families and religious communities. This research contributes to existing literature by (a) examining the influence of a Christian upbringing on sexual identity development, (b) considering how individuals overcome conflict to integrate two seemingly
exclusive identities, and (c) presenting how the adoption of a LGBQ Christian identity
decenters heteronormativity and queers family relationships.
Religion can do no more than conscientiously, fervently, indomitably sustain the sublime, superindivudual significance of our living personality, with all of its deeply grounded relations, to the rest of life and to the world at large… Such religious sentiment, how divinely would it sanctify the great facts of human life - sanctify the mystery of love, when… on the wide fathomless sea of living existence, buoyed with lofty hope and eternal trust, life meets life in mutual love, trembingly, joyously presentiment of higher and higher world fulfillment.

Edmund Duncan Montgomery (1886, p. 1)
DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to all who have felt lonely, unheard, or unseen in their place of worship. Surely the last shall be first (Matthew 20:16, KJV).
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I recognize that this work does not belong to me: it belongs first and foremost to the study’s participants who shared fear, hope, and beauty with a stranger. I consider it a great privilege to hold your stories, which I regard as deep miracles. I sincerely hope that you find an accurate and genuine representation of your experiences.

I extend my gratitude to my parents, for teaching me and my siblings to walk in the way of grace. Our home was always safe and wide enough to contain our whimsical imaginations. Today still, I cherish the effort you made to teach us that the world could be beautiful, and to commission us as agents and carriers of beauty in our relationship with ourselves and with others. Adam, I am thankful for your relentless joy; you are a man of great character and integrity. Rebecca, I admire you as a strong, independent, and well-spoken woman who always stands up for others. You are an advocate and activist of the finest caliber.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the Problem

The United States is largely understood to be a Christian nation, founded on Biblical principles and values since its inception in 1776 (The Library of Congress, 1998, 1). However, recent generations are considerably altering religious landscapes and trajectories. According to Pew Forum Research, the number of religiously unaffiliated, that is to say individuals that do not identify with any religion, has increased from 12% in 1970 to 23% in the early 2000s. In addition, millennials (born 1981 to early 2000s), are currently the least likely demographic group to attend a religious service (Pew, 2012). Hypotheses explaining this religious decline range from political backlash, to delays in marriage, to social disenchantment (Pew, 2012).

Members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans*1 (LGBT) community are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to report no religious affiliation. Indeed, 48% claim to have no religious affiliation, nearly twice as many as the general population. Those who do report religious affiliation are less likely to attend a religious service and to perceive their faith as important. Religious institutions are largely viewed as unfriendly and hostile towards LGBT individuals, as well as contributors to families’ negative reactions towards their LGBT children (Pew, 2013). These statistics suggest a significant interplay between religious beliefs, religious behavior, religious upbringing, and sexual identity and orientation.

Religion, and in particular Christianity, has long acted as moderator and arbitrator of sexuality (Griffith, 2012). Sexual acts perceived as abnormal, especially same-sex acts, have been deemed worthy of death (Williams, 1999). In fact, the term “sodomy” used to refer to same-sex intercourse was retrieved from the Biblical narrative of Sodom and Gomorrah, in

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1 The term “trans*” will be used throughout the study as an umbrella term for transgender, transsexual, gender non-conforming and gender non-binary individuals.
which two cities are assumed to be destroyed for their inhabitants’ same-sex acts. The traditionally violent rhetoric surrounding same-sex acts and relationships has contributed to dissonance between Christianity and LGBT communities.

**Gaps in the Literature**

Cognizant of this conflict, academic scholarship has sought to examine the relationship between Christian and queer communities (e.g., Bassett, Kirnan, Hill, & Schultz, 2005; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez, 2008; Uecker, Regnerus, & Vaaler, 2007; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2012) as well as change and variability in the spiritual lives of LGBT people (e.g., Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Dahl & Galliher, 2010; Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008). However, few studies have sought to prioritize the experiences and narratives of LGBT emerging adults. A considerable number of studies have utilized youth and adolescent samples (e.g., Hillier, Mitchell, & Mulcare, 2008; Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2008) and have focused on the behavioral implications of religiosity, such as binge-drinking (Rostosky, Danner & Riggle, 2007) and smoking (Balsam, Beadness, & Karin, 2012). A longitudinal and process-centered framework remains largely absent. The absence of a family perspective is also prevalent within the Christian-centered literature. How do relationships change after disclosure of sexual orientation? How do parents perceive the negotiation of LGBT and Christian identities of their children? What are parents’ experiences within their religious communities after disclosure? These questions remain largely unanswered. Oswald (2001) examined the experience of LGBT individuals during religious family rituals and noted that participants reported feeling misunderstood and separated in their families. Her findings indicate interesting family dynamics that emerge after disclosure that merit further examination.

Thus, little is known about how young adults come to resolve and negotiate the conflict
of growing up with same-sex attractions in a largely anti-gay environment and the effect of their conflict on families. A majority of studies indicate that young people do indeed experience conflict. However, in light of several denominations’ decision within the past five years to openly welcome gay and lesbian people, research must query whether or not identity conflict remains a salient and dominant theme in the lives of LGBT youth who grow up in a Christian home. Indeed, it would be a misrepresentation to brand all of Christianity as a wholly anti-gay institution given the recent changes in denominations such as the Presbyterian Church of America, the Episcopal Church of America, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America who recently decided to accept LGBT people as church members, deacons, and priests. Furthermore, Exodus, the largest Christian ex-gay organization recently closed its doors stating, “for quite some time we’ve been imprisoned in a worldview that’s neither honoring toward our fellow human beings, nor biblical” (Exodus, 2013). Current social science literature has yet to catch up to the numerous changes taking place within the Christian landscape to offer a relevant and accurate look into the lives of LGBT people growing up in Christian environments.

**Significance and Overview of the Current Study**

The current study seeks to offer timely and socially relevant insight into the experiences of emerging adults who identify as both Christian and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer (LGBQ). To this end, two aims guide this study.

**Aim 1:** Describe how perceptions about past religious experiences within family and church contexts influenced sexual identity development before disclosure.

**Aim 2:** Explore the significance and meanings associated with identifying as both Christian and LGB as an emerging adult, and how views of this negotiation is perceived
by both families and churches, in particular after disclosure.

Qualitative data were gathered from emerging adults who were raised in a Christian home environment and currently self-identify as Christian.

**Theoretical Perspectives**

Both Symbolic Interaction and Queer Theory acted as the theoretical frameworks for the current study. They primarily guided the conceptualization of religiosity and sexual orientation, as well as the data analysis.

**Symbolic Interaction**

Blumer (1983), father of Symbolic Interaction, was primarily concerned with the meanings individuals ascribe to reality, meanings defined, refined, and negotiated by society. Snow (2003) identified four broad themes present in symbolic interaction: human agency, interaction determination, symbolization, and emergence.

*Human agency* recognizes individuals as participants who are not passive recipients of symbols and knowledge. Instead, they have the capacity to make conscious decisions and to be actors and goal-seekers (Snow, 2003). Religion provides rituals through which symbols become visible and tangible. These rituals are certainly rich in symbolism and meaning, but they are dependent on individuals actively engaging with them. *Interactive determination* calls for a contextual and relational understanding of objects usually presumed to be intrinsic, that is to say situated within a person. While religious communities often assume the existence of a Higher Being, symbolic interactionists ask how societal and communal influences work together to reinforce this assumption. *Symbolization* highlights the processes through which objects, events, or individuals go from ordinary to symbolic, and consequently to meaningfulness. This notion is often posited as the very heart of symbolic interactionism. The
transition from ordinary to meaningful may also be placed at the very heart of religion: art as a form of prayer, candles as a form of intercession, priests acting in persona Christi. Religion allows for a framework where tragedy, sadness, and loss carry a transcendental meaning. The concept of emergence is concerned with the evolution of symbols over time. The emergence of new symbols and the death of old ones is influenced by social structures, rather than determined by them. Old religious symbols of faith or belief may alter, and produce new, emergent, meanings.

Ultimately, symbolic interaction posits a malleable view of reality, one in which individuals consciously or subconsciously project meaning upon the world around them and act upon these prescribed meanings. Religion is a collection of beliefs only viable and sustainable if individuals engage with and participate in its teachings. However, teachings emanating from sacred texts are inherently interpretations in light of the fact that theologians today are unable to ask Biblical authors the exact meaning of their writings. Instead, they purport a post-hoc analysis presenting a suggested meaning. These meanings may or may not be accepted by followers, who might develop their own interpretations. The culture of meaning, interpretation, and multiple realities permeating religion is naturally complemented by a symbolic interaction framework. Other scholars have also successfully integrated Symbolic Interaction into their studies of religious experiences (see Avishai, 2008; Stroope, Draper, & Whitehead, 2013).

**Queer Theory**

Queer theory emerged out of the post-structuralist school of thought in the early 1990s as a rebuttal towards society’s strict adherence to gendered and sex-related binaries. The very term “queer” challenges categories of heterosexual/gay/lesbian/bisexual and purports a sexual orientation and/or gender identity that transcends socially constructed labels. A queer identity
resists a strict definition and instead includes all people “whose behaviors or sympathies challenge the dominant structures of sex, gender, and sexual identity” (Seidman, 1996, p. 322). Queer theory allows for the harmonious co-existence of seemingly conflicting desires, behaviors, and identities (Jagose, 1996).

Sexuality is also understood as a spectrum by queer theorists who posit same-sex attraction and heterosexuality as polar opposites on a line on which individuals are mobile and free to explore. Queer theory allows for the integration of multiple identities that challenge social conventions. In a society that largely views a Christian identity as mutually exclusive with a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer one, queer theory paves a bridge between the two categories. The discipline of religion has been particularly prolific in adopting a queer perspective. Religion has been “queered” in feminist theologies (Russell, 1985), philosophy of religion (Armour, 2010) and in religious psychotherapies (Dahl & Galliher, 2009). Furthermore, both queer and Christian ideologies affirm the value of distinguishing between sexual desire, behavior, and identity making queer theory a particularly relevant framework for this study.

**CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Research on non-heterosexual populations has undergone significant growth in the past decade. The increasing visibility of LGBT individuals coupled with a growing dedication to LGBT rights has induced the discipline of Human Development, as well as the broader social sciences, into a novel scholarly paradigm concerned with recognizing and understanding a population that has long remained under-studied and misrepresented (Biblarz & Savci, 2010). This very misrepresentation of queer sexuality and queer people has contributed to making the LGBT community, particularly LGBT youth, an at-risk population (Russell, 2002). Indeed,
stereotypes and a lack of understanding of non-heterosexuality largely contribute to making LGBT youth the single most vulnerable adolescent population (Herek, 2000; Kivel & Kleiber, 2000; Van Wormer, 2003; Varjas, et al., 2008). Resilience literature identifies strong family and communal support as particularly salient protective factors against the day-to-day risks faced by LGBT youth (Needham & Austin, 2010; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010). The following literature review will consider the impact of Christianity, understood as one of the prevailing institutions in the United States and a considerable source of community for many American families, on the sexual identity development and family dynamics of LGBT young adults.

In an effort to situate queer sexuality developmentally, the review will begin by examining the literature on emerging adulthood and the milestones unique to the 18-to 25-year-old population. Secondly, models of sexual development and sexual identity development and integration (SIDI) will be reviewed and critiqued as to evaluate how scholars have conceptualized and understood the sexuality of LGBT youth. Thirdly, the review will examine religious identity and its conceptualization into linear models of development. The Queer perspective will primarily be used to challenge the sequential and model-based conceptualizations of sexual and religious development. Next, in an effort to contextualize religious and sexual development models historically and theologically, the current state of Christianity will be appraised. Finally, the review will close by summarizing the small body of literature examining the role of Christianity in the lives of LGBT young adults and their families.

Emerging Adulthood

In his 2000 article, Arnett suggested the creation of a new developmental stage
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reflective of the shift among societal and cultural norms for 18-to 25-year-olds: emerging adulthood. The following summary of emerging adulthood is representative of the concepts and hypotheses theorized and produced at the inception of the study of this developmental stage. Arnett’s perspective presents considerable limitations that will be critiqued through a Queer lens at the end of the section.

Demographics

According to Arnett (2000), the delay of marriage and child-rearing and the pursuit of higher education have considerably influenced the transition from adolescence to adulthood. He identified a certain “volition” (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) during the 18-to-25-year-old window that releases individuals from the marital, familial, and professional expectations that were preponderant past the age of 30. In light of the lack of social roles, young adults may experience a multitude of demographic statuses. Residential status might include living with caregivers, cohabitation with a romantic partner, or living in a university dormitory, among others. This status is prone to change and qualified as “exploratory” (Arnett, 2000, p. 471). Education outcomes are equally as unpredictable and irregular. Overall, emerging adults are demographically similar in their lack of consistency and steadiness.

Self-Perception

Emerging adults experience an ambivalent identity, struggling to negotiate characteristics that they perceive as belonging to both adolescence and adulthood. While they often conceptualize adulthood around social status and recognition, such as attainment in education, jobs, and family roles, they are primarily concerned with character properties and qualities during emerging adulthood, in particular financial independence and “responsibility for one’s self” (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). Furthermore, when asked if they perceive themselves as
adults, their answers usually entail a variant of “in some ways yes, in some ways no” (Arnett, 2000, p. 471). The desire to develop a sense of self is reflective of the identity exploration that is usually associated with adolescence. The delay of family life extends the period of exploration from adolescence to emerging adulthood, and is in fact most salient during the 18-25-year-old age group. Arnett (2000) identified three core areas of identity exploration: love, work, and worldviews.

**Identity Exploration**

Dating during adolescence is often defined recreationally and takes place in groups, while emerging adults tend to date with the intention of romantic and physical intimacy. Sexual intercourse is more likely to occur, as well as the consideration of more formal forms of commitment, such as cohabitation or marriage. Work often involves a field that is of interest to emergent adults and is perceived as the groundwork for future adult roles. Professional settings provide the opportunity to consider life-goals, strengths and weaknesses, and passions. Emerging adulthood is an ideal time to explore introspective questions such as “what kind of work am I good at?” and “what kind of work would I find satisfying for the long term?” (Arnett, 2000, p. 474). These questions may also be posed during college, a time during which emerging adults leave their family home and are confronted with new worldviews and ideas. The novel and pluralistic nature of many college campuses allow them to explore ideologies in safe settings away from the possible rebuke of parents. Upon graduation from university, students have often committed to one worldview. Interestingly, emerging adults who have not attended college often experience a similar period of transition in worldviews during the 18 to 22 age window. Religious beliefs are particularly prone to revision, and are considered inevitable and necessary areas of exploration (Arnett & Jensen, 1999). The three areas of identity exploration are likely
to involve discouragement, pessimism about the future, and overall disillusionment (Arnett, 2000, p. 474).

**Risky Behavior**

While risky behavior is often associated with adolescence, Arnett (2000) noted that unprotected sex, substance abuse, and binge drinking are most common among emerging adults. Researchers hypothesize that the exploratory and curious nature of emerging adults translates into a desire to experience a wide variety of situations before committing to “adult roles.” The lack of adult supervision permits a greater exploration of behaviors. In addition, the lack of accountability to a partner or a child further increases the likelihood of engaging in risky behavior. Indeed, risky behavior significantly decreases following parenthood (Bachman, Johnson, O’Malley, & Schulenberg, 1996).

**Positive Development**

Researchers note the fact that much of the literature addressing emerging adults is articulated around risk (Masten et al., 2004). In an effort to depart from a deficit and risk perspective, research since the mid-2000s has sought to identify protective factors as well as predictive factors for “positive development” (Carlson & Tanner, 2006). The concept of “positive development” has not been clearly defined by scholars, but has usually possessed a functional aspect focused on behavioral and status-related outcomes (Molgat, 2007; Seiffge-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008), such as forming a family through coupling and child-bearing and having a professional career. Such definitions are challenged, however, in light of recent research suggesting that these are no longer primary concerns of emerging adults (Seiffge-Krenke & Gelhaar, 2008; Skaletz & Sieffge-Krenke, 2010). Hawkins and colleagues (2009) successfully tested a model for positive development encompassing five areas deemed
important milestones for emerging adults: (1) civic action and engagement, (2) trust and tolerance of others, (3) trust in authorities and organizations, (4) social competence, and (5) life satisfaction. These areas depart from previous criteria articulated around tangible outcomes affirmed through external validation. Instead, they reflect a pursuit of social justice, positive relationships, and sense of self. At this point, emerging adults are able to adopt a broader outlook on their lives. There is an understanding of societal and cultural implications, which begin to influence their behavior and attitudes.

**Sexuality**

As noted by developmental psychologist Erikson (1968), sexuality, its discovery, and its exploration are essential in the development of individuals. It is therefore surprising that so little research has considered sexuality during emerging adulthood beyond the topic of “hooking up” or risky sexual behavior (e.g., Olmstead, Pasley, & Fincham, 2013; Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011; Zuckerman, & Boyer, 2012). Torkelson (2012) offered a further critique of the study of sexuality during emerging adulthood: its blatant and unapologetic heteronormativity. The consideration of roles in the emerging adulthood literature is articulated around marriage, an institution inaccessible to many, as well as biological parenthood. He calls for a “queering” of the field, which would examine how non-conformity to prevalent heterosexual and gender essentialist ideals affect the three areas put forth by Arnett (2000): love, work, and worldviews. While several studies have considered non-heterosexuality during emerging adulthood, they maintained a deficit perspective in examining substance and alcohol use (Newcomb, 2013; Talley, Sher & Littlefield, 2010), experiences of homophobia (Woodford, Howell, Kulick, & Silverschanz, 2013), or risky sexual behavior (Moeller, Halkitis, Pollock, Siconolfi, & Barton, 2013). Overall, the study of sexuality during emerging adulthood has remained largely focused
on heterosexuality in casual and non-committed relationships, and the sparse work produced on LGBT populations continues to be centered on risk.

**Critique of Emerging Adulthood**

The questionable relevancy of Arnett’s conceptualization of sexuality resounds into other facets of identity as well, such as race, class, and gender. Arnett’s description of emerging adulthood is largely articulated around a White, economically-privileged population. Indeed, individuals who are lower-class, have limited access to education, experience racial and gender discrimination, or who lack family support are absent. His presentation of emerging adulthood lies in the assumption that all individuals follow a clear trajectory and have the means to actualize their goals. Additionally, Arnett (2000) conceptualized emerging adulthood as a *stage*, other scholars see in it a *process* that is heterogeneous and sensitive to environment (Hartmann & Swartz, 2007; Water, Carr, Keflalas, & Holdaway, 2011). The latter fits best into a queer framework. Indeed, emerging adulthood as process implies construction, negotiation, and agency. A stage, however, suggests that becoming an adult is an exogenous phenomenon that is imposed onto one’s development, as opposed to a phenomenon one experiences and creates for him or herself.

The use of emerging adulthood as a concept in the current study is motivated by the desire to situate religion and sexuality developmentally, with a recognition of the unique cognitive, emotional, social, and cultural that affect experiences throughout the life course. The field of family studies has traditionally been understood as sensitive to the complexities of “contextualism, dynamic systems, and transactional analyses” (O’Brien, 2005, p. 880). Therefore, the use of emerging adulthood is not necessarily an endorsement of all its principles, inasmuch as recognition of the variability that occurs within lived experiences. These lived
experiences are linked to intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 2013) influenced by larger systems that often dictate how 18- to 25-year olds should or should not act, live, or be. Coupling emerging adulthood with queer theory allowed for the collected data to be examined with particular attention given to the mechanisms used by participants to challenge sexual and religious normativity.

**Sexual Identity Development**

While sexual development is understood as a sequential and linear process, scholars today largely view sexual orientation and identity as categories of sexuality that transcend stage-based models. Initially, however, psychologists established numerous models attempting to map the emotional, physical, and social experiences of non-heterosexual individuals (e.g., Coleman, 1982; Rosario et al., 2001; Savin-Williams, 1990). Two of the most widely used models were developed by Cass (1979) and Carrion and Lock (1997).

**The Cass Model of Sexual Orientation Development**

The Homosexuality Identity Formation Model (1979) contains six stages. Identity foreclosure is possible at any stage if the individual elects to forgo a “homosexual identity” (p. 220) which would temporarily or permanently end the identity formation. During stage 1, *Identity Confusion*, individuals experience dissonance between their presumed heterosexuality and their actual same-sex attractions. These same-sex attractions are subsequently compared with the attitudes and behaviors of heterosexual people in an effort to attempt to project a heterosexual identity to others during stage 2, *Identity Comparison*. Stage 3, *Identity Tolerance*, entails a growing proximity and cordiality towards other gay and lesbian people. Establishing such a form of community enables individuals to cope with feelings of loneliness and alienation. They may choose to disclosure their sexual orientation to a selective few during
stage 4, *Identity Acceptance*. Fear of discrimination and intolerance are still particularly salient at this stage, causing the individual to maintain a heterosexual image in certain settings. These fears diminish during stage 5, *Identity Pride*, as individuals learn to place less weight on others’ opinion towards their sexual orientation. This may lead to a newfound boldness and gumption to speak out against stereotypes and homophobia. Finally, during stage 6, *Identity Synthesis*, the individual departs from an essentialist “us” (i.e., LGBT community) vs. “them” (i.e., heterosexuals) perspective to ultimately seek an integration between the perception of others and the perception of self.

**The Carrion and Lock Model of Sexual Orientation Development**

Carrion and Lock’s (1997) model conceptualizes sexual development as a process beginning during the early years of adolescence. It begins with *internal discovery of sexual orientation*, which may include feelings of bewilderment, shame, denial, or minimization. Youth will subsequently come to terms with these feelings and same-sex attraction in the second stage, *inner exploration of attraction to sexual object*. The *integration of same-sex attraction* into youth’s identities qualifies the nature of the subsequent stages. The fourth stage marks the beginning of this process of reconciling sexual orientation with identity, *early acceptance of an integrated sexual self*. This is followed by a maturation of sexual identity development, *congruence probing*. Subsequently, youth will consider coming out to their peers and come to a *further acceptance of an integrated sexual self*. Deciding whether or not to come out to peers is marked by a misalignment between the way youth view themselves and the way they are perceived by others. They must learn to exert agency over their identity and appraise the perceptions of others, a stage called *self-esteem consolidation*. This self-esteem will build over time and may even turn into a sense of pride and comfort. Eventually, it will lead to a *mature*
formation of an integrated self. These seven stages resolve into the eighth stage, integrated self-identity with a social context. Youth are then assumed to be at peace with their sexual orientation and are able to integrate it into their identity and social spheres.

**Critique of Sexual Development Models**

Carrion and Lock (1997) extended disclosure over the four last stages of their model. Disclosure was integrated with self-acceptance, self-esteem, and social context. Cass, on the other hand, limited disclosure to one stage named “identity acceptance.” Identity acceptance becomes the subsequent catalyst for the last two stages, identity pride and identity synthesis. These two models conceptualize disclosure differently. Carrion and Lock (1997) presented disclosure as a continual process that extends over a period of time. Cass (1979) posited disclosure as a compounding element essential to the individual’s further development. It is a single event in time that will define the rest of the adolescent’s life.

The relevance of these models has been challenged by recent studies, suggesting that models for disclosure have evolved over time, and may be influenced by the changing societal landscape for queer individuals. Indeed, in a qualitative secondary data analysis of 18 queer youth raised by lesbian and bisexual mothers, Kuvalanka and Goldberg (2009) found that the participants felt having queer parents accelerated the discovery of their sexual orientation and allowed them to disclose it at a much younger age. Participants also pointed towards augmented exposure to queer communities and to concepts of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008) which led to increased levels of comfort during youths’ deliberation process.

Furthermore, sexual development models assume a life-long allegiance to one sexual identity label, as well as uniform and agreed upon definitions of the labels. Scholars have recently noted a considerable change in how youth self-identify and think of their sexual
orientation, suggesting that the terms “gay” and “straight” might become obsolete. An increasing number of queer youth are redefining and renegotiating their sexuality by resisting labels (Horner, 2007; Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2008). Several studies suggest this to be particularly true for women, who are more likely to identify as bisexual than as lesbian (Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Diamond (2000) surveyed 80 women aged 16 to 23 who identified themselves as lesbian or unlabeled, and found that over a two year time span, half of them changed sexual orientation identities multiple times and one fourth had engaged in sexual behavior with men as well as women. She points to a prominence of non-exclusive sexual orientation and behavior among young women who embrace sexual fluidity.

Additionally, the Center for Disease Control (2005) noted approximately 11.5% of women ages 18 to 44 have had a same-sex experience, compared to only 4% of women ages 18-59 a decade before. Such demographic information suggests that an increasing number of women are resisting heteronormative experiences.

Russell, Thomas, and Clary (2009) addressed the post-gay notion in their study of 2,560 high school students in California. Among those who did not identify themselves as heterosexual, 70% claimed a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity. Thirteen percent were questioning, 5% identified themselves as queer, and fewer than 10% used an alternative label. The authors suggest that sexual identity labels are still relevant, even though the extent of their use may be questioned. They speculated that while decisions regarding sexual behavior and mate selection are fluid among youth, they still rely on prescribed labels and terminology to classify their identity. Among those that did use alternative labels, however, there was a certain amount of creativity, indicating respondents felt a freedom to construct their identity by using terms such as “hetero-flexible” and “bisexually gay” (Russell, et al., 2009, p. 887).
The question of whether or not sexual orientation changes over time, paralleling the notion of sexual fluidity (Diamond, 2008), is beginning to permeate the literature. Heterosexuality has been considered the most stable sexual orientation. Kinnish, Strassberg, and Turner (2005) surveyed 762 individuals between the ages of 36 and 60 over five years and found that 65% of self-identified lesbians reported at one point considering themselves as something other than lesbians. In addition, Savin-Williams and Ream (2007) noted within their sample from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health that heterosexual youth showed greater stability in their sexual orientation and behavior compared to non-heterosexual participants. Finally, Dickinson, Paul, and Herbison (2003) examined a birth cohort of about 1,000 participants in New Zealand over five years, between the ages of 21 and 26. Nearly 2% of men departed from an exclusive heterosexual orientation and nearly 2% moved towards it. Nine percent of women moved away from an exclusive heterosexual orientation and 1.3% moved towards it. Therefore, the women in this study showed greater variance over the course of the five years and were more likely to identify as gay compared to the male participants.

These studies yield results difficult to synthesize into a cohesive conclusion. The diversity of results points towards a myriad of experiences, labels, and identities sensitive to time, gender, and culture. Theorists have echoed similar concerns regarding linear models of sexual identity development stating “they do not adequately account for the role of social constructs in shaping sexuality” (Rust, 2003, p. 243). The plurality of experiences reflects not a deviation from a “normative” queer experience. Instead, it should be perceived as a “socially and psychologically mature response to one’s changing social contexts” (Hunter, Shannon, Knox, & Martin, 1998, p. 64).
Conceptualizing Sexual Orientation

Sexual orientation is a relatively new concept and the product of social construction dating back to the 1930s when the terms *homosexual* and *heterosexual* were first utilized in mainstream American media (Williams Paris, 2011). Until then, sexuality was largely understood as an interpersonal phenomenon exchanged between people and not as an intrapersonal identity reflecting that which is within a person. The dichotomous terms first emerged out of the writings of Austrian journalist Karl Maria Kertbeny in 1869 who, incidentally, perceived same-sex attraction as both natural and unchangeable (Feray, Herzer, & Peppel, 1990). Sex researchers Richard Von Kraff-Ebing and Albert Moll appropriated the terms several years later as they developed a novel understanding of human sexuality. Both scholars posited that “deviant” sexual behavior was not strictly incidental, symptomatic, or behavioral, but the result of an innate condition integral to one’s sexuality. The paradigm shift from behavior to identity influenced the field of psychiatry to consider a pathologization of sexual identity, permitting the chastization of individuals for their sexuality considered inseparable from their inherent sense of self (Oosterhuis, 2012).

In light of the historical circumstances surrounding the terms “heterosexual” and “homosexual” it is important to acknowledge the triune nature of sexual orientation that is articulated around same-sex desire, behavior, and identity, which originated from Kinsey’s sexual orientation continuum (Diamant & McAnulty, 1995). *Desire* refers to an attraction that may be both biological and cultural in origin (Nussbaum, 1999). This attraction can express itself through the desire to be sexually and romantically involved with a person (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1997). The expression of such desire becomes a *behavior*. The exact nature of the behavior remains ambiguous in the literature, as it may refer to a non- sexual
committed relationship, an exclusively sexual relationship, or even a one-time instance of sexual contact. Finally, *identity* involves the appropriation of a label and implies the belonging to a category in line with one’s “fantasies, attractions, and behaviors” (Savin-Williams, 1995, p. 166).

**Religious Identity**

**Religion vs. Spirituality**

The term “religion” possesses various definitions in scholarly literature. It is a term scholars from a broad array of disciplines still struggle to define today. What does it mean to be religious? What does it mean to be spiritual? How do scholars measure religiosity and spirituality? No consensus has yet been reached. A founding father in the psychology of religion and coping, clinical psychologist Pargament (2009) argued that while new measures of spirituality are being developed, it is not certain they provide any new information. In fact, he admitted that these new scales of spirituality are quite similar to old scales of religiosity. He suggested that religion is “a search for significance in ways related to the sacred,” while spirituality is “a search for the sacred” (1997). The distinction made is subtle, but important. Religion is functional, while spirituality is an end in itself. However, certain themes and concepts are found in both terms *spirituality* and *religion*. Both are universally accepted as notions that transcend institutions and that have the capability of being experienced on an individual basis. Over time, religion has adopted an operational function, and is often substituted for *institutional religion*. Spirituality, on the other hand, “refers to the personal, the affective, the experimental, and the thoughtful” (Pargament, 2009).

**Religious Identity Development**

Psychologists conceptualize religiosity much like they have conceptualized sexual
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orientation over the course of the past century. Religiosity is understood as an experience integral to one’s self that progresses through stages concomitantly with one’s cognitive and emotional development. Developmental psychologist James Fowler (1981) theorized religious identity development into a stage model after an extensive research project interviewing over 350 individuals about their spiritual growth. Results yielded six stages undergirding the progression of faith. Fowler made a clear distinction between faith and religion. Faith is understood as a “human quest for relation to transcendence” (Fowler, 1981, p. 14) and indissoluble from one’s core identity, a characteristic he referred to as an “orientation.” Religion is a human-made structure based upon a common faith in a source of transcendence (Fowler, 1981).

Paralleling Piaget’s (1959) theory of child development, Fowler stated that between the ages of two and seven children begin to develop the cognitive capabilities to identify symbols yet are still unable to think fully rationally. Myths and religious phenomena are largely processed through imagination and fantasy making faith mostly an intuitive phenomenon; hence stage 1 is labeled the intuitive-projective faith stage. Children transition into a developmental stage allowing them to process information with more rational thought in the mythic-literal stage. Religious stories make up the most salient part of religious identity and are understood to be literal. This narrative-based stage increases awareness about justice and world events. Children are, however, not yet able to reflect introspectively on the meaning of stories for their own lives and relationships. Puberty then induces individuals into a synthetic-conventional faith. During this time, adolescents seek a more coherent faith that is able to help them make sense of their experiences, as well as the experiences of others. A religious belief system begins to form but is not yet subject to examination or thorough critique. Individuals in this stage are
particularly sensitive to the evaluation and judgment of others, which may, in turn, lead them to compromise their beliefs or conform to the beliefs of others. Some individuals may end their religious identity development at this point and choose to forgo a religious identity altogether. Usually after leaving home during late adolescent years and early 20s, individuals that have moved through stage 3 move into an *individuative-reflective* stage. This stage is particularly difficult in that it requires critical reflection and taking responsibility for one’s decision to commit to a belief system. Individuals are expected to be able to justify their belief in relativism vs. absolutes, individuality vs. group membership, subjectivity vs. objectivity, and self-fulfillment vs. self-actualization. Notions of self (identity) and ideology (outlook) are more clearly solidified to create an actual religious identity. However, not until stage 5, *conjunctive faith*, usually reached in mid-life, are individuals able to form a solid religious identity so that they can integrate the hardships and struggles of life with their belief system. The battle between relativism and absolutes experienced previously gives way to a paradoxical faith that concedes certain life events as inexplicable. Finally, a small portion of individuals will reach *universalizing faith*. This stage is marked by a resolution of the paradoxes experienced in stage 5. These individuals are uncannily in tune with transcendence, religious devotion, and universal suffering and compassion. Fowler stated, “stage 6 becomes a disciplined, activist incarnation- a making real and tangible- of the imperatives of absolute love and justice of which stage 5 has partial apprehensions” (Fowler, 1981, p. 200). Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa of Calcutta are prime examples of figures who may have reached stage 6.

While Fowler’s stages of faith are usually recognized as a robust and reliable mapping of faith (Miller-McLemore, 2006), their sequential and linear nature have attracted criticism from scholars who accuse them of being “prescriptive” (Rust, 2003, p. 239). By upholding a
standard of faith progression, this model inevitably upholds the idea of the existence of an
abnormal faith progression. Further absent from Fowler’s theory is the consideration of life
events, emotions (Cartwright, 2001), and the diverse theologies addressing the purpose of
existence and salvation (Jardine & Viljoen, 1992).

Christianity and LGBT Issues

Christian Teachings on Same-Sex Attraction and Relationships

Same-sex acts are the subject of several scriptural passages in both the Old and New
Testament interpreted and analyzed since the very early years of the Church. The exact number
of verses referring to same-sex acts remains debated, given that some scholars perceive an explicit
reference to same-sex acts in certain passages while others do not. Theologians tend to commonly
identify at least six verses (Williams-Johnson, 2011). Two verses in Leviticus are perhaps the most
well-known scripture thought to explicitly condemn same-sex acts as violent actions of rebellion
against God’s intended will for humanity and sexuality. Leviticus 18:22 states, “You shall not
lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination” and Leviticus 20:13 declares “If a man
lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be
put to death; their blood is upon them.” The story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) is an
epic narrating the experiences of two cities burned to the ground after their male inhabitants
attempted to rape angels. The particularly striking element of this story lies in the interpretation
that the two cities brought the wrath of God upon them as a result of their attempted same-sex
acts. This interpretation seemingly presents same-sex acts not only as sinful, but also worthy of
punishment, shame, and destruction.

Traditional Christianity understands the New Testament to install a new covenant, or a
new promise, with the people of Israel releasing them from the laws and fear-based
understanding of God that permeated the Old Testament. Moving into a new covenant sealed with the person of Jesus freed Jews from the extensive rules and customs recorded in the Books of the Law: “For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14, KJV). The passages in the New Testament addressing same-sex acts therefore bear much weight in the minds of theologians, as they deal with the aspects of the Law that were not completely forfeited by the New Covenant but intended to be continued. In the book of Romans found in the New Testament, St. Paul portrays same-sex acts as “unnatural” and worthy of retribution (Romans 1:26-27) and later reiterates this point in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

**Interpretation of Sacred Texts**

The Roman Catholic Church formally stated same-sex relationships to be “disordered” in the Catechism (Catholic Church 2357). This teaching persisted through the Reformation (Plass, 1959). The Anglican priest Derrick Bailey was the first to assert boldly the Church had misread Scripture and made erroneous claims regarding same-sex relationships (Bailey, 1955). Bailey’s article induced the academic theological community into a debate that has been maintained into the contemporary 21st century. His work was pivotal in that it challenged an old and respected assumption upheld by esteemed writers and Fathers of the Church, such as St. Peter Damian and St. John Chrysostom (Crompton, 2003). Since the 1950s, a considerable number of denominations have changed their position on same-sex relationships and have opened church membership and ordination to non-heterosexual individuals. Such denominations include the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church of America, the Unitarian Church and the United Church of Christ. In contrast, the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Missouri Synod, and the Church of
Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints among others have maintained their teachings prohibiting any same-sex relationships and excluding non-abstinent gay and lesbian people from ordination. Justin Lee, founder and president of the Gay Christian Network, popularized a dichotomy to represent affirming and non-affirming communities: “side A” (affirming) and “side B” (non-affirming). In an effort to construct meaningful and respectful dialogue between the opposing groups, he uses these terms to avoid vilifying one camp and consequently affecting the quality of the dialogue (Gay Christian Network, 2013).

While dichotomous labels of pro- and anti-gay serve as simple and effective terms to communicate standpoints on the issue of same-sex relationships, theologian and scholar William Stacy Johnson (2012) noted that many churches and faith communities fit neither category. He identified six models of church attitudes towards same-sex attraction in an effort to represent accurately the myriad of views permeating American society. Firstly, the *non-affirming church* condemns all forms of same-sex behavior and encourages reparative therapy. Same-sex relationships, particularly sexual ones, are viewed as perverted and unnatural. Secondly, the *tolerating church* condemns same-sex behavior yet still encourages a loving and welcoming attitude towards LGB people. The "hate the sin, love the sinner" slogan is particularly prevalent in tolerating churches. Individuals in this category understand sexual orientation to be compulsory and recognize ineffectiveness of reparative therapy. Celibacy is considered the best, and only, option for LGB people. Thirdly, *accommodating churches* are particularly ambiguous and struggle to articulate a definitive stance on same-sex relationships. In many cases, overarching dogma and church authority condemn same-sex relationships while parish members welcome LGBQ people. The extent of disconnect between teaching and actual church behavior varies. Overall, these churches lack clear consistency and attitudes vary depending on
individual church communities. Fourthly, members of the legitimizing church appeal to justice and Jesus's command to care for the oppressed. Their welcome towards LGBTQ people is primarily motivated by “imago dei,” the concept that all are created in God's image and therefore equal. Just as God celebrated His creation in Genesis, so do celebratory churches rejoice in the lives and relationships of all people and conceptualize sexual orientation as an innate part of the self. Finally, the liberationist church draws upon Liberation Theology which understands all forms of oppression to be negated through the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, to be a Christian is to actively dismantle oppression to reflect God’s intention of liberation for humanity. The six categories presented by Johnson (2012) represent the range of the conflict occurring in churches attempting to articulate their stance and the difficulty associated with attempting to present a coherent summary of a church’s attitude towards same-sex attraction.

The United Methodist Church (UMC) is a prime example of the conflict described by Johnson (2012). Their General Council of Finance and Administration is currently responsible for ensuring that no funds from the UMC are allotted to organizations supporting same-sex relationships, nor allotted to organizations that violate the dignity of LGBT individuals (UMC, 1991). The Book of Discipline, used to guide the UMC’s creeds and policies, allows all people, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation to receive the sacraments, yet forbids LGBT individuals from being ordained into clergy (2008). At the 2012 General Conference, authorities agreed to reconsider the statement in the Book of Discipline stating that the “practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” (Johnson, p. xiii). The UMC has struggled to negotiate a policy that excludes certain individuals from ministry yet claims to view them as equals.
This ambiguity is also reflected in the discussion about whether to bless same-sex relationships vs. officiating same-sex marriages. The distinction may appear benign, yet it demonstrates the reticence of some denominations to fully endorse same-sex relationships. For instance, the Episcopal Church has a rich history of supporting same-sex relationships and ordaining gay clergy and continues to be known as a “pro-gay” church. However, the 2009 General Convention elected to bless same-sex relationships in a rite named “The Witnessing and Blessing of a Lifelong Covenant” instead of affirming same-sex relationships under the same marriage rite for heterosexual couples found in the Book of Common Prayer (Goodstein, 2012).

**The Experience of Being LGBT in Christian Spaces**

In his memoir *Torn* (2012), gay Christian Justin Lee reflected on the dilemma he faced as a teenager, “It wasn’t that there weren’t any gay Christians to begin with. It was that in a Gays-vs.-Christians culture, everyone had to pick a side” (p. 157).

Empirical research supports Lee’s thesis of a dichotomized gay vs. Christian framework. In a 2001 study of 45 self-identified LGBT adults, Oswald (2001) considered their experiences at heterosexual weddings. A majority of participants expressed feelings of misfit and of being outsiders as queer individuals within a religious setting. A review of the literature reveals a large sense of conflict among LGBT people immersed in religious settings. Participants identified extrinsic religiosity as inducing feelings of alienation, loneliness, and shame (Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008; Shuck & Liddle, 2001). Consequently, LGBT youth who attend a religious community report lower levels of mental health (Dahl & Galliher, 2010).

While religiosity has long been conceptualized as a protective factor against risky
behavior (Sinha, Cnaan, & Gelles, 2007), it appears that extrinsic religiosity, faith that is primarily utilitarian and concerned with achieving a specific end (Allport & Ross, 1967), among LGBT populations loses most of its protective nature. In a 2008 study with a sample size of 11,699 extracted from the National Add Health study, sexual minority youth (SMY) were less likely to report a religious affiliation than heterosexual youth. Decrease in religiosity was highest among sexual minority youth, with religiosity measured according to the responses of six questions inquiring about the importance of religion in participants’ lives, attendance of religious services and activities, and the saliency of religion in day-to-day life and decisions. While religiosity acted as a protective factor against substance abuse for heterosexual youth, this was not so for SMY (Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2008).

Intrinsic religiosity, understood as private devotion to a faith tradition (Allport & Ross, 1967), however, may act as a source of resilience. In a qualitative study of 28 bisexual men, one participant thanked God for His protection, “I feel like God is the sustainer of my mind and my heart. And He’s been there. He’s gotten me this far. It’s been five and a half years, almost six years, and I could’ve already killed myself, could have already OD’ed” (Jeffries et al., 2008, p. 11). Furthermore, in a qualitative interview of queer youth raised in the Christian tradition, participants who were raised in what they qualified as a “narrow-minded” family, understood as unsupportive of a LGBTQ identity, led them to several positive outcomes, such as an increase in sense of self and autonomy from parents, an acceptance of diverse populations, and the institution of “good core values” (Dahl & Galliher, 2012, p. 1615). Indeed, witnessing first hand un-affirming attitudes prompted participants to reflect how their own behavior might change to be more supportive of individuals who belong to minority groups (Dahl & Galliher, 2012).
Reconciling church teachings with same-sex attractions led to internal conflict and a reevaluation of beliefs for approximately one-third to two-thirds of participants in several studies. The conflict, however, should not necessarily be conceptualized as negative as some LGBT individuals reared in a Christian environment have identified it as an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, “I have had to thoroughly question the foundations of my faith and belief in God. I believe I have become stronger personally and in faith from the experience” (Schuck & Liddle, 2001, p.74). Among a sample of 66 LGBT people, 64% indicated feelings of struggle with their religious upbringing (e.g. Dahl & Galliher, 2010; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Resolution of conflict involved distancing from the oppressive church community, leaving the faith altogether, and looking for alternative faith traditions. In a larger-scale study of 339 LGBT individuals, only 17% of men and 14% of women claimed to have reached a point of reconciliation with their religious beliefs; 39% of men and 32% of women reported experiencing no conflict. Remaining participants either changed their beliefs, ignored the conflict, or left Christianity altogether (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005).

In a study of 105 LGBT youth, 13% reported no conflict with their religious views, 46% now considered themselves spiritual instead of religious, 22% identified with no religious tradition, and 18% changed religious institutions. Sources of support included acceptance of one’s sexual orientation (67%), knowledge of Biblical readings (49%), support of friends in the church (31%), and family support (30%) (Dahl & Galliher, 2009). One participant had a particular insight into overcoming her religious conflict:

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. (p. 103)

The role of social community through church is particularly salient, as exemplified through this quote. Indeed, leaders from religious communities are often approached by questioning LGBT parishioners. In a qualitative study of gay Latino Catholic men, one participant recounted his negative experience speaking with his priest, "I had homosexual thoughts at the time, and finally I talked to my minister and told him I was having these thoughts, and I got kicked out of the church" (Garcia, et al., 2008, p. 424). Another claimed the homophobic atmosphere in the community prevented him from sharing his identity, "I knew that I was gay. The church said that if I was gay, I was going to hell. I was so f*cking afraid of hell I wouldn't do anything." (Garcia, et al., 2008, p. 424).

Canadian researchers (Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier, & Dejaeghere, 2010) investigated perceptions towards LGBT people among a variety of self-identified religious individuals. Jewish participants were the most supportive of equality for the LGBT community. Authors noted that while Jewish and Christian participants shared a common sacred text (i.e., the Hebrew Bible), the attitudes emerging from the interpretation of the text differed greatly, suggesting the hermeneutic, which is the interpretation of linguistic expressions (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2005) to be more salient than the literal reading of the sacred text.

Overall, the literature suggests religiosity, religious communities, and religious support generally acts as protective factors. However, the benefits of religiosity are mitigated by a non-heterosexual identity. Variables include intrinsic vs. extrinsic religiosity, the presence of social support, and the religious community’s attitude towards LGBT issues. Furthermore, the literature has been primarily concerned with the outcomes associated with growing up Christian
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AND LGBT and its impact on church membership. Studies have identified the saliency of identity conflict experienced by LGBT people in Christian families and communities (Couch, Mulcare, Pitts, Smith, & Mitchell, 2008), however, they have scarcely addressed the process through which this conflict is, or is not, resolved. Researcher Denise Levy (2012) identified only four studies prioritizing the process through which the outcome of the conflict is achieved (Mahaffy, 1996; McQueeny, 2003; Shallenberger, 1996; Thumma, 1991). As the leading researcher in the social sciences exploring the interplay of religiosity and a queer identity, her suggestions for future scholarship include intentionally recruiting bisexual individuals (Levy, 2012) and seeking out participants who identify as “queer” (Levy, 2011).

Furthermore, the majority of studies identified in this literature review were conducted outside of a human development paradigm. Social workers, sociologists, and psychologists have been particularly helpful in contributing to the literature, but family-centered and developmentally sensitive research remains largely absent.

**Abstinence Discourse and Heterosexuality**

A significant portion of Christian churches expect and teach that sexual intercourse should occur between two married heterosexual individuals. Sex outside of marriage is deemed sinful and an attack on one’s very personhood. Abstinence is often coupled with the phrase “to be pure”. The language of choice permeates the purity discourse: choice, choose, decision, and decide are key words found in abstinence literature (Gardner, 2011). These words are deceptive, in that they imply that purity is primarily something one does. However, the phrase “to be pure” is descriptive, not active.

The leading abstinence education organization, True Love Waits, encourages adolescents to make the following commitment, named a “purity pledge”: “I commit my body
as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto Christ, which is an act of worship” (True Love Waits, 2013). The effectiveness of purity pledges remains fairly limited. In a longitudinal study of 3,440 adolescents, pledgers had nearly identical numbers of sexual partners as their non-pledging counterparts. In fact, 84% of pledgers denied having ever taking a purity pledge (Rosenbaum, 2009). Adolescents who sign purity pledges are likely to delay their sexual debut by approximately 18 months, but are more likely to contract a sexually transmitted disease due to lack of information about contraception and its proper use (Bearman & Bruckner, 2001). As noted by Bruckner and Bearman (2005), to have sex is to break a promise often made publicly. The incentive to preserve the illusion of virginity is heightened by the sense of voyeurism on behalf of the religious community. Therefore, adolescents may not disclose their sexual activity to their health care providers, pharmacists, and therapists. A pledge made privately, of one’s own accord, however, has been shown to delay sexual activity longer than those taken publicly, suggesting that the context in which the pledge is taken is more salient than whether or not the pledge is made (Bersamin, Walker, Waiters, Fisher, & Grube, 2005).

Abstinence-only education restricts the possible co-existence of multiple identities, behaviors, and attractions. The operationalization of binaries (good and evil, pure and impure, chaste and dirty) chokes any possibility of mobility upon the spectrum that is sexuality and attraction based upon the elevation of a supposed normality and universal morality. As noted by Warner (1999), groups seeking to restrict sexuality operate under the assumption that they are enforcing a social good preserving the wholeness of society. Consequently, they advance a rhetoric of shame to “deviants” of the social norm under the argument that such behavior is a threat to nature itself. Warner (1999) conceptualizes stigma as moral judgment imposed on one’s identity, rendering it inseparable from the core of one’s personhood. The ineffectiveness
of abstinence-only education may then be tied to its use of stigma to discourage sexual behavior. If an individual has already had sex, their “purity” has been compromised, and consequently the very worth of their being. There is nothing left to lose, no choices available to retrieve purity, and certainly no forgiveness from high school peers.

Implications of purity discourse are significant for non-heterosexual individuals. Indeed, LGBTQ individuals are fully prohibited from ever participating in sexual activity if they reside in a state with restrictive marriage laws. Sexual activity becomes a casualty in the war against same-sex marriage, holding LGBTQ individuals to an even higher standard than their heterosexual counterparts: they are to remain forever abstinent. This full and terminal erasure of non-heterosexual sexuality ensures a discourse of silence, shame, and misinformation about safe same-sex intercourse. Fine (2005) named this phenomenon an “active silence” characterized by an intentional desire to suppress and ignore same-sex attraction.

In the only study to date examining the effect of purity discourse on non-heterosexual individuals, eight gay and bisexual males reflected on the culture of shame and silence that was fostered during their adolescent years (Fisher, 2006). Participants lamented the heteronormativity of churches and sex-education material, and indicated their complete lack of information about gay sex and same-sex relationships. Several participants commented on the feelings of sadness and loneliness that overtook them as they sensed that life-long celibacy would be their only acceptable option. They often turned to the Internet for information, but felt discouraged by the prevalence of pornography tied to gay male sex.

Overall, abstinence-only education can be a salient factor in the sexual development of non-heterosexual individuals. While abstinence-only education has yielded largely unsatisfactory results for heterosexual individuals, its effects on LGBQ adolescents are even
more alarming. Indeed, its effects are two-fold: on one hand, it negates the existence of their attractions, and on the other hand, vilifies any sexual experience they will ever have.

**Chapter Summary**

Both sexual and religious development models identify a sequential process through which individuals reach a place of knowledge and comfort regarding each aspect of their identity. A queer perspective challenges a model claiming a finality or resolution of any form of identity development. Instead, the theoretical frameworks guiding this study purport a plurality of identities that are malleable and plastic. The literature identifies a conflict experienced by some gay individuals raised in a Christian environment. This conflict usually takes place during adolescence and emerging adulthood, as individuals are developing emotionally, sexually, and cognitively, making these age groups particularly sensitive to identity conflict. Negotiating a LGBQ and Christian identity will be influenced by the dogma taught in Church groups, support systems, and access to alternative religious expressions and faith groups. An examination of the processes that undergird the conflict is largely absent from the literature, as well as a consideration of the conflict’s impact of family relationships.

**CHAPTER III: METHODS**

**Introduction**

The purpose of this study is to understand the extent to which a Christian upbringing affects the sexual identity development and integration of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer-identified individuals. Furthermore, it explores how emerging adults come to integrate a Christian and LGBQ identity and how this integration is perceived by church communities and families of origin. This chapter details the methods used to answer the following research questions:
1. How do LGBQ Christians raised in Christian families perceive the influence of both religious communities and their families on their sexual identity development?

2. What is the process through which participants negotiated the co-existence of both a Christian and LGBQ identity?

3. How do LGBQ and Christian-identified emerging adults currently perceive the integration of these two identities? How do they think this integration is perceived by their families and Christian communities?

**Methodological Paradigm**

Methodological excellence is increasingly *de rigueur* for qualitative methods in the field of family studies. The use of Grounded Theory Methods (GTM) has proliferated since its inception in the 1960s by Glaser and Strauss and has become a trusted methodological paradigm (LaRossa, 2005).

LaRossa (2005) identified five propositions synthesizing the principles of GTM that lend themselves to the current study. First, he posited that language is central to the human experience and must be attended to as a rich and thick source of data (LaRossa, 2005). The study’s use of Symbolic Interaction as a theoretical framework naturally complements GTM’s pursuit of meaning through socially constructed words and interpretations. Second, words are indicators of theory. The researcher must be mindful of the reciprocity emerging from the words on a page and the theory being constructed. Third, the coding process is rooted in comparisons among data sources to identify common variables, which are named categories in GTM parlance. This process is particularly relevant to the study of religious experiences in light of their plurality and heterogeneity. Fourth, theory is understood as a collection of related propositions, which are
sentences connecting variables together. Finally, a central category should be identified to act as the main theme of the story being assembled through data analysis. This contributes to the aesthetic and cohesion of the generated theory (LaRossa, 2005).

Overall, GTM resists a hypothesis-based methodology in favor of an inductive and exploratory process through which a theory is constructed from observation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Charmaz (2006) offered a lens through which to conduct GTM, constructivist grounded theory (CGT). The constructivist approach is particularly sensitive to societal context, time, and culture, and their contribution to the researcher’s biases. In light of the researcher’s own sensibilities and views, it would be deceiving to claim the ability to predict or explain. Instead, through constructivist grounded theory, one attempts to understand. The understanding gained is situated socially while attending to structures. Given the historical, societal, structural, and interpersonal properties of religiosity, a constructivist approach fits well. Furthermore, the queer perspective of sexuality as a fluid entity free of labels and boundaries is increasingly political and influential in modern perceptions of sexual orientation. It would be remiss to address sexuality without considering its structural implications. Therefore, the three research questions guiding this study consider structures (families and churches) and the extent of their perceived influence on intrapersonal and interpersonal processes and identities (sexual identity development, religiosity, and family relationships).

Additionally, constructivist grounded theory intently considers the relationship between researcher (usually an interviewer) and participant. Instead of attempting to relay data from participant to interviewer neutrally, Charmaz (2006) encouraged researchers to be active interpreters of data by attending to context. A contextual examination may include a consideration of culture, society, and dominant discourses and their influence on participants’
narratives. Further, the context in which the interview is conducted is also deemed worthy of analysis. Charmaz (2006) urges researchers to make meaning of the privileged position of the interviewer and issues of power that will undoubtedly transpire in some fashion. This aspect of CGT is particularly relevant for a study examining religion and sexual orientation, as both concepts are often used to justify power and oppression of certain individuals. They are both rooted in a long tradition and history of discrimination that may surface during interviews. Examining the positionality of the researcher is a trustworthy method to bring to the surface a researcher’s biases and position of privilege.

Definitions

Queer

The current study deals specifically with sexual orientation, and not gender identity. Therefore the traditional acronym LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) will be reduced to LGB. In addition, “queer” is included in an effort to maintain cultural relevance in light of increasing evidence suggesting that individuals, especially younger ones, are seeking to shed sexual identity labels. Indeed, terms such as “queer” and “questioning” have gained popularity due to their ambiguity and vagueness (Horner, 2007; Russell, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2005). “Queer” fits squarely within a post-structural framework which posits sexuality as “fluid, paradoxical, political, multiple” (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2007, p. 8). To attempt to define “queer” would go against its very ontological nature, which resists adherence to socially constructed identities.

Christian

Scarce methodological literature exists presenting criteria for the definition of “Christian”. Instead of attempting a theologically complex definition, the current study will
allow participants to self-identify as Christian, the only requirement lying in their belief in the
person of Jesus Christ. This sole criterion is derived from the etymology of “Christian,” which
is Greek for “follower of Christ” (Bickerman, 1949).

**Christian Upbringing**

The saliency of Christianity in a home environment is difficult to measure, and is privy to
one’s perception of religiosity. Therefore, participants will self-identify as having received a
Christian upbringing, understood as having been raised in a Christian home or environment
(Lapinski & McKirknan, 2013).

**Identity**

Identity has been traditionally conceptualized as the absence of belonging to something of
significance. Adhering to an identity was understood as the solution to a void. For example, the
term “homosexuality” was understood as not being heterosexual (Hebert, 2001). Recent
post-structural theorists have posited a new definition of identity articulated not around absence,
but around creation. By creating an identity, individuals are able to dynamically construct a sense
of self that is “multiple, reflecting an on-going and open-ended process” (Hebert, 2001, p. 158). It
is the latter definition of identity that guides the current study.

**Sexual Orientation**

The American Psychological Association defines sexual orientation as “the sex of those
to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted” (APA, 2011, p. 1). However, Savin-
Williams (2005), following the work of Kinsey, argued that sexual orientation is best
conceptualized as sexual attraction, sexual behavior, and sexual identity. He encouraged
researchers to pay particular attention to sexual attraction, as it is the component least sensitive
to external influences (Savin-Williams, 2005). Therefore, in the current study, sexual
orientation is the dynamic interplay of attraction, behavior, and identity, with the expectation that each factor will vary in intensity for each participant.

**Design of the Study**

**Sampling and Recruitment**

Purposeful sampling was used for recruitment. Patton (1990) described purposeful sampling as the effort to select information-rich cases that are capable of providing particularly salient data. Patton identified 16 such strategies, of which the current study will utilize two: maximum variation sampling and chain sampling. Maximum variation sampling is recommended for use in studies that explore themes spreading across different groups (Patton, 1990). It is a particularly helpful technique to identify common patterns in heterogeneous groups. Given Christianity’s theological pluralism, maximum variation sampling permitted the recruitment of a wide breadth of denominational experiences sensitive to geographical factors (rural vs. urban, east coast vs. west coast, etc.). To this end, recruitment was intentionally disseminated to national organizations with a reach beyond what an exclusively local recruitment would have been able to provide. Recruitment information was disseminated online. The use of social media for recruitment is increasingly popular in empirical studies. Indeed, its cost-effectiveness, efficiency in targeting specific populations, and interactive capabilities make it a prime choice for researchers seeking maximum sample variation (Andrews, 2012). I built a WordPress blog for the study containing IRB forms, criteria for participation, the resource list, and contact information. I created the Twitter account @LGBQChristian and “tweeted” well-known LGBTQ Christians and allies and asked them to “tweet” the link to my WordPress blog. An unintentional but fortunate snowball effect occurred: individuals on Twitter saw the link to the study and posted it on their own Twitter accounts and Facebook profiles.
I contacted the Gay Christian Network (GCN) to request formal support of the project and dissemination of recruitment material on their social media platforms. The GCN was founded by gay Christian Justin Lee with a similar mission, to “offer support for those caught in the crossfire of one of today’s most divisive culture wars” (The Gay Christian Network, 2013). Through speaking events, videos, online fora, and an online radio program, the GCN has amassed a membership of 17,000 individuals worldwide. The Gay Christian Network encouraged me to post about the study on the forums. My post on the forums were met with suspicion and I eventually asked a moderator to remove my initial post. Please refer to the audit trail (Appendix G) for more detail.

Most individuals who contacted me included the criteria for participation found on the WordPress blog in their initial e-mail. Therefore, only limited pre-screening was needed. If certain answers were unclear, I replied and asked them to provide more detail to ensure they met the criteria. Participants were compensated $15 in the form of an Amazon gift card for their participation thanks to funding through the Graduate Student Assembly at Virginia Tech.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

To qualify for the study, participants were required to meet the following criteria: (a) be between the ages of 18 and 25, (b) self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer, (c) self-identify as having received a Christian upbringing, (d) currently self-identify as Christian, (e) have disclosed their sexual orientation to at least one parent, (f) have experienced a conflict between Christian and LGBQ identities, and (g) be willing to participate in an interview lasting no more than 90 minutes in person or through Skype.

Emerging adulthood as identified by Arnett (2000) ranges from 18-25, justifying the age restriction. In light of the Symbolic Interaction and Queer frameworks permitting multiple
realities and resisting imposed definitions, recruitment allowed the self-identification of
“Christian” and “gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer”. Identifying with another sexual orientation
label such as pansexual or omnisexual was not grounds for exclusion, as sexual identity and
sexual orientation are not limited to the letters “LGBQ”. However, for the sake of simplicity,
other sexual orientations were not identified on recruitment material. “Christian upbringing”
was also self-identified.

**Human Subjects Protection**

All participants virtually signed an Internal Review Board (IRB) -approved informed
consent form, acknowledging potential risks and benefits of participation. Consent was obtained
prior to commencing the interview through Qualtrics. At the end of the interview, I thanked
each participant for their time. While all participants recounted emotionally difficult and stressful
life events, they expressed a certain degree of satisfaction and stability in their current life situations.
Several participants who had expressed a desire to connect with LGBT-affirmative churches were e-
mailed national resources from the resource list (Appendix D) after the interview, and were
encouraged to contact me if they had any more questions.

**Data Collection**

Ten interviews were conducted through Skype and one interview was conducted in
person. I was in a private area to avoid eavesdropping and to preserve confidentiality. Two
methods of data collection were used: a brief questionnaire addressing demographic
information and sexual identity development milestones, and semi-structured interviews.
Participants were e-mailed a link to Qualtrics once an interview time was arranged. The
Qualtrics survey contained the consent form, and the brief questionnaire. The information
gathered was addressed during the interview to probe or to inform and contextualize interview
data. The interview schedule was informed by Charmaz’s grounded theory interview techniques (2006), which involve the use of open-ended questions that allow for a non-judgmental discussion about a topic to emerge (Charmaz, 2006). The questions were complemented with Rubin and Rubin (2005)’s suggestion to use a “responsive style” (p. 129), qualified by an interactive discussion-like interview that uses main questions, follow-up questions, and probes.

Qualitative research, and in particularly grounded theory, resists the notion of an ideal sample size (Morse, 1995). Instead, qualitative methodologists recommend striving for theoretical saturation, that is to say when a sample is cohesive, does not present gaps, and interviews are no longer providing additional information. To this end, the current study did not have a pre-determined sample size. Instead, the estimated sample size ranged from eight to ten interviews with the understanding that data would continue to be collected if saturation had not been reached. To gauge saturation, I followed Morse’s (1995) suggestion to ask, “am I hearing anything new?” Due to the limits of a thesis project, sufficient saturation was achieved with eleven participants.

**Data Handling Procedures**

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed using NVivo 10 software within two weeks of data collection. Only audio recordings were obtained. They were stored on my personal computer and only accessible via password. They were then erased from the recording devices. No physical data were obtained. Identifying information was only accessible to myself and I assigned an alias each participant. To maintain confidentiality of participants upon the completion of the study, the same procedures will remain until I decide to permanently destroy identifying information according to IRB procedures.
Data Analysis

LaRossa (2005) describes three major phases of Grounded Theory Methods (GTM) coding which guided the data analysis. The first phase, open coding, involved identifying similarities and differences within the data set. Instead of perceiving each interview as a separate entity, each was placed within a broader web of stories forming the arc of a story. This process of constant comparison allows the data to cohesively begin to form concepts made up of multiple indicators which can be words, sentences, or phrases. It is with this mindset that the initial coding took place. Next, axial coding consists of an in-depth analysis of each category or variable. I was particularly cognizant of time and considered the longitudinal progression of variables expressed by participants in the interviews. It is during this stage that propositions became visible and statements emerged from connecting the variables. Finally, during selective coding, stories were assembled and a core variable was designated to represent the category with the most saturation and relevance (LaRossa, 2005). Throughout the data collection process, I detailed my analytical process using memoing. More detail on the data analysis process can be found in the next chapter and the audit trail (Appendix G).

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research holds itself to the same standard of excellence and reliability as quantitative research. While quantitative researchers speak of reliability and validity of data, qualitative methodologists pursue trustworthiness, understood as the credibility and clarity of the data (Padgett, 1998). I followed five steps identified by Guba (1981) to enhance internal validity to ensure the trustworthiness of the data collection procedures and data analyses:
triangulation, a subjectivity statement, peer examinations, and an audit trail.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation seeks to buffer a study against the dominating perspective of the researcher by inviting third parties to participate. Multiple sources may provide triangulation, such as individuals privy to the topic at hand, various sets of data, theoretical frameworks, or methodological practices (Mathison, 1988). In the current study, I used theoretical triangulation by incorporating both Symbolic Interaction and Queer theory. These two frameworks, while similar, offer unique lenses through which to view religious and sexual identities. Symbolic Interaction considers meanings *prescribed* by ourselves or by others, while Queer theory examines meanings *assimilated* into identities and their influence on human behavior and interaction.

**Subjectivity statement.** Qualitative methodologists encourage the open recognition of researcher biases and their potential impact on their work (Allen, 2000; Morrow, 2005). Therefore, a statement of my experiences regarding Christianity and LGBTQ issues is included at the end of this chapter, as well as a reflexive account of the recruitment process in the conclusion (Chapter 5). This brief, reflexive, account is intended to illuminate life events and processes that have shaped my understanding of religiosity and sexuality and influenced the approach to the topics of this study.

**Knowledgeable insiders.** Knowledgeable insiders belong to the culture or group being studied. Their membership in and knowledge about the group allows them to identify biases and offer unique perspectives unavailable to the researcher (Padgett, 1998). Two individuals acted as knowledgeable insiders. First, a female queer-identified doctoral student in Human Development reviewed the interview schedule and project methodology to critically appraise their relevance in regards to LGBT issues and LGBT culture. Second, a female lesbian-
identified individual active in the LGBT community in Blacksburg, VA served as a knowledgeable insider in matters of sexuality and Christianity. With over a decade of involvement in campus ministries and churches as a closeted as well as an out lesbian woman, her experiences as a LGBQ person of faith informed the interview schedule and recruitment process. Knowledgeable insiders were compensated with $15 gift cards to Amazon for their help with the project.

**Audit trail.** To promote credibility and rigor, qualitative researchers are encouraged to keep track of the progression of their study in the form of an audit trail. The trail can include a wide variety of information, ranging from interview transcripts, to field notes or a reflexive journal (Wolf, 2003). For the purpose of this study, my audit trail was available to myself and the chair of my thesis committee in the form of a Google Document, which was updated regularly with (a) a timeline progression of data collection, (b) brief summaries of interviews conducted, and (c) a reflexive component to account for my researcher’s personal comments and thoughts on the project. The audit trail was complemented with the use of memo writing during the coding process. Memoing encourages researchers to describe their immediate ideas and thoughts about codes to supplement more formal forms of coding (Charmaz, 2006). The audit trail can be found in Appendix G.

**Researcher Biases and Assumptions**

As the daughter of two Protestant missionaries in France, Christianity permeated every area of my life. Our home was distinctly Christian, conservative, and evangelical. Earliest memories of my childhood include a fluency in the common parlance of Evangelical culture; I spoke words like “salvation”, “Calvary”, and “intercession” void of any knowledge that they belonged to a subculture and were not a part of the majority’s vocabulary. Evangelical culture is
further distinct in its use of phrases such as “walk with God”, “pursuit of holiness”, and “prayerful discernment”. They represent an exclusivity of language and the profound sense of calling to live according to Biblical laws to obtain spiritual communion and unity with God. I followed this paradigm throughout my adolescence with the assumption that the Bible possessed one, sole interpretation. This interpretation disallowed any same-sex relationships and conceptualized same-sex attraction as the inevitable result of a “fallen world”. Same-sex relationships were nothing more than a distant concept, and to my knowledge, untouched and unexperienced by anyone in my surroundings.

It was not until I entered college that I was exposed to the myriad of Biblical interpretations permeating Christian culture. Suddenly, my tightly-held beliefs were challenged with arguments just as rigorous and articulate as my own. Concomitantly, I enrolled in several Women’s Studies’ classes that exposed me to different paradigms through which to view sexuality and sexual attraction. A bit flustered and overwhelmed, I wrestled with matters of theology to make sense of the maelstrom of questions nesting inside my mind. Incidentally, answers to my questions did not resolve my tumult. Instead, it was the newly formed friendships with LGBTQ people that were particularly influential. I credit these relationships for putting flesh and bones on long-held beliefs that always seemed to remain suspended in abstraction. Ideas affect people. This simple realization induced me into a human-centered perspective on God, church, and sexual orientation. Ideas and beliefs have the power to build up or tear down, and my Christian faith promotes a life articulated around love.

These formative years in my undergraduate program prepared me for the coming out of someone dear to me after graduation. While his disclosure enhanced and benefited our relationship, it contributed to a certain perplexity and confusion from those around us. As a
result, I felt compelled to contribute to the literature addressing LGBT issues and religiosity as a metaphorical form of atonement for the challenges faced by my friend during his Christian upbringing.

Christianity continues to play a paramount role in my life. However, I have departed from the absolutism of my childhood towards a faith understood not as a collection of rules, but as the pursuit of goodness and love, which I perceive to be the archetype of Christian living. In the Pulitzer-winning novel *Gilead* by Marilynne Robinson, the protagonist, a dying small-town pastor in Iowa, states, “nothing true about God can be said from a posture of defense” (p. 177). After many years of speaking from a posture of defense, I have relinquished my vocabulary of disunity and separation towards the LGBT community to adopt posture of grace.

While my Christian identity may afford me “insider status” for this project in some regards, my heterosexual identity inherently creates separateness from the participants. From a feminist intersectional standpoint (Crenshaw, 2013), religious and sexual identities inevitably impact each other. Therefore, religion experienced as a heterosexual person cannot be assumed to be identical to religion experienced as a LGBQ person. Social, sexual, and gender scripts coupled with lived experiences will all influence how we “do” religion. For this reason, a LGBQ person of faith will act as a peer debriefer. Adopting the role of ally for the LGBT community has certainly educated me about queer sexuality and the unique family dynamics in LGBT families. However, I recognize that no amount of knowledge or education can be substituted for the lived experiences of LGBT Christians. Thus, I think of my ally-ship primarily as a form of support the LGBT community, and not speaking on their behalf.

As a White, middle-class, heterosexual, and educated person, I am privy to certain privileges that must be acknowledged. These privileged identities limit my capacity to
understand the experiences of the study’s participants. While listening, adopting a posture of learner, and asking questions can certainly limit the expression of my privilege, they do not erase my status as outsider of the group.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to conduct research relevant to changing cultural, political, and religious landscapes in the United States on the intersection of Christianity and sexuality. Specifically, the current study provides insight on the effect of a Christian upbringing on sexual identity development, on the negotiation and subsequent reconciliation of LGBQ and Christian identities, and family dynamics following disclosure. The results are reported according to the following research questions:

1. How do LGBQ Christians raised in Christian families perceive the influence of both religious communities and their families on their sexual identity development?

2. What is the process through which participants negotiated the co-existence of both a Christian and LGBQ identity?

3. How do LGBQ and Christian-identified emerging adults currently perceive the integration of these two identities? How do they think this integration is perceived by their families and Christian communities?

The report of findings may be best understood as a chronological timeline of participants’ lives divided into loosely-defined developmental timeframes. The times frames are categorized according to information gathered on participants’ sexual identity milestones, and not according to stages defined in child development theories. Because participants’ experiences varied, there are no clear-cut age ranges in the processes that took place. Additionally, attempting to categorize participants’ experiences into time frames would not be consistent with the study’s use of queer theory, which resists stage-based models. For this reason, the developmental stages are qualified as “loose” to convey not a sequence, but a
progression of time and the acquisition of new experiences and knowledge.

The first vignette begins with an examination of participants’ familial and religious upbringings and their effect on participants’ understanding of sexuality and sexual orientation. As shown in Table 2, participants reported first being aware of their same-sex attractions between the ages of 6 and 17. Therefore, this tableau presents experiences during childhood and adolescence. The second vignette explores how participants came to adopt a non-heterosexual identity in light of the religious discourses of their childhood during late adolescence (ages 13-22, see Table 2). Specific consideration is given to participants’ resolution of both LGBQ and Christian identities. Finally, the third section considers the present time, during which participants are emerging adults (ages 19-25, see Table 1). It addresses how families perceive and make sense of their family member’s co-existing identities, and the effect on family relationships. Additionally, this section considers how the integration of identities is perceived by religious communities. The findings are supported and enriched by direct quotes from the interviews.

This qualitative study included 11 in-depth interviews lasting 47 to 101 minutes ($M = 63.56$). One of the interviews was conducted in person, while the remaining 10 were conducted through Skype. I conducted all of the Skype interviews from my apartment in a quiet room, and all participants appeared to be in their homes as well. The interviews were completed over a four week time frame from December 2013 to January 2014. I recorded the interviews using two audio recording devices set next to my computer, and I transcribed all of the interviews within two weeks. Because they contacted me using their personal e-mail addresses, I had access to their first and last names. Therefore, no participant was completely anonymous to me.
One participant was recruited through word-of-mouth. Ten participants were recruited using Twitter or Facebook. They indicated that they heard about the study through various Christian platforms, such as Christian blogger Rachel Held Evans, who “tweeted” the link to the study’s website, and information posted by a person unknown to me on a Facebook group for LGBQ Christians moderated by the Gay Christian Network. Two of the participants (John and Samson) indicated that they participate visibly and actively in interfaith dialogues through the Marin Foundation and the Gay Christian Network by giving keynote addresses, speeches, talks on college campuses, and leading workshops on their experiences as LGBQ Christians.

I begin this chapter describing the participants’ demographic information. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym. Following the participants’ descriptions, I elaborate on the data analysis and present the results obtained through Constructivist Grounded Theory through the use of quotes, categories, charts, and tables. The concluding section of the chapter provides a visual representation of the emerging theory derived from the data using GTM.

Demographic and Descriptive Characteristics of Participants

The sample of participants in the study all present heterogeneous characteristics. Fifty-four and a half percent identified as male \((n = 6)\), 36.4% as female \((n = 4)\), and 9.1% as a gender queer woman \((n = 1)\). They ranged in age from 20 to 25 years old \((M = 22.8, SD = 1.83)\). The sample reflects a wide variety of geographical locations, with participants from the West to the East coast. Five participants (45.4%) were from the Midwest, five from the East Coast (45.5%), and one from the West Coast (9.1%). They self-identified as gay (27.3%, all male), lesbian (27.3%, all female), queer (18.2%; one male, one female), bisexual mostly attracted to women
(9.1% female), pansexual (9.1%, male) and bisexual/queer (9.1%, male). All participants identified as White except for one participant who identified as Puertorican. Four participants (36.4%) had a bachelor’s degree and were pursuing a graduate degree, two of which were in seminary. Four participants (36.3%) were in college and currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree. Three participants (27.3%) had graduated from college and currently held jobs in various occupations.

Six participants (54.5%) were raised in Baptist or Southern Baptist families and churches, one participant (9.1%) was raised Evangelical Covenant, one (9.1%) in the Methodist tradition, one (9.1%) in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, and two in the Catholic Church (18.2%). They currently identify as non-denominational (27.3%), Episcopal (9.1%), Seventh-Day Adventist (9.1%), Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (9.1%), Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA) (9.1%), Evangelical Covenant (9.1%), Southern Baptist (9.1%), United Church of Christ (9.1%) and Catholic (9.1%). Over half (64%) of participants identify with a Christian denomination other than the one in which they were raised. Table 1 details the distribution of demographic information according to each participant.
### Table 1: Demographic and Religious Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Family’s denomination</th>
<th>Current religious identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Gender queer woman</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Seminary Student</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Michigan</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Non-denominational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>Evangelical Covenant</td>
<td>Evangelical Covenant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Theatre Director</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Bisexual, mostly attracted to women</td>
<td>Marketing Specialist</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>Non-Denominational, Evangelical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>Seminary Student</td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>Evangelical Lutheran Church of America</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>Non-Denominational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Puertorican</td>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
<td>Seventh Day Adventist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>College student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Presbyterian Church of the United States of America</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 presents information gathered from the brief questionnaire addressing sexual identity milestones. Participants reported first noticing their same-sex attractions between the ages of 6 and 17 ($M = 12.6$, $SD = 2.76$). Identification with a non-heterosexual label occurred between the ages of 13 and 22 ($M = 18.3$, $SD = 3.23$). They rated their level of comfort at first disclosure on a four-point likert scale ranging from “not at all comfortable” to “very comfortable”; scores varied from “not at all comfortable” ($n = 6$) to “somewhat uncomfortable” ($n = 5$) ($M = 1.45$, $SD = 0.52$). They rated their current level of comfort with their sexual varied orientation on an identical scale, with scores varying from “somewhat comfortable” ($n = 5$) to “very comfortable” ($n = 6$) ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .50$). All participants reported that their families were involved in church; scores ranged from “somewhat involved” ($n = 2$) to “very involved” ($n = 9$) ($M = 3.81$, $SD = .40$).

Participants first disclosed their sexual orientation to a peer or close friend ($n = 5$, 45.4%), followed by the person they were currently in a romantic relationship with ($n = 2$, 18.2%), a parent ($n = 1$, 9.1%), a sibling ($n = 1$, 9.1%), and a youth leader at church ($n = 1$, 9.1%). Their level of comfort when disclosing to this person was low ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 0.52$), as most indicated they felt “very uncomfortable” ($n = 6$, 54.5%), followed by “somewhat uncomfortable” ($n = 5$, 45.5%).
Table 2: Sexual Identity Milestones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Min</th>
<th>Max</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>At what age were you first aware of being attracted to same-sex persons?</td>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>17.00</td>
<td>12.59</td>
<td>2.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what age did you first identify as something other than heterosexual?</td>
<td>13.00</td>
<td>22.00</td>
<td>18.27</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of &quot;not at all comfortable&quot; (coded as “1”) to &quot;very comfortable&quot; (coded as “4”), how would you rate your level of comfort when you first disclosed your sexual orientation to another person?</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>1.45</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of &quot;not all at comfortable&quot; (coded as “1”) to &quot;very comfortable&quot; (coded as “4”), how would you currently describe your level of comfort with your sexual orientation?</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of &quot;not at all involved&quot; (coded as “1”) to &quot;very involved&quot; (coded as “4”), how involved was your family in church?</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.81</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nearly half ($n = 5, 45.5\%$) of participants currently identify with a sexual orientation label different than the one they used when they first disclosed their sexual orientation. While the changes were minor for two of these participants (bisexual to bisexual mostly attracted to women, bisexual to bisexual/queer), they are worth noting in light of the study’s use of queer theory and its conceptualization of sexuality as fluid and mobile. This information is presented for each participant in Table 3.

Table 3: Use of Sexual Identity Labels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sexual identification when first disclosed</th>
<th>Current sexual identification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicia</td>
<td>Homo-romantic asexual</td>
<td>Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austin</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Gay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bisexual, mostly attracted to women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samson</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bisexual/Queer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis Process

The coding map in Figure 1 details the constant-comparison method that allowed themes and models to answer the respective research questions. The first iteration emerged while I was collecting data. After each interview, I listed reoccurring themes and then compared them to the themes I had identified in previous interviews. At this point in the analysis, the codes were specific and exhaustive. The second iteration occurred after the completion of the data collection. I attempted to condense themes and broaden their labels as to encapsulate the experiences of all participants. Finally, the third iteration developed as I was constructing my models based off of the codes in the second iteration. Throughout all three iterations, I was cognizant of the themes in similar studies (identified in Chapter 2), particularly as they related to purity culture (Fisher, 2009), identity negotiation (Levy, 2011; 2012), and relationships with families and churches (Levy, 2008). I met with my advisor, Dr. Grafsky, throughout the completion of the coding process to discuss potential themes and models. Her expertise and knowledge base helped shape the final outcomes. I also met once with my committee member Dr. Allen to discuss the emerging models. She recommended grounding my findings in feminist family literature, a recommendation I followed in Chapter 5.

Many themes emerged that could not be directly matched to research question. Therefore, several minor themes are referenced throughout the report of the results, but not given focus or priority within a model. I anticipate developing these themes in future journal publications. However, in light of the study’s scope as a master’s thesis, they are not fully articulated in the current chapter. I developed two questions derived from the two aims of the study presented in Chapter 1 to determine whether or not a theme warranted a place in one of the models, or if it should be presented in future studies: “does it deal with or address past family and church
experiences?” and “does it fit within the concept of meaning-making and interpersonal relationships with families and churches?”
Figure 1: Coding Map

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

R1: how do Christian families and communities influence sexual identity development?

R2: what is the process through which participants negotiated the co-existence of a LGBQ and Christian identity?

R3: How do LGBQ and Christian-identified emerging adults currently perceive the integration of these two identities? How do they think this integration is perceived by both their families and their religious communities?

FIRST ITERATION

1A. Trivialization of sexuality
1A. Purity discourse
2B. Heteronormativity
2B. Church discourse on same-sex attraction
2B. “active silence”
3C. Parents’ adherence to church teachings
3C. Overlap of church and family spaces
3C. Holiness above happiness
4D. denominational culture

Conflict:
1A. Loneliness
1A. fear
2B. Option of abstinence/ celibacy/ change
2B. Ex-gay material
2B. Conflict between theology and experiences

Catalysts:
1A. belief that this conflict is not the end
2B. Mental distress
3B. Knowledge that reconciliation is possible

Resolution:
3C. Personal study
3C. Reevaluating teachings from their childhood
4D. peers
4D. Role models
4D. Affirming church communities
4D. External validation
5E. commitment to finding the truth
5E. need for a final answer

Self:
1A. opportunity to educate others
1A. opportunity to advocate for other minorities
2B. separate from their identity
2B. intertwined with their identity
2B. possibility that they are wrong
3C. redemptive process
3C. Illuminates certain aspects of their faith
3C. Pride

Family:
4D. question salvation
4D. question commitment to religion
5E. Education on sexual orientation
5E. Beliefs about personhood
5E. Value of Time
6F. Family unaware of integration
7G. Threat to family’s integration in their church

Religious Community:
8H. invisible integration
8H. integration over-emphasized
Integration under-emphasized
9I. feelings of misfit
SECOND ITERATION

1A. Church discourses on sexuality
2B. Church discourses on same-sex attraction
3C. extent of the overlap between Church and Church spaces
4D. Denominational culture

Conflict:
1A. Lack of support from community
2B. Unsuccessful resources
2B. unanswered theological questions

Catalyst:
1A. Internal catalyst
2B. External catalyst

Resolution:
3C. Personal evaluation of sacred texts
4D. Validation and support from affirmative communities
5E. Determinism

Self:
1A. opportunity to educate others
1A. opportunity to advocate for other minorities
2B. separate from their identity
2B. intertwined with their identity
3C. redemptive process
3C. illuminates certain aspects of their faith

Family:
4D. question salvation
4D. question commitment to religion
5E. lack of education on sexual orientation
5E. distinction between sexuality from personhood
6F. family unaware of integration
7G. threat to family’s integration in their church

Religious Community:
8H. invisible integration
8H. integration over-emphasized
8H. Integration under-emphasized
9I. feelings of misfit
9I. othering

THIRD ITERATION

1A. Church discourses on sexuality
2B. Church culture surrounding LGBQ issues
3C. Blending of family and church spaces
4D. denominational culture

Conflict:
1A. Interaction with religious communities
2B. Unresolved theological questions

Catalyst:
1A. Internal catalyst
2B. External catalyst

Resolution:
3C. Personal study
4D. External validation
5D. Motivation

Self:
1A. sense of calling
2B. beliefs about identity
3C. assigning a redemptive purpose

Family and Community:
4D. beliefs about the authenticity of child’s faith
5E. beliefs about sexuality
6F. knowledge of the extent of their child’s beliefs
7E. Assumptions about LGBQ Christian identities
Research Question 1: How do Christian Communities and Christian Families Influence Sexual Identity Development?

While participants were reared in a wide variety of denominational backgrounds, they all indicated that their family lives significantly overlapped with their religious communities, made up of their churches and their churches’ para-groups such as Bible studies and youth ministries. Parents and stepparents appropriated vocabulary, beliefs, and attitudes acquired in their church communities to understand and speak of sexuality, and in particular same-sex attraction. During the initial development of this project, I dichotomized upbringing and conflict resolution into two research questions. Through the use of the constant-comparative method, the data indicated that the two are linked. Participants typically described family life enmeshed into church life and rarely spoke of them as two separate entities. Additionally, I conceptualized religious communities and families as two separate entities, whereas participants described them as intertwined with one another. I will begin by presenting the data relevant to the first research question by tending to the intersection of religious communities and families, and will transition into presenting the processes that merge research question 1 and research question 2.

Figure 1 represents the overlap of church and family spaces, as well as the practices and discourses assimilated by a LGBQ person growing up in a Christian family.
Religious rituals, beliefs, and attitudes characterized the family lives of all participants. For eight participants, the overlap of family and church was acute, to the extent that nearly all family activities involved church and saturated weekly schedules. Parents acted as deacons,
Sunday school teachers, and pastors. Religious rituals were completed as a family unit with the intention of creating a distinctively Christian family. They attended developmentally-appropriate events throughout their child and adolescent years, attending Awana (a children’s ministry utilizing a national curriculum) and youth groups.

John remembers,

We went to church every Sunday and Wednesday at minimum, usually twice on Sunday, morning service, Sunday school morning service, pot luck if there was one, home for a couple of hours, choir, discipleship and then evening church. And Wednesday we usually, if we were at a church that did Awana, than we did Awana.”

Peter had a similar weekly schedule “we would go to Awana every week, memorized scripture, did the drills, all of those fun things. Sunday school and church at least three or four times a week, Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, youth group, small group.”

The degree of the overlap varied, as three participants indicated that their parents’ involvement in church was rather impersonal and intended to provide some sort of religious education to their children more so than to develop a strong Christian identity. Ruth describes her religious upbringing as “something that we did on Sundays. It wasn’t really important to us, just my dad being Catholic, his mother and sisters being very very devoted to that. I felt pressured to do that…church is something you do and you go. It’s where you go to make friends.” These three participants had come to develop a strong Christian identity through their own motivation and involvement during their high school and college years, and currently self-identify as having a strong and personal Christian faith. Therefore, participants experienced their Christian upbringing primarily through their families, or primarily through their own initiatives or personal faith experiences.
“A very clear subculture”. The scope of the study extended to all Christian denominations which each possess their own teachings, scripts, and expectations. This was reflected in participants’ narratives of their upbringing, indicating that their experiences were not merely Christian, they were rooted in deep denominational cultures that set them apart from other Christian denominations. Alicia described her years in the Southern Baptist tradition as possessing “a very clear subculture: homeschooler, at least that’s how it was where I was. And if you belong to the wrong pop culture, or the wrong kind of music, you just didn’t fit”. Luke, who was raised Catholic, spoke of the prevalence of discussions addressing “hot Catholic topics”, which involved “abortion, contraception, homosexuality.”

Samson grew up Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) and reflects on the SDA denominational culture,

The Seventh Day Adventist church has a very specific, there’s a culture behind the church, a part from our beliefs. We have a certain lifestyle that is extremely specific to the church, as in the majority of our church is vegetarian if not vegan…people don’t wear jewelry, there are types of music we don’t listen to.

Therefore, the blending of Christian and family spaces is best understood as an appropriation and assimilation of denominational traditions and beliefs. In fact, the three participants raised Southern Baptist all referenced books they had read in their adolescent years written by the same authors further highlighting the mechanisms through which denominations advance a specific culture.

“A Good Christian.” The expectation of adherence to church principles and teachings was common amongst all denominational experiences. Participants were expected to follow teachings, which often included the adoption of a heterosexual identity. Liz recalled being “the
really good, obedient, straight youth group leader teenager.” Chris used similar language when describing his first response to his same-sex attractions, “I was going to be a good Christian and I was going to really seek after Christ; I needed to be heterosexual.” Not conforming to church teachings carried implications. Samson described being expelled from his school for being involved in same-sex touching, “I was picked up and told that I had to leave the school…I was excommunicated by my church even though we don’t technically practice that… I was stopped being asked to sing in front of people.” These experiences reflect the extent to which participants perceived a gaze upon their behavior, sexual or otherwise, and in some cases, the extent to which the gaze was an actual threat and desire to moderate behavior.

“Every young woman’s battle except yours”. Participants’ descriptions of their churches’ discourses on same-sex attraction and relationships were often framed with observations regarding how their churches spoke of sexuality which heavily drew from purity discourse. John reflected on purity culture’s rejection of dating in favor of courtship, “the craze at the time was I Kissed Dating Goodbye, that was the big deal. And it was something that I kind of hated, this idea of forced courtship, and the idea of parental involvement.” Alicia, on the other hand, claimed to have “very much bought into the whole purity culture thing, so you don’t think about sex, you don’t do these things.” Purity culture’s disregard and negation of same-sex attraction was heavily sensed by participants. Same-sex attraction was scarcely addressed, and in the few instances in which it was addressed, it was trivialized, chastised, or primarily described as sinful behavior.

Laura recounted it as,

Definitely a taboo thing growing up. I didn’t know anyone that was gay. And if I did hear about that, it was disgusting and wrong. I know I always believed it was the worst of all, that’s just what you hear, you’re going to hell no matter what.
Several participants recounted hearing the “hate the sin, love the sinner” slogan describing their leaders’ attempt at a more nuanced stance; Luke remembered an experience in his Catholic high school, “the big line that came up especially was ‘hate the sin, love the sinner’, love the person because no matter what each person is created in the image and likeness of God and should be respected.”

Chris, who described his church community as non-affirming but within the “love the sinner” framework, recounted an experience highlighting the dissonance between discourse and actual behavior. After disclosing his attractions to a peer, he was referred to the church pastor by a youth leader. Confident that speaking with a pastor would be beneficial to address his attractions, he arranged a meeting:

I was nervous showing up, and it was a good conversation. Again I don’t remember a whole lot of it, of what happened but, he really did show a lot of care and support but also an assurance that it could be fixed. So then we rescheduled an appointment for the next week, and I showed up for my appointment, and he wasn’t there. And I checked with his secretary, and she said he was golfing, and I never contacted him again or went back.

Several participants referenced popular books about purity, notably I Kissed Dating Goodbye by Joshua Harris and Every Young Woman’s Battle: Guarding Your Mind, Heart, and Body in a Sex-Saturated World by Shannon Ethridge and Stephen Arterburn. They lamented the full erasure of LGBQ issues in these books which insinuated that same-sex attractions were not legitimate and not worth tending to. Alicia described Every Young Woman’s Battle as

An entire book about these things that are completely irrelevant to me, and then this page at the end, that says “if you struggle with attraction towards women”. I was like, “thanks, that
was helpful”. Every woman’s battle, except yours.

Liz recounted reading the exact same passage in the book, “and it had a chapter at the end about straight girl crushes where it was basically the chapter was ‘don’t jump to the conclusion that you are gay, it’s natural to have those feelings’”.

Same-sex attractions were often framed as causal, and as separate from identity. Ruth’s Bible study leader explained it as such, “it’s essentially an act, it’s not necessarily sinful to be gay, there are reasons people are gay, it’s because they have an overbearing mother or a father who’s gone.” Liz’s church community also tied same-sex attractions to external factors, as well as to deviant behavior,

It was something that occurred after you had already decided to be involved in sexually deviant behavior, so that would be something that happened after years of going down that path, either that or that in some exceptions someone that had been abused as a child.

Therefore, a same-sex identity was largely perceived to be behavioral in nature. Several participants indicated that their church leaders would differentiate between the presence of attractions and actual same-sex behavior. When Samson approached his Seventh Day Adventist University to ask if they accepted LGBQ students, they replied, “well yes of course as long as they don’t partake in same-sex sex.” Chris described his own church’s attitude as “if you get a good Christian counselor, you can counsel the gay right out of you.” Such statements conceptualize same-sex attractions as separate from one’s core self. They are dependent upon one’s self-control and malleable to change. It is important to note that church discourses on same-sex attraction and relationships reported by participants varied in intensity. While Laura’s community spoke with aggression and condemnation, Chris’ community addressed same-sex attractions and relationships with a greater attempt at nuance by separating identity, behavior, and attraction.
Since sex was restricted to marriage, and same-sex relationships were forbidden, participants concluded that they would never engage in sexual behavior and would be forced to live celibately. John remembered, “because in my mind, it was always one way or the other. In my mind being alone for the rest of my life, being celibate, not having any relationship with anyone other than friendship was just devastating.” Additionally, Chris concluded, “I would just have to be not gay, or be celibate and pretend like I wasn’t.”

Overall, participants’ religious communities clearly communicated, whether it be through silence or public vitriol, that a non-heterosexual identity was not acceptable and certainly not compatible with what was deemed to be an authentic Christian life. The pastors of several participants encouraged the use of ex-gay resources; however this material was distributed in private one-on-one settings, and will be further described in the conflict-resolution portion of this chapter. In conclusion, no outlets or options for individuals with same-sex attractions were publicly presented to congregations, whether it be through sermons, Bible studies, or Sunday school.

“A non-issue”. Families generally appropriated the language and teachings of their church when discussing same-sex attraction during participants’ upbringings. Two participants recalled their parents’ heavily derogatory comments on Ellen DeGeneres’ coming out. Alicia recounted the experience,

I remember when the movie Finding Nemo came out. I remember Ellen DeGeneres being interviewed on something, and my mom said something about “she is so funny, it is such a shame”. That’s what she said. And I said, “what’s a shame?” And my mom just said, “she’s a bad person.”

Peter’s parents had a similar reaction,
They talked about how Ellen had come out as a lesbian and I was like “that’s a different word I haven’t heard that before” so I asked my dad “what’s a lesbian?” And he said “it’s the most disgusting thing you can ever imagine, you don’t want to know.”

Peter and Alicia’s parents’ reactions mirrored their churches’ attitudes towards same-sex identity. Conversely, when churches were silent on same-sex attraction, so were participants’ parents. Austin stated,

Growing up I never heard anything about it. It never came up.” Peter summed it up the following way, “generally it didn’t come up a lot until, it was just sort of a non-issue, if you will, until it was ‘oh, this is me, I’m…”

When asked to describe the attitudes towards same-sex attraction during their childhood, most participants recalled church experiences, and scarce family experiences even though the family climate was generally unsupportive. Participants reflected on the culture of silence in their families and linked it to feelings of discomfort on behalf of their parents. The discomfort was described two-fold: a discomfort with the topic, and a discomfort with the possibility of their child identifying as LGBTQ. Shortly after Liz disclosed her same-sex attractions to her mother, she attempted to have a more in-depth discussion about it, “she was bothered that I was bringing it up again because it was something we didn’t talk about.” Chris had a similar experience with his parents, I think they were just uncomfortable with it. I don’t know if it just the topic of homosexuality that made them uncomfortable or if it was actually addressing the gay part of their gay son that was uncomfortable for them. I saw it then and I see it even now when conversations come up with them, it just makes them very uncomfortable.

“The worst possible thing that you could be in the church was me”. The effect of church and family discourses on same-sex attraction was heavily credited by participants as influencing who
they spoke with about their attractions, how they felt in church, whom they interacted with, how they made sense of their attractions, and ultimately how and when they disclosed to their parents.

Several participants reported initial desires to suppress or deny their attractions in light of what they heard and believed about sexuality. Laura stated,

I know I always believed it was the worst of all. That’s just what you hear, you’re going to hell no matter what. And that’s how I felt about it I think. Even when I started feeling that way, I was like “no way, I’m not even going to admit that to myself” because it was just something you get drilled into your head.

Similarly, Chris did not actively address his attractions, “it was really kind of denial repressing throughout high school.” Although Samson did claim a bisexual identity during his adolescence, he indicated that the adoption of a LGBQ identity appeared to be delayed for many LGBQ Christians, “most Christian people that are LGBT that I meet don’t come out as early as 18, sometimes it’s even 20s, I mean the older generation didn’t come out until their 40s and 50s after trying a marriage.” To a certain extent, his statement holds true for many participants in the current study. Because of Christianity’s teachings on same-sex attraction as unnatural, participants often began their sexual identity development by framing their attractions as a “struggle” or as a temporary occurrence. When Liz disclosed her attractions to her mother she said, “Mom, if I weren’t a Christian I would identify as a lesbian.” But as she started to panic, it was “but don’t worry I still like guys and I will probably marry a dude but I wanted you to know because I love you.” In a similar way, John disclosed his same-sex attractions to his parents qualifying them as past:

And so at that point I also told my parents in the past tense because it was something that I thought I would be moving past. I said “this is something that I need to let them know”.

My mom’s reaction was basically “yeah I figured we’d be having this conversation, but I
think you’re right, I don’t think you are gay”. And then my dad, he was completely taken by surprise, and was crying, which was very difficult to see, but both of them were like “hey, we are glad you have moved past this”.

Certain participants chose to not disclose their attractions to their parents during their adolescent years. Instead, they used language and practices from the purity culture in which they were raised. For Alicia, this meant coming out as asexual since it fit closer to church teachings on abstinence, and also because it fit with her intentions at the time to live celibately and closeted:

I did try to find something that would be more palatable to my family, then “hey I’m queer, yay”. And so looking for people who happily and contently lived alone was how I stumbled across that identity, and I was young! So, you know, most of what I knew and experienced was very much emotional, romantic, psychological aesthetics, not particularly what I would call “sexual orientation”, but I think when you are young, at least, that’s not really what it’s about.

Peter, who currently identifies with the asexual label, echoed Alicia’s sentiment of “palatability” of asexuality, “The first time I came out, I came out as asexual. So that wasn’t too big of a deal, well if you’re not having sex it’s not a big deal.”

John used purity culture’s teachings on dating to blend into his religious community and advance an image of heterosexuality.

When we were in High School I stumbled across this book written by one of the authors of the homeschool group we were involved with, called “Dating with Integrity” and the idea behind it was that you don’t actually date, or if you do you don’t date in a way that we understand dating, basically you are really good friends with people, and you don’t do anything with someone that you couldn’t do with them if you were engaged or married to
someone else…. And so I kind of hid behind this wall of “I don’t date, I’m just really good friends with people”. And because in the conservative Christian homeschooling community that sounded really good and godly, and Jesus-y.

The desire to remain closeted was acute among many participants. Sarah recounted an early memory of wondering about her attractions:

I was in one room and my parents were in another room and I was watching lifetime, it’s called “The Truth about Jane” and that’s when I was like ‘huh, that sounds really familiar, like could that be me? Maybe?’ and then I just didn’t want to think about it and I didn’t have anyone to talk to.

John’s adolescent life was heavily articulated around church functions and most of his interactions were within some faith capacity. Therefore, to ask questions might have raised suspicions or gone against his church’s culture of silence on sexuality:

I went through a phase where I was much more cautious about associating with people who didn’t believe as well as I did, or if I did associate with them it was with the intention of witnessing and saving their poor, dangered, endangered souls. And so, that was probably the biggest impact that it held, that I felt I couldn’t talk to anyone in my life. I felt like even just raising, not even raising a question about me, just raising the topic was dangerous and risky. One because no one talked about, and so if I talked about people probably would assume I was, and two even if they didn’t, people would just be appalled that good little [John] was going to be, was asking them about gay sex.

Feelings of catastrophe and impending doom came to characterize some participants’ beliefs about their attractions. The accumulation of hiding their attractions, fear of rejection, and fear of having to live celibately developed into incubators for feelings of shame and loneliness. Chris first
disclosed his attractions to a youth leader and recounted his feelings surrounding the event, “I don’t know it was just fear, and like I said shame that this kind of worst possible thing that you could be in the church was me.” Alicia recounted feeling trapped in a no-win situation, “

I thought ‘well I am going to be single forever and that’s cool. Make some friends, get some dogs.’ I looked very much into what it took to adopt as a single woman. Because I really saw that as my future, because nothing else was an option. Nothing else.

The discourses emanating from church and families contexts ultimately led to conflict as feelings and experiences intensified and became destabilized. It is worth reiterating that three participants reported growing up in families that partook in church life but had limited personal adherence to their faith. For Luke, the religious factors that led to conflict emanated primarily from his Catholic school. Laura and Austin became involved in campus ministries during their college years and experienced personal spiritual conversion to Christianity. It was during this time that church teachings on same-sex attraction intensified and truly created a sense of conflict.

Therefore, the assimilation of teachings and discourses varied across participants both in intensity and in temporality. Figure 2 details the second vignette in the lives of LGBQ Christians which broadly took place in late adolescence.

Research Question 2: What is the process through which participants negotiated the co-existence of both a Christian and LGBQ identity?
The exposure to church and family discourses and subsequent adoption of their beliefs induced participants into a conflict. The conflict was two-fold. On one hand, participants indicated that their conflict was characterized by a sense of misfit within both their families and in their church communities. On the other hand, participants reported a personal sense of conflict between the assimilated beliefs of their childhood and their experiences. They sensed they could

**Figure 3. Identity Conflict and Open Resolution**

**Overview of Conflict and Resolution Model**

The exposure to church and family discourses and subsequent adoption of their beliefs induced participants into a conflict. The conflict was two-fold. On one hand, participants indicated that their conflict was characterized by a sense of misfit within both their families and in their church communities. On the other hand, participants reported a personal sense of conflict between the assimilated beliefs of their childhood and their experiences. They sensed they could
not progress academically, spiritually, or relationally until the conflict was resolved.

A catalyst was introduced into their conflict which ultimately led them to a form of open resolution. Participants identified various catalysts that all involved the introduction of new options. The knowledge that resolution was possible propelled them into actual resolution. Upon the acquisition of this new knowledge, participants resolved their conflict through resources that reflected the nature of the conflict. They resolved the sense of communal misfit through the presence of supportive peers, affirming communities, and role models. Additionally, they solved the internal conflict of beliefs through personal study of Biblical texts and a commitment to discovering truth. The participants in this study maintained the Christian identity from their childhood. While some indicated that during the conflict stage they considered disregarding their Christian beliefs, they preserved the faith of their upbringing due to their beliefs that Christianity taught truths that could not be discarded.

Participants reported having resolved their initial conflict. However, they discussed extensively the extent to which their resolution is criticized, mocked, and a source of confusion, and the mechanisms through which this destabilizes their own resolution. Indeed, the constant gaze of others upon their identities generated frustration and loneliness. Therefore, the stage of resolution is left incomplete as it is not fully accepted by the broader communities in which they participate. The perception of others upon participants’ identities will be further discussed in the findings of the third research question.

Conflict. Participants reported a sense of impasse: being LGBQ and Christian did not appear to be an option. The rhetoric of their upbringing on the impossible co-existence of LGBQ and Christian identities suggested that if one did claim a LGBQ identity, they could not claim a Christian one, must less the belief that they would go to Heaven. John came to doubt the
authenticity of his faith,

The things I had been reading, especially on the anti-gay side of things, the ex-gay side of things, was that gay people are renouncing their faith if they say that they are gay, and so I was like “is that what I have to do? Can I not claim salvation, can I not claim any of that stuff?”

Given their commitment to their Christian beliefs, several participants attempted to “solve” their attractions to no avail. Austin remembered the initial disappointment that his attractions were not going away:

I didn’t know what else to do…I didn’t know there was another way…I spent several years trying to, for lack of a better term, pray away the gay. Doing everything I could, listening talks from the Exodus conference, just trying to essentially change who I was from my behaviors, and that…So, yeah…I looked at that but I never experienced anything from it.

Liz also attempted to erase her attractions:

Because I wasn’t saying I wasn’t straight, but what that meant was every single time I would think “oh she’s so cute”, I would feel guilty. Like, so, I could not have ever counted how many times I repented for thinking a girl was cute. Which, obviously now looking back, I see how nonsensical it was. But it was a continual cycle, because it would be “ok, I’m doing good, and then all of a sudden if I was attracted to a girl, I was slipping into sin. So then it was like the sin cycle, and then it was shame, and so I repented, and I thought God was going to help me get over this.

The realization that their attractions were not changing caused several participants to experience severe mental health problems, interfere with their education, and develop anxiety.
Sarah remembered the distress she felt when she would go to Mass, “there was a period when I would be taken to church on a Sunday morning and I would have panic attacks and feel really sick and lightheaded and tried to leave.” The stress of trying to hide her same-sex relationship from her friends and community, and ultimately being removed from her community by the leaders because of it, led Laura into a state of depression,

We broke up, I was already having all of these feelings and then I think I kinda started to idolize that relationship or that secret maybe and so um my world fell apart I got depressed and then not even a month later I got removed the church planting team and so that was gone and I mean I lost my girlfriend in the team but she was also my best friend, so I lost that too. I had nothing and I became really depressed just laid around and got drunk a lot.

John reported a similar state of depression,

I wasn’t going to school anymore, I was at home on my couch not moving from my couch except to go the bathroom and put a little bit of sustenance into my body, and I failed all of my finals, it was an awful, awful time.

The conflict varied in intensity among participants. However, the conundrum behind the conflict was the same: how to live a life with same-sex attractions when being a Christian implies heterosexuality. Ruth described the dilemma,

There is a time period when I knew that I was gay, and I knew what God said about being gay, and at that time I thought this wasn’t right, and so I felt like I was going to be alone for the rest of my life, or I am going to have to defy God, one of those two things and that’s when the thoughts of suicide, not necessarily wanting to die, but just hoping that something would kill me, kind of just hopelessness.
Participants remained trapped in the conflict until a new element offering an alternative was introduced.

**Catalyst.** The catalyst was plural in nature: it was composed of feelings, experiences, and knowledge. Participants’ catalysts were made up of different combinations of these three elements and were external in nature. New elements were introduced into their conflict from an outside source. These sources included a person they were attracted to, affirming communities, role models, and teachings different than the ones they had originally adhered to.

Several participants were offered introspective reflections on their conflict from another person, particularly the realization that remaining in the state of conflict was no longer an option because of its growing control over their lives. John’s father was involved throughout his time of depression attempting to provide support and comfort. He encouraged John to put an end to the conflict:

He said “[John], this is not right.” He said, “this pain that you are feeling is not of God, and he said “you are an incredibly godly young man” It still chokes me up when I talk about it. He said, “you are an incredibly godly young man, you have put more effort into trying to figure out what the right thing is than anyone that I know in my life, if, I cannot believe that if you are wrong about this, God is going to condemn you for eternity, I don’t believe this is going to separate you from him, I just want this pain to stop for you, and whatever that means, you just tell me and we’ll make that happen. And if you come out and say that you’re gay, you know, it may take me a little while to understand that and fully support that, but I support that, if that’s what you need to do, that’s what you need to do.” And that was, that was the final piece in a lot of ways for me to be able to reconcile being the decision that no, this is, this is what I believe, this is what I need to believe to live.
For other participants, the resolution occurred because of an affirming community that gave them increased confidence that they could in fact be LGBQ and belong in a church. Alicia and her brother decided to no longer attend their non-affirming Southern Baptist church and began attending a local affirming church.

And the senior pastor took a great interest in making sure we felt welcomed, he very much understood from the beginning why we were there...that was pretty awesome, and really they just liked me. And for so long, at my other church, it was just very clear that they loved me, but they didn’t like me. And they didn’t like who I was becoming. The more I became who I felt myself to be, the less they liked me. So I felt at home, and that was huge at 16.

Sarah experienced similar comfort when she visited a local Presbyterian church with a friend, “it was just that intense feeling of home, that comfort and warmth, that just comes from inside when I was at the Presbyterian church that I never got in my Catholic church.”

While affirming communities were certainly influential, certain individuals within them encouraged participants to consider a possible reconciliation. For example, Liz described the pivotal experience of meeting Christian lesbian women with similar morals as her:

When I went and met people there, [there] was one of her friends who was a lesbian and a Christian and that was like “aahh” so I was so excited because I was like “I can be lesbian and a Christian.” They had a couple friends, and a couple who were lesbians and they were talking about, how none of them were Christians, and they were making fun of them because they were waiting until they were married to have sex. And I thought “this is the coolest thing in the world!”

For Sarah, meeting the mother of a gay son at her church provided an additional sense of belonging.
There was another person on staff at the church and her son was gay and so I talked to her a couple of times and she was great, she was very patient and she kind of knew exactly what to say, just having her, to finally have someone to talk to who had actually been through the experience was really big, because the youth minister and the pastor they kind of knew people but they didn’t have that direct connection.

These individuals were not always affirming Christians. Two participants reflected positively on discussions with religious leaders who expressed doubt instead of the certainty they had heard from their childhoods. Meeting another person with doubt validated and legitimized their own questions. Ruth stated, “my Young Life leader at the time was just the biggest thing, she was just humble and she didn’t know, even though she didn’t really know anything about it, admitting that was good.” When Laura’s campus minister found out about her same-sex relationship, she did not address it with anger or frame it as a sin,

One of my leaders that I talked to, the one that treated me like I was a human in a relationship, that was amazing for me to have especially for the first person that I talked to about it, for her to be that comforting was amazing and a blessing.

The catalyst that was the most salient amongst all participants was the realization that their Christian and LGBQ identities were in fact reconcilable without compromising theological beliefs. Five participants recounted feelings of shock and comfort upon learning about the Gay Christian Network, an organization led by gay Christian Justin Lee. The juxtaposition of both terms “gay” and “Christian” side by side without any qualifiers provided a new framework for them to explore. John stated,

I finally discovered the Gay Christian Network and that was the first time I had ever googled “can you be both gay and Christian?” the first time I had ever googled that and the
first term that came up was the Gay Christian Network. And I was like “what?” “oh my, what?” and one, it was just amazing, because they had a forum on there with 10,000 people registered, and I am sure some of them were duplicates, but still, you know, the fact that there was even 1,000 people out there who were having similar questions and wondering the same thing, and trying to hold onto both their faith and their sexual orientation, that was pretty mindboggling.

Ruth also stumbled upon the Gay Christian Network which introduced her to a new solution to her conflict:

It wasn’t until my sophomore year that I saw some opposing Christian viewpoints on the subject, and I didn’t know there were any, I stumbled upon them online, the first one being the Gay Christian Network with Justin Lee and I started to read a bunch of blogs, and I started to think more critically about what is being fed to me through my Bible study at home with young life, and parents and stuff like that.

Luke saw a possible reconciliation through new perspectives emerging from Catholic leaders, “I see different teachings or sayings that are coming out of the Vatican from Pope Francis and I see the younger generation coming in who is like ‘who cares?’ it almost seems like those two identities could be reconciled.”

The catalyst is characterized by the introduction of new knowledge and solutions. However, participants still underwent a lengthy process to decide how to think and act upon this new knowledge.

**Open Resolution.** Resolution was facilitated by three factors: personal study of sacred texts, external validation, and a commitment to finding truth. The element of personal study is characterized by the re-examination of Scriptural passages that have traditionally been used to
condemn same-sex relationships. Justin Lee popularized the “side A” and “side B” dichotomy which was adopted by several participants to navigate their questions. Both “sides” were given equal consideration throughout participants’ resolution stage due to their commitment to finding truth, as opposed to finding a theological position to justify a position they already held. John described his desire to find truth, “I wanted to make sure I wasn’t just doing something because I wanted to do it but because it was something that was you know, that was supported by the tenets of my faith.” Sarah also expressed a need for a meaningful and thoughtful arguments, “I needed more than just someone saying “oh yeah it’s ok”. I needed something I could, tangible, like a book, that was very scholarly and broke down each argument piece by piece and countered them.”

Austin also made an effort to invest energy into exploring both positions with equal weight,

I would look at websites that were larger, more reputable organizations and just listening to talks, looking at their other beliefs and trying to figure out how much research and looking into the issues that happened, trying to discern whether it was, if they were taking a leap or truly trying to understand the original contexts, so yea I kind of looked around and looked at a bunch of different websites, both for gay people and against gay people to see how they are.

Different theologies were explored largely through the use of books containing a certain theological and academic rigor. Additionally, several participants attended Christian universities and used their classes as springboards to ask questions. Chris used assignments in his religion courses to explore church teachings,

The thing that really started me on that path of reconciliation was my studies, because my
second major was in Biblical studies so I spent a lot of time in that, pretty much three
quarters of all the major papers I wrote from sophomore to senior year were all on the
topic of homosexuality, my senior thesis was on homosexuality and the church.

Peter used a similar method,

And frankly the only objections that I heard towards people who are gay-identified, is they
come from the Bible and from the Hebrew Bible, and because of that I used a class as a
means of exploring, as one of my directed readings, as a means of exploring what it meant to
be like, what the Bible would actually say and look at the historical critical context and use
that methodology to detoxify the passages.

Participants who did not have the opportunity to focus their studies on the matter turned to books
and the Internet, and often times spent a considerable amount of time working through their content,
such as Samson who “read about 400 or 500 pages on the theology of all sides.” Liz also turned to
books,

That summer I went home and got a few books, I read Andrew Marin’s book *Love is an
Orientation* and that was the first time I really, and it was a really good first book to read, I
read that. And I just started to read other things and that was a point where I finally came to
myself to think “it’s ok if I am attracted to girls” like that, and I wasn’t even at a point of
changing my view of sexual ethic, what the Bible presents, anything like that. But that was
a point where I came to “there’s nothing wrong, it’s not a sin because I am this way”, so
reading good books, that helped me.

External validation of the conclusions they were arriving to in their personal study further
aided reconciliation. Meeting and interacting with LGBQ Christians acted as catalyst for some,
but being absorbed into a community that did not compromise moral values or other Biblical
teachings led participants to believe that being a LGBQ Christian could be a long-term and intellectually-satisfying life, as described by Alicia:

Having specific people who were highly educated, who were very devout, uh, who believed that these things were reconcilable was immensely powerful for me…. There were these smart, very very smart, very well-educated post-grad pastor people who were queer, and living it, and doing it. So I would have been willing to say “you’re right, I’m justifying it, it’s not possible to reconcile these two” but I became very quickly unwilling to say that about those other people that I met. So because I was, “well she believes this, and she is doing this, and she’s very smart, and I trust that this isn’t just me”. This isn’t just me trying to justify something. So it was kind of important to have external validation of the fact that this was a coherent position that someone could hold and still have intellectual and spiritual integrity.

Sarah credits most of her reconciliation to her peers, “my friends, yeah, it was definitely my friends and that church in particular. The PCUSA church in [Midwestern city] that I went to.” Identifying as both LGBQ and Christian was no longer an abstract idea described in books or an intellectual option, it became a possible reality for their futures. The community was not always an affirmative church. For some participants, the community was found in organizations such the Gay Christian Network. Chris highlighted the positive impact the organization has had for him, “the Gay Christian Network, that has been a huge help and benefit to me.”

Participants indicated that while they considered disregarding their Christian identities, they never did because of their commitment to finding the truth. The beliefs of their upbringing about the person of Jesus were too salient to dispose of. Chris stated,

I had the conscious thought that I can’t walk away from this…I’d experienced too much in
my personal life, I’ve seen, I mean I want to say I’d seen miracles, there was no way, there was no doubt in my mind that maybe the doctrines aren’t all true, but that Jesus we are seeking is true and is truth and I thought about it and there was no way I could step away from that.

Peter spoke of a similar commitment to the person of Jesus, as well as to the value of Christian beliefs and community,

I was passionately in love with Jesus and I had that relationship with the person of Jesus, Jesus divine, human, whatever, just having read the gospel and seeing what Jesus had done, having that I could never give that up, I could give up pretty much everything else. The ritual of going to church every week was something that I deeply missed and so I was like, even if I don’t find this is helpful, even if I find that I don’t agree, this is something that I need in my life for community and ritual and enrichment.

Clinging to the person of Jesus allowed Samson to distinguish between Jesus and those who claim to speak on His behalf:

When I was finally able to differentiate what pastors, spiritual leaders, and people in my church were saying from what I felt like my personal relationship with God was saying was a huge thing for me. Like every time someone was discriminated against, it was almost like it was an act of God, He himself told them to do this to me, and I never felt like banished from Christ, personally. I felt banished by Christ people.

The reconciliation process often entailed two separate dimensions: resolution with one’s self, and resolution with others. The act of resolving and integrating a Christian and LGBQ identity for oneself provided relief, comfort, and a sense of rejuvenation. John described the feeling of relief he felt after coming to terms with the theological arguments,
My mind was in my stomach, there was just this huge relief of tension and all of a sudden it was like this space inside of me that had never been there before and this openness, and the feeling of peace and of just settling into it, “ok this, this is right.”

A sense of comfort and safety emerged as participants came to the conclusion that even if their theological beliefs were wrong on the issue, it would not impede on their salvation or their ability to live out their Christian beliefs. Ruth stated, “I finally came to the realization that my salvation whether or not I find the answer, is this right is this wrong, what should I do, none of that really mattered in the long scheme of things.” A newfound energy to share their identity and resolution process, as well as to learn about broader LGBT issues accompanied the feelings of comfort and relief. After returning from studying abroad and finally calling himself a gay Christian, John described that

One of the very first things I did when I got back from Egypt was go to the LGBT resource center on the [university] campus, and I mean, that’s the thing about me when I make a decision I make it all the way, and once I was ok with being gay, I was like “I’m going to learn everything I can learn to be able to talk about this”.

With the help of a psychiatrist and other university students, Samson actively encouraged his university to change policies to be more inclusive of LGBT students and started his own LGBT group on campus. He then assembled a network of LGBT groups on Seventh Day Adventist universities:

The next summer after changing policies and started my own group, it was three other groups that have been involved for a year or two or three on GSAs at Seventh Day Adventist universities… that summer was the first time I met with 15 leaders from four different universities campuses and discussed the network that is now IAC, or the
Intercollegiate Adventist coalition, we are now on eight universities nationwide.

The intensity of their reconciliation process coupled with the knowledge that other young Christians were experiencing similar conflict led participants to make meaning of their integrated identities in a unique way which will be further explored in the third research question. In light of the fact that the reconciliation process was heavily influenced by a reinterpretation of texts, participants were cognizant of the fact that their conclusions were indeed an interpretation, and could not be empirically proven. Therefore, several participants expressed an awareness that their affirming theology could be wrong. This awareness was not salient enough for them to return to the conflict stage. However, it was an aspect of their beliefs that they expressed candidly. Chris stated, “I am not so haughty to say that’s the truth, side B can’t possibly be true, I could be wrong, but this is where I believe God has led me.” Similarly, John claimed “I’ve tried to be, stay open to the possibility that I’m wrong, over the past few years, I make sure that I am still being intellectually sound in what I believe and why I believe it.”

Resolving their identities externally, with individuals other than themselves, was affected by societal, cultural, and social discourses on the legitimacy of a LGBQ Christian identity. Participants were often met with skepticism, if not explicit rejection from religious communities. Due to this fact, and to some participants’ willingness to consider that their beliefs may be wrong, the final step of resolution is left open, as seen in figure 2. Figure 3 presents the third vignette depicting in greater detail the mechanisms through which participants currently make meaning of their identities, and how they are perceived by their families and religious communities.

Research Question 3: How do LGBQ and Christian-identified emerging adults currently perceive the integration of these two identities? How do they think this integration is perceived by their families and Christian communities?
Once an internal resolution occurred, participants were often asked to justify this resolution to their families, churches, and peers. Christians would ask them how they could claim a non-heterosexual identity, and LGBQ individuals would challenge how a LGBQ person could align themselves with a faith tradition that has historically oppressed LGBQ people. This forced participants to make meaning of their own identities, often to satisfy the curiosity, if not the disapproval of others. Therefore, the meaning-making process was often framed with an orientation towards other individuals and communities. Nearly all participants indicated that they had reached a state of comfort and satisfaction with their LGBQ Christian identities. However, none of them indicated that this integration was fully perceived or understood by either Christian communities or their families. The extent to which families and religious communities believed and affirmed the authenticity of the participant’s LGBQ identity moderated the inclusion and participation they granted them. Upon reaching adulthood, participants severed most ties with the physical community of their childhood, even if they stayed within the same denomination. Therefore, families and religious communities are conceptualized as two separate entities. Several participants reported they felt mostly included, while others felt silenced and closeted in many ways. Thus, the extent, or the height of the brick wall in the following model is mobile and sensitive to the concepts detailed below.
Beliefs about identity

Assigning a redemptive purpose to experienced conflict

Feeling called to a higher purpose

Meaning-making of a LGBTQ Christian Identity

Beliefs about the authenticity of the participant’s faith

Beliefs about sexuality

Assumptions about LGBTQ identities

Knowledge of the extent of the participant’s LGBTQ Christian identity

Family

Church

**Figure 4: Meaning-Making of a LGBTQ Christian Identity and Perceptions of Family and Churches**

**Meaning-Making of a LGBTQ Christian Identity**

Making and assigning meaning to a LGBTQ identity involved three processes: reflecting on the nature of identity, perceiving their experienced conflict as redemptive, and feeling called to a higher purpose.

**Beliefs about Identity.** Participants presented different beliefs about identity. Several participants claimed an undeniable integration of their LGBTQ and Christian identities inseparable from their core selves. They perceived the two as actively influencing one another and did not want their integration to be under-emphasized. John stated,
It’s something I really come to embrace and be grateful for, and protect as a part of myself. People sometimes say that being gay is just a part of myself; yeah it is, but this part to me is actually really big. It’s a huge part of who I am, and I’m ok admitting that, because it’s just so much more than just having sex, it’s, there’s so much more there.

Samson echoed similar feelings, “I actually attribute my faith in Christ a lot to my sexuality.” They perceived their challenging experiences as contextualizing and illuminating certain aspects of their faith. For instance, Peter appreciated Queer Theology’s emphasis on marginalized populations, which offered new insight into his own experiences:

Being queer deals with being in these sort of unstable, liminal spaces and doing queer theology helps me realize that Christianity is full of these unstable, in between places…this is where I can find a place, or maybe this is where I can see my own literary persuasion, and reading theology through a lens of liberation because those points help me find a space for myself in those communities.

Other participants, such as Laura, stated that their identity resided primarily in their Christian beliefs:

I want my identity to be in Christ and not as, I want my identity to be Christian or follower of Jesus, I don’t want it to be as a gay person or straight person, because I wouldn’t, I guess people labels themselves as straight but I don’t know, I never did put a label on it, ever. I don’t know why I didn’t. I just haven’t ever done that.

Several participants expressed the tendency for their identities to be over-emphasized. Sarah indicated that her faith and her sexuality both make up her identity but do not necessarily influence another,

They are both part of me and I can’t suppress that…it’s who I am so, I can’t say it’s “oh it’s
just what I do” but it’s not like this huge part of me, that’s all there is. It’s just, they are there, and they are both there.

In a similar way, Luke resisted the labels of pansexual and even Catholic as he perceived them as limiting. Instead, he placed his identity in his personhood and his connections with other people:

I have to say that in general I don’t like labels at all. It turns into an identity and you almost create that idea of “hello my name is this and this, this is my group and this is me” the catholic faith too, I wouldn’t say “I’m [Luke] and I’m Catholic”, people would look at me crazy and I would never want to limit myself in my connections with people. Identifying myself, from my personal self, any other sexuality is just as limiting as identifying myself as Catholic.

Alicia also resisted being defined as a queer person of faith and felt the integration of her two identities was over-emphasized,

I think they are intertwined in a sense, it’s more frustrating that people seem to think that intersection is the only one that matters, they make it overly important, it’s just not that important, you don’t make other people’s sexuality the lens through which you view their entire faith.

Assigning a redemptive purpose to experienced conflict. While participants expressed different views on identity, they all expressed some sort of gratitude for the conflict they had experienced. Most notable was the belief that having suffered as a minority person made them more sensitive and compassionate towards the suffering of others. John expressed such sentiments,

It’s given me an experience that I can use to help relate and empathize with people who have been hurt and other people who are in pain, either it’s because they are gay or because they’re depressed and we know how our society likes to deal with mental illness, you know, or
because they’ve experienced discrimination because of race, or because they are a religious minority.

Samson was initially skeptical towards becoming involved in LGBT advocacy in his church, but eventually perceived it as a positive outcome to his experiences, “I felt a lot like Jonah, I kind of laughed at God for a while…I was like “you’re crazy” but yeah I essentially turned my story and made something beautiful of it.”

The redemptive process was also characterized by an increased sense of proximity and intimacy with God. Liz attributed the shame of her childhood to separating her from God; accepting her sexuality made her faith more authentic,

It’s hard to be close to God when you are constantly on this shame cycle which isn’t how you are supposed to deal with sin anyways so I think I matured a lot in regards to my understanding of my relationship with Christ, how I view that, how I viewed that changed and a lot and that made my faith a lot more real.

Laura also expressed a newfound depth to her faith, “God still looks at me and sees Jesus because Jesus lives in me and it just really helped me see how personal of a relationship with God that I have and how special I am to him.”

*Feeling called to a higher purpose.* The aspect of redemption was often coupled with a desire to advocate for others, especially LGBT individuals in Christian communities. Alicia quoted the passage of Esther 4:14. The book of Esther narrates the life of a young Jewish woman named Esther who was called by God to marry a King and use her position to advocate on behalf of the Jewish population. Esther 4:14 report the words of her uncle Mordecai to her, encouraging her to move forward her mission,

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from
another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

Alicia used this passage to fuel her passion to care for and inspire others:

I want my kids to have a different life than this. So the idea that I am here for such a time as this, then made a transformative difference in my life. And if I can do that for one person it’s enough. Being present, existing, existing visibly as a queer person of faith in a leadership role where there are courting positions, in itself, is massive.

Austin described a similar opportunity to support others given his past experiences:

I also think not an obligation but a special area of expertise to where I can reach out to people within the church, people who are constantly having to belittle themselves to try to change…I have an area to talk with them and just really get to understand them…To open their eyes, give them my thoughts and what I’ve learned and be available for them.

Two participants, John and Samson, became active in the national dialogue on Christianity and LGBT issues and speak and write regularly on the issue. Participants often described the multi-faceted meaning-making process of being an LGBQ Christian with enthusiasm and solemnity by participants. However, when asked how others perceived this experience and process, they described feelings of misfit, misunderstanding, or separation. I conceptualize this as a *brick wall* for three reasons. First, the height of a wall affects the visibility of what is on the other side. Participants indicated that the less supportive their social groups and families were of their identities, the less their LGBQ identity was visible to them. Secondly, a wall separates. For several participants, being a LGBQ Christian led to being removed from leadership positions and exclusion from family life. Thirdly, a brick wall is made up of multiple of bricks, not one uniform material. In the same way, there was no one element or aspect of participants’ identities that dictated the nature...
the brick wall. Instead, an assemblage of factors made up how participants conceptualized their relationship with family and churches. The height of the wall was affected by different factors, dependent on each participant’s family life and faith affiliation.

**The Brick Wall: Separation and Embrace from Families and Churches**

*Accounts of families’ and churches’ perception of the authenticity of the participants’ faith.* Participants’ salvation was a primary concern of parents and affected family relationships upon disclosure. Austin described a text message he received from his father, “they thought when I came out to them earlier this summer they thought [that] I was throwing away my life. My dad asked me in a text was I even a Christian.” Because his parents did not believe it was possible to be LGBQ and Christian, he reported that they interpreted their son’s coming out as a disregard of his Christian faith and currently maintain a tense and severed relationship with him over this issue. Alicia’s parents expressed a similar concern over the retention of her Christian identity, but more readily accepted the co-existence of her Christianity and her sexuality, “basically it was more like “but you still identify as a Christian, right?” and I said “yes” and they believed me. So it wasn’t challenging me on my, it was just double-checking.” Participants reported their parents’ need to “double-check” or “check-in” reflecting the saliency of parents’ religious beliefs. The outcome of appraising their child’s faith often affected the extent to which they accepted their child’s sexuality. Several parents were skeptical towards their children but were still capable of expressing some level of acceptance. This acceptance was not necessarily towards their children’s decision to live as an out LGBTQ Christian; they accepted their children’s identities as a reality that would not change and that did not have to lead to severed relationships. Alicia described her parents’ attitude, “they decided early that it wasn’t essential to salvation. As long as it wasn’t essential to salvation, then they might hate it, but it wouldn’t be a relationship ender.” Liz reported that her parents reacted in a similar
fashion, “they don’t doubt my Christianity, they don’t doubt my faith at all, but they think that I’m being misled and confused by liberal people.”

The remaining four participants who transitioned into affirming religious communities were motivated by their communities’ affirming approach, and sometimes by strategic decisions for their future careers. This was especially true for Peter and Alicia who are in the ordination process. Alicia explained why she chose to leave the Baptist denomination in spite of some affirming branches,

I ended up switching denominations, I am no longer Baptist, I’m in the Episcopal ordination process, and that was because I felt that if I stayed a Baptist, my entire ministry and career was going to be defined by being a queer woman. Just kind of convincing people of my right to be present. And you know, for all of its faults, the Episcopal church has been ordaining queer women for decades.

Beliefs about sexuality. A considerable number of participants reported a certain level of misinformation about sexual orientation on behalf of their parents. The belief that sexual orientation could change with the right effort and resources, that it was a choice, and that it had a causal explanation affected parents’ reactions to their child’s disclosure. Throughout her childhood and for several years into her adult life, Alicia’s mom attributed same-sex attraction to social conditioning,

My mom espoused the theory that people who are gender non-conforming are ostracized… the gay community tells them that what that means is that they are gay, “come here and we will love you”. In seeking community, they get tricked into thinking they are gay. She didn’t think anyone actually is, that it is straight people who get tricked into thinking. Similar misinformation between gender identity and sexual orientation emerged in participants’
narratives about their parents. They assumed that their child’s LGBQ identity implied a
transgender identity or some sort of gender non-conformity. John attributes his mother’s initial
difficulty accepting his sexual orientation to her assumption that he would at some point change
his gender,

We were talking about terminology, GLBT, T I A QQ P, you know, and I was explaining
everything and we were talking about trans issues… I started explaining “well I’m gay, but
I’m not trans, and this is why” and she looks at me and says “so you’re not going to come out
as trans?”… And I was just like, dumbfounded. I was like “how? Why did you make this
leap all of a sudden? And why is this only coming up three years after?”…she said “I’m sorry,
I didn’t know”. And so I reaffirmed her, I said “no, I’m very happy being a man, I am not
going through transitioning, I’m not being a woman any time soon…she said ‘but that’s why
I’ve been trying to prepare myself and get ready for…” and so ever since then, things have
been so much better because she’s not worried about me wanting to be a woman.

Samson also noted a dissonance on behalf of his family regarding sexual orientation, gender
identity, and gender expression when a family member asked, “do you want to be a woman?” after
learning he had performed in drag.

The plausible causality of sex-same attraction led some parents to believe that their child
might still change their sexual orientation in the future, especially if this assumption was espoused
by the participant in their youth. For example, when Chris was still living at home, he disclosed
his attractions to his parents but did not claim a gay identity and expressed his intent to not do so.
Therefore, upon the integration of his two identities, he had to “come out” a second time,

When I turn to my mom and say “so what would you do if I brought a boy home?” The
reaction was a little bit less than enthusiastic than what I had hoped for. The “wait, what?”
and very confused look on her face, my heart sank and I realized “uh oh”. It looks like I have to do this all over again. It was a very stressful conversation, “but you were struggling with this and you were working to overcome up and your giving in and identifying as gay? You don’t have to identify as that.” So I’ve come out to twice to my parents, and it’s not fun.

Liz also experienced a second coming-out process, since she initially had an initial conversation with her mother in which she did not claim a lesbian identity,

“If I weren’t a Christian I would identify as a lesbian.” But as she started to panic, it was “but don’t worry I still like guys and I will probably marry a dude but I wanted you to know because I love you.”

When she did come out as a lesbian to her parents, her parents were surprised, “I wasn’t super clear in explaining it, and when I told her she said, ‘well you’ve already told me this before’”. Coming out a second time reintroduced old feelings and experiences. As with Liz’s parents, it generated feelings of frustration that contributed to separation in the form of misunderstanding.

Disclosing a sexual orientation other than “gay” or “lesbian” presented additional challenges in terms of explaining terminology and how an individual could be attracted to multiple genders. Peter’s parents know him as gay, “because of safety and because of my parents I’ve pretty much exclusively identified in [city] where they live and among my family as a gay because a queer identity, it would be too much for them to handle.”

Luke recounted his mother’s initial reaction upon learning of his sexual identity,

“ok so you’re saying you’re gay” “no I’m not” “so you’re, you’re not straight” “yes” “so you identify as bi?” and I was like “um, closer!” it’s almost like a hot cold kind of game,
she said “so you’re confused.”

He tried to explain it further, “I don’t really subscribe to any solid label or anything like that, but there’s an idea called pansexual” and she laughed at a little bit because she hadn’t heard anything other than gay and lesbian. “So you love everyone?” As Luke’s mother came to understand his sexual orientation, he said her initial reaction of confusion dissipated. Similarly, Alicia reported that her parents no longer hold to the theory that credits gender identity to a LGBQ identity.

Acquiring knowledge about sexual orientation, the LGBQ community, and affirming theologies improved the parent-child relationship. Sarah’s mother was inspired to reach out to her daughter after watching a movie depicting a severed relationship between a mother and her gay son,

She had seen Prayers for Bobby it was on one day and she sat through it and she realized she had some of the same thoughts as Sigourney Weaver’s character. She didn’t say what, but she was like “I am so sorry, can you forgive me?” and I said “of course!” but I didn’t really know what she was talking about. I think that was a really big moment for her when she saw herself in that movie, which is really funny because I did the same thing.

John recognized that a lack of knowledge affected many families, and lamented churches’ passivity in this role,

It does require a lot of education, and so it kind of sucks in a lot of ways because our churches should be educating people on how to actually love people, and actually get that message across, and it’s not, so a lot of Christian parents are unintentionally hurting their children and there’s not much they can do about it unless they go out themselves and learn to educate themselves which of course people do.

Therefore, the brick “beliefs about sexuality” is characterized by families’ initial beliefs about sexuality that may or may not evolve upon disclosure. Seeking resources on the topic often led
parents to a gentler relationship with their child. Participants cited physical resources, such as books and movies as influential in their parents’ development. However, the mere fact of having a child identify as LGBQ challenged their Christian teachings in some cases. Samson described this phenomenon as “humanizing the topic.”

_Assumptions about LGBQ Christians_. “Humanizing the topic” seeks a person-centered approach articulated around caring for the person and not reducing them to Side A or Side B of the debate. Samson described his vision as such,

I don’t really care if you believe homosexuality is a sin or not, that’s not what’s important to me, it’s about reframing the dialogue, even if you believe same-sex sex is a sin, how should we show people love, how should we have a community for LGBT folks?

Alicia also described the importance of focusing on relationships,

The biggest thing that’ve learned growing up as a queer person of faith is that theological arguments about homosexuality are important and useless at the same time. That if you don’t have a good internally consistent theologically rigorous theology of human sexuality, you can’t move forward really…it will never change another person’s mind. The relationship is the only thing that does that, the theology is what you are able to hand to them after that has happened to say “you’re not dumping your faith off the side of the boat by doing this”.

Alicia’s parents have adopted a similar viewpoint allowing them to treat her first as a person, which her mother communicated during poignant moment,

There was this girl at my church, my age, very cute…my mom called her “Southern Baptist Barbie”, and she had a cute southern Baptist boyfriend who was going to seminary to be a southern Baptist minister, I’ll always the remember the day when she said “just so you
know, you are exactly the daughter I wanted, I don’t wish that she was my daughter, I don’t wish that you were like her. You make me a better person.”

Other participants reported feeling as if their parents largely perceive them through the lens of their sexuality. This stinted the opportunity for proximity and intimacy with them. Peter’s parents continued to express strong disagreement with his identity,

We have these sort of thaws and freezes as a like to think of them. So once I moved to [city] in July we had a lot of intense time together, because they helped me move, we had a relationship when they helped me move, which was very helpful but once I moved here and they realized I was actually going to a Lutheran school, there was a freeze. I had a mental health crisis about three quarters through the semester, it was a time when we had a lot of contact, and just this past week they started bringing up reparative therapy again.

Most of the contact Austin has with his father revolve around his sexuality,

Randomly my dad will send me a text and say “here’s some more support for not being gay” or whatever and basically going through the Bible picking out the clobber passages and say “read this, this will tell you why you are not gay.”

Parents’ beliefs about the capacity to have Christian and LGBQ identities influenced family interactions and relationships. Even if parents were not supportive of their child’s sexuality, viewing them primarily as a person and not as LGBQ helped ease tension and improve relationships. Several participants described feelings of appreciation towards their parents who did not support a LGBQ Christian identity yet still made an effort to be a part of their lives. Liz’s parents indicated that they would welcome her partner into their home:

One thing that I will say about my family that I have been very appreciative of is that even though they think I am very very wrong, and even though they hope I will find a guy and
have many grandchildren for them, they have been clear that they love me no matter what…Even if I have a girlfriend, they want me to bring her home for Christmas, then they would probably make awkward comments (laugh). But still they would want me to be there.

Chris’ mother also sought to be supportive when he experienced a break-up, “I mean there was one relationship that didn’t work out, I went to my mom and she didn’t say anything about making an argument out of it, she was just consoling.”

Parents who were involved in their child’s sexual identity development throughout their adolescent years, or the process detailed in Figure 2, were often able to maintain positive relationships with their children into their early adult years, even if they were not supportive of their LGBTQ identity. Samson’s mother supported him when he was expelled from school, which contributed to increased closeness, “I’ve always been super close to her, the only that changed was that I watched more, I knew I could share with her but I didn’t know what I could share with her.” In the same way, John’s dad started to read books alongside him and was involved throughout his conflict-resolution process, “

He started doing all of the reading that I was doing alongside me and we started to talk about it a lot more openly, a lot more in depth. And I returned, and that kind of gave me the energy to go back and start my reading again where I had left off.

While the data do not explicitly suggest that parental involvement in childhood leads to positive relationships in the future, it is worth noting that for some participants parents were a positive presence and source of support.

**Knowledge of the extent of participant’s LGBTQ Christian identity.** Due to tense family relationships, several participants scarcely communicated about their LGBTQ Christian identity to
their parents. The decision not to reveal the extent of their identities was largely motivated by a desire to preserve family stability and avoid the hostility of their parents. For example, Austin brought his partner home and introduced his as his friend. His mother questioned their relationship and expressed discontent,

My mom finally put together the pieces that that was who I had been dating it…she asked “is he the one you are in a relationship with?” and I was like “yes” and that was it. No sympathy, immediately quiet and changed the subject she couldn’t talk about it I guess. And so it’s definitely changed our relationship and how we interact with them, and how much I can tell them. In a way, I am open about it, but I am not able to be open about it.

Participants’ interactions with church communities differed, in light of the fact that six were currently attending non-affirming communities. Apart from Samson who is an active LGBQ leader in the Seventh Day Adventist church, the remaining five participants hypothesized that if they were to disclose their sexual orientation to their communities, they would likely be permitted to attend without overt vitriol but would be excluded from service and leadership opportunities. Several of these participants said that their parents echoed concerns about their child being involved in a non-affirming church. Liz’s recounted her parents’ concerns, “I know they are nervous about that. I know they think that being open about it will exclude me of certain ministry opportunities; and it will at most places.” However, being excluded from opportunities was not perceived as an influencing factor when choosing a church to attend. Participants felt strongly about other teachings that they did not wish to compromise in order to be in an affirming community. For example, Samson agreed with other teachings of the Seventh Day Adventist faith and felt most at home in the community of his childhood with its unique denominational culture:

I looked at other faiths but I feel like the Seventh Day Adventist church has the closest to
what I believe… it’s also kind of hard to leave that entire lifestyle behind that you grew up
with, it’s not just going to church once a week, and it’s not just that for most evangelical
Christian communities, but then it’s also like your school system, and your habits, and your
food, and even it’s just a whole thing.
Laura also expressed a desire to remain faithful to the denomination of her upbringing, “and
so that’s my denomination, I’ve said southern Baptist technically I guess my whole life, even the
church I went to when I was in college was a reformed southern Baptist church and so that’s been
my denomination.” Luke described his Catholic upbringing as a salient part of his life, and even
though formal teachings were not affirming, the positive relationships he maintained were enough
for him to want to remain Catholic,

It’s been incredible to have the community that I’ve been brought up with, that consistent
string of my entire life still, I still have a place, I can still function, I can still be accepted, I
can still have that place and be respected and loved.

Over half of participants reported not having disclosed their sexual orientation in their
churches. Luke was the only participant attending a non-affirming church to have disclosed his
sexual orientation to his group of friends.

Participants who had transitioned into affirming theologies expressed several concerns
about being LGBQ in affirming spaces. Liz noted the extent to which the affirming communities
she attended focused on sexuality, instead of their common Christian beliefs:

I’ve found with some groups that are kind of gay Christian groups, the focus is “we are
gay”, I’m involved in things with church, I want to it to not be an issue. Like, um, yeah I
want to have gay friends who are Christian but if we meet together I want to talk about
Jesus, about the Bible, about what we can do in the community. I don’t want to talk about
the fact that we are gay, about how gay people are oppressed. Not because I don’t believe it is an issue, but because it is not what I want to be doing at church.

Liz attends a non-affirming church in which she has not disclosed her sexual identity. Alicia, who is publicly “out” as queer in her Episcopal community, expressed frustration about her community’s perception of her identities,

It’s just frustrating to feel like it’s a little bit limiting in how other people see and hear and receive what I have to say about my faith. They can’t hear me as a person, a person, from a particular position, just like everyone else’s, they just see gay.

Peter attends an openly affirming seminary with courses and expertise in Queer Theology and identified a lack of support and space for individuals who do not fit into gay or lesbian labels, “if you’re not heterosexual, gay, or bisexual… if you’re trans, queer, intersex, asexual, they don’t know what to do. And because they don’t know what to do, they just sort of silence those voices and don’t include them.”

Therefore, communities did not always accurately understand and perceive the meaning participants had created around their LGBQ identities. In some cases, such as Liz’s, this limited her involvement in a religious community and her opportunity to share the meaning of her LGBQ identity.

Summary of Figure 3

Making meaning of a LGBQ identity is a dynamic process influenced by three factors: beliefs about identity, assigning a redemptive purpose to conflict, and a sense of being a part of a larger purpose or calling. These three factors are unique to the participant, their stories, and processes. Therefore, the meaning-making process is exclusive to the individual. The uniqueness of each person’s LGBQ Christian identity can lead to a sense of being separated or misunderstood
by families and religious communities. The extent to which a person’s identities are accepted and understood by families and religious communities is affected by four factors: beliefs about the authenticity of a person’s faith, beliefs about sexuality, assumptions about LGBQ Christian identities, and knowledge of the extent of a person’s integrated LGBQ and Christian identities. These four factors together make up a wall that varies in height. A “short” wall can contribute to supportive and positive family and church experiences, while a “tall” wall can contribute to family tension and exclusion from church communities.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The following chapter will discuss the implications of the findings detailed in Chapter 4. Directions for future research will be discussed as well as the limitations of the study. In light of GTM’s emphasis on the role of the researcher, I will close the chapter with a reflexive account of my own experiences dealing with recruitment and the implications for researchers studying this particular population.

Conclusion and Discussion

The current study was conducted in order to carry out two aims. First, the study sought to describe the extent to which a Christian upbringing within family and church contexts affect sexual identity development. Second, the study intended to explore how and why individuals raised in a Christian context come to adopt identities as both LGBQ and Christian emerging adults, and how the integration of these two identities is perceived by families and churches.

Three vignettes were presented to address the three research questions. Each vignette matched a developmental stage determined from data gathered on sexual identity milestones. Symbolic Interaction and Queer theory guided the data analyses and are used to discuss the findings.

The first vignette, early adolescence, depicted how participants initially made sense of their same-sex attractions in light of their Christian upbringing. Participants reported an overlap and blending of family and church spaces, which both provided language, beliefs, and attitudes for them to appropriate before they fully identified as LGBQ. The use and appropriation of purity discourse was an unexpected finding, however it consistent with Fisher’s (2006) findings revealing that purity culture induces feelings of shame and fear for LGBQ individuals. The extent of the appropriation of purity discourse is a valuable contribution to the literature on sexual identity development. Indeed, not only did purity discourse cause feelings of shame, it
was used to make sense and meaning of participants’ own attractions. Additionally, the current study illuminated the extent to which church life influences family dynamics and rituals. The blending of family and church spaces emerged out of the data, as I had originally conceptualized them as two separate entities. The consideration of both realms worked well and contributed to the breadth of findings on what constitutes a Christian upbringing.

By appropriating language, beliefs, and teachings of their childhood, participants actively bent themselves and their attractions to fit into established social scripts. They exhibited acts of volition in order to maintain stability and consistency within two groups that were imperative and unavoidable: family and church. For two participants, this involved disclosing an asexual identity that they deemed more palatable to their parents. Other participants used ex-gay resources, attempted to “pray the gay away”, or simply hide their attractions. These actions were motivated by the belief they could not be LGBQ and Christian. Since the theological and social frameworks in which they were operating did not allow for their identities, they had to intentionally modify, or at least attempt to modify, attractions and attitudes. The act of bending within religious communities is supported by previous literature (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Dahl & Galliher, 2012; Jeffries, Dodge, & Sandfort, 2008). This study reveals the extent to which participants bent themselves within their families, especially during childhood and adolescence. Oswald’s (2000) study on LGBT individuals attending religious, heterosexual weddings revealed that families ostracized or attempted to mask their family member’s sexual identity. Families actively included and excluded their LGBT family member. While this occurred for several participants after coming out, they mostly included and excluded *themselves* as young adolescents. They intentionally hid behind facades of the ideal Christian adolescent by
performing according to heterosexual scripts, being involved in church life, and even being leaders in their communities.

The second vignette explored how participants came to experience a conflict between the religious beliefs of their childhood and their budding same-sex attractions, understood as a destabilization of the identity constructed in the first vignette. The presented model suggested that participants were propelled towards resolution through the mediation of a catalyst. The catalyst was multi-faceted and included some form of new knowledge. I suggest that it is at this point that participants began to queer their experiences. Oswald, Blume, and Marks (2005) claim that a heteronormative process is queered through the mediation of a decision to resist heteronormativity. The decisions are described as “creative spaces; they are border places where new constructions get crafted and old ones are remade” (p. 148). Considering the possibility of a LGBQ Christian identity instead of choosing identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966) is certainly a liminal space permitting construction and creativity.

The resolution stage was not fully completed, as participants reported feeling misunderstood or ostracized by their families and communities who challenged their LGBQ Christian identity. This conceptualization of resolution is a new contribution to the literature and emerged as a result of considering both internal and external signs of resolution. The challenges surrounding participants’ LGBQ Christian identities are representative of the fluidity, change, and volatility of all identities. Queer theory does not conceptualize an end; instead it conceptualizes a process that is never fully static and always subject to reinterpretation (Sullivan, 2003). The dichotomy of experiences separating internal and external resolution provided a framework to understand the third vignette, which addressed meaning-making for the self, and for others.
The final vignette described how participants made sense of their LGBQ Christian identities and how the integration of their identities was perceived and accepted by families and religious communities. Varying degrees of physical or emotional separation affected participants’ relationships with families and churches. This was true even for participants whose parents were largely supportive of their identities and who were involved in affirming churches. Both an over and under-emphasis on participants’ LGBQ identities generated feelings of being misunderstood. The data revealed that while certain common elements contributed to the meaning associated with being a LGBQ Christian, each person constructed her or his own meaning, which is a queer process of identity construction (Cerulo, 1997). While participants reported using the language and culture of their childhood to make sense of their attractions as children and adolescents, their adult LGBQ Christian identities were an assemblage of concepts intrinsic to the person and not relative to others: beliefs about sexuality, prescribing a redemptive purpose to their conflict, and feeling called to a higher power. This shift from framing their attractions around existing paradigms to constructing their own paradigm is reflective of agency, autonomy, and creativity.

It is tempting to vilify non-affirming churches and brand them as dangerous for LGBQ youth, especially in light of existing literature (Dahl & Galliher, 2010; Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008, Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005). However, seven participants in the current study remained in their non-affirming denominations due to teachings on other issues and the sense of community, suggesting that non-affirming churches can still contribute to positive outcomes for LGBQ people. They did not stay in their churches in spite of their non-affirming stance. Instead, they stayed because they did not perceive their sexuality to be the hinge upon which all decisions should be made. I posit that these participants are
queering religion (Bardella, 2001, Griffith, 2012, Schippert, 1999) and their own identities (Kasch & Abes, 2007). They are choosing to not perceive their sexuality as the most salient part of their identity. Instead, they are focused on their personhood, at the potential expense of their safety and inclusion in their faith communities. It is an act of volition that is based in their desire to construct their own identity that transcends denominations, labels, and theologies. In a similar way, participants who changed denominations also queered their religious experiences. They redefined their religious upbringing to challenge ideas and attitudes that no longer described them. This iterative meaning-making process is reflective of the fluidity that defines queer theory (Seidman, 1996).

Queerness creates space to create, redefine, renegotiate, and construct one’s self. All participants in the study, to some extent, queered their upbringing and their faith by integrating two identities largely deemed mutually exclusive and by actively choosing what identities were the most salient to them. The most remarkable feat lies in the fact that these two identities were integrated at the expense of participants’ inclusion into many communities. While participants may not have been aware of the “brick wall” before resolving their identities, they certainly became aware of it afterwards. They constructed a new meaning to ascribe to their past conflict, one of redemption and altruism. Choosing to stay in an environment that fosters feelings of misfit in order to live authentically in the word is brave and bold; it is queer to its core.

The role of families in the study was difficult to articulate, as participants had varying experiences that did not lend themselves to simple statements or findings. Just as participants rooted themselves in their self-constructed identities, they reported that their parents ascribed and prescribed meaning to children’s identities and to their own experiences. Given that parents’ reactions and attitudes were reported by their children, and not by themselves, it is not possible
to make claims about parents’ experiences. However, several participants described how their relationship with their parents came to be person-centric over a period of time extending itself several years. While Alicia’s parents were initially skeptical and reticent towards their daughter’s queer identity, they eventually came to appreciate her for who she was as a person, “the best part is they see me as a person in ways neither, they don’t deny it or compartmentalize it, they are able to accept it as an organic of who I am, this is only a part of who I am.”

Participants who reported current positive relationships with their parents described their parents’ experiences as a journey characterized by coming to love their child for who they are as a person. Conceptualizing parents’ experiences as a process is supported in the literature (Grafsky, 2014). The space created in the parent-child relationship decenters heteronormativity to “do family” in a way that allows for complex sexualities. Oswald, Blume, & Marks (2005) argued that families are best understood in terms of processes instead of outcomes. Furthermore, they defined “complex sexualities” (p. 148) as beliefs, practices, and experiences that do not always align coherently, and subsequently create a queering process. To be LGBQ and Christian is certainly complex in its rebuttal of social and religious scripts, and in the creative and unique processes undertaken by participants to form their identities. I suggest the families described in the sample, and in particular parent-child relationships, are queered according to participants’ report of their parents’ attitudes and fit Oswald, Blume, & Mark’s (2005) conceptual model.

The religiously conservative parents described in the study challenged socially and religiously accepted scripts to view their LGBQ children as people whose identities are complex yet not defining. For instance, Alicia’s parents chose to defy the expectations and stereotypes of LGBQ individuals of their Baptist congregation to support their daughter, not because she identifies as queer, but because of her identity as their child. This phenomenon pertained to five
out of eleven participants and did not fit into any of the models. It emerged as a finding throughout the entirety of the interviews and was not restricted to any part of the interview schedule. Additionally, the interviews and research questions did not heavily deal with parent-child relationships. It is therefore not given a specific or named focus in Chapter 4. However, I hope the reader will see the thread throughout the report of the findings: parents’ adherence to church teachings, parents’ involvement (or not) throughout their child’s conflict, and parents’ perception of their child’s identities. Participants described their parents’ experiences as complex and nuanced, which I perceive as an unintentional queering of Christian family relationships.

**Limitations**

The current study presents several limitations. Firstly, recruitment did not achieve full maximum-variation sampling. While the sample does include a variety of denominations, some were more represented than others. Additionally, the sample was overwhelmingly White and did not reflect racial and ethnic factors that are so salient to family and church life. Participants were college-educated and had access to resources to facilitate their resolution process. Many of them used the Internet, purchased books, took college-level courses on religion, and had some kind of means of transportation to attend churches and LGBQ-related events. To a certain extent, they fit Arnett’s (2000) concept of emerging adulthood. Their economic privilege contributed to their ability to construct their identities. All of these elements gave participants language and knowledge to make sense of their identities and communicate them articulately during the interviews. Next, participants were largely recruited from the same source: the readership of blogger Rachel Held Evans. Being a member of the same virtual community limits the heterogeneity of the data, which is a hallmark of Charmaz’s (2000) Constructivist Grounded
Theory Methods. This was reflected in the fact that participants referenced similar organizations, such as the Gay Christian Network, the same books, and conferences. The models therefore may not apply or be relevant to other demographics. Having Internet access eliminated potential participants who may be of lower socioeconomic class, as well as individuals who do not have access to a webcam to Skype.

Secondly, sexual orientation labels are socially constructed and do not pertain the same implications and definitions across the LGBQ community. The Queer and Symbolic Interaction theories guiding the study did not fully account for the variation in identifications and the interview schedule and time restraints did not allow for an in-depth analysis of sexual orientation labels. Thirdly, the nature of the study requires a certain amount of reflexivity and ability to think critically about one’s experiences. It also asks individuals to reflect on potentially difficult and emotional processes. This limited participants to those willing to discuss such personal issues.

The matter of who is likely to participate in the study presents serious limitations. The individuals who responded to the recruitment announcements were: (a) comfortable talking about their sexuality to a stranger, (b) felt that they have enough insight to contribute to the study, and (c) were at ease with discussing sexuality and religion, two topics deemed fairly controversial and private. Therefore, the sample does not include individuals who consider themselves to be private, timid about issues related to sexuality, or uncertain about the value of their experiences.

As mentioned in the methodology section, theoretical saturation was not fully achieved because of the sampling procedure. Theoretical saturation was further inhibited in light of the study’s nature as a master’s thesis: time constraints and feasibility did not allow for all themes to be fully explored to exhaustion.
Suggestions for Future Research

To my knowledge, this study is the first within the past 10 years to use a sample exclusively composed of individuals who were raised Christian and maintained a Christian identity. Further research is needed to identify how the meaning-making process of LGBQ Christian identities evolves over time, especially in light of Christianity’s changing landscape in the United States. Additionally, researchers should emphasize the social nature of being a Christian person of faith. Findings of the current study identified salient internal as well as external factors. A consideration of both is needed to fully capture the processes at hand. Also, a more thorough examination of the role of pastors and religious leaders in the development of LGBQ youth might illuminate or explain more precise mechanisms and phenomena that lead LGBQ youth to disclose or not their attractions to religious figures in their lives. Only one participant disclosed his sexual orientation to his youth leader in the current study. Further research could identify the processes and outcomes that occur when youth do disclose.

Participants’ perceptions of their families’ lack of knowledge about sexual orientation is concerning. It is necessary to make resources available to them and to their churches, whether it be through physical resources such as books or events like those organized by the Gay Christian Network. External evaluation research could help identify how parents and leaders learn best about sexuality issues, what teaching methods are efficacious, and how to tailor events to specific churches and denominations. Participants’ parents perceived lack of knowledge regarding sexual orientation and gender identity, and expressed relief upon understanding that their child was not trans*. While this may be a source of comfort for parents, it raises concerns for individuals from Christian families who do disclose a trans* identity. The impact of disclosing a trans* identity to Christian parents merits further examination.
The overlap of family and church life reveals the extent to which the two systems are enmeshed. To study Christian families, one must look at their churches, and to examine churches, one must consider the families in the pews. Future researchers studying LGBQ Christians should consider using family theories and processes to better identify the saliency of one’s childhood context. Using a developmental perspective could complement a study examining change over the life course.

**Reflexive Account and Suggestions for Future Recruitment**

There were several instances throughout the development of this study that highlighted the extent to which I was an outsider of the population at hand, in spite of identifying as Christian and an ally to the LGBT community. During the recruitment phase, I contacted a national organization inquiring about disseminating information about the project on their social media sites. They encouraged me to post on their forums. Posting about my project induced a deluge of comments, which eventually led me to ask the moderator to remove the initial post. Commenters were skeptical and suspicious, and expressed concern about being turned into “guinea-pigs”. After recovering from the initial frustration of being mistrusted, I came to the conclusion that they were indeed justified. I had invaded space that had become a refuge to many LGBTQ individuals. Facebook and Twitter are not media intended to foster closeness; they are snapshots of our lives exchanged back and forth like a tennis ball. Sharing information about my project was not invasive; I was simply throwing the ball back across the net. Forums, on the other hand, are spaces of dialogue and I had interrupted their conversation about one of the most private part of their lives. It was an assault on their safe space. Therefore, I discourage researchers from using forums for recruitment in future research. We have a responsibility to
honor the safe spaces that individuals who identify as LGBQ create for themselves and to respect their boundaries.

**Summary**

The findings of the current study revealed the intricate, complex, and non-linear experiences of Christian LGBQ individuals and their families. More often than not, families transcended the terms “affirming” and “non-affirming” by revealing that beliefs and attitudes are actively constructed and grounded in social, cultural, and religious environments. Abstract labels are easy to assign in popular and academic discourses; however, they can be reductionist. Christian families with a LGBQ child should not become the terrain for theological or political wars. The opening quote of this thesis by Edmund Duncan Montgomery (1886) describes religion as an agent of a transformative and sanctifying love. This description of religion implies movement and a capacity for improvement. It is mysterious and mobile. If family is indeed something one “does” (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005), then as family scholars, we must avoid imposing static terms and recognize that religious families are not defined by their denomination, their church, or even their views on same-sex relationships. Instead, they are an assemblage of lived experiences, feelings, and beliefs that are often the result of individual, familial, and religious processes.
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Appendix A
Pre-Screening Interview

Hello, my name is Katherine Hickey. Thank you for contacting me about the study “Religiosity Among LGBQ Emerging Adults”. This project will serve as my Master’s thesis. I am a heterosexual ally interested in the interplay of religiosity and sexual orientation. This project is intended to explore how growing up in a Christian family affects individuals’ sexual identity development, and how LGBQ young adults come to negotiate having both LGBQ and Christian identities. I am going to ask you several questions to verify that you meet the criteria to participate. You are not obligated to answer the questions, and are free to skip questions or stop the interview at any time. I am going to ask you about your Christian upbringing, your sexual orientation, and some demographic factors. These answers are completely confidential and any identifying information will only be available to myself and my advisor, Dr. Erika Grafsky. You can use an alias as your name. If you do not participate in the study, your answers will be destroyed. If you do participate, your answers will be locked up in a cabinet only accessible to myself.

Would you like to continue? (If no, thank individual and hang up, if yes, continue)
- Please tell me your full name, or provide an alias.
- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- What is your race?
- What is your highest year of school that you have completed?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What city did you grow up in?
- Did you grow up in a Christian family?
- What was your family’s religious affiliation?
- On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being low involvement and 5 being high involvement, how involved were you in your church?
- Did you experience a conflict between your sexual identity and religious beliefs?
- Do you currently identify as Christian?
- If so, do you identify as a member of a particular denomination?
- Are you out to at least one parent?
- Are you willing to participate in a 90 minute interview?
- What state do you live in? Is it rural or urban?
- May I contact you in the future to discuss further participation?

Thank you for taking the time to answer these questions.

Researcher determines whether participant is eligible, and indicates whether:
- Participant meets all criteria. If so, state that they will be contacted within 2 weeks to set up a time for the interview, or set up a time immediately.
- Participant is not eligible. Explain why, thank them for reaching out and taking the time to answer the questions.

Do you have any more questions? If you have any more questions, please feel free to contact me at (913) 526-2038 or kahickey@vt.edu. Thank you for your interest in this project.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participant’s name or alias</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education obtained</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your current occupation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your sexual orientation when you first came out?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your sexual orientation now?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being extremely comfortable, how would you rate your level of comfort with your sexual orientation?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Town/city in which you were raised</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family of origin’s religious affiliation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of involvement in church (scale of 1 to 5)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what age were you first aware of being attracted to same-sex persons?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At what age did you first identify as LGBQ?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was the first person you told?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a scale of 1 to 5, 5 being extremely comfortable, how would you rate your level of comfort when you first disclosed?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What denomination, if any, are you a part of currently?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C
Interview Schedule

Research Question 1: How do Christian communities and Christian families influence sexual identity development?
• Tell me about the religious climate in your family
• What did your family believe about same-sex attraction?
• How did you feel about this growing up?
• How did this affect your coming out process?
• What was it like being LGBQ in your family?
• What was it like being LGBQ in your faith community?
  - What influenced your decision to come out or not to people in your faith community?
• Think back and describe an experience you had in your family and/or in your faith community that affected you as a LGBQ person

Research Question 2: What is the process through which participants negotiated the co-existence of both a Christian and LGBQ identity?
• Growing up, what was it like being Christian and gay?
• On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not important at all, how important was religion to you growing up?
• On a scale of 1 to 10, 1 being not important at all, how important is religion to you now?

If there was a change in religiosity:
• Can you describe the process of going from a X to a Y?
• What has influenced how you’ve reconciled both a Christian and LGBQ identity?
• How did you cope with the process of reconciling the two?
• If there was conflict, how did you ultimately come to resolve the conflict?

Research Question 3: How do LGBQ and Christian identified emerging adults currently perceive the integration of these two identities and how is this integration perceived by families and Christian communities?
• What does it mean to you currently to be a LGBQ person of faith?
• What is something you wish someone would have told you about being a LGBQ Christian?
• Describe your current involvement in religious communities. How, if at all, has it changed from when you were young?
• Some people believe that it is impossible to be both Christian and LGBQ, what do you think?
• How do you think your family would have answered this question?
• What do they think of you identifying as a LGBQ Christian?
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Resources</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Address/Contact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PFLAG - NRV</strong></td>
<td>Local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays</td>
<td>508 S Main Street, Ste A. <a href="mailto:nrvpflag@gmail.com">nrvpflag@gmail.com</a> 540-577-3534</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Roanoke Pride/ Roanoke Destiny</strong></td>
<td>DESTINY is a peer-based support group affiliated with Roanoke Pride whose mission is to provide a safe and nonjudgmental meeting space to LGBTQA youth up to age 22 in the Roanoke Valley. Currently meets on the 1st &amp; 3rd Sunday of each month from 5-7 PM at the MCC.</td>
<td>MCC Blue Ridge 806 Jamison Ave SE Roanoke, VA 24013 <a href="mailto:destiny@roanokepride.org">destiny@roanokepride.org</a> <a href="http://www.roanokepride.org">www.roanokepride.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LGBT Support Group at Virginia Tech (open to the community)</strong></td>
<td>A safe space to vent and get advice about issues in your life, LGBT-related or otherwise. The meetings are held on Mondays at 8 PM in Squires Student Center at VT in room 300.</td>
<td>Natasha Cox <a href="mailto:nacox@vt.edu">nacox@vt.edu</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VT LGBT Alliance &amp; Resource Center</strong></td>
<td>The largest collection of LGBT media (books, movies, and other publications) in the New River Valley. It also serves as a study lounge and social space open to members of the community.</td>
<td>Squires 304 <a href="http://www.lgtha.org.vt.edu/office.html">www.lgtha.org.vt.edu/office.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VT LGTQ Coordinator</strong></td>
<td>Responsible for assisting VT in the creation of a supportive and welcoming environment for all members of its community including LGBTQ students, faculty and staff, alumni, and community members as well as their allies.</td>
<td>Squires 150 540-231-8584 <a href="http://www.mps.vt.edu/lgtq/index.php">www.mps.vt.edu/lgtq/index.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Star City 247</strong></td>
<td>Roanoke area LGBT community events                                                                aterno</td>
<td><a href="http://www.starcity247.com">www.starcity247.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VT Women’s Center</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>206 Washington Street</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Religious Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NRV Unitarian Universalist Congregation</td>
<td>1301 Gladewood Drive</td>
<td>540-552-9716</td>
<td><a href="http://www.uucnrv.org">www.uucnrv.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glad Church (United Church of Christ)</td>
<td>1600 Glade Road</td>
<td>540-552-3394</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge</td>
<td>806 Jamison Ave</td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.mccblueridge.com">www.mccblueridge.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christ Episcopal Church</td>
<td>120 Church Street NE</td>
<td>540-522-2534</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blacksburg Presbyterian Church (PCUSA)</td>
<td>701 Church Street SE</td>
<td>540-552-2504</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Mental Health Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Services Description</th>
<th>Phone</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Trevor Project</td>
<td>Crisis intervention and suicide prevention service for LGBTQ youth</td>
<td>1-866-488-7386</td>
<td><a href="http://www.thetrevorproject.org">www.thetrevorproject.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACCESS &amp; RAFT Crisis Hotline NRV Community Services</td>
<td>Emergency and referrals for clinical mental health issues</td>
<td>540-961-8400</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Therapy Center of VT</td>
<td>Psychotherapy for couples, families, and individuals. Sliding scale fee</td>
<td>840 University City Blvd Suite 1</td>
<td><a href="http://www.familytherapy.vt.edu.ftc">www.familytherapy.vt.edu.ftc</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological Services Center</td>
<td>Mental health services to any member of the Blacksburg community. Sliding scale fee</td>
<td>3110 Prices Fork Road</td>
<td>540-231-6914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook Counseling Center (VT Students only)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### National Organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Marin Foundation</td>
<td><a href="http://www.themarinfoundation.org">www.themarinfoundation.org</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gay Christian Network</td>
<td><a href="http://www.gaychristian.net">www.gaychristian.net</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 6, 2014
TO: Erika L Grafsky, Katherine Ann Hickey
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)

PROTOCOL TITLE: Family Experiences of Christian LGBTQ Emerging Adults
IRB NUMBER: 13-876

Effective February 6, 2014, the Virginia Tech Institution Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the Amendment request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7
Protocol Approval Date: December 4, 2013
Protocol Expiration Date: December 3, 2014
Continuing Review Due Date*: November 19, 2014

*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.
GRDP Award Notice

gsagrpchair <gsagrpchair@gmail.com>  
To: kahickey@vt.edu

Dear Katherine Ann Hickey,

Congratulations! Your application has been reviewed and we are pleased to announce that you have been selected to receive funding in the amount of $200 from the GSA Graduate Research Development Program (GRDP)! Please make your purchases within one year (12 months) from today (Note that if there are any travel expenses, you need to turn in your reimbursement request within 30 working days after the completion of the trip). Make sure to save all relevant receipts and expense documentation. Then give the documents to your department bookkeeper/secretary with a copy of this email and the GSA GRDP Reimbursement Document (attached). Please visit the GSA GRDP reimbursement page (http://www.gsa.graduateschool.vt.edu/funding/grdp/reimbursements) for more information. Feel free to let me know if you have any questions. Congratulations again!

Sincerely,
Amanda Nelson
Chair, Graduate Research Development Program (GRDP) 2013-2014
Graduate Student Assembly
Appendix G
Audit Trail

12/4:
- received IRB approval
- set up twitter account and blog

12/5:
- E-mailed the Marin Foundation and the Gay Christian Network
- Tweeted Rachel Held Evans to ask for a retweet of the blog link, which she did.
- Was e-mailed by two female college student to learn more about the study. They learned about it through Twitter.
- I e-mailed both of them back with information about the study, link to the blog, criteria for participation, and encouraged them to reply back with any questions.
- Was e-mailed by a male individual located in Texas. E-mailed him information, consent form.
- Was e-mailed by a 25 year old male in Illinois who heard about the study through a Facebook Group.

12/6
- I have created a table containing all of the information of the individuals who have contacted me to ensure I follow up with all of them, and am able to track our conversations
- Was e-mailed by a woman who did not want to participate but still wanted to share her blog that details her coming out. I thanked her for sharing.
- E-mailed my two knowledgeable insiders for their feedback on the interview schedule. They have responded and approved my questions; they did not have any particular concerns.

12/7

First interview with “Liz” at 6 PM. There is a storm planned for tonight. I warned Liz that there may be connection issues. I gave her my phone number in case we break up and she can’t get a hold of me. Additionally, I found out that the software to record video Skype conversations is not free. To save on costs, I have chosen to only record the audio with my two recording devices which I will set on my keyboard. I have tested this system with a colleague to ensure the quality of the recording.

The interview took place at 6:10 PM. I called Liz over Skype, and went over the following items:
1. the interview would only be audio recorded, she indicated that this was not a problem.
2. explained the three parts of the interview (upbringing, negotiation, family)
3. went over consent, asked if she had any questions, reiterated that she could skip any questions.
4. explained a bit about myself and my interest in the topic.

Interview lasted 53 minutes. I was Skyping from my apartment, in my bedroom. Liz was in her basement. She was very articulate, and had well thought-out answers to my questions. I skipped certain questions from the interview schedule because she had answered them previously. I felt like I did not have to probe very much, and the conversation flowed well. She was very friendly, and at the end of the interview I thanked her for her time and indicated that I had applied for funding, and that I may be able to compensate her. I asked if it would be alright to contact her about this in the future; she said yes.

We debriefed afterwards. I told her this was my first interview and she said she thought it had gone well.

The Wild Goose Festival retweeted the link to my study, which led to the recruitment of one participant, “Alicia”. I am going to interview her tomorrow.

I submitted an amendment to the IRB to remove video recording.

12/9

The Gay Christian Network suggested I post about the study on their forums, which I did today. I indicated that I was particularly interested in hearing from bisexual and pansexual people, as well as people of color.

Interviewed Alicia for 1:08. The interview went very well. She is very articulate and has a clear, theological voice with which to describe her experiences. I went over the four points I had discussed with Liz (see above). During the first half of the interview, she was crying a little bit. I considered asking her if she wanted to take a break, but she was still speaking and not letting it affect her, so I decided to keep letting her speak unless the crying became more prominent and there was evident signs of discomfort. There were several themes that crossed over with Liz’s interview:

1. their parents’ reaction as fully intertwined with their faith, and the most significant factor influencing their reaction.
2. Parents’ religious beliefs as a factor in trying to salvage their relationship with their child
3. value of having role models
4. frustration towards being ostracized by religious communities, as well as queer communities.
5. frustration with people perceiving the intersection of faith and sexuality as the defining characteristic of their faith.

Alicia referenced Esther 4:4, “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows
but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”. I found this to be a very powerful quote.

I indicated that I had applied for funding, and asked if it would be alright if I contacted her in the future. She said yes.

I received a response on the GCN forum:

*How would you feel if someone with whom you had never interacted in the past approached you to ask all kinds of personal questions?*

*The post above is your one and only on this forum and your user profile discloses no information at all about you. Are you LGBT? Are you a Christian? What is your stance on Christianity and homosexuality? Is it Side X, B, or A? Are you a person of color? What is your ethnicity?*

*If you hesitate to answer any of the above then you can understand why many on these boards would be less than enthusiastic to share with you. I suggest you establish a presence here for a time before you try to involve folks in your project.*

*As for me, I respectfully decline to participate. This isn’t the first time a stranger has come to this site for supposed research. I got burned last time.*

*No thanks,*

*Jorge*

I e-mailed Erika for her feedback. She suggested I draft a response and send it to her, which I did.

12/10

I had been in touch with a participant “Austin” to schedule an interview. He responded very late at night, and I did not see his e-mail wanting to interview at 9 AM Central until later. I Skyped him right away (I was about 45 minutes late from what we had agreed) and apologized and explained the situation. We went ahead with the interview.

He did not have a very strong Christian upbringing, so there was not a lot to talk about in that regard. We spent most of the time talking about the reconciliation process. I asked some questions about his disclosure to his parents. He seemed reluctant to talk about it since it had just occurred a few months ago. I asked relevant questions from the interview schedule, but did not probe very much to respect his privacy. At the end of the interview, I apologized again for being late, asked if I could contact him about possible compensation in the future, and debriefed. He said my questions were very inclusive, and he enjoyed the interview. He said that he doesn’t usually talk about these topics very much, and that it was rare for him to talk for so long. The interview lasted 52 minutes. There were some reoccurring themes from my past interviews:

1. the extent to which religious beliefs influenced parents reaction.
2. the feeling of not belonging in either Christian or LGBT communities

3. not going to a church based on whether or not they are affirmative, but based on other aspects

4. a somewhat positive reaction the first time disclosing to a religious community

There have been new developments with the GCN message board. This message was posted today

_The following thread will explain why we do not take too kindly to strangers showing up with research they want to do on LGBT *guinea pigs*:

http://www.gaychristian.net/community/showtopic.php?tid/13933367

The link is to a previous message board by a researcher seeking to recruit LGBQ Christians for a study. Apparently, the research protocol left to be desired. Members of the forum indicated how inappropriate the questions were, and pointed out inconsistencies.

I e-mailed Dr. Grafsky and indicated that I wanted to delete my original post out of respect for the community, since they seemed to have been hurt in the past by researchers. She agreed. I contacted a moderator named “Lindsey” to delete the post.

Lindsey responded with the following message:

_Hi Katherine,_

_As a moderator, I will take down your thread as you've requested._

_As a PhD student myself and long-standing member of this community, I'd like to tell you a bit more about why you were likely received as you were. It's become a vogue thing to study the experiences of religious GLB people. We've recently seen an increase in undergrads waltzing in to do their various honors thesis. GCN is the top Google hit when people are searching for communities of gay Christians, so naturally several researchers have found their way to us. Researchers tend to assume that we'd love to be studied and post an open call for participants without sharing what they want to do with the results. It's a huge problem because it borders on exploitative sampling tactics._

_I've reviewed your study. It seems like you're looking for 1-2 people with bisexual or pansexual orientations who are between the ages of 18 and 25. With that being the magnitude of your need, perhaps it's better to post an open question (not one from your Skype interviews) about whether people feel like they are silenced in sharing their experiences with bisexuality or pansexuality. Participate in the thread, share your own perspective on why you think these orientations are important to notice, and, as you build relationships, consider asking some of your new friends to help you out by giving a Skype interview. Such an approach often works a bit better._

_Cheers,_

_Lindsey_
I responded to Lindsey and thanked her for her insight. She responded with the following:

Not a problem Katherine,

We recently had an undergraduate senior who did not follow best research practices and really misrepresented a survey where she claimed the results were supposed to be representative of both Side A and Side B people.

I do qualitative research myself, and I've been interviewed for other people's dissertation work on faith and sexuality. So much of it is about approach. Here on GCN, that approach needs to be relational.

Good luck recruiting your participants!

Lindsey

12/11

I am transcribing Alicia’s interview and these thoughts came to mind:

1. Alicia is frustrated that she is not fully viewed as a person by both the LGBT and Christian communities, she is seen as the sum of her sexual identity. Her parents, however, are the few people that actually view her as a whole person. Maybe parents can act as a unique refuge for LGBQ Christians, who feel excluded from both communities. Parents are able to see past identities because they know the child better than anyone does. The parent-child relationship is where “queerness” is the most salient, in that it is capable of transcending identities in ways other relationships can’t.

2. influence on purity, using the language of abstinence and discourse to assuage coming out process (similar to Liz). trying to make meaning of sexual orientation through purity culture.

12/12

I interviewed John this morning. He was extremely talkative; we spoke for about an hour and forty five minutes. He is a theatre artist, and is therefore very articulate. Additionally, he has spoken at conferences about his experiences. I believe this contributed to his ease with discussing the topic. He indicated that he would like to read my thesis once it is done and that he is willing to be contacted about anything related in the future. Overall, this was a very positive interview. John was very energetic and pleasant. I told him I could email him a copy once I have defended late spring. Reoccurring themes were:

1. trying to make sense of his attractions using purity culture (talked about the book Kissing Dating Goodbye)

2. valuing rigorous academic scholarship

12/13

Participant Peter was having technical difficulties, so we decided to reschedule our interview to the following Tuesday at 4PM EST

12/14
As I am transcribing John’s interview, there are several themes starting to ossify, especially with certain quotes.

**The role of purity culture in sexual identity development:**
1. making sense of same-sex attraction with purity rhetoric
2. using purity rhetoric as a “way out” of coming out.
3. use of extreme measures to not be “found out” (due to the taboo nature of sex, and in particular of ssa)

**Heteronormative expectations of families and churches:**
1. assumption that in spite of ssa, marriage to a person of the opposite sex was likely and desirable
2. framing ssa as a “struggle”

**The (in)visibility of gay christians**
1. Erasure of Gay Christians in families and communities: never questioning whether an individual could be both gay and Christian.
2. the impact of knowing and gay christians on the disclosure process
3. the impact of seeing smart and educated gay Christians
4. the impact of being embraced into a community as a LGBQ person of faith

**The value of personal study**
1. using academic and theological resources to make sense of ssa
2. realizing the ambiguity of the Bible: having to make a decision

**The experience of misfit.**
1. negotiating identities in religious spaces
2. negotiating identities in LGBT spaces
3. finding “comfort and solace” in the person of Jesus

**Parent-Child Relationships**
1. “are you still even a Christian”? parents fearing for their child’s salvation
2. parents’ reactions moderated by their Christian beliefs and their child’s commitment to the faith
3. maintaining a love for their parents in spite of their attitude/reactions
Other family relationships

1. Horizontal nature of sibling relationships reflected in their reaction to disclosure

There need to be additional sections in the lit review about purity culture, and “side a” “side b” rhetoric.

12/15

As I am transcribing John’s interview, I am noticing a certain nuance to the themes I identified yesterday, especially the ones about the impact of personal study and knowing LGBQ Christians. I think more broadly what helped with the reconciliation process was having questions validated by people respected and admired by participants. With Alicia, for example, it was her new friends at her affirming church. For John, it was his dad. There was a concern about their personal study being taken seriously and viewed as rigorous. They needed other people to know they were not flippant.

Also, both Alicia and John’s parents were highly confused about the difference between gender identity and sexual orientation. Suggestion for future research: impact of a Christian upbringing on the disclosure of trans identity.

12/16

I am finishing transcribing John’s interview and I noticed a cross over between his and Austin’s answer to the question, what does it mean to be a gay person of faith? Both of them referenced the idea that they were created gay, and described this awareness as an encouragement to them, and a source of identity.

New theme: a gay identity allowed John to subvert the patriarchy of religious institutions. I will have to look back into Austin’s interview and see if this appears there as well.

There is the reoccurring theme of reaching out to others and using one’s suffering to help others. This fits well within a SI theory: prescribing new meaning to an event.

I interviewed participant “Laura” at 6 PM. I sent her the link to the Qualtrics site three days ago, but she had not filled it out by 6 PM. I messaged her through Skype and explained that my protocol required her to sign the consent form before starting the interview. She filled out the Qualtrics survey and got started.

The interview went very well. She was very friendly and felt comfortable sharing. Her experiences paralleled Austin’s in that she did not grow up in a very religious household. It was during college that she came to develop her faith. Additionally, it was during a relationship with a woman that she came to identify as bisexual, and not before hand. This is interesting to consider in light of the concept of sexual fluidity. After the interview, she asked me questions about myself and my interest in the topic. We talked about my family, my conversion to Catholicism, and my thesis. We debriefed afterwards and she said she appreciated the open ended questions and the freedom she was given to “ramble”. She expressed interest in reading my thesis when it was over. I told her about applying for funding and got her permission to contact her if I was awarded monies. Initial reoccurring themes that come to mind are: the
importance of personal study, positive family relationships, not having her sexuality be a part of her identity.

She did not disclose the nature of her professional occupation during the interview. This information had always come up with previous participants. I submitted an IRB revision to add the question “what is your current occupation?” to the Qualtrics survey.

I had been intentionally seeking to recruit bisexual or pansexual individuals through Twitter; this had been unsuccessful, so I am relieved to have Laura participate as she completes the acronym “LGBQ”. I would still like to have one more male participate. Currently there are 4 males and 5 females.

I interviewed Sarah at 8:30 PM. I was tired from my previous interview with Laura, so I will try to not schedule two consecutive interviews in the future. I anticipate Sarah’s story contributing the the project mostly in terms of her assimilation (or lack thereof) into the LGBT community. Her religious upbringing was fairly mild, and her current involvement in church is limited. She has a quiet, sweet, temperament. She was less talkative than the other participants have been, so I had to probe more. This may also be due to the fact that she was quite introverted and was less likely to offer up information that she did not feel was relevant to the topic. The interview lasted 46 minutes. She did not hold her computer steady, and so I was feeling dizzy from the movement on the screen. I asked if it would be alright for me to contact her about possible funding; she said yes.

12/17

I interviewed Peter today. This interview was somewhat different than the others of I have conducted. The tone was much more serious. Past participants usually reflected on their experience with a certain light-heartedness, whereas Peter spoke with academic and scholarly language.

12/26

I have been ruminating on the intersection of the family and the religious community. For most participants, they overlapped to great degrees before disclosure. After disclosure, these two spheres overlapped more, less, or remained stagnant. The use of Venn diagrams might be helpful to visualize this in a future model.

12/28

As I am transcribing Laura’s interview, I am reminded of the word “redemption”, in that several participants feel like their hardships are redeemed or made valuable because of their faith.

12/29

I have updated my literature review to include a section on abstinence culture. I was able to use some of the material I had written for a paper on abstinence culture during the Fall of 2013. It included a more heavy theoretical analysis of abstinence and queer issues, which I feel was relevant to include in my literature review given that some of the feedback on my proposal called for a stronger “queering” in my writing.
Tonight I am interviewing a participant who is very publicly involved in the debate between religion and LGBT issues. He shared with me an article he wrote for the Advocate and the Huffington Post, as well as a spoken word youtube video that he wrote about his experience growing up bisexual. I read the articles and watched the video before conducting the interview. He chose the alias Samson. The interview went well, he was very talkative and comfortable discussing his story. Reoccurring themes were: desire to be a part of an advocacy movement, parents’ confusion about gender identity, need for education among families.

12/30

As I am transcribing Sarah’s interview, I am realizing the extent to which each denomination has it’s own culture and scripts. Last night, Samson conveyed the same thing about the SDA church. Catholic culture allows for someone to call themselves liberal and allies, there is much more internal diversity. Whereas in southern baptist churches and SDA church, there is an assumption that everyone agrees.

After transcribing Sarah’s interview, I decided to send her some resources. At the time of the interview it seemed like she was fairly connected, but in hindsight, I realized this was not the case I thought she might benefit from the resource list. I sent her the following e-mail:

Hi [Sarah],

I hope you enjoyed the holidays! I just finished transcribing your interview, and at the end you mentioned trying to connect with more LGBT friendly faith communities. I wanted to pass along these websites in case you were interested, they have lots of helpful stuff and ways to get connected locally:

http://www.gaychurch.org/ (to find an affirmative church in your area)

http://www.themarinfoundation.org/ (they have lots of stuff nationally, but particularly in the Chicago area)

http://www.gaychristian.net/ (they have really active forums)

I hope this helps :)  

Katherine

January 2

Participant Chris did not “show up” for the interview. I sent him a reminder e-mail the day before and he did not respond. I was contacted by a potential participant a few minutes later and decided to allow him to participate given that my sample was now down to 9.

I updated the blog to indicate that data collection was closed.

January 3
I rescheduled with Chris and interviewed him at 7 PM EST. He was very willing to share and spoke articulately. Reoccurring themes include: sense of calling, a redemptive story, silence with parents, value of having role models.

January 4

I interviewed another participant today. The interview remained rather short and superficial. I attribute this to the participant’s age. She is only 20 and doesn’t have as many experiences to reflect on. Additionally she is at a different stage developmentally and may not have the same capacity for introspection as other participants.

January 5

I am transcribing Chris’ interview and I am struck by the fact that most participants’ parents did not seek advice or counsel from their church, they turned to alternative sources. Even when they did disclose to church friends, it was more in the interest of sharing than seeking advice. I am realizing that I have a lot of data not strictly linked to my research questions and that I can use for different projects.

Possible manuscript ideas:

1. Christian parents of LGBQ young adults (where they sought resources, how they interacted with the community)

2. Sexual discourses in Christian churches and their effect on LGBQ youth

As I am transcribing, I am reminded to emphasize the way participants originally framed their SSA as a “struggle”. Appropriation of church rhetoric to make sense of their identities. The “struggle” can force individuals to have to come out multiple times. This was the case for Chris and Liz

January 6

I am transcribing Ruth’s interview and I think it would be important to try to write an article for pastors on how to care for LGBQ youth.

January 12

I interviewed one final participant today. He brought a unique perspective given his pansexual identity and the difficulties associated with coming out with a less mainstream identity label. Initial reoccurring themes that comes to mind are:

- parent’s reaction moderated by their lack of knowledge about sexuality

- beliefs about identity

- use of religious terminology and imagery to make sense of sexual identity

- integration of identities unseen by others and confusing to others. (parallels with the internal/external dichotomy in my model)
-denominational culture (catholic school)

Transcribing his interview, I think I am going to add an element of unresolution, or open-endedness to the “resolution” piece of my model. A lot of participants indicated that while resolution has occurred to some degree, there is always an ongoing process of redefining the meaning-making process.