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2011

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### Repository Citation

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Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Coming Out at the Intersection of Spirituality and Sexual  
Identity

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**Abstract**

In this study, the researchers examined how lesbian, gay, and bisexual undergraduate students negotiated and defined their spiritual identities during the coming-out process. Although there were varied responses, the findings suggest that students describe spirituality as acceptance, personal relationships with a powerful essence, and connections to nature. When navigating multiple identities, students experienced various levels of intersectionality including irreconciliation, progressive development, arrested development, completed development, and reconciliation.

*Keywords:* lesbian, gay, bisexual, college students, sexual orientation, spiritual development

## **Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students Coming Out at the Intersection of Spirituality and Sexual Identity**

The purpose of this study was to examine how lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) undergraduate students negotiated and defined their spiritual identities during the coming-out process. Specifically, we sought to examine the language students used, the experiences they perceived as influential in the process of coming out, the perceived comparisons among themselves and heterosexual students, and their goals for the future as they related to spirituality and LGB identity. This study is significant for counselors and helpers in higher education, especially due to the ostracism and bullying that LGB individuals such as Tyler Clementi and many others have experienced on campuses (Espelage, 2011).

### **Review of the Literature**

This review of the literature summarizes research on spirituality for LGB individuals, spirituality, and spiritual development in higher education. It then concludes with a description of the general social context in which this discussion occurs and the need for the current study.

### **LGB Identity Development**

Bilodeau and Renn (2005) reviewed a number of LGB identity development models. Most of these models have been stage models with four general characteristics. First, they begin with a stage of multiple defense strategies that allow individuals to block recognition of personal same-sex attraction. Second, a gradual recognition and tentative acceptance of same-sex feelings emerges, including feelings that they are not heterosexually oriented. Third, some models emphasize an identity crisis at the end of a first same-sex relationship. Fourth, the individual begins to again accept same-sex feelings, and identity becomes increasingly internally integrated. Stage models are designed to help individuals understand and organize human development;

however, development across the life span is a fluid, complex, and multi-layered process that is influenced by a number of psychosocial identities. Consequently, the oversimplified notion that “human life unfolds in stages” for LGB individuals is not desirable (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005, p. 36).

### **LGB Spirituality**

In 2001, Shuck and Liddle conducted a qualitative study to provide psychotherapy practitioners a richer understanding of LGB individuals’ difficulties when identity conflict arose. Sixty-six lesbian, gay, and bisexual participants were included in the study. The researchers found that 64% of respondents indicated a conflict between sexual identity and spiritual identity, religious teachings about homosexuality were the most common source of conflict for respondents, and 53% of respondents considered themselves spiritual rather than religious as a result of the conflict experienced between spiritual identity and sexual identity. As a result, the researchers asserted that the way individuals resolve conflicts between spiritual identity and sexual orientation can have a major effect on mental and spiritual health.

In Knight and Hoffman’s (2007) scholarly essay, they sought to provide an in-depth exploration of LGB identity development with faith development, and the implications for therapy, clinical training, and research. They acknowledged that psychology has a particularly long tradition of misunderstanding sexual minorities and not addressing religious issues with clients for whom religiosity and well-being have a positive correlation. They went on to suggest that psychologists must acknowledge this major oversight in research and in practice, continue to develop lesbian-, gay- and bisexual-affirming therapy such as social advocacy and knowledge of religious groups, and make the correlation that has been provided in research: religiosity and well-being are connected. No new empirical research was presented, yet this theoretical article

sought to awaken a sleeping psychological field and highlight untapped areas of research and practice.

Later, Jones (2008) explored the religio-spirituality of the coming-out process for LGBT college students. Jones (2008) defined religio-spirituality by purposefully including both religion and spirituality: religion being “too often seen as what we do with others” (Nash, 2001, p. 18) and spirituality being “what we do within ourselves” (Nash, 2001, p. 18). Jones (2008) found nine themes that explained the essence of the coming-out process and the connection with religio-spirituality, such as noticeable societal influences on LGBT beliefs, a direct “church” influence on LGBT beliefs (p. 95), difficulty merging sexuality and religio-spirituality, a feeling of guilt for being an LGBT individual, religio-spirituality affecting when and to whom to come out, leaving the church after coming out, and an attempt to maintain a relationship with God or a higher being without a relationship to a church or religious institution. Jones eventually concluded that individuals in the coming-out process found themselves at a divide in their lives; an internal personal debate waged regarding the validity of their LGBT identity, whether they should come out or remain closeted as LGBT, and if they should leave a church or change their religio-spiritual beliefs.

There is also pioneering scholarship that directly addresses the spiritual experiences of lesbian and gay college students (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). The researchers interviewed seven lesbians and five gay men to explore the interaction between spiritual identity and sexual identity. Their findings included identifying experiences that contributed to the process of reconciliation, the differentiation of religion and spirituality, coming out in relation to spiritual development, and the interplay of sexuality and spirituality. Distinct experiences contributed to the process of reconciliation such as “the experience of working through

challenges, difficulties, and conflicts between religion and sexuality” (p. 204). Their findings revealed a paradoxical relationship for students regarding issues of spirituality and religion: an experience in a religious tradition that rejected some students was the means by which they persisted to develop an advanced spiritual identity. To date, there are few additional studies that directly address the intersection of spiritual identity and sexual identity development for college students (Cushman-Kosar, Grajales, & Thompson, 2008; Jones, 2008). Overall, there has been little connection between spiritual identity and sexual identity apart from these studies; however this particular topic provides a clear opportunity for intersectional scholarship. Such ongoing work should be continued and augmented.

The first Gay Spirituality Summit in 2004 authored *A Statement of Spirituality* to clarify the nature of spirituality in and beyond the gay community (Helminiak, 2006). It acknowledged that although spirituality is not identical to religion, nevertheless “religion is at the service of spirituality” (p. 212). The summit’s attendees did not concretely define spirituality, yet loving-kindness was highlighted and defined as the measure of spirituality. Loving-kindness was defined by the summit as the essence of what people—as members of the gay community or otherwise – show to each other that results in a positive contribution to people and their societies as a whole.

The study of spirituality among LGB people brings together both sexual orientation and identity and spirituality or faith identity. As such, it is related to the constructs of multiple identities and intersectionality. Recent research by Abes, Jones, and McEwen (2007) further refining a model of multiple identities, indicates that identity salience is a significant factor in determining how students relate to and articulate their multiple identities. Other research by Stewart (2009) illustrated with a sample of African American college students that spirituality

can be the lens through which some individuals perceive identity coherence and identity intersectionality.

### **Spiritual Development in Higher Education**

Defining spirituality is essential to research concerning spiritual development, especially when it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between religious development, character development, faith development, and spiritual development. All of these terms have been used interchangeably since the establishment of American colonial colleges to the present day (Dalton, Eberhardt, & Echols, 2006) to describe college students' meaning-making and belief formation processes.

Love and Talbot (1999) proposed a framework of spiritual development meant to portray spirituality and spiritual development as relevant beyond organized religious traditions. Love and Talbot's framework identified spiritual development as having the following five characteristics involving: a) an internal process of seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness as an aspect of identity development; b) the process of continually transcending one's current locus of centrality; c) developing a greater connectedness to self and others through relationships and union with community; d) deriving meaning, purpose, and direction in one's life; and e) an increasing openness to exploring a relationship with an intangible and pervasive power or essence that exists beyond human existence and rational human knowing (pp. 364-367). Additionally, Love and Talbot asserted that the five previous propositions were not stages and were not listed in a linear, chronological order, but rather were interrelated and often concurrent.

More recently, scholars, associations, and students are calling for a renewed interest in the spiritual development of college students (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Collins,



Hurst, & Jacobson, 1987; Hoppe & Speck, 2007; Keeling, 2004). In *Learning Reconsidered* (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004), the interconnected learning map denoted *meaning-making* as a central process of holistic transformative learning; several scholars have interpreted meaning-making processes as spiritual development (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators & American College Personnel Association, 2004; Parks, 2000). As a result, helpers and counselors must consider spiritual development a part of the overall approach to students' mental, physical, and emotional health (Reynolds, 2008).

### **Social Context**

Based on Young's (1990) definition of social groups, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) communities are social groups defined by a sense of identity and classification by group meanings. Moreover, using Young's categories of oppression, the LGB community has been marginalized by most faith communities because they have been deemed to be unfit for participation in those spaces. Using Christianity as one example among many, Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) examined more than a dozen nationally representative surveys based on thousands of interviews from 16 – to 29 – year old non-Christians. More than 9 out of 10 respondents (91%) said the word *anti-homosexual* accurately described present-day Christianity. Yet, despite the tension and hostility that continue to exist between LGB individuals and non-gay-affirming organized religious communities, Kinnaman and Lyons' research also indicated that one-third of gay and lesbian individuals attended church regularly and represented a wide spectrum of denominations and backgrounds (Kinnaman & Lyons, 2007).

LGB college students have admitted that there were very few times and places where discussions concerning spirituality were welcome (Love et al., 2005), yet many of them consider

spirituality a high priority (de la Huerta, 1999). Psychological research has suggested that the way individuals resolve conflicts between spiritual identity and sexual orientation can have a major effect on mental and spiritual health (Shuck & Liddle, 2001). In fact, when college students worked through the conflicting identities of religion of birth and sexual orientation, it led to a more contemplative, deeper spirituality (Love et al., 2005).

The spiritual development of LGB students has been unattended along with the spirituality of all college students; however, LGB students consider spirituality important, face significantly different challenges from heterosexual students with the integration of spirituality and sexual orientation, and lack safe places for development (Cushman-Kosar et al., 2008). The pastoral and emotional needs of LGB people are simply ignored, while discussion, dialogue, or debate of the perceived problem of the LGB population among religious communities continues (Countryman & Ritley, 2001). The lack of attention to spiritual development for LGB students can have negative implications for students' spiritual, physical, and mental well-being.

### **Need for Current Study**

The spiritual development of LGB undergraduate students is fraught with nuanced challenges that have not been addressed in previous literature across disciplines. These challenges included covert and overt oppression which entailed a lack of social justice outcomes, various understandings and ways to operationalize spirituality as a related but separate construct from religion, the assorted ways to embody LGB identities, and the intersection of multiple identities in evolving environments. Second, spirituality and spiritual development have often been explored from the perspective of Christianity; therefore broad perspectives that include, but are not limited to Christianity have not been equitably represented in the literature. Third, spirituality studies concerning LGB individuals have primarily focused on the development of

sexual identity in isolation, failing to recognize the intersection of spiritual development and sexual orientation. This study allowed the researchers to consciously address these nuances.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is framed by three constructs: oppression, the closet, and the coming-out process. These concepts are intricately intertwined and together define the theoretical framework in which this study was situated. Oppression is the social construct that builds the closet in which all LGB individuals reside, whether fully or partially (Rhoads, 1994). Signorile (1993) asserted:

The closeted, as captives, suffer such profound psychological trauma that they develop a relationship to their closets similar to that of hostages to their captors; they defend them – lulled into a false sense of security and blind to the trauma they experience – and are threatened by those who are out (p. xxii).

Such oppression causes a closeted individual to “liv[e] without disclosing one’s sexual orientation or gender identity” (Bochenek & Brown, 2001, p. xiii). The closet is the location between self-identifying as gay and disclosing one’s sexual orientation to others (Rhoads, 1994). In some cases, individuals choose to come out, which is the process through which an individual acknowledges, recognizes, and labels their sexual orientation and then determines disclosure to others throughout their lives (Rhoads, 1994). According to Plummer (1995), coming out is the “most momentous act in the life of any gay and lesbian person” (p. 82). A number of student development theories suggest that sexual identity formation is one developmental task of the college experience (D’Augelli, 1991; Evans, Forney, Guido, & Patton, 2009) and the college environment is often the context for beginning or continuing the coming-out process (Rhoads, 1994). As a result, the coming-out process is a significant element of student development

theory and practice with LGB students. Given that the coming-out process (Rhoads, 1994) and the cultivation of spirituality (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2010) often occur in the college context, counselors (especially in the higher education setting) should be aware of how academic performance, psychological well-being, leadership development, and satisfaction with college can be supported with their skilled assistance.

### **Methodology**

This exploratory study answered the research question, “How do LGB undergraduate students anchor themselves in a sense of spirituality during the coming-out process?”

Supporting considerations included: a) the language commonly used by LGB students to describe their own spiritual development; b) the undergraduate experiences LGB students perceive to be influential in their spiritual development; c) how LGB students compared to their own spiritual development to heterosexual students; d) the ways in which a student’s spiritual life hindered, maintained, or enhanced the sexual identity development process (Jones, 2008); and e) how LGB students described their spiritual goals or aspirations for the future.

### **Research Design**

This study used a qualitative design, which was constructivist and emancipatory in nature. Constructivism is a paradigm of inquiry that is used to make “something foreign, strange, or separated by time, space, or experience” familiar, present, and comprehensible (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006, p. 18). Using this paradigm, the goal was to understand human behavior from the perspective of those who experience it (Hultgren, 1989), while also acknowledging one’s own lens and purview as a researcher. This study also strove to be emancipatory in nature by creating actionable research to transform research and practice concerning LGB college students and their spirituality during the coming-out process. As Oliver (1992) suggested, “The

emancipatory paradigm, as the name implies, is about the facilitating of a politics of the possible by confronting social oppression at whatever levels it occurs” (p. 110). The constructivist worldview and emancipatory research paradigm guided the selection of research methods, data collection, and data analysis.

### **Participant Selection**

Participant selection was a major consideration for this study because the process garnered eligible participants for research on a hard-to-reach population. According to Jones (2008), the method of participant selection also reflects the researcher’s theoretical perspective, methodological approach, and interpretive stance. As researchers who are keenly aware of both saturation and positionality, we strove to recruit a diverse pool of LGB undergraduate students through the administration of a Web survey via networking. Lee (1993) describes networking as starting from an initial set of contacts that pass the research opportunity on to others, who in turn refer others, and so on. The sample is presumed to grow; therefore networking is also called snowball sampling (Dilley, 2000; Stage & Manning, 2003). Networking has not been extremely popular in survey research; however, it has been recognized for considerable potential when sampling rare populations (Sudman & Bradburn, 1982). Networking also has advantages when those being studied are vulnerable and highly stigmatized, such as LGB individuals (Lee, 1993).

Networking, when done properly, requires a number of phases. In order to maximize sample variability and the theoretical utility, first Biernacki and Waldorf (1981) suggested making sufficient contact in order to get the project started. This was accomplished through 10 LGB student listservs at various institutions to which the researcher had access as a practitioner. Second, the researcher exercised more control over referral chains by using a wide variety of starting points to ensure extensive coverage of the sample population. Third, members of the

Consortium of Higher Education Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Resource Professionals (Consortium) were used as gatekeepers to potential participants. The Consortium listserv included over 100 professional staff working with LGBT issues and their networks of LGBT students across the country. If the director agreed to serve as a facilitator for this study, he or she forwarded the web survey through the respective campus LGBT student listserv, thereby serving as a credible gatekeeper for garnering participants nationwide.

### **Instrumentation**

The Web-based survey protocol was designed in four parts. In part one, the purpose of the study, human subjects' protection, and length of time to complete the survey was included on the welcome page. In part two, demographic information was collected; much of this section allowed the participants to describe themselves using their own language. The Outness Inventory was also administered in order to "measure the degree to which respondents' sexual orientation was known by or openly talked about with people in different spheres of the respondents' lives" (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000, p. 71). Such data was collected to garner levels of outness in the three life domains of family, everyday life, and religion. Part three presented a structured interview protocol using some questions from Dilley (2000) and Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker (2001). Finally, in part four, a number of resources were provided for the participants, including on- and off-campus counseling or therapists.

The constructivist design of the survey instrument was essential. Students who chose to complete the survey instrument in its entirety were given many opportunities to define themselves and make meaning of responses to survey items. For example, participants provided their own transcripts through free-responses to the online survey instrument. Second, peer debriefing occurred, in which emergent themes, categories, and theoretical constructions were

reviewed and critiqued by colleagues. Third, dependability and confirmability were established through the process of data analysis and the construction of an audit trail using the raw data transcripts written by the participants, analytical memos, emerging themes, findings, and journaling. Fourth, reflexivity was structured with a three-pronged approach using a timeline, a bracketing journal, and a methodology journal. There are limitations to every study; yet as a result of these processes this study was credible and rigorous.

### **Data Analysis**

This study used free – response Web-based data collection in order to capture the lived experience of LGB undergraduate students' spiritual development during the coming-out process. Participants were asked to articulate spirituality using their own words consistent with constructivist methodology.

The collected data were downloaded from the Web survey, cleaned (incomplete data and typographical errors were removed), and imported into a qualitative data analysis software program for content analysis. The data were encrypted and analyzed inductively based on emerging themes. Using a qualitative data analysis software package, AtlasTi 6.0, data were analyzed through the general inductive process for coding (Thomas, 2003). First, the researcher read through many pages of text data for line-by-line examination. Second, specific segments of information were identified. Third, approximately 40 segments of information were labeled to create themes using language very similar to the words participants used (Jones et al., 2006). Fourth, the themes were reviewed for the purpose of reducing overlap and redundancy; this narrowed the categories down to 8 major themes. Fifth, continuing revision and refinement of the category system occurred in order to search for sub-themes, contradictory points of view, new insights, and sequence (Thomas, 2003). Sixth, the researcher was cognizant of spiritual

identity development, sexual identity development, and the interaction of the two identities evident in the raw data, therefore the 8 major themes and 34 sub-themes were organized from least identity interaction to most identity interaction. Additionally, Love and Talbot's (1999) 5-point framework for spirituality and the *Statement of Spirituality* developed at the first Gay Spirituality Summit in 2004 (Helminiak, 2006) were used as a framework to organize common emerging themes from the data in order to construct meaning.

### **Limitations**

There are a number of weaknesses in this study that are common to LGB research. Inherent difficulties exist in randomly accessing the LGB populations on college campuses such as homophobia, fear of having sexual orientation revealed, lack of trust in research and researchers, and the harassment and violence towards LGB people; all of which can contribute to this inaccessibility (Travers, 2006, p. 9). Therefore, the first readily identifiable limitation is networking, or snowball sampling, which was used for this study. Qualitative studies are prone to use the snowball method to reach LGB people, but this might exclude LGB individuals who are isolated. Second, the participant recruitment method prohibited any ability to intentionally seek out maximum variation in the sample by any social identity. Third, the Outness Inventory (OI) had some limitations when used as a demographic tool (Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). For example, the OI used language of "religious" as in *members of my religious community* or *leaders of my religious community*. This may have been a distraction from the primary use of spirituality as a construct different, but possibly intertwined, with religion. Also, the authors of the OI admitted that the item development process was conducted by mostly White, highly educated individuals and based on literature written by mostly White researchers and theorists. Additionally the OI was validated for gay men and lesbians, not bisexual individuals or self-



defined individuals who completed the survey instrument as a participant in this study. Fourth, due to networking as a nonprobability sample, the findings are not generalizable.

### **Findings**

A major strength of qualitative research is the resulting understanding of the processes (spiritual development and/or the coming-out process) that lead to outcomes like spiritual identity, sexual identity, intersectionality, or possibly reconciliation of identities for participants. In addition to crucial demographic information, analyzed data from the web survey indicated at least 3 major themes and nine sub-themes describing how LGB undergraduates anchored themselves in a sense of spirituality during the coming-out process for the purposes of this article. First the characteristics and demographics of the study participants will be summarized, including participants' definitions of spirituality. Next, a brief overview of multiple identities will be provided in this section.

### **Characteristics & Demographics of Study Participants**

A total of 47 students participated in this study. The respondents for this study were overwhelmingly White or Caucasian (95.8%). Transgender and other gender variant people were among the survey respondents but we recognized that gender identity and sexual orientation were separate constructs, so it was possible for transgender people to identify sexually in a number of ways consistent or inconsistent with the study's parameters to focus on LGB students. Cross-referencing these participants' responses defining their gender with their answers regarding how they described their sexuality determined whether these participants' responses would be included as meeting the study's parameters to include only self-identified LGB participants. Data from transgender individuals were included in the study if they identified as part of the LGB communities; however if respondents did not identify as LGB, their

responses were excluded from data analysis. For example, one transgender individual considered himself a “heterosexual transgender male” and was excluded from this study. The second individual self-defined as “bisexual transgendered,” thereby including herself in the LGB communities based on sexual orientation. Further racial, gender, and sexuality demographics of participants are described in Appendix A.

Participants’ outness or levels of disclosure varied across the different spheres of their lives. Spiritual and religious communities were generally spaces where these participants were most likely to be closeted about their sexual identities. The largest percentage of participants reported no disclosure to religious communities (56.3%) and religious leaders (64.5%). Over half of the participants (56.3%) indicated that “religious community members” were individuals who “definitely [do] not know about your sexual orientation status.” As a point of comparison, just over a third of participants (34.8%) indicated that “extended family/relatives” were persons who “might know about your sexual orientation status, but it is never talked about.” Overall, disclosure of sexual orientation was lowest when related to religious communities and religious leaders.

### **Participants’ Definitions of Spirituality**

Based on the nature of the constructivist paradigm of inquiry, it was ideal for participants to determine their own definitions of spirituality. Themes of acceptance, personal relationships with a powerful essence, and connections to nature were commonly used by the participants to describe spirituality. Students used words like “love, respect, and acceptance,” “acceptance that all that is, is,” and “seeking acceptance in the eyes of man and God.” Some also used language including understanding and compassion to demonstrate acceptance. One participant noted, “I believe in God and that he is not as discriminatory as human beings have come to preach.”

Others articulated personal relationships with a powerful essence or other entity sometimes labeled as God as their definition of spirituality. Participants who appreciated nature noted a “profound awe at the world” and a connection to, respect of and gratefulness for “all forms of life”. Admittedly, some participants acknowledged that they simply could not describe spirituality using a coherent vocabulary. One participant summarized by saying “...words really just aren’t enough to say how I feel when I’m close to God. There are no words.”

### **Intersection of Multiple Identities**

At the crux of this study is the idea of multiple identities with a primary focus on sexual identity and spiritual identity. As such, participants demonstrated a wide range of statuses at the intersection of spiritual identity and sexual identity. These different statuses, or positions, were labeled as irreconciliation, progressive development, arrested development, completed development, and reconciliation.

**Irreconciliation.** *Irreconciliation* indicated some form of strain, discomfort, or argument between spiritual identity and sexual identity. Participants indicated times in which spirituality has not supported their sexual identities. One participant stated “I have not ever felt that any mainstream religion has actively supported homosexuality. The best they have done, is in my eyes, tolerate it” (White, gay male, age 20). Tolerance, rather than acceptance was evident in this participant’s experience. Another participant (White androgynous, nonheterosexual/gay, age 22) witnessed a rift in a house of worship due to irreconciliation concerning gay clergy and same-sex marriage among its members:

[Did sexual identity conflict with] other people in my community, hell yes. I did not feel comfortable in the Episcopal Church, especially during the gay bishop thing. Half my church left because we supported him. It felt like a personal rejection each time. At

temple the only slight I feel is that I'm not allowed to be married in the sanctuary. Which sucks.

Finally, one participant (a White female, nonheterosexual/gay woman, age 22) specifically connected the coming out process with the rejection she experienced within Christianity:

When I came out and was struggling to maintain my relationships with my family members, I would pray to the Christian God I had known to, and had strongly felt before, take care of me and asked for peace and understanding from my parents. Instead of the warm feeling of comfort I had felt before when I prayed, I felt cold, physically and spiritually cold, like a door had been closed on me. I didn't feel comfortable in church and heard and believed much of what the media states about Christianity's dislike for gays. I turned my back on Christianity as I had felt it turned its back on me and to this day I do not feel comfortable with any Christian religions, particularly those that condemn homosexuality and put a lot of money into political battles to keep gays and lesbians from marriage. To me, being gay is too important to compromise for a religion.

For several individuals, there were major disconnections between the two layers of identity, even after an active attempt to reconcile spiritual identity with sexual identity.

**Progressive development.** *Progressive development* alluded to the fact that participants anticipated that spiritual development and sexual identity development would be a process that continued on indefinitely throughout their lifetime without full completion (Lerner, 2002). This time of development will be full of new ideas, findings, or opportunities for growth. One participant (White androgynous, nonheterosexual gay, age 22) stated that injustices within her religious community should be anticipated in the future, regardless of one's feeling that everyone should be accepted:

I think in the positive way [spirituality and sexuality] will continue to relate to each other. I can understand the feeling of being a minority because of my sexuality and that helps me understand more of what it means to be a Jew. On the negative side, things might become sticky in a couple years when I'm trying to marry my girlfriend. We will both be Jewish, but less accepted in the community than an interfaith couple. It's not that the interfaith couple shouldn't be accepted. It's that we all should. After college, it will probably affect what religion I end up choosing to follow.

Another student (a White female, lesbian, age 21) preparing to attend graduate school anticipated that her sexuality and spirituality would progress in positive ways:

I am moving across the country and starting law school, so I think I will meet new challenges and continue to develop myself for the better, which I am sure will include my sexuality and spirituality. How? I'm not sure.

Participants also articulated a desire to increasingly understand and master their self identity in the context of the world around them (White male, gay male, age 20):

My inner voice tells me that I'm still learning, but that if I feel good about myself in a way that's connected to my sexuality, I'm doing something right. If I'm becoming a better person and my sexuality is one of the causes of that, then I feel like whatever power there is out there wants me to keep learning about/with my sexuality.

Another gay male student (White, age 20) discussed aspects of reinterpretation through the lens of sexual identity:

With every book I read, every idea I come into contact with, I am forced to reanalyze and re-interpret from a nonheterosexual point of view. And it is this that has taught me so much about myself and others.

Participants were not specific concerning the ways in which they anticipated sexual and spiritual development, yet they were certain that such development would shape their lives after college.

**Arrested development.** *Arrested development* indicated the idea that participants' development had stopped due to other outside forces (Sigelman & Rider, 2009). Several did not anticipate significant changes developing in the next year, or even in the future. Some chose not to explore their spirituality any further. One participant thought her "spirituality will only grow stronger, but right now I am preoccupied with thinking about sex" (White female, questioning/self labeled nonheterosexual/ queer, age 18). As a result, her internal questions about her sexuality were prioritized over her spiritual needs. Several of the students in this category did not anticipate significant changes developing in the next year, or even in the future. Some chose not to explore their spirituality any further.

**Completed development.** Some participants felt that they had attained *completed development*. This was constituted by characteristics of complete spiritual and sexual development, with no anticipation of growth or changes in the future. One person planned to continue "to embrace who I am ... I really do not see my spirituality changing at all in the coming year" (White female, lesbian, age 19). Another stated that he honestly did not think his spirituality would develop any more than it has. He said, "Perhaps the relationships I have because of [my sexual identity] will show some changes, but again my beliefs are far more based on my sexuality than vice versa" (White male, gay male, age 21). Based on the data, participants experienced various processes that developed multiple dimensions of identity; however one group perceived that their identity development process was complete as it related to sexual and spiritual identities.

**Reconciliation.** Finally, *reconciliation* indicated that harmony had been restored between two factions of the self. In the case of this study, reconciliation indicated the harmonious restoration of both spiritual identity and sexual identity for participants. There were several examples of such reconciliation, such as the following example from a White, female, age 22:

My own personal reflections lead me to believe that whatever god, spirit, higher being, whatever, would not create a human or any living creature to be anything it disapproved of in terms of identity. What I mean to say is that I don't think the higher powers believe nonheterosexuality is a sin, especially since people have found happy nonheterosexual relationships that create love in the world.

Another religious gay woman (White, nonheterosexual, age 22), stated that Buddhism and its inherent social justice tenets are crucial to her spiritual and sexual reconciliation:

I feel like Buddhism supports my sexuality. Buddha only spoke against sexuality that was harmful or without consent such as rape. Buddha also preaches a message of compassion and is against suffering, so he would not want anyone to be hated or mistreated because of their sexuality.

Finally, another participant (a White, gay male, age 21) articulated how reconciliation should be inherent to belief and identity:

It is incredibly strange to me how anyone could believe in anything that doesn't allow for something so crucial to their makeup as their sexuality. Indeed, from my point of view, sexuality, amongst other things, should be crucial in shaping your beliefs, as opposed to the other way around.

Reconciliation of the spiritual self and the sexual self was evident in the findings. Participants discussed a number of issues including God's acceptance, compassion, and disdain of suffering by major religions, and sexuality as a crucial part of one's makeup. Based on the characteristics and demographics of the study participants, including participants' definitions of spirituality, and the various understandings of multiple identities, it is clear that various levels of reconciliation, growth, and development are foundational to understanding spiritual and sexual identities simultaneously.

### **Discussion & Implications**

The previous section relayed findings of the study, however this section gives meaning to such data. Further discussion of how these findings connect to the extant literature regarding definitions of spirituality and the intersection of multiple identities is presented below.

#### **Definitions of Spirituality**

Heerman, Wiggins, and Rutter (2007) asserted that when working with gay spiritual and religious issues, practitioners should assess how individuals use spirituality and/or religion to make meaning in their lives. For the participants of this study, acceptance, personal relationships with a powerful essence, and connections to nature were most prevalent. It is clear that the personal relationship that participants experienced with a powerful essence was commonplace. This coincides with Love and Talbot's (1999) notion of spiritual development which involves the exploration of a relationship with "an intangible and pervasive power or essence." Additionally, nature was a recurring theme throughout participant transcripts. This may be a result of the green movement by students on college campuses.



### **Intersection of Multiple Identities**

Throughout this study, the intersection of multiple identities was examined. Yet, at the intersection of those identities, there can be varying ranges of identity interaction and reconciliation. Participants began to become self-authored (Baxter Magolda, 2001); this indicated a time in which the students constructed themselves, by carefully examining each part of oneself while reconstructing a new identity internally. The notion of intersectionality and the more involved notion of reconciliation was a function of how much emphasis participants placed on reconciliation and integration as a priority in their lives, as well as a function of a feeling of empowerment to explore other identities (Stevens, 2004). Based on the findings, LGB students place a high priority on acceptance, regardless of the setting. For example, much of the raw data discussed experiences along the wide spectrum of acceptance. From rejection to embrace, the notion of acceptance rang loudly through the study. Various levels of being willingly received as an LGB individual on college campuses generally, or in spiritual circles specifically, were part of the students' daily realities.

In his study of gay males in the college environment, Stevens' (2004) findings paralleled what was revealed in this study. First, he noted that current sexual orientation models did not address other aspects of identity such as religion in relation to gay identity development. Additionally, he supported the idea that students must come to terms with homosexual identity and how it connects or does not connect to religious identity as a part of their own environments.

### **Implications for Research**

Although this study adopted an emancipatory paradigm of inquiry, it did not garner a racially diverse population. One reason for this may be connected to methodological considerations. As an emancipatory, action researcher, one should find a method that fits who

participants are, including their physical, personal, and intellectual spaces. Scheurich and Young (1997) mentioned that the “critical tradition” or research epistemology includes critical theory, feminism, and lesbian/gay perspectives which start from the experiences of a group that has been “excluded, marginalized, or oppressed over [a] lengthy historical period” (p. 12). Therefore, such epistemologies should be included as a critique of social inequities related to participants’ experiences and as a potential catalyst toward emancipatory social change for those groups.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings from this study relative to definitions of spirituality and the intersection of spiritual and sexual identities also yield several implications for practice by counselors and helpers in higher education settings. Both sets of campus professionals may have contact with LGB students and should take responsibility for fostering these students’ holistic learning and development.

**Implications for counselors and helpers.** To assist counselors and helpers in their work, there must also be a focus on discovering an array of solutions that aid LGB individuals in their process of integrating sexual orientation and spiritual identities. For example, Shuck and Liddle (2001) mentioned that a number of respondents were able to resolve conflicts without abandoning religion or sexual orientation; this was accomplished by accessing people, books, organizations, and other tools to resolve conflict. Empirical exploration of the effectiveness of the previously mentioned tools would aid both counselors and clients by providing an array of options to assist with the integration and sexual orientation.

A holistic approach to the social and cultural support needs of LGB students is appropriate and grounded in a psychological and helping skills philosophy (Reynolds, 2008). Effectively addressing the needs of a marginalized campus population, such as LGB students,

require the development of multicultural competence (Pope, Reynolds, & Mueller, 2004) among counselors and helpers to strengthen the services with which LGB students come into contact. This study's findings indicate that the development of multicultural competence particularly pertaining to sexual identity and spiritual identity would be helpful for counselors and helpers. Specifically, it is necessary for counselors and helpers to recognize the spiritual dimensions of coming out and the sexual identity development process. An awareness and knowledge of the ways social identities influence students' searches for meaning and purpose is recommended in Kocet and Stewart's (2011) discussion of necessary competencies for student affairs professionals. As a result, the findings of this study suggest numerous implications for counselors and helpers in higher education settings: a) increased and ongoing cultural competencies concerning multiple identities, especially the nuances of the coming out process in spiritual and non-spiritual settings; b) creating "hearth-sized" experiences which are "mentoring environments" (Parks, 2000, p. 158) that are "important to forming meaning, purpose, and faith in the young adult years" and "invite reflection and dialogue" (Parks, 2000, p. 154-155) for LGB students; and c) providing "respectful and appropriate space on campus" (Kocet & Stewart, 2011 p. 6) for exercising spiritual and nonspiritual disciplines such as meditation, prayer, reflection, and dialogue.

The complexity of the intersection of spiritual and sexual identity also suggests that counselors and helpers may need to collaborate with religious life professionals to most effectively address the intersection of these identity facets. Collaboration in providing counseling, advice, and interventions to LGB students would be warranted and desirable.

**Implications for religious life practitioners.** Religious life practitioners are situated differently relative to college counselors depending on the institution. Some are campus

employees in religious life, while others may be faith professionals in the community who volunteer to work with specific student groups and organizations. These variances require any recommendations to be somewhat general to accommodate this reality. The recommendations given above for counselors and helpers are also relevant for supporting the multicultural competence of religious life professionals as part of and an enhancement to their full-range of professional competencies. Yet there are some specific recommendations that are unique to the position that religious life professionals serve on campus. As symbolic representatives of specific religious groups, spirituality, and religion generally, and perhaps even of the divine itself in the minds of undergraduate students, religious life professionals must be especially aware of how their attitudes toward and behaviors regarding issues of sexual orientation and identity may serve to support, repress, or even harm the healthy growth and development of a spiritual identity among LGB students. We offer a few practical suggestions for religious life professionals: a) become aware of the warranted or unwarranted perceptions of religious life practitioners/leaders, including the negative and positive aspects of their respective traditions that they may symbolize; b) pursue increased and sustained cultural competence concerning multiple identities, especially the nuances of the coming-out process in spiritual and non-spiritual settings; c) actively seek out opportunities for their faith communities to interact with, rather than avoid, LGB communities; and d) provide settings for comfortable, less structured “hearth-sized” conversations concerning intersectionality and meaning-making. Such practical acts at least begin to more intentionally consider and provide for the spiritual needs of LGB students.

Overall, the findings of this study further undergird the rationale for attending to the spiritual development needs of LGB students, in particular heeding Chickering et al.’s (2006) assertion that spirituality is central to the identity development process. Second, this study

demonstrates the need to initiate and foster collaborative relationships among counseling professionals, helpers, and student support services that emphasize spirituality, religiosity, and/or meaning-making and those which emphasize sexual orientation and identity. Third, this research adds to the growing interdisciplinary literature regarding the intersection of multiple identities.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine how LGB undergraduate students negotiated and defined their spiritual identities during the coming-out process. The participants of this study were overwhelmingly White, but despite a lack of racial diversity, many students defined themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or self-defined. Acceptance, personal relationships with a powerful essence, and connections to nature were all used to describe spirituality. Participants also demonstrated a wide range of developmental stages at the intersection of spiritual identity and sexual identity to include irreconciliation, progressive development, arrested development, completed development, and reconciliation. Such range of intersectinuality indicated that acceptance was a high priority, both spiritually and sexually.

Historically, organized religion has made itself unavailable to LGB individuals, yet LGB individuals invite acceptance and spiritual development in various forms. Using the unique perspective of college counseling practitioners, helpers and religious life professionals who work alongside campus communities, these entities bear the onus of proactively supporting the human, student, and spiritual development trajectories of students who live in one capacity along the spectrum of sexual orientation.

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## Appendix A

*Participant Demographics*

Characteristic	Participant N
<b>Race</b>	
White/Caucasian	46
Asian/Pacific Islanders	5
Chicano/Latino/Hispanic	4
African American/Black	2
American Indian/Alaskan Native	2
<b>Gender</b>	
Women	32
Men	10
Transgender	1
“Self Defined”	4
“Gender Neutral”	1
“Gender Queer”	1
“Androgynous	1
“don’t have one”	1
<b>Sexuality</b>	
Lesbian	16
Gay male	9
Bisexual	12
Questioning	3
Self-identified nonheterosexuals (gay, gay woman, queer, nonheterosexual, pansexual, asexual, bisexual transgender, other)	6
<b>Student Classification</b>	
First Year	11
Sophomore	16
Junior	10
Senior	11
<b>Institutional Type</b>	
4-year public institution	41
Community College	3
4-year private institution	2
2-year public institution	1

*Note:* Data presented in this chart was taken from 1 through 9 of the online survey instrument.