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DEVELOPING QUEER FAITH: EXPLORING EXPERIENCES OF COGNITIVE
DISSONANCE AND IDENTITY INTEGRATION FOR LGBTQ CATHOLICS INDIVIDUALS

Kendal Marie Vaarwerk

University of San Francisco

Signature Page

This dissertation, written under the direction of the candidate's dissertation committee and approved by the committee members, has been presented to and accepted by the faculty of the PsyD Program in Clinical Psychology in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Acknowledgments

At the start of this dissertation, I would like to thank all who have contributed to my personal and professional growth, including my family, friends, faculty, staff, and peers at the University of San Francisco. Specifically, I would like to thank my grandmother, “Nonny Bev,” for her emotional and proofreading support throughout this process.

I am incredibly grateful to those who supported me in developing this project, including the members of this dissertation committee: Dr. Michelle Montagno, Dr. Daniela Domínguez, and Dr. Richard Ferm. Additionally, I want to thank my parents for giving me my roots and wings and my family for supporting me through this endeavor.

I would also like to thank my past and current clients, who contributed to my understanding of this critical research area and served as its inspiration.

Specific Aims

The main aims of this study are:

Specific Aim 1: This study explores the identity development of individuals who identify as both LGBTQ and Catholic. This study will explore their experiences growing up in religious households, religious socialization, discovering their sexuality, and holding both possible conflicting identities.

Specific Aim 2: This study aims to understand the personal experiences of how LGBTQ Catholics manage the tension between their sexual and religious selves, the ways they express their sexual and religious selves, and strategies/techniques they have used to reconcile conflicting identities.

Specific Aim 3: This study aims to identify the personal meaning attributed to one's sexual identity concerning one's religious identity and vice versa amongst LGBTQ Catholics.

Identification of Issue

LGBTQ individuals have been pathologized in psychological research literature even before the Hungarian journalist Karoli Maria Kertbeny first coined the term “homosexual” and “homosexuality” in 1869 (Lewes, 1988). Though the research was growing in understanding sex and sexuality (Kinsey, et al. 1948 & 1953), this was mostly ignored by American Psychology and met with hostility due to the contradictions with past theories and conceptualizations (Lewes, 1988). Yet a nonpathological analysis of LGBTQ individual's life challenges did not appear until the decision in 1973 to redefine ‘homosexuality’ as a disturbance in sexual orientation versus being considered a psychiatric disorder (Adams, 2019); which was followed by the removal of “Ego Dystonic Homosexuality” in 1987 with the publication of the revised third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III-R) and in 1990, when the

World Health Organization finally removed Homosexuality from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) (Adams, 2019; Cochran, et al., 2014). These changes were strongly influenced by the courageous gay activism across the country in the mid-20th century, who stood up and rejected the stigmatizing and pathological model of sexuality to ultimately bring modern sex research theories to the attention of the American Psychological Association (Adams, 2019; Cochran, et al., 2014).

However, despite this reformed, nonpathological approach to sexual orientation, current research suggests that LGBTQ individuals experience poorer emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes when compared to their heterosexual youth counterparts (Goldbach, Fisher, & Dunlap, 2015). Specifically, LGBTQ individuals raised in religious environments that convey non-affirming messages regarding LGBTQ attractions, behaviors, and identities may experience significant cognitive dissonance regarding their sexual orientation and religious identities (Anderton, Pender, & Kashubeck-West et al., 2017). Affiliation with such an institution result in higher internalized homo-negativity and negative views towards same-sex attraction (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013), which results in difficulty reconciling their sexual identities with their religious beliefs (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

Yet, it appears that researchers have jumped ahead to examining religious identity/sexual identity tension resolution strategies before fully exploring or understanding what this experience is like for the LGBTQ Catholic individuals experiencing this type of identity tension. In this jumping ahead, four general categories of coping strategies were identified that LGBTQ Catholics utilized to alleviate this tension: (1) Rejecting one's religious or sexual orientation identity; (2) compartmentalization; (3) identity integration; and (4) seeking a more affirming religious or spiritual faith (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Of those who utilized these conflict resolution

strategies, research has consistently shown that people in the later stages of identity integration report lower levels of negative beliefs and feelings about their LGB identity; and displayed a more positive sexual identity development than those who utilized a different conflict resolution strategy (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). With this gap in understanding the LGBQ Catholic experience of potential identity conflict, this study aims to focus more in-depth on the experiences of LGBQ Catholic individuals who believe they have integrated these two potentially conflicting identities and to better understand the process of incorporating multiple identities. Overall, integrating religious and sexual identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

This project was an exploratory study to better understand the identity development process and the integration process for those who specifically choose to remain a part of the Catholic church and identify as LGBQ. A interpretative phenomenological analysis approach was used to determine themes around identity development and dissonance experienced by LGBQ Catholics. This study's utilization of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology made it possible to identify common themes observed across participants and better understand the individualized experience of dissonance within oneself and the ultimate integration of these identities. The utilization of IPA provided a rich and complex account of each individual's lived experience on their terms, which allowed for a fuller understanding of the experience of integrating these possibly conflicting identities of LGBQ and Catholic. Most studies relating to tension between religious and sexual identities are dated and sociologically oriented (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczk-Skrzypek, 2016). This and the gaps in the research discussed above emphasize the need for this research to better understand the experience of

LGBQ Catholic's identity development, possible cognitive dissonance experienced, and the integration process of these identities.

Alignment with USF Values

This project aligns with the University of San Francisco's values in several ways; specifically, it is committed to advancing the Jesuit Catholic tradition. This study aimed to understand the role of religion in the lives of those who integrated both their religious and sexual identities. Therefore, the university's overarching culture promotes the acceptance of people of all faiths and backgrounds.

Second, it aims to understand the needs of a historically underserved community, which is a central value of the University of San Francisco. As a Jesuit Catholic institution, USF promotes the ideals of “cura personalis,” or “care for the whole person.” This study aimed to understand how LGBQ Catholic individuals have been denied a holistic approach to their care and are often left feeling like they need to choose one of these identities over the other.

Chapter One: Introduction

An individual's religious identity includes their "distinctive religious group affiliation and respective beliefs" (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991, p. 87). Pew Forum on Religion and American Life (2011) found that 92% of United States Americans report believing in God; 83% are members of a religious organization; 81% report actively engaging in prayer; 54% had attended a religious service within the last month, and 39% indicated they had participated in a religious service within the past seven days (Anderton et al., 2011). This suggests that religion is a large part of the American culture, specifically Catholicism, which accounts for about 1/5 of the US adult population's religious identity (Anderton et al., 2011).

When choosing further to understand the experiences of identity development, cognitive dissonance, and identity integration among individuals who identify as both LGBTQ and Catholics, the existing research around tension or dissonance between one's religion and sexual orientation has been mostly limited to looking at only the LGBTQ Christian experience (Anderton et al., 2011; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; D'Augelli, 1994; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019; Mahaffy, 1996; Page et al., 2013; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Szymanski, Kashubeck-West & Meyer, 2008). Despite this research being backed by LGBTQ Catholic studies, this researcher decided to expand on this understanding of the tension between one's sexual orientation and religious identity through a more expansive lens that attempts to limit the perpetuation of this bias. This was made possible through this researcher's decision to take a qualitative approach to this study to have the opportunity to expand on the existing and limiting literature. Additionally, this researcher chose to focus on the experience of individuals who identify as Catholic; due to its large following in the United States, the researcher's personal experience as someone who once

identified as Catholic, and the existing research surrounding the experiences of individuals who identify as both Catholic and LGBQ.

This relationship between one's religious and sexual identity is complicated and can be both harmful and helpful in the identity development of those who identify as both LGBQ and Catholic. Religious identity/sexuality identity conflict occurs when an LGBQ individual experiences tension or dissonance between their religious identity and an emerging or present sexual identity that is non-heterosexual (Anderton et al., 2011). These conflicts permeated through homophobic church sermons, bible verses describing one's sexual identity as a "sin," stigma within one's family and congregation, and more (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016).

Previous research suggests that when individuals who identify as LGBQ and Catholic are experiencing both or either external and internal tensions between these two possibly contradicting identities, the most utilized cognitive dissonance resolution strategies are: disaffiliating from non-affirming churches or religions; seeking out new organizations, congregations or religions; focusing on the development of a spiritual identity rather than a religious one; compartmentalizing; integration; and abandoning religions and spirituality altogether (Anderton et al., 2011). Of these different coping strategies for LGB Catholics, Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) found that those individuals who integrated these conflicting identities displayed more positive sexual identity development. Therefore, this study aimed to understand and more fully explore how one integrates both conflicting selves, what effect dissonance has on identity development, and how to best support others working towards harmoniously incorporating both identities.

Definition of Terms

Affirming and non-affirming religions. In the present study, religions that convey negative

messages about same-sex attractions, behaviors, and identities will be considered non-affirming. In contrast, institutions adopting more tolerant stances of same-sex attractions, behaviors, and identities will be referred to as affirming.

Bisexual. Denoting or relating to a person who is sexually attracted not exclusively to people of one particular gender; attracted to both men and women (Eliason, 2014).

Catholicism. The faith, practice, and church order of the Roman Catholic Church.

Cognitive Dissonance. When an individual experiences tension between two psychologically inconsistent thoughts or beliefs (Festinger, 1957).

Faith. In the Catholic context, faith is understood both as a gift of God and as requiring a human response of assent and trust, so faith is something concerning which people are both receptive and active (Bishop, 2016).

Gay. Generally used as denoting or relating to a person who identifies as a man who is sexually attracted to men (Eliason, 2014). It is important to note that this term has also been used by women and individuals who identify as nonbinary to denote their sexual attraction to people of their sex.

Homosexual. Denoting or relating to a person who is sexually attracted to people of their sex (Eliason, 2014). A primary or exclusive attraction to individuals of one's gender (Herek, 2000). It is important to note that this is an outdated term that is not often used in the LGBTQ community.

Internalized Heterosexism. It represents negative feedback received by LGBTQ individuals from their immediate environment and society, which is then adopted and directed inward as self-rejection (Page et al., 2013).

Internalized Homophobia. A negative self-evaluation for being LGBTQ (Friedman & Downy, 2008). It has been long observed that the interaction between the individual and the environment

can significantly affect the process of sexual identity formation (Cass, 1979).

Lesbian. Generally used as denoting or relating to a person who identifies as a female who is sexually attracted to women (Eliason, 2014).

Religiosity Vs. Religious Tradition. Religiosity is the devoutness or importance of religion in one's life. In contrast, religious tradition categorizes religious beliefs into prominent families with a core belief system and history (Longo, et al., 2018). Differentiating religious tradition and religiosity is essential as they can impact attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (Longo, et al., 2018). Religiosity can have explanatory value beyond religious tradition in predicting attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors (Longo, et al., 2018). Religion also operates on the social identity level. When speaking of faith as identity, "we are speaking about religion at the group level, expressed by the individual and experienced by them as a label" (Anderton et al., 2011, p. 263).

LGBQ. This terminology is often used to describe the general population who do not fit stereotypical gender and sexuality norms in the United States. Specifically, Ferris (2006) stated: "The LGBT community is composed of people who feel their gender and sexuality are different from that of mainstream society... The LGBT community has no clear boundaries and is being refined every day. Terms are changing, and definitions are constantly evolving" (p. 9).

Religious Identity. Refers to a person's "distinctive religious group affiliation and respective beliefs" (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991, p. 87).

Sexual Orientation Identity. It involves a person's self-definition as a sexual being and consists of recognizing and accepting one's sexual orientation (Anderton et al., 2011). This researcher will utilize the terms sexual orientation and sexual identity throughout this document interchangeably with the term of sexual orientation identity.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The present study seeks to better understand the identity development/integration process for individuals with Catholic and LGBTQ identities. I examined how LGBTQ Catholics navigate identity tension; what their experiences are/were of attempting to or resolving/integrating these possibly conflicting identities; and the impact of these conflicting identities on their identity development and integration process. The goal was to better understand and support individuals experiencing tension amongst their identities and difficulty integrating their many intersecting identities.

The literature review was designed to guide the reader through the many essential topics involved in this research topic, starting from more general to more specific. First, I introduce identity development as a process that is unique to every individual to identify particular theories of general identity development then. All these theories recognize that conflict is what drives development change. This idea started with Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development. The many views I have chosen to include in this paper are built upon these concepts, specifically Marcia's (1966) Four Phases of Ego Identity Development. Marcia (1966) is mentioned first because of his work to expand on Erikson's model to involve crisis, commitment, and exploration.

Narrowing in, even more, I then bring attention to two theories around religious identity development: Fowler's (1981) Model of Faith Development and Beit-Hallahmi's (1991) Conceptualization of Religious Identity. These theories are discussed for the reader to identify that religious identity operates on many levels, such as social, individual, and group levels. In addition, the dominant model of faith development for the past two decades has been James

Fowler's Theory of Faith Stages (Piper, 2002). I then highlight one linear or hierarchical model of sexual identity development: Cass's (1979) Linear Model of Homosexual Identity, and two nonlinear or dynamic models: D'Augelli's (1994) Model of LGB Identity Development and Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) Nonlinear Model of Homosexual Identity Development. I chose to highlight these models to understand what was once assumed in the 20th century, that identity was achieved in adulthood and endured for the rest of one's life (Cass, 1979), as well as to identify the new understanding of identity development as a set of processes that occur in no specific order, remaining flexible throughout one's life through D'Augelli's (1994) and Lapinski and McKirnan's (2013) models.

Then I focus on mental health outcomes for those who identify as Catholic, LGBQ, and both LGBQ and Catholic. Here I will incorporate Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model to conceptualize specific internal and interpersonal processes that may affect LGBQ individuals. Here I bring attention to Festinger's (1957) theory of Cognitive Dissonance, Heider's (1958) theory of Cognitive Consistency, and Baumeister, Shapiro, and Tice's (1985) theory of Identity Conflict to better understand the discomfort and distress experienced with identity conflict. These theories were chosen because one can conceptualize the framework for understanding the psychological pain experienced by those who identify as both LGBQ and Catholic.

Finally, reaching the heart of this research question, I discuss the diverse ways that LGBQ Catholics are coping with this dissonance and integrating or resolving these possible conflicting identities. Here, the different resolution strategies for dealing with this tension between sexual identity and religious beliefs are discussed, such as rejection of sexual identity, rejection of Catholic identity, integration of sexual and Catholic identities, and compartmentalization (Anderton et al., 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Then I lead the reader to focus on the subgroup of LGBTQ Catholic individuals that integrated these possible conflicting identities. I do this by identifying the diverse strategies used by LGBTQ Catholics to resolve the dissonance. Then bring attention to Shallenberger's (1998) theory of the Identity Integration Process because of his focus on three key issues that LGBTQ Catholics grapple with throughout their identity development process: 1) questioning, 2) reintegration, and 3) reclaiming (Shallenberger, 1998). In qualitative research, the literature review is designed to present relevant topics that may emerge from the interviews. The discussion section of the finished project will highlight results that are similar, different, or not present in the research. Therefore, this literature review is organized to understand and explore more fully: How one integrates both conflicting selves, what effect dissonance has on identity development, and how to best support others working towards harmoniously integrating both identities.

Identity Development

An individual holds multiple identities simultaneously, including race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, age, and socio-economic status (Hays, 2016). Several studies have examined genetic, environmental, or individual factors that may play a role in identity development (D'Augelli, 1994; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019; and Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). For this research project, I will be focusing on only two of these identities: 1) religious affiliation (Catholic) and 2) sexual orientation (LGBTQ). An individual's religious identity refers to a person's "distinctive religious group affiliation and respective beliefs" (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991, p. 87), and an individual's sexual orientation identity involves a person's self-definition as a sexual being and involves the recognition and acceptance of one's sexual orientation (Anderton et al., 2011).

It was generally assumed in the 20th century that one's identity was achieved in early adulthood and endured throughout the lifespan (Cass, 1979; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Yet, D'Augelli (1994) challenged those assumptions and argued that identity develops and changes over one's life span due to changing social and environmental conditions (D'Augelli, 1994). D'Augelli believed others played a pivotal role in forming and acquiring one's identities through developing an understanding of their identities in coordination with others (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Additionally, suggesting that as environmental conditions change, so do the individuals experiencing the change (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Therefore, requiring the individual to adjust to their specific context. As individuals and the environments around them shift and change, individuals may go and change their identities to fit the changing environment best. Any change at one level influences changes in other levels, which also impact one's development (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). By levels, D'Augelli identifies that one cannot view identity development as separate from the environment but as part of the interactive process (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). This view aligns with the postmodern notions of identity, where identity development is experienced as fluid, multifaceted, and ever-changing, as well as human development over the lifespan (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). This assumes that over the course of a human's life, the individual continues to develop and change (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). However, models and theories related to identity development differ in scope, format, and underlying epistemological assumptions (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). These perspectives range from being based on assumptions of a universal linear experience of identity development that relies more on the social context of the developing person (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Theories of Identity Development. Identity is an “ever-evolving core” within oneself where the person's genetics, culture, family/friends, traditions, race/ethnicity, experiences, and

choices come together to form who they are (Palmer, 2008). Identity formation refers to the process of developing and holding these distinct identities. Specifically, Marcia's (1966) Identity Status Theory directly addresses the process of identity formation and development. He based his theory after focusing and expanding on Erikson's (1956 & 1963) concept of an identity crisis as the failure to achieve ego identity in adolescence. The fifth of his eight stages of psychosocial development is referred to as 'Identity versus Role Confusion' (Erikson, 1956, 1963).

Marcia (1966) believed identity tension in adolescence is the disparity between identity achievement and identity confusion. He outlined four stages of ego identity development: (1) Identity Diffusion, (2) Identity Foreclosure, (3) Identity Moratorium, and (4) Identity Achievement (Marcia, 1966). To identify which stage an individual may be in, one must consider a combination of an individual's level of exploration, crisis, and commitment (Marcia, 1966). Therefore, Identity Diffusion is marked by a general avoidance of exploring or making commitments across life-defining areas, essentially a stage of little investment (Marcia, 1966). Identity Foreclosure is when an individual has committed without exploring alternatives, usually accepting traditional values and cultural norms (Marcia, 1966). Moratorium involves little or no commitment and much exploration of possible options (Marcia, 1966). Identity Achievement is often experienced after an individual overcomes or experiences an identity crisis and undergoes identity exploration (Marcia, 1966). This can lead to the individual committing to holding this identity. In other words, during identity formation, individuals are at the least engaged stage of identity development. They are considered diffused, while those who have explored and committed to identity are considered achieved (Marcia, 1966). Going on to suggested that identity development status is likely related to self-esteem and proneness to anxiety or psychological distress (Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016).

In addition to Marcia's (1966) theory of identity formation, several other theories focus on the socialization of identity development, such as Tajfel's (1972) Social Identity Theory. This theory suggests that an essential part of identity development during adolescence is understanding and acknowledging the social groups with whom one identifies (Page et al., 2013). Additionally, engagement in a social group supports the development of insight into the emotional significance that being a part of that particular group can hold for that individual (Page et al., 2013). Tajfel (1972) was not alone in this thinking. Turner and colleagues (1987) identified the Self-Categorization Theory, which discusses the tendency for people to self-categorize themselves into separate groups, and that those groups form essential parts of that individual's identity.

Additionally, Burr's (2015) Theory of Social Constructionism argued that constant courses of socialization with people who "share the same society or culture" lead to the construction of identity (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Social constructionists contend that humans come together to create and shape an everyday reality. Though individuals can see and experience the same situation, we may walk away with different understandings and knowledge of that reality (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Identity development involves making sense of each individual's existence and where they "fit" within it. Identity development is key to the study of emerging adulthood. For many individuals, this period of life is one in which they explore and come to terms with their intersecting identities (Scroggs, et al., 2018).

Intersectionality

Kimberle Crenshaw, in the 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics," first introduced the term intersectionality to address the marginalization of Black

women at the intersection of antidiscrimination law, feminist theory, and antiracist theory (Carbado, et al., 2013). Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is rooted in the experiences of Black women, who are frequently the product of "intersecting patterns of racism and sexism and how these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourse of either feminism or antiracism" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1241). Intersectional identity as both women and people of color recognizes that the problem is not the frames but the narratives of these frames. Research frequently frames gender through the lens of white women's experiences; the narratives of these frames as a race are based on Black men's experiences, leaving women of color frequently marginalized. In other words, those frames and narratives have privileged some experiences and excluded others (Crenshaw, 1991).

Consistent with Critical Race Theory, the goal of intersectionality is to understand the social dynamics of power and to bring light to the interplay of oppressive aspects to change them (Carbado, et al., 2013). Crenshaw (1989) exposed and sought to dismantle the embodiment of marginalization within institutionalized systems that validate the existing power relations and articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy on Black women. However, it is essential to understand that "there are other sites where power structures intersect" (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1243). Crenshaw's focus on the intersections of racism and sexism also highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed (Crenshaw, 1991)

Since Kimberle Crenshaw publicized "Demarginalizing" and "Mapping," scholars and activists have broadened intersectionality to engage a range of social identities to examine the interplay of power dynamics, discriminatory legal and political systems, and oppressive structures in the United States and beyond (Carbado, et al., 2013, p. 304). Individuals holding

different genders, ethnicities, and sexual orientations simultaneously have utilized intersectionality to understand their ever-widening range of experiences. Intersectionality, like Critical Race Theory, is a concept animated by the imperative of social change (Carbado, et al., 2013).

Intersectionality may provide the means for dismantling other marginalization, such as heterosexism and racism. It can serve as a basis for a critique of churches and other cultural institutions that reproduce heterosexism (Crenshaw, 1991). Examining the intersections of racism, heterosexism, and non-affirming religious doctrines, according to Sneed (2008), the Black church is a source of comfort in a hostile world, yet its members and leaders often prevent Black queer men from receiving that comfort (Sneed, 2008).

Similarly, considering the intersection of heterosexism, non-affirming religious doctrines, and legal systems, 20 states have laws banning conversion “therapy” for minors. One state has regulations in place that partially restrict (no use of taxpayer dollars to go to these practices, and state-licensed professionals are not prohibited from practicing) conversion “therapy” for minors, and 29 states have no laws or policies in place around conversion “therapy” (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2020). Of important note, conversion "therapy" laws do not restrict practice among religious providers (MAP, 2020). Additionally, the experience of LGBTQ parishioners can vary widely across dioceses and parishes (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017). Many Catholic communities reach out to welcome LGBTQ members within the limits of the Church, while other parishes have denied membership to LGBTQ individuals and families (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017).

Through an awareness of intersectionality, we can better acknowledge the different experiences among diverse populations, within groups, and the interplay of simultaneously held

oppressive identities to urge the expression and consideration in constructing group policies (Crenshaw, 1991). Rooted in Black feminism and Critical Race Theory, intersectionality can lead to mutual acknowledgment of how structures of oppression are related and can create a connection around shared experiences of discrimination, marginalization, and privilege (Carbado, et al., 2013). Despite intersectionality's global engagement, expansion, and continued potential, it is essential to be cognizant and appreciative of its frame to understand better the experiences of Black women and women of color. Utilizing and remaining mindful of this intersectional lens/framework in this study provided context and understanding of the multiple oppressions that may be experienced by LGBQ Catholics, specifically women of color.

Religious Identity Development

There have been innumerable attempts at defining 'religion(s),' and the discussion continues. Yet, no definition can capture the entirety of relevant historical or contemporary religious phenomena within the world (Kim, 2020). These multiple attempts at defining religion(s) include:

- (a) James (1958, p. 42) "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you to take it arbitrarily, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand about whatever they may consider the divine;"
- (b) Durkheim (1995, P. 44) "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden beliefs and practices which unite one moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them;"

(c) Drooger (2009, p. 277) “Religion is the field of experiencing the sacred, a field in which both believers and scholars act; each category is applying the human capacity for play, within the constraints of power mechanisms, to the articulation of basic human dichotomies, thus adding an extra dimension to their construction and view of reality;”

This array of selective definitions of religion(s) suggests the impossibility of fixing the purpose of religion (Kim, 2020). These differences vary in community involvement, traditional practices, active versus passive involvement, and individual experiences.

Similarly, the definition of faith has also been widely regarded in the Abrahamic, theist, and religious traditions as unified enough for an inquiry into its nature to make sense, even if a successful real definition is too much to expect (Bishop, 2016). “Faith may be a state one is in or comes to be in; it may also essentially involve something one does” (Bishop, 2016, p. 3). Therefore, it is essential to obtain an adequate account of faith by encompassing affective, cognitive, and practical components of faith (Bishop, 2016). In the Catholic context, faith is understood both as a gift of God and as requiring a human response of assent and trust so that their faith is something concerning which people are both receptive and active (Bishop, 2016).

For many people in the United States, religion and faith serve as a source of strength, promote community and cultural functions, and help develop self-identity and values (Kashubeck-West, et al., 2017). Additionally, there is a clear consensus in the literature on happiness that people with religious or spiritual beliefs are happier than those who do not, no matter what they physically possess (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016). Went on to state that religious beliefs give people a “sense of the meaning of life, a sense of wellbeing or comfort and a genuine social network” (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016).

Religion operates on an individual identity level, as well as a social identity level or group level (Anderton et al., 2011; & Kashubeck-West, et al., 2017), and an individual's religious identity refers to the individual's "distinctive religious group affiliation and respective beliefs (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991, p. 87)." Specifically, Beit-Hallahmi (1991) conceptualized religious identity in three different ways, these include: (1) By a religious community (either consciously or unconsciously); (2) a social identity (made up of several sub-identities); and (3) an ego-identity (a religious sub-identity, which may or may not be a source of support and integration) (Beit-Hallahmi, 1991). As a central societal institution, religion plays a significant role in shaping the trajectories and transitions of people's lives. Several theories of religious identity development have been conceptualized, specifically Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith.

Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith. Based on interviews with hundreds of people, Fowler (1981) created his model of faith development to inform notions of religious identity development, which includes the following six stages: (1) intuitive-projective; (2) mythic-literal; (3) synthetic-conventional; (4) individual-reflective; (5) conjunctive; and (6) universalizing (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). In the first stage (intuitive projective), children typically display magical thinking and rely on their faith caregivers to provide a religious blueprint (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). When children develop logical reasoning, they move into the second stage (mythic literal), where they can distinguish make-believe from reality (Fowler, 1981). When individuals reach puberty, they develop their faith based on the familial, environmental, intrapersonal, and social influences in their lives, which moves the individual into the next stage, the synthetic, conventional stage (Fowler, 1981). It is important to note that the first three stages of Fowler's model are primarily driven by the individual's evolving cognitive abilities (Piper, 2002). Although most individuals stay in this stage until their 20s, some might remain in this

stage until their 40s or even for their entire life (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). The fourth, individuative-reflective, is the first stage that includes critical reflection of one's faith (Fowler, 1981). Individuals in this stage experience and address tensions between group membership and individualism, as well as between objectivity and subjectivity (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). The fifth or conjunctive stage typically occurs in midlife, when an individual recognizes their faith is subjective and multi-dimensional (Fowler, 1981). The final stage, universalizing, is rarely achieved but often strived for (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). Individuals in this stage usually stand out as leaders committed to justice, selflessness, and love (Fowler, 1981). Additionally, many youths become skeptical of institutionalized religion and question religious beliefs developed during their earlier years, and some grow to identify as nonreligious or agnostic (Fowler, 1981; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Smith & Snell, 2009).

Critique of Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith. The most influential American theory of faith development originated in the late 1960s when a young Methodist minister named James Fowler established the dominant model of the faith development of the past two decades: Fowler's Theory of Faith Stages (Piper, 2002). Fowler describes a triadic faith model involving the self, others, and a shared center of value and power. According to Piper (2002), Fowler's inclusiveness and neutral theological perspective sidestep the debate within diverse theist perspectives (Piper, 2002). In other words, scholars propose that Fowler's concentration on the process of faith development rather than the content of that faith allows others to utilize this model both within and across different traditions (Piper, 2002). Some suggest that one of the greatest strengths of this theory is its inclusiveness by focusing on the process rather than the content of faith development (Piper, 2002).

Fowler's theory suggests that stages in faith development are "hierarchical, sequential, and invariant (Piper, 2002)." This means that one wants to reach the higher stages and cannot get to the higher stages until achieving every one of the lower stages, which are always experienced in the same order (Piper, 2002). According to Piper (2002), a complete model of faith development must include a more holistic and nonuniform rather than a cognitive-structural, linear, and hierarchical (Piper, 2002). Fowler's stages of faith model should not be used alone to educate clients/students about religious identity development. Despite that, this model has established a strong foundation for understanding the process of spiritual identity development.

Sexual Orientation Identity Development

Sexuality is a fundamental dimension of every human being. It is reflected physiologically, psychologically, and relationally in a person's gender identity, primary sexual orientation, and behavior (Anderton et al., 2011). For some young individuals, this means discovering one's is "sexual oriented predominately toward persons of the same sex" or both sexes (Liuzzi, 2001, p. 21). One's sexual orientation is used to describe an individual's sexual behavior, psychological attraction, psychological identities, and social or cultural roles (Herek, 2000). Sexual identity development is a complex process involving a person's self-definition as a sexual being and consists of recognizing and accepting one's sexual orientation (Anderton et al., 2011). Therefore, the process of sexual identity development for LGBTQ individuals is multifaceted and complex.

Research suggests that while young adults are engaged in developing an LGBTQ identity, they may experience more psychological distress based on specific environmental and societal factors (Meyer, 2013; Page et al., 2013; Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016). I will discuss

three primary models that have been developed to characterize sexual identity development: Cass (1979), D'Augelli (1994), and Lapinski and McKirnan (2013).

Cass's (1979) Linear Model of Homosexual Identity. Cass (1979) proposed a linear, six-stage model, which suggests that people progress from identity confusion and comparisons, through acceptance and pride, to identity synthesis. The first stage, identity confusion, includes tension between assumed heterosexuality and same-sex sexual desires (Cass, 1984). In the next step, identity comparison, individuals compare their sexuality to heterosexuals and often experience isolation (Cass, 1984). Identity tolerance, stage three, addresses this isolation through individuals actively seeking out other LGB individuals (Cass, 1984). After acknowledging their LGBQ identity or gaining acceptance of their sexual identity, individuals begin to develop identity pride (Cass, 1979). However, a large part of this stage is the individual's expression and feelings of anger towards experiences and messages of homophobia and heterosexism that can be present in our society (Cass, 1984). This final stage, identity synthesis, includes recognizing that sexual orientation is only one aspect of identity (Cass, 1984).

D'Augelli's (1994; 2006) Model of LGB Identity Development. D'Augelli's 6-phase model follows the development of LGB individuals assimilating internal and external processes to form a self-identity (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). These six processes are not linear developmental stages, meaning that individuals may experience more significant development in one process than another and possibly experience a regression to a previously developed process throughout one's life span (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). The first process involves the individual "exiting heterosexual identity" (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006). Exiting heterosexuality means recognizing that the individual must adopt a new identity/label (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). The second process is developing a personal LGB identity status (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006).

This status is their own, resonates with the individual, and provides a “sense of personal socio-affectual stability that effectively summarizes thoughts, feelings, and desires” (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019, p. 153). Here, an individual must challenge internalized myths about what it means to be LGBTQ (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

During this process, social interaction with others who identify as LGBTQ is crucial in developing one’s LGB identity so that learning from others and modeling/normalizing behaviors can occur (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). This vital influence of relationships with others who can confirm ideas about what it means to be non-heterosexual can propel individuals into the third process, which is developing an LGB social identity (D’Augelli, 1994; 2006; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). This is where an individual develops and finds more community support and friendships by creating a safe and affirming support network of people who know and accept the individual’s sexual orientation. The fourth process is becoming an LGB offspring (D’Augelli, 1994; 2006; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019), which involves disclosing one’s identity to their caregivers/family (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019) and possibly, renegotiating their familial relationships after the disclosure (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). It is important to note that there are no set stages to achieve and for individuals not to feel discouraged if their disclosure experience is slower or looks different from someone else in their life or even the broader culture (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

The fifth process is developing an LGB intimacy status; this forces the emergence of “personal, couple-specific, and community norms (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019, p. 154)”, which should be more individualized to the experience and needs of the individual (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019, p. 154). The last process, or the sixth, involves entering an LGB community; this requires a commitment to “political and social action and changing social barriers ”

(Goodrich & Brammer, 2019, p. 155)”; this should also be individualized based on the comfort levels and interests of the individual. Some LGB individuals never take this step, while others take significant personal risks (e.g., rejection, loss of job/housing) to engage in this process (D’Augelli, 1994; 2006; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

D’Augelli believed that to have a meaningful identity; one must have a conscious awareness of oppression and work to resist it (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). Overall, D’Augelli’s model of Sexual Orientation Development offers a lifespan perspective of LGB identity development that includes an exit from heterosexuality, developing an LGB social identity, and entering an LGB community (D’Augelli, 1994; 2006). D’Augelli’s (1994) model views identity development as a set of processes that occur in no specific order, remaining flexible throughout one’s entire life, which aligns with Lapinski and McKirnan’s (2013) nonlinear model of homosexual identity development.

Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) Nonlinear Model of Homosexual Identity

Development. This model proposed a general, nonlinear identity process that views LGB identity as consisting of three primary functions: formation and conflict, acceptance, and integration (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Identity formation involves becoming aware of one’s sexual orientation and discovering what it means to be LGB (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). During this time, the individual may begin to explore their same-sex attraction, often in a safe environment where their identity cannot be jeopardized (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). This process usually consists of confusion, denial, and exploration for LGB individuals (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). As time progresses, the individual may increasingly accept the term LGBTQ as descriptive of themselves, which supports the individual to enter the following process of

identity acceptance (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Lastly, identity integration involves accepting and committing oneself to one's sexual orientation (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

Comparing the Models: These three models of Sexual Orientation Identity Development are similar and diverse in many ways. A fundamental similarity across these models is that each model includes an element of social connection as a critical component of an individual's identity development. These models also display limitations in their absence of consideration of the Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) and their lack of versatility. These LGBTQ identity development models should not be used alone to educate individuals about sexual identity development (Goodrich, & Brammer, 2019). Yet, these models have established a foundation for working with individuals undergoing sexual identity development processes.

Variables to Sexual Orientation Identity Formation. Overall, sexuality can play an integral part in the human experience of living and relating. Even if one were to develop a positive LGBTQ self-concept, there might be certain family dynamics, workplaces, or geographic locations that may not permit someone to disclose their sexual identity, either for personal safety or to protect one's relationships or financial security (Goodrich, & Brammer, 2019). Specifically, D'Augelli (1994) noted that variables are embedded in his theory involved in this identity formation process. Such as understanding one's perceptions and feelings about sexual identity, sexual behaviors, and the meanings attached (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006). Additionally, aspects outside the individual's control, such as influences of family, peers, intimate partnerships, social norms, policies, and laws, can play a role in an individual's sexual identity formation (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006).

Research findings also indicate that multiple aspects of identity formation can fall vulnerable to a combination of stressful experiences that can reflect adverse reactions and overt

victimization due to identifying as LGB (Page et al., 2013). These include the role of self-esteem, sexual history, and awareness of LGB identity earlier, which have been shown to have a significant relationship to one's LGB identity process about a positive LGB identity (D'Augelli, 2006; Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016). Findings suggest that youths who self-identified and self-disclosed LGB at a younger age reported more lifetime victimization (D'Augelli, 2006). Yet, an individual's sexual history was significantly related to a positive LGB identity, with participants whose histories consisted of same-sex only partners displaying a more positive LGB identity (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

The developmental processes of LGBQ youths must consider factors other than sexual orientation factors, especially the many forms of stigmatization and victimization youth experience (D'Augelli, 2006). Henrickson's (2007) Lavender Island study revealed that individuals with a Catholic upbringing took longer to recognize feeling different from their peers and self-disclosed their LGBQ identity later than those individuals raised non-religiously, suggesting that religious indoctrination may delay the achievement of sexual identity milestones (Stern & Wright, 2018). They are establishing a positive sense of oneself as LGBQ can be a highly complex and potentially difficult process in navigating through invalidating messages and intolerance from others (Page et al., 2013). Current research trends have established the impact of online platforms and other forms of media, which have been found to assist LGBQ individuals' ability to seek out role models (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019). In addition to playing a significant role in one's decision to come out, positive role models can allow for feelings of group identification, hope, happiness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019; Schrogg et al., 2018).

Coming out. LGBQ individuals experience a distinct developmental trajectory due in part to the “coming out” process and the fact that LGBQ individuals exist as ‘outsiders’ in a heteronormative society (Liuzzi, 2001). This process has been identified (whether directly or indirectly) within each of the LGBQ identity development theories discussed previously. Coming out or being out can be described and experienced as a gradual process that includes one’s awareness and disclosure of sexual preferences and identity. In today’s heteronormative society, “coming out” is never a once-and-for-all moment. It is a daily task at work, play, church, school, and elsewhere (Liuzzi, 2001). Studies have found that an LGBQ individual’s “outness” to their primary social networks was significantly related to a positive and a negative sexual identity (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). This means that the more an individual felt safe and comfortable expressing their sexual identity with others, the more positive their sense of sexual identity appeared.

Additionally, many LGBQ youth do not disclose their identities to their families due to fear of experiencing familial rejection. Individual and community support resources can act as buffers in these cases where the individual may experience negative social and domestic responses to their LGBQ identity. Social support systems, emotional regulation, resilience, and involvement in the LGBQ community can act as moderators that weaken the positive association between micro-aggressions and mental health issues (Goldbach et al., 2015). The life experiences of LGBQ youths must be mindful of the possible developmental challenges they may face before, during, and after puberty. It must also address the social contexts of these experiences because of the cultural stigma they face (D’Augelli, 2006).

Catholicism and Mental Health

According to Rizvi and Hossain (2016), people who are “believers” have a particular mindset that includes a belief in the power of prayer, the belief in an afterlife, the sense of mutually looking after one another, and the belief that because there is a higher power, things happen for a reason, which aids in making sense of tragedy (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016). It is said that religious beliefs give people a “sense of meaning of life, a sense of wellbeing or comfort and a genuine social network” (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016, p. 1562). Most individuals regard religion as essential to their daily lives to obtain peace and happiness and report better psychosocial adjustment (Rizvi & Hossain, 2016). However, higher levels of religiosity have also been associated with a few adverse psychosocial outcomes (Longo et al., 2018). Outcomes such as increased levels of guilt, higher levels of authoritarianism, higher levels of fear and alienation, higher levels of scrupulosity, and increased levels of depression were observed among certain groups (Longo et al., 2018).

Religious Stress. Religious stress entails any difficulty or tension that an LGBQ youth may feel from their religion or spiritual beliefs (Page et al., 2013). Some examples of religious stress are reconciling one’s desire to stray away from abstinence before marriage because it is sinful, incongruent behaviors of members of the congregation at church and outside of the church, balancing beliefs of religion as a source of war and peace, and messages about one’s sexual orientation as immoral (Page et al., 2013). Exactly why some people take a more positive outlook toward religion while others take a more negative view, scholars do not yet (Page et al., 2013). Future studies should be conducted to explore this topic better. Although religion is generally associated with positive psychosocial outcomes for adolescents, LGBQ youth may feel rejected by their religion or may cease practicing a religion due to tension with their sexual orientation (Page et al., 2013). In some cases, individuals may come out of a religious struggle

feeling more whole, particularly those who have support from the community throughout their struggle (Pargament, 1997).

Religious Coping. Empirical studies indicate that many groups commonly use religious coping in times of stress, particularly the most disenfranchised in society (Pargament et al., 1998). Religious coping is how people draw on religious beliefs and practices to understand and deal with life stressors (Pargament et al., 1998). Positive religious coping includes “an expression of a sense of spirituality, a secure relationship with God, a belief that there is meaning to be found in life, and a sense of spiritual connectedness with others” (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 720). These may include seeking spiritual support, religious forgiveness, collaborative religious coping, spiritual connection, religious purification, benevolent religious reappraisal, and religious focus (Pargament et al., 1998). “A negative pattern of religious coping is defined by a different set of religious coping methods, including spiritual discontent, punishing God reappraisals, interpersonal religious discontent, demonic reappraisal, and reappraisal of God’s powers” (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 720). In each of these negative coping strategies, individuals are implementing different patterns of religious thoughts, feelings, and relationships to deal with significant life stressors. These negative coping strategies often involve anger, blame, and discontent with God for the distress caused.

Religious coping methods mediate the relationship between an individual’s general religious orientation and the outcomes of significant life events (Pargament et al., 1998). Generally, positive religious coping patterns were tied to benevolent outcomes, including fewer symptoms of psychological distress, reports of psychological and spiritual growth as a result of the stressors, and interviewer ratings of greater cooperativeness (Pargament et al., 1998). In contrast, the negative religious coping pattern was associated with signs of emotional distress,

such as depression, poorer quality of life, psychological symptoms, and callousness towards others (Pargament et al., 1998). For example, if an individual has experienced a loss of a loved one, they may turn to God and pray that their loved one is safe with God (positive coping). In contrast, the individual may turn against God to curse God for taking their loved one away from them (negative coping). These forms of coping can bring an individual closer to their religion and strengthen their religious identity, or they can feel more distant from their religion and struggle to make sense of their religious identity in times of tragedy or stress. In short, religion can be a source of distress and support when coping with adverse life circumstances. Therefore, the outcomes from the former studies reveal that religious principles and values can both provide meaning and decrease the negative effect on personal identity, as well as cause adverse experiences and tension with intimate needs and desires.

LGBQ Individuals and Mental Health

LGBQ adolescents experience well-documented behavioral health disparities compared to their heterosexual peers (Page et al., 2013). Earlier studies have shown lower academic achievements and elevated risks for internalizing psychopathologies, such as depression, anxiety, self-harm, eating disorders, obesity, and substance use (Goldbach et al., 2015). LGBQ youth tend to demonstrate poorer emotional, psychological, and behavioral outcomes when compared to their heterosexual youth counterparts (Goldbach et al., 2015). In a study conducted by Goldbach and colleagues (2015), LGB adolescents were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide when compared to their heterosexual counterparts, and nearly $\frac{1}{3}$ of LGBQ youth met the criteria for a mental health disorder and reported a suicide attempt in their lifetime (Goldbach et al., 2015). Furthermore, longitudinal studies have shown that these mental health concerns persist into adulthood (Goldbach et al., 2015), which can negatively influence a lifelong

trajectory of health and well-being. Research suggests that LGBTQ individuals seek out treatment at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts, with concerns around determining whether to reveal one's sexual orientation, dealing with antigay verbal and physical harassment, and difficulties reconciling one's sexual orientation with one's own religious beliefs (Anderton et al., 2011). Many LGBTQ individuals experience stressors that are unique to their population.

Minority Stress Theory. Expanded by Meyer (2003), Minority Stress Theory is a practical conceptual framework for understanding how stressful experiences related to one's LGBTQ identity might impact health outcomes. Stressors have been identified as "events and conditions... that cause change and require the individual to adapt to the new situation or life circumstance" (Meyer, 2003, p. 675). Minority stress is the excess stress that people from stigmatized social categories might experience due to their social position (Meyer, 2003). The Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003) identifies that discrimination, violence, and victimization, which are pervasive in a homophobic culture, are the primary sources of stress and most probable driving mechanisms of mental health problems among LGBTQ (Meyer, 2003).

Individuals in a minority group, in this case, LGBTQ individuals, are affected by two sets of minority-related stressors (Meyer, 2003). This includes both distal stressors in the environment (e.g., prejudicial events, discrimination) and proximal stressors internal to the individual (e.g., expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia) (Meyer, 2003). It is important to note that these factors are interrelated and bidirectional. The minority stress theory proposes three distinct minority stress processes that may help explain the above-noted health disparity. Meyer (2003) describes these three processes of minority stress related to LGBTQ individuals, ranging from distal to proximal, as (1) External, objectively stressful events (e.g., incidents of victimization); (2) expectations of aforementioned stressful events, and vigilance

associated with those expectations (frequently conceptualized as rejection sensitivity); and (3) internalization of negative societal attitudes, which includes internalized heterosexism (negative attitudes and assumptions about one's sexual orientation that are prevalent in society) and concealment of sexual orientation identity (Meyer, 2003)

By Meyer's theory, the present study will examine the three stress processes described above to better understand how mental health symptomatology may be affected among nonreligious LGBTQ individuals. The first process of minority stress described by Meyer (2003) is external stressful events, such as incidents of victimization (Meyer, 2003). Victimization can take many forms, including discrimination, threats, verbal harassment, property damage, physical and sexual assault, and stalking (Herek, et al., 1999). Victimization appears more prevalent among LGBTQ populations and correlates with various adverse mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Herek et al. (1999) found that individuals who had experienced a sexual orientation hate crime within the past five years reported more anger, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress than did survivors of non-discriminatory related crimes and those with no experiences of crime victimization (Herek et al., 1999).

The second process of minority stress described by Meyer (2003) is expectations of the aforementioned stressful events and vigilance associated with those expectations, such as rejection sensitivity (Meyer, 2003). Researchers theorize that previous experiences of discrimination lead LGBTQ+ individuals to expect similar rejection in the future, contributing to internalizing symptomatology (Dyar, et al., 2016). Dyar and colleagues (2016) found that rejection sensitivity predicted anxiety symptoms, concerns about acceptance of sexual identity, and difficulty developing a positive sexual identity, as measured by the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS) (Dyar et al., 2016).

The third process of minority stress described by Meyer (2003) is the “internalization of negative societal attitudes,” such as internalized heterosexism (Meyer, 2003). Internalized heterosexism (IH) is defined as “the internalization by gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals of negative attitudes and assumptions about sexual identity that are prevalent in society” (Szymanski et al., 2008, p. 510). Internalized heterosexism represents negative feedback that LGB individuals receive from their immediate environment and society, which is then adopted and directed inward as self-rejection (Page et al., 2013). LGBQ people who grew up in heterosexist faith environments and experience IH may feel inferior to their heterosexual peers and believe they deserve their oppressed status, which may drive their use of negative religious coping behaviors that are consistent with this negative self-schema (Bourn et al., 2018).

The present study will be mindful of the impact of stressful experiences related to one’s LGBQ identity on individual health outcomes, such as victimization, rejection sensitivity, and internalized heterosexism. Additionally, it is essential to consider that LGBQ individuals may display signs of sexual distress or low sexual esteem that may be more accurately understood in relation to their sexual identity development status, rather than the explanation that distress is innate for individuals who identify as LGBQ (Shepler & Perrone-McGovern, 2016).

Holding Both Identities: LGBQ and Catholic

Literature shows that attitudes towards LGBQ individuals are complex and may vary even within the same religious traditions (Anderton et al., 2011). Some studies indicate that negative religious beliefs and sermons about LGBQ individuals can arouse prejudice against LGBQ individuals and contribute to experiencing the religious group as oppressive (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejcz-Skrzypek, 2016). At the same time, other studies highlight the distress associated with fear of rejection for crossing the taboo by LGBQ Catholics individuals

(Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczk-Skrzypek, 2016). Of the possible 2,500 religious' denominations in the US, only a few view LGBQ identities as being "valid and morally supportable" (Anderton et al., 2011, p. 260).

A Pew Research Center (2013) survey of over 1,100 LGBQ adults in the US found that 51% have a religious affiliation, and 43% claimed religion was either "somewhat" or "very" important in their lives. It is important to note that of those who reported being affiliated with a religion, 55% reported a conflict between their religious beliefs and sexuality. Additionally, Porter and colleagues (2013) said that only 39% of the 46 different Christian denominations (Catholicism falls under this umbrella) that are currently active in the United States accept LGBQ in their congregation (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017). Additionally, only 20% of those 46 different Christian denominations allow the ordination of LGBQ individuals, and less than 9% allow same-sex couples to marry within the church (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017). It is noteworthy that only a small number of people choose their religious identity after a process of search and deliberation outside their family of origin (Anderton et al., 2011). At the same time, sexual identity development is a complex process involving a person's self-definition as a sexual being and consists of recognizing and accepting one's sexual orientation (Anderton et al., 2011). In other words, one usually does not choose their religion but is born into it through their family of origin. At the same time, one's sexual orientation is complex and a deliberate process of self-exploration.

Interestingly, Wagner and colleagues (1994) found that having a Catholic background slowed the development of a nonnormative sexual identity (Wagner et al., 1994). Holding both a Catholic and LGBQ identity may affect an individual's identity development by slowing the development of their sexual identity and speeding up their faith development (Levy & Edmiston,

2014). These effects on the individual's identity development were suggested to be due to the tensions between the individual's LGBQ and Catholic experiences, where they may feel forced to ask questions of their faith and experience dissonance between these identities. Research has consistently shown that people in the later stages of identity integration report lower negative beliefs and feelings about LGB orientation (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Additionally, sexual identity can develop while religious identity is also taking shape, and this co-development creates a potential conflict with competing claims about identity and behavior (Sherry, et al., 2010).

According to Rodriguez (2009), Catholic doctrine states that those who identify as LGBQ are "unnatural" and "perverse," yet also says that "God loves you unconditionally" and "all of the children of God will achieve a place in heaven" (p. 9). Understandably, such a dualistic message may create a sense of confusion, self-loathing, and despair within LGB individuals (Rodriguez, 2009). This aligns with Schuck and Liddle's (2001) findings that LGBQ Catholic individuals experience severe cognitive and emotional consequences because of oppressive religious doctrine, including guilt, shame, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). It is essential to consider the messages that LGBQ youth receive as they develop their sexual identity within these environments. Schuck and Liddle (2001) found that two-thirds of their participants indicated experiencing these tensions stemming from religious messages that asserted the sinfulness of same-sex sexual attraction, the need for forgiveness, and external celibacy (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). This conflict is not just about the clash that can occur when holding both an LGBQ and Catholic identity but also about the anxiety that arises in an LGBQ person experiencing such conflict (Rodriguez, 2009). This tension between one's sexual orientation and religious belief system can result in "competing selves" with emotional and

cognitive conflicts between the two (Longo et al., 2018). Unresolved, these competing selves can lead to depression, anxiety, isolation, concealment of oneself, and suicidal ideations (Longo et al., 2018).

Identity Conflict. Baumeister et al.'s (1985) theory of identity conflict refers to “the problem of the multiple defined self whose definitions have become incompatible” (p. 408). They suggest that identity conflicts are brought about by “extraordinary developments” in situations and personal commitments that create a feeling in the individual that they are in an impossible situation (Rodriguez, 2009, p. 15). There are two critical components to this view of identity conflict: (1) having a strong personal commitment to distinct identity components; and (2) having a multiplicity of identity (Rodriguez, 2009). A strong personal commitment to both distinct identity components is essential because no tension would exist without this commitment (Rodriguez, 2009). Therefore, cognitive dissonance can manifest when an individual is highly committed to both their religious identity and an emerging or present sexual identity that are in tension with one another (Anderton et al., 2011).

The causes of tension can be both extrinsic and intrinsic (Anderton et al., 2011). Some of the external causes are strict adherence to established Catholic tenets, usually those promoted by the conservative Catholic religious right; acceptance of anti-gay Catholic doctrine; acceptance of other LGBTQ individual's negative outlooks and experiences; and contradiction with the religious beliefs of family members and friends (Rodriguez, 2009). Intrinsic causes identified in previous research include fear of divine retribution and strong beliefs that these two identities are incompatible (Rodriguez, 2009). Across many studies, the rigid upholding of the basic principles and written text within the Catholic religion appears to be one of the chief causes of both

intrinsic and extrinsic experiences of tension and anxiety among this population (Rodriguez, 2009).

In many LGBTQ Catholic individuals, this tension can in part be due to the messages religious institutions convey that LGB individuals are “immoral and second-class,” and these messages are then internalized by the individual (Page et al., 2013). Indeed, heterosexist messages from religious sources have been associated with shame, guilt, and internalized heterosexism (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2005; Sherry, et al., 2010). Spreading these rejecting and condemning messages about LGBTQ individuals was also related to more internalized negative self-messages and more significant challenges in developing and accepting one’s sexual identity in a sample of adolescents and young adults (Page et al., 2013). This inner battle between their religious beliefs and sexual orientation had significant religious guilt and social pressure to adapt to the hetero-normative culture (Page et al., 2013; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2005; Sherry, et al., 2010). Moreover, these LGBTQ Catholic individuals appear to have internalized the conservative views of their churches, which fosters the tension between sexual orientation and religious identity (Mahaffy, 1996). Overall, when an individual is experiencing tensions between intersecting identities, there is a need to resolve this cognitive dissonance to relieve such tension.

Striving for Congruency: The present study is grounded in cognitive consistency theories in social psychology (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), which describe an individual’s desire to maintain consistency and provide different techniques to address these types of incongruencies within oneself. According to these consistency theories (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958), conflicting cognitions will inevitably cause psychological tension. Although research tends to focus on inconsistencies between beliefs and behaviors, I am examining inconsistencies

that may occur between two differing identities, specifically an individual's sexual orientation identities and religious identities (Scroggs et al., 2018). Establishing a congruent identity is fundamental to developing a strong sense of self and is thought to relate to good mental health (Meladze & Brown, 2015). When this is not met, an individual can experience cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory. According to cognitive dissonance theory, most individuals are motivated to achieve consistency and congruency within themselves (Festinger, 1962). Dissonance was defined by Festinger (1957) as the “existence of non-fitting relations among cognitions, incongruity or inconsistency occurring between any knowledge, opinion, belief about the environment, about oneself, or one's behavior”. Therefore, a state of psychological tension, or dissonance, can result when an individual holds two inconsistent cognitions (Anderton et al., 2011).

To reduce dissonance, individuals strive to change one or more elements that do not fit together (Festinger, 1962). Dissonance can be temporary, for instance, when a person is exposed to information that conflicts with a previously held belief. Dissonance can also be enduring and of a more severe magnitude if there is a conflict between two firmly held beliefs about oneself (Anderton et al., 2011). Festinger (1962) explains that the more critical the conflicting elements are to the individual, the more severe the dissonance will be, and the more likely the individual will engage in behaviors to reduce the dissonance.

Identity conflict in LGBTQ Catholics can occur when there is tension or experience of dissonance between an individual's religious identity and their present or emerging sexual identity (Anderton et al., 2011). Cognitive dissonance generally manifests when a person's religious identity is tied to non-affirming beliefs about same-sex attraction while that person is

experiencing same-sex attraction in the context of their sexual identity (Anderton et al. 2011). The tension between religious identity and sexual identity is likely of critical importance in identity formation as steps in religious identity development temporally correspond to steps in the formation of sexual orientation development (Anderton et al. 2011; Bradshaw et al., 2015; & Meladze & Brown, 2015). Historically, Catholicism has non-affirming stances towards LGBQ attractions, behaviors, and identities. Therefore, LGBQ individuals growing up in these environments may be exposed to more minority stressors than consistently unaffiliated individuals or those raised in affirming religious contexts (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017).

When reconciliation does not occur between one's religious beliefs, cultural values, and sexual identity, the resulting cognitive dissonance may lead to internalized homo-negativity (IH) (Meladze & Brown, 2015). A person with high IH may view same-sex attractions as immoral, often resulting in psychological reactions, such as shame, developing a poor sense of self, and mental health concerns (Meladze & Brown, 2015). As the number of these inconsistent cognitions increases, so does the magnitude of the cognitive dissonance. The importance of dissonance is positively related to how critical specific values are to the individual. Therefore, a significant obstacle for numerous LGBQ individuals is reconciling their desire for self-acceptance with the negative messages of several faith institutions (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017).

Coping/Resolving Temporary Dissonance. Many individuals experience some temporary dissonance; it is situations in which the dissonance being experienced is less than temporary, and the magnitude of dissonance is high that will then motivate individuals to engage in behaviors to try and alleviate the psychological duress they are experiencing as a result of this dissonance (Anderton et al., 2011). The more critical these elements are to the person, the greater

the severity of dissonance the person will experience. According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, this internal tension can be mitigated by discarding specific beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors or by validating them (Festinger, 1957; Mahaffy, 1996).

To decrease the dissonance a person is experiencing, there must be a change in one of the elements that do not fit; this includes: 1) Changing the environmental, cognitive element; 2) adding a new cognitive element; or 3) changing a cognitive behavioral element (Anderton et al., 2011). This can occur only if one controls their environment or can change their cognitions about the environment without changing it (Anderton et al., 2011). Yet, societal norms and stigma are still very much present. Regardless, adding a new cognitive element is a strategy that allows an LGBQ Catholic person to form a new religious belief or beliefs about their sexual identity and religious identity, allowing the individual to integrate these previously incongruent aspects of self (Anderton et al., 2011).

Identity Conflicts and Resolution Strategies in LGBQ Catholics

Often, individuals feel that there are only two polarizing choices available when faced with this tension, to either leave one's religion or renounce one's sexuality. However, there are strikingly different ways in which individuals cope with situations that present them with interpersonal, social, and ideological forces so much at odds with their own experience of their identities (Kashubeck-West, et al., 2017). Whitehead and Whitehead (2014) noted that many LGBQ individuals struggle to identify ways to live life openly and fully; rather than in the disguise that church communities often demand (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2014). Resolving this dilemma between sexual identity and religious faith can become necessary.

Many LGBQ Catholics have been refused absolution, left the confessional, and simply drifted away from the church, never to return (Liuzzi, 2001, p. 9). Some move towards

individualized relationships with God, and some individuals desire to remain in their faith traditions (Liuzzi, 2001). Such a choice can lead to intense feelings of personal tension between sexual identity and religious identity (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Choosing or being forced to choose one's sexual identity over one's religious identity can cause mental health losses that are considerable; However, disaffiliation from non-affirming churches or religions decreased the participant's level of internalized homophobia; it did not have a positive impact on the participant's mental health (Anderton et al., 2011). Individuals who choose their sexual identity over their religious belief could also potentially lose their families, friends, religious community, and religious identity (vice-versa) (Anderton et al., 2011). Additionally, individuals may utilize various strategies simultaneously or sequentially if one is found ineffective (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczk-Skrzypek, 2016).

Specifically, research of LGB Catholics and general identity processes revealed four general categories that LGB individuals might attempt to alleviate tension between their LGB and religious identities (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). These strategies for dealing with this conflict are (1) Rejecting one's religious or sexual identity; (2) compartmentalization; (3) identity integration; and (4) seeking a more affirming religious or spiritual faith (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Changing one's environment was the most utilized cognitive dissonance resolution strategy (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). These included disaffiliating from non-affirming churches or religions, seeking out new organizations, congregations, or religions (giving a place to connect with others and experience both parts of identity), focusing on the development of a spiritual identity rather than a religious one, abandoning religions and spirituality altogether (Anderton et al., 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; & Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Despite changing one's environment being the most utilized coping strategy, many LGBQ Catholics have strong feelings about their religious beliefs and sexual identity and refuse to sacrifice (reject) either part of themselves and utilize compartmentalization (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). However, compartmentalization is a short-term coping strategy to reduce internalized conflicts associated with multiple, incompatible identities by de-emphasizing one of them based on the context (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Of note, some LGBQ Catholic individuals endorsed never experiencing a conflict between their LGBQ and Catholic identities; some possible reasons for this lack of tension may be: (a) Never encountering/internalizing homophobia or heterosexist religious rhetoric; (b) devaluing church teachings; (c) coming out at a late age; (d) attending seminary; and (e) God's all-encompassing love (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

As a whole, the majority of LGBQ Catholic individuals are experiencing religious identity/sexual identity tension. Of those experiencing this tension, some of those LGBQ individuals were able to integrate their sexual and religious identities. In contrast, for others, questioning religious beliefs led them to leave their faith tradition altogether or significantly alter their relationship to their faith, including transitioning to spirituality rather than associating with organized religion (Longo et al., 2018). Other LGBQ Catholic individuals reported developing their sexual identity at a much slower pace than their nonreligious LGBQ peers and suggested that perhaps this was due to their Catholic upbringing and the conflicts they experienced (Levy & Edmiston, 2014; & Wagner et al., 1994). Despite the incongruent messages received by LGBQ individuals within the Catholic religion and the tension many LGBQ Catholics are experiencing between these two possibly conflicting identities, many LGBQ Catholics refuse to sacrifice either of these identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). It may be that this process of

refusing to sacrifice either identity and a desire to be “out” as both LGBQ and Catholic (rather than just simply to alleviate tension between the two) could be the trigger that allows an individual to begin the integration process (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). For this research project, I will focus on LGBQ Catholics who have integrated their sexual and religious identities to resolve this dissonance and fully understand their individualized integration process.

Integration of Conflicting Identities

Researchers have proposed that identity conflict can be alleviated when LGBQ individuals integrate their religious beliefs and their LGBQ identity into a single, workable understanding of the self (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Such individuals hold a positive LGBQ identity and a positive Catholic identity and do not feel the tension between the two. This creates a new, complex, yet coherent identity; LGBQ Catholic. It is believed that behind this process of identity integration is acceptance (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). This acceptance is what supports the individual through the transition from identity formation to identity integration. Acceptance is not seen as unidirectional; rather a balance of positive and negative attitudes that may oscillate depending on the availability of social support, cultural shifts, or personal experiences (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). In addition to acceptance of oneself, reading relevant literature, simply talking to other individuals, and even direct intervention by God were all mentioned as possible precipitating factors for the integration of LGBQ and Catholic identities (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). These factors facilitate the integration process by acknowledging perceived similarities between these different identities and understanding and reframing these identities to complement and enrich each identity instead of causing tension (Yampolsky, et al., 2013).

However, negative social relationships can hinder Catholic LGBQ identity integration (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Supportive families and friends appear to be essential elements in

the integration process, where studies have shown that lower social support is associated with negative attitudes toward one's own sexual identity and, in turn, toward various psychosocial stressors (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Schrogg et al., 2018). It is important to note that one should not make assumptions that a client who identifies as both Catholic and LGBTQ is necessarily dealing with tension in negotiating their identities. Some possible reasons for this lack of tension may be a) never encountered/internalizing homophobia or heterosexist religious rhetoric, b) devaluing church teachings, c) coming out at a late age, d) attending seminary, and e) God's love (Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000). Overall, people can effectively adjust aspects of the self in practical and adaptive ways that work for them to successfully negotiate the integration of these two aspects of identity in a way that allows them to feel congruent and free from identity tension (Sherry et al., 2010).

Shallenberger's (1998) Notion of Integration as a Process. The beginning of the integration process central to Shallenberger's (1998) model pertains to LGBTQ Catholics, is the individual's conscious acknowledgment of the inherent discrepancies between their LGBTQ and Catholic identities. Here, Shallenberger (1998) highlighted three key issues LGBTQ Catholics grapple with throughout their identity development process: questioning, reintegration, and reclaiming (Shallenberger, 1998). In questioning, individuals engage in an extensive (primarily internal) conversation where they question their religious beliefs as they relate to their experiences as LGBTQ (Shallenberger, 1998). In reintegration, they attempt to reincorporate their religious identity with their LGBTQ identity (Shallenberger, 1998). This is accomplished through reading relevant literature, talking with loved ones, and identifying and approaching other LGBTQ individuals grappling with these same or similar concerns. During the reclaiming process, individuals also seek out safe spaces where they can reconnect with both their LGBTQ identity

and their Catholic identity in a community of supportive, like-minded individuals (Shallenberger, 1998).

This research paper will specifically focus on individuals who hold both LGBQ and Catholic identities. However, it is essential to note that one can hold many different identities simultaneously. Individuals who hold multiple identities often need to navigate the various norms and values associated with their multiple cultural identities (Yampolsky, et al., 2013). They also need to manage and organize their different and possibly clashing cultural identities within their general sense of self (Yampolsky, et al., 2013). This may trigger the individual to negotiate their alignment with these multiple cultural groups (Yampolsky, et al., 2013).

The framework of intersectionality stems from Black feminist scholarship, specifically the work of Kimberle Crenshaw (1994). Her Critical Race Theory framework posits that multiple identity statuses, such as being Catholic and LGBQ, can act independently and in combination to shape a person's experience (Mayo, 2007). In this way, the intersectional perspective recognizes that multiple identity variables held by any person are inherently intertwined and ultimately shape the person's experience of themselves and the world (Crenshaw, 2018). Indeed, "intersectionality reminds us that... no category of identity work alone (Mayo, 2007, p 68)."

Summary

While religion may be meeting existential needs, it may, at the same time, be asking the LGBQ youth to be someone different than who they are (Longo et al., 2018). LGBQ individuals experience severe cognitive and emotional consequences because of oppressive religious doctrine, including guilt, shame, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). When LGBQ individuals are involved with religious belief systems that cast rejecting or disapproving messages about LGBQ individuals, these individuals often experience more

internalized negative self-messages, as well as more significant challenges in developing and accepting one's sexual identity (Page et al., 2013). Therefore, this very faith that often helps these individuals find meaning, spiritual strength, and solace often, at some point, triggers a conflict when they begin to experience same-sex attraction and realize they might be LGBQ (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczk-Skrzypek, 2016). This inner battle between their religious beliefs and sexual orientation induces religious guilt and social pressure and forces these individuals to adapt to the heteronormative culture (Page et al., 2013). This tension from religious beliefs and a lack of strength and support from those beliefs are essential contributors to LGBQ identity challenges, above and beyond the impact of other types of stressors that LGBQ youth face (Page et al., 2013).

Most existing studies focus on the result or final resolution of the tension between sexual identity and religious beliefs and focus on outcomes such as rejection of sexual identity, rejection of Catholic identity, integration of sexual and Catholic identities, and compartmentalization (Anderton et al., 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). It is difficult for individuals to reconcile their sexual identity with their religious identity if they come from non-affirming faith traditions. In addition, mental health fields sometimes have discounted the importance of religious identity within the LGBQ population and underestimated the number of losses people might experience if asked to give up their religion (Kashubeck-West et al., 2017). Therefore, despite the incongruent messages received by LGBQ individuals within the Catholic religion and the tension many LGBQ Catholics are experiencing between these two possibly conflicting identities, many LGBQ Catholics refuse to sacrifice either of these identities (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Of those who decided to integrate these two possibly conflicting identities, research has consistently shown that people in the later stages of identity integration

report lower levels of negative beliefs, more positive sexual orientation development, and feelings about LGBQ orientation (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

This integration of these identities has come to be understood as a process rather than simply a two-dimensional or bipolar construct (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Therefore, assessing integration as a process can potentially address the complexity of the phenomena more adequately (Anderton et al., 2011). This research aims to understand and explore more fully: How one integrates both conflicting selves, what effect dissonance has on identity development, and how to best support others working towards harmoniously incorporating both identities. Overall, the integration of LGBQ and Catholic identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

In this chapter, this researcher has outline the methodology for this study. The focus of the proposed research was to explore more fully an individual's experience of religious and sexual identity development, religious identity/sexual identity conflicts or lack thereof, and the integration of these identities. This researcher utilized a qualitative approach, specifically Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, to allow for a more personalized engagement with participants and to obtain a more detailed personal account of their experiences.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is based upon the work of the 20th-century philosopher Edmund Husserl, further developed by Heidegger (Smith, et al., 2009). IPA is informed by hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation. IPA aims to make sense of what is happening or experienced by an individual through a process of double hermeneutic (Smith, et al., 2009). This is where the interpretive phenomenological researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's experience of making sense of their experience.

IPA views human beings as "sense-making creatures, " and participants' accounts will reflect their attempts to make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The interpretive phenomenological analysis focuses on the significant meaning individual places on everyday lived experiences, which often indicates that this is important to the individual. IPA attempts to understand others' experiences through interpretations and must bring attention to the focus of creating meaning out of the experiences shared.

IPA examines experiences, in its terms, instead of being overly influenced by psychological theorizing or by the personal preferences of the researcher (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). To understand a particular phenomenon in particular contexts conducted on small

sample size. A small sample size provides a detailed case-by-case analysis of individual transcripts, and the aim is to write in detail about the perceptions and understandings of these participants (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was used in this current study to provide a detailed and descriptive examination of the identity development and possible psychological tension that individuals who identify as Catholic and LGBTQ may experience. IPA examines experiences, in its terms, instead of being overly influenced by psychological theorizing or by the personal preferences of the researcher (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This methodology supported this current study in examining LGBTQ Catholics' experience of identity development, integration of identities, and any tension or discrimination experienced in navigating these two possibly conflicting identities. Specifically, an interpretive phenomenological analysis researcher is interested in looking at how someone makes sense of the significant transitions in their lives (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Therefore, further understanding of the transitional experience of individuals navigating these possible conflicting identities.

The central research questions for the current study were to understand and explore more fully: How one integrates conflicting parts of self; what effect dissonance has on identity development, and how to best support others who are working towards incorporating both identities harmoniously. Overall, the integration of LGBTQ and Catholic identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research.

Reflexivity Statement

Considering IPA's emphasis on the detailed analytic attention placed on making sense of one's experiences (Smith et al., 2007), it is essential that the researcher has a process for understanding and reflecting on her subjectivity as a qualitative researcher. A foundational

assumption in IPA is that subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research. The researcher must do her best to understand how her beliefs, biases, and motivations influence her (Smith et al., 2007). There are three significant ways the researcher has accomplished this. First, she kept a reflective journal to track her subjective reactions during the research project. This continuous and conscious written reflection allowed the researcher to bring awareness to her subjective meaning-making process – one part of the “double hermeneutic” of IPA (Smith et al., 2007). The second is that this researcher reflected on where she is positioned in her own identities related to this research. This included reflecting and placing herself in terms of her own privileged and oppressed identities as a heterosexual, middle-class, white, cisgender female who grew up Catholic in western society and is conducting this research in the context of a PsyD program at a Jesuit University. It has been critical to be mindful of how these identities have shaped her worldview and contributed to her unawareness of the experiences LGBTQ Catholics may have. The third is that this researcher actively sought training (a 2-part UCSF training entitled "Speaking with Patients About Sexuality and Gender," Presented by Dr. Jennifer Potter, MD, and other professional panelists) around conducting research and working with individuals who identify as LGBTQ before engaging in data collection. It has critical to be conscious of the possible implications of the researcher identifying as heterosexual and white when working with the LGBTQ and Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) populations, such as utilizing discriminatory and heteronormative language, the impact of participants' experiencing valid skepticism and difficulty building initial rapport, and lack of awareness of the oppressive experiences of individuals. By remaining as culturally aware and sensitive as possible, continuing to gain knowledge of the experiences within these communities, and aiming for a

holistic, open, and understanding standpoint, the researcher was able to gain insight into the individualized experiences and views of each of the participants.

Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge that the researcher herself was significantly influenced to undertake this study by two factors. The first factor is her upbringing, religious identity development, religious stress, and personal decision to leave the Catholic religion. The second is her clinical work with a client who experienced non-affirming messages about his sexual identity from his Catholic family, Catholic Church, and Catholic community but made the active decision to stay connected to the Catholic church. This client experienced significant cognitive dissonance between his LGBQ and Catholic identities, internalized heterosexism, and other mental health concerns. After working with this client, this researcher realized that she may have misunderstood the amount of loss this client might have experienced if he attempted to reject his religious identity. This researcher saw first-hand the resiliency and difficulty navigating the integration of these two possibly conflicting identities. Overall, the researcher prioritized the commitment to honestly and continuously exploring her subjective responses throughout this project.

Procedures

Recruitment

Participants were recruited utilizing a recruitment flier (Appendix A) placed in Catholic churches in the San Francisco and Phoenix Area and posted on websites or forums, such as Reddit, Facebook, and individual churches' online forums.

For this study, participants were selected for their experience holding and integrating two possibly conflicting identities of Catholic and LGBQ. Therefore, this study utilized a homogeneous sampling method to gain insight into a participant's particular experience.

Additionally, this study used snowball sampling, where research participants recruited other participants.

Interviews

When a potential participant emailed this researcher for more information and to participate in the study, a template email (Appendix B) was sent to them with detailed information about the study. Inclusion criteria for the study were reviewed with the potential participant, and if inclusion criteria were met, an interview was scheduled.

Semi-structured interviews were utilized for this study. Interviews lasted 45-90 minutes and were conducted over a virtual meeting platform (Zoom). Before the interviews, each participant signed and reviewed the informed consent form (Appendix C) and completed a brief demographic form (Appendix D). Consistent with IPA research methods, an interview schedule (Appendix E) was followed to serve as a guide. This provided a comfortable and consistent environment for each participant, allowing them to present clear and detailed accounts of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). The interview consisted of 11 open-ended and expansive questions to allow participants to provide narrative and descriptive responses. Each interview was recorded and transcribed through a digital platform (Rev).

Throughout the interview process, this researcher was aware of the possible impact of participants' retelling or sharing their individual experiences and checked in periodically with participants to offer them a break. None of the participants became distressed enough to need a break from the interview. Additionally, following each consultation, the researcher provided a debriefing period and offered mental health resources. None of the participants engaged in the debriefing period or requested mental health resources.

Upon completing the interview, each participant received a \$10 gift card to Amazon that was sent to them digitally through their email. This researcher followed up with each participant to provide her contact information for any questions or concerns, additional mental health resources, and to confirm receipt of the \$10 gift card.

Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criteria for this study are included the following: 1) Self-identify as LGBQ, 2) Self-identify as Catholic, 3) Grew up in a Catholic household where they experienced non-affirming messages about their sexual orientation, 4) Self-identify as integrating their LGBQ and Catholic identities, and 5) Between the ages of 25-45 years old. Exclusion criteria for this study include 1) individuals who are not fluent in English due to this researcher's limitations.

Data Analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is the form of analysis that this researcher utilized for the current research. This methodology supports a better understanding of the internal processes experienced by LGBQ Catholics. It identifies similar presenting themes across participants for its focus on personal meaning and sense-making in a particular context for a specific experience (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is characterized by several stages of analysis that this researcher engaged in. These steps are: 1) Immersing herself in the original transcripts, 2) Initial Noting, 3) Developing Emergent Themes, 4) Identification of Connections Across Emergent Themes, 5) Repeating the process for each participant, and 6) Identifying Patterns Across Participants or Super-Ordinate Themes (Smith et al., 2009).

First, this researcher immersed herself in the original transcripts. This was achieved through thorough reading and re-reading of the data to become actively engaged with the data and begin the "entering the participant's world" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 82). The second step of

IPA is “Initial Noting.” Here the researcher examined “semantic content and language use on a very exploratory level” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 83). In other words, this step involved the careful exploration of the specific language that the participants each used; the consideration of their lived experience within their unique environments; and carefully identified the aspects of the data that may contribute to creating the meaning of the patterns/themes that appeared within the transcripts. This researcher completed a detailed and comprehensive set of notes and comments on the data (Smith et al., 2009). This annotation stage was interpretative and focused on the participants’ more profound understanding of what they were discussing.

The third step of IPA is developing emergent themes. Analysis at this stage required the researcher to look for emerging themes in the data sets while also managing the more extensive data set. This researcher organized, synthesized, and interpreted the data to produce the emerging themes amongst the transcripts (Smith et al., 2009). At this phase of analysis, this researcher utilized emergent theme boxes to organize the many emergent themes that appeared within the data and the exploratory comments that surfaced by the researcher. This helped to re-focus on the interpretation of the analysis while developing emergent themes in the data sets (Smith et al., 2009).

Step four is the identification of connections across emergent themes. This required mapping the transcript's interrelationships, relationships, and patterns to understand how these themes fit together (Smith et al., 2009). Searching for connections across emergent themes highlighted analytic processes of abstraction, subsumption, polarization, contextualization, numeration, and function (Smith et al., 2009). These processes were used to look for patterns in the emergent themes, which were identified as “super-ordinate” themes at this point in the analysis process (Smith et al., 2009, p. 99). These analytic processes were organized using the

same boxed formatting as the developing emergent theme. Developing tables and appendixes to organize each transcript made it possible for the researcher to create a brief single case study of each participant's transcript (Smith et al., 2009). Step five involved moving to the next participant's transcript and repeating the process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It was important to remember to treat each case as its entity and take an individualist approach to its analysis.

Lastly, the sixth step is looking for patterns across participants. This required examining patterns across participants' data to draw connections and differences between participants' experiences. The research looked at each participant's super-ordinate themes and data compared to other participants' brief case studies to identify the shared experiences/articles (Smith et al., 2009). This process is illustrated as a table of the themes across the different participants (Table 1: Themes and Subthemes). A deeper data analysis will continue throughout the discussion and interpretation of these common themes among participants.

Dissemination Plan

Results of the current research will be published by the USF Gleeson library and submitted to ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

Ethical Considerations

All participant's data will be protected using a password-encrypted flash drive. All participants' information was de-identified using randomly assigned participant codes to maintain confidentiality. The data was organized through Microsoft Word Documents and Microsoft Excel Sheets. As needed, the printing of themes and tables to maintain and establish management of data and coding was utilized. This research project did not require additional software programs or data entry platforms to code, analyze or interpret the data from the

transcripts. The University granted ethical approval for this research to be conducted under San Francisco's Research Governance and Ethics Team and IRB.

Chapter Four: Results

Participants

Participants for this study included eight (8) LGBTQ Catholics living in the United States, Canada, and Jamaica. The mean age of the participants in this study was 33.75, ranging from 26-44 years of age. Of the 8 participants, seven identified as a cisgender male, and one identified as a cisgender woman. Of the 8 participants, five identified as white, one as Latino, one as Filipino Canadian, and one as Mixed Asian/African. Of the 8 participants, seven identified as Gay and one as Queer and lesbian. Of the 8 participants, five reported they were in a relationship. Of the 5 participants that said they were in a relationship, one reported being married, 1 reported a live-in relationship with a life partner, one reported being in a long-term relationship with their partner, and 2 reported having boyfriends. Of the 8 participants, 5 obtained graduate-level degrees (of which 2 are Ph.D. candidates), and three have obtained bachelor's degrees. All 8 participants identified as Catholic, growing up in a Catholic household, experiencing tension between their sexual and religious identities, and having integrated these two held identities. The names of participants and their family members have been changed to protect their anonymity. All demographic information was based on self-report at the time of the interview.

- David was a 40-year-old Filipino Canadian cisgender male who identified as gay. David reported being in a romantic relationship, having "one partner of 17 years."
- John was a 31-year-old Latino cisgender male who identified as gay. John reported that he was not currently in a romantic relationship.
- Gabriel was a 26-year-old white/Italian cisgender male who identified as gay. Gabriel reported being in a romantic relationship and having "one gay male partner."

- Noah was a 38-year-old white cisgender male who identified as gay. Noah reported being in a romantic relationship and having a "Boyfriend."
- Ezekiel was a 37-year-old mixed Asian/African cisgender male who identified as gay. Ezekiel reported being in a romantic relationship, sharing, "I live with my life partner."
- Paul was a 44-year-old white cisgender male who identified as gay. Paul reported that he was not currently in a romantic relationship.
- Isaiah was a 44-year-old white cisgender male who identified as gay. Isaiah reported being in a romantic relationship, sharing, "I have been w/ my husband for 20 years."
- Mary was a 28-year-old white cisgender female who identified as gay or lesbian. Mary reported that she was not currently in a romantic relationship.

Themes

Through data analysis, six major recurrent themes were identified and described across participants. See Table 1 for a list of the six themes and 17 subthemes that reflect the lived experiences of these eight participants navigating their sexual and religious identities. These themes and subthemes support a better understanding of how one integrates conflicting identities, the types of dissonance experienced, the effect dissonance has on identity development and the self, and the impact of family traditions and culture on one's identity coping with this dissonance. A thorough and detailed interpretive analysis will follow for each theme below, including direct quotes from the participants' interview transcripts.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes Among Participants

Themes and Subthemes	No. Of Participants w/ Theme
1. Catholicism as a Part of Family Tradition/Culture	8/8
2. Dualistic Messages Received Regarding One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity	8/8
a. Experienced Negative Messages and Stigma	8/8
b. Felt or Experienced Rejection	8/8
c. Experienced Positive Messages	7/8 (P1; P2; P4; P5; P6; P7; P8)
3. Impact of Received Messages and Experiences Received Regarding One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity	8/8
a. Internalization of Negative Messages Experienced or Internalized Homophobia	8/8
b. Suppressing SOI ¹	8/8
c. Questioning ROI ²	8/8
d. Lack of Freedom to Explore SOI	6/8 (P2; P3; P5; P6; P7; P8)
e. Mental Health Concerns	4/8 (P3; P5; P7; P8)
4. Coping with Cognitive Dissonance	8/8
a. Seeking External Affirmation and Knowledge	8/8
b. Engaged in Changes in ROI or Religious Practices	7/8 (P1; P2; P3; P4; P5; P6; P7)
i. Needed to Take a Break From Catholicism to Explore SOI	5/8 (P2; P3; P4; P5; P7)
c. Rejecting Negative Messages as Coping	7/8 (P1; P2; P3; P4; P5; P7; P8)
d. Religion as Coping	6/8 (P1; P2; P3; P4; P7; P8)

¹ Sexual Orientation Identity

² Religious Orientation Identity

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| 5. Integrated Conflicting Identities | 8/8 |
| a. Creating Meaning that Resonates with Self | 8/8 |
| b. Holding onto Core Meanings in Catholic Teachings | 8/8 |
| c. Integration as a Process | 6/8 (P1; P2; P3; P5; P7; P8) |
| 6. Current Engagement in Catholic Practices | 8/8 |
| a. Hope for the Catholic Churches Future | 5/8 (P1; P2; P3; P4; P5) |
| i. Advocating and Creating Safe Spaces | 3/8 (P1; P2; P5) |
| b. Anticipated Future Tension | 5/8 (P1; P3; P4; P7; P8) |

Theme 1: Catholicism as a Part of Family Tradition/Culture

All eight participants expressed a family connection and a rootedness in the traditions and cultural practices of Catholicism, even as many of their relationships with Catholicism were explored. It is essential to mention that as a part of the recruitment inclusion criteria, each participant had to identify as growing up within a Catholic household as this was to determine the role and impact of early messages and traditions on one's identity development. Many participants described an obligation or an ingrained-ness of the Catholic practices/traditions within their family of origin. These quotes below illustrate the traditional practices, customs, and norms within their families of origins and the environments in which they grew up. These customs became common and mechanical aspects of Catholicism in which the participants would engage without questioning and with a sense of obligation or expectation.

For example, David described his early experiences with Catholic affiliations (birth, school, and Sunday school) and expressed his engagement in all the Catholic sacraments.

David: “I was born in a Catholic hospital, went to Catholic elementary...[and] school, high school, celebrated all the sacraments, lived the tradition. My parents were devout and went to church... every day before school. I would say that was a good, solid grounding in the tradition of being Catholic. And that's part of my identity.”

John described that meeting the Catholic milestones was more of a family need versus a fuller understanding of the meaning behind these milestones.

John: “What's interesting about religious life in my family is that it was very devotional... There are these markers, and you just do them out of custom... They enrolled me in the classes... They never asked me. That demonstrated a lack of solid theological understanding of what our faith is. So, faith becomes more of a custom cultural practice than a deep philosophical, theological framework.”

Isaiah described Catholicism as a part of the larger family culture.

Isaiah: “I think my family was almost culturally Catholic, in that it was just a part of life.”

Lastly, Mary shared how Catholicism is a large part of connecting her to family:

Mary: “It still really does connect me to the main facet of my identity, where I come from, and my family past and present. I would say that's it for me. It's something that brings an intense community, a sense tied back to my identity.”

Theme 2: Dualistic Messages Received Regarding One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity

The experience of dualistic messages and cognitive dissonance was a significant component of this research; therefore, participants were explicitly asked questions about the tension experienced and messages received around their sexual or religious identities. All eight

participants described receiving mixed messages regarding their sexual and religious identities from their family of origin, the Catholic church/community, and societal and political stigma. Within this theme of experiencing dualistic messages are the subthemes of A. Experiencing Negative Messages, Experiences, and Stigma, B. Felt or Experienced Rejection, and C. Experienced Positive Messages.

Subtheme A: Experiencing Negative Messages and Stigma. All eight participants described experiencing negative messages regarding their sexual and religious identities. Some shared experiences early in life, young adulthood, and currently. Many received these messages from their family of origin, the Catholic church/community/representatives, society and politics, and shared experiences of blatant or direct discrimination. These quotes below each depict some of these negative messages and experiences.

For example, Gabriel shared receiving negative messages about his sexuality through a religious sermon presented by a representative of the Catholic church.

Gabriel: “I remember my priest said, the Sunday after they legalized gay marriage, he said... I'm sorry, that's a garbage truck. He said, "America is worse than ISIS," he said, "because ISIS can only kill the body, but America, with its promotion of homosexuality and contraception, destroys the soul." Now that made me very uncomfortable, even though, I guess on paper, I would have thought something like that. I didn't really believe that; I was just trying to fit in.”

Ezekiel described receiving homophobic messages from his mother when he was younger, often in the home where he grew up.

Ezekiel: “growing up, I was always very much into that religious sphere. However, mom... Well, I mean, as a kid, she didn't consider that I might be gay, right? So, she used to would say a lot of homophobic things and so on, and that really did an impact on me.”

Paul reported experiencing negative messages around his religious identity from his LGBTQ community and not being able to be his whole self in those spaces as a result.

Paul: “I am also a little bit maybe hesitant to be so outwardly open about being Catholic, just because it's not common and a lot of people have strong feelings against religious or Catholic people in the gay community. And so just for, not protecting my own state, but just for not getting into that argument, on my dating profile, I don't put that I'm Catholic just to not talk about it.”

Finally, Mary shared how her impression of LGBTQ folks was informed by these negative messages received from her family of origin within the home she grew up in.

Mary: “[negative messages] informed my impression of gay people. I would say that gay people... That kind of view that they're disgusting, there's something wrong with them, they're creepy, that stuff was kind of deeply an impression left on me.”

Subtheme B: Felt or Experienced Rejection. All eight participants described feeling or experiencing rejection from many different spaces, such as family, the Catholic church, work, friends and peers, representatives of the church, and society. Many participants expressed a normalization of the experience of rejection and have accepted this as fact.

For example, David shared his experience of rejection within his family and his church, as well as a normalization of rejection as a part of the Gay Catholic experience.

David: “Well, how do you deal with that?” Well, I would say part of it is I was taught to deal with this by having a mother who rejects me, a church that rejects me. One prepares me for

the other. And in fact, this is what the church teaches, that the family is the domestic church. We get prepared for church life in our families.”

Noah demonstrated the normalization of rejection among different churches and illustrated how one’s experience of rejection could differ from the Catholic church to the Catholic church.

Noah: “You know? Then I’ll be like, “Okay, I’ll go right to the next church.” You know and see... Not the next one, but you know, kind of just, I guess go down the line, for it.”

Isaiah described his experience anticipating and preparing for rejection in Catholic spaces.

Isaiah: “But I find I’m always concerned about, it’s like, “Well, if I get involved with them, it’s like how am I going to fit in with that?” It’s like, “How am I going to interact with these guys? Is it going to be a little more traditional than what I’m comfortable with?”

Lastly, Mary feels rejected by her sibling, church, and God (through Sacraments of communion) due to her engaging in a loving, intimate relationship.

Mary: “my sister...said, ‘I don’t think you should be taking communion anymore if you’re going to be dating a girl.’ That was extremely hard, and I definitely cried over it because it was really scary to think that I could be taking communion in a state of sin, quote unquote.”

Subtheme C: Experienced Positive Messages. Seven out of the eight participants reported explicitly receiving positive messages. Similar to the other two subthemes, these participants expressed the importance of receiving positive messages across communities and spaces around their sexual and religious identities, specifically from family, the Catholic community, and friends.

For example, David shared a positive experience he gathered with a large group of other self-identifying LGBTQ Catholics at Catholic retreat where many representatives of the Catholic church would be.

David: “our group had decided we should all stand with our big banner and our rainbow sashes at the entrance of this gym where they're going to have mass, where the procession was going to go by with of all these priests and these bishops, just to be there. And so we did that, and there must've been maybe 40 priests and bishops. And I would say most of them just looked upon us neutrally. We had some really good smiles from a ton of them too. And maybe there was just the one priest that shook his head. And I'm like, wow, this is my Catholicism.”

John described a change within his family of origin around their views of his sexuality.

John: “because of my coming out they've had to come around. They've really done a 180. I've brought partners home. They're great, and now because of that, they've had to really rethink their faith and what does Catholicism mean.”

Noah reported experiencing acceptance from family and friends around his identities.

Noah: “I guess just family and friends that... Well, most of my friends are gay anyways. But just a huge family, that's accepting, and everything else of it.”

Lastly, Paul shared his experience of having a positive support system of friends that are accepting and affirming of his identities, while understanding that not everyone is.

Paul: “And so I feel like I've gotten a lot of good positive reinforcement from people.

But it's also good that I don't have blinders on that the world is a perfect place.”

Theme 3: Impact of Received Messages and Experiences Received Regarding

One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity

This researcher also asked about the impact that dualistic messages had on participants' sexual identity, religious identity, and identity development. All eight participants shared several different implications of the mixed messages they received throughout their life regarding their

sexual and religious identities. Within this theme are the following subthemes: A. Internalization of Negative Messages, B. Suppressing Sexual Orientation, C. Questioning Religious Identity; D. Lack of Freedom to Explore Sexual Orientation Identity, and E. Mental Health Concerns.

Subtheme A: Internalization of Negative Messages. All eight participants shared experiences of internalizing the dualistic messages they had received around their identities. Participants described accepting negative messages they received as truth, either unconsciously or consciously accepting bias about their sexuality, including that they are engaging in sin. These quotes depict the experience of internalization of these negative messages.

For example, John shared his experience of the Catholic church misusing their teachings to inflict pain and his feelings of needing to alter himself to better meet this expectation that the Catholic church has impressed upon him.

John: “they used that faith and twisted it, really, unknowingly. And now it became destructive... Well, I want to re-experience this peace, this inner plenitude and love that I experienced, and I can't now because I'm gay, so I need to fix it.”

Gabriel illustrated the internalization of following the church’s rules.

Gabriel: “I was trying to follow all these Catholic rules, and I got a psychological payoff with the Tridentine Mass³ and now I didn't have that, and so in my mind, it just wasn't what it was before, and also, I didn't understand how homosexuality or masturbation, which I had avoided, could be so wrong,”

Isaiah reported internalizing the beliefs around traditional morality and how his ideas would act as intrusive thoughts as he navigated his sexual orientation.

³ The Tridentine Mass came from the Council of Trent (1545-63) to address several concerns in response to the rise of Protestantism in Europe (Richert, 2018). Going on to state that there is little room for departure from the rubrics (rules) of the Tridentine Latin Mass (Richert, 2018).

Isaiah: “Struggling with that traditional morality was toxic, I think to some degree. At least for me it was. Because every time I'd be having a good time or something like that, or out and about, back of my mind would be like, ‘Oh, man.’ It's like, ‘Maybe I shouldn't be doing that.’”

Finally, Mary shared her internalized belief that identifying as gay meant that she would need to celibate her entire life.

Mary: “Again, I might not be attracted you guys at all. That was the bigger shock. that was really scary because I had definitely grown up my whole life...believing that all gay people had to be celibate. I very much still believed that at the time.”

Subtheme B: Suppressing One's Sexual Orientation. Eight of the eight participants reported suppressing their sexual orientation due to the dualistic messages they experienced. Many participants described hiding pieces of themselves to fit into family structure and cultural norms.

For example, David shared how he consciously used the possibility of becoming a priest to hide his sexual orientation from his family and church.

David: “So yeah, for me, I use the priesthood deliberately as a method for finding the splendid closet in which I can be in and thrive in. And I came to see, oh, this is a really good life. I don't have to tell my parents that I'm gay. I don't ever have to explain why I'm not going to have kids or be married to a woman. If I become a priest, this is perfect.”

John disclosed how he attempted to change his sexual orientation to avoid eternal damnation.

John: “I definitely tried to change my sexual orientation, to no avail, obviously. That was several years of me doing that, so three years probably. Maybe a year and a half, actually.

Then when I was in college, I decided to explore that gay aspect of me. I was always a very religious guy, so that's why conversion therapy and all this religious language served... Was really a way to convince me that I was going to hell, so I needed to change something. Change my ways.”

Noah described how even when he attends Catholic mass with his significant other, he still needs to act a certain way in church, not able to fully be himself with his partner, such as holding hands or expressing love towards one another.

Noah: “No, I mean my boyfriend would go to church with me. I mean, as he would, I would go to church with him. You know? And I wouldn't... I mean, I'm not going to hold him and make out with him in the Church. And you know whatnot.”

Lastly, Ezekiel brought attention to the dualistic messages received around desiring versus acting on same-sex, including his need to suppress or not act on these urges.

Ezekiel: "Well, the sons of the Catholic churches say that you're made this way, and so there's nothing wrong inherently with being gay. It's just that they don't want you to be a practicing homosexual essentially."

Subtheme C: Questioning Religious Identity. All eight participants disclosed experiences of questioning their religious identity or Catholic practices/beliefs. These quotes illustrate that these dualistic messages caused them to question their Catholic faith.

For example, David disclosed the destructiveness of the narrative of needing to choose either one's religious or sexual identity and described that through questioning his religious identity, he came to a place of flexibility and fluidity within his sexual and religious identities.

David: “it's a beautiful language, spiritual fluidity. And don't be binary about your faith and your Catholicism, and your gender identity. Having to be forced to choose is

oppressive. Your freedom lies within that spectrum. And so, find the treasure in the traditions that you're a part of.”

Gabriel shared how he engaged in questioning his religious identity through looking to Jesus and identifying how Jesus was questioning the beliefs and practices of Catholics at that time.

Gabriel: “But Jesus was turning it over on its head; think about it, in all the religions before, we had to offer food for the gods, but Jesus does the opposite; he offers himself as food for us. So, he turns over all these religious things”

Paul described his engagement of doubt and questioning of the Catholic teachings and practices. He also goes on to share his anger and frustration towards these practices that caused him to question his religious identity.

Paul: “And while the immediate front is I'm mad at the family member, I always go to the next step, and I'm the reason why they're doing this, is because of their religion and it's the same as my religion. And it always just causes, I wouldn't say doubt in what I believe in, but just anger towards Catholicism, because it's directly affecting my life just because not everyone sees it the way I do.”

Mary reported her shaking credibility in faith in the Catholic teachings due to these dualistic messages and that she is questioning what is keeping her tethered to her Catholic faith.

Mary: “On the one hand, I can't imagine my life if I wasn't Catholic, but on the other hand, it's hard for me to think if the church's teaching on this really is wrong and it needs to change, what else that they're teaching is also wrong and needs to change? Which is hard. That shakes my credibility in the church and my faith. I almost wonder as well am I only Catholic because I'm afraid what would happen if I wasn't Catholic? If I would be

afraid for the state of my soul, do I still have that kind of guilt, or is the relationship genuine?”

Subtheme D: Lack of Freedom to Explore Sexual Identity. Six out of the eight participants reported a lack of freedom to explore their sexual orientation. Participants shared several obstacles, including family customs/beliefs, fear of being outed or rejected, physical freedom to explore, and internalized dualistic messages about one’s sexual and religious identities.

For example, Ezekiel shared how he was able to finally explore his sexual orientation in college because of the freedom that the distance from home, family, and church community created; however, he shared that even with this distance, there was still a fear of being outed by those peers that he knew from home that moved to college with him.

Ezekiel: “I say right up until I was about 17, it was a big struggle. And even when I first got to [college]... I think that was a greater struggle. Because it was, oh, I'm scared that everybody's going to find out about me, because I have a friend who also went to [college] as well from Jamaica and she's friends with my parents, and I was what if she goes and tells them?”

Paul described a lack of freedom to even think about his sexual orientation and therefore protected himself by avoiding that exploration.

Paul: “it's really easy to push it [sexual identity] out of sight out of mind. I don't want to think about it. I don't want to make a connection. So I think I was blinded for a while, but then when I was older, I realized more conflict.”

Lastly, Mary reported that she felt the need to wait until she was financially stable and separated from her family of origin before deeply exploring her sexual orientation.

Mary: “I did end up waiting until I was financially stable to come out. That was really good. I had my own apartment, own paycheck, savings, which was very helpful.”

Subtheme D: Mental Health Concerns. Four out of eight participants explicitly reported experiencing mental health concerns due to the mixed messages about their sexuality and religiosity, including symptoms of anxiety and depression, such as negative self-worth, low mood, racing thoughts, and hyper-vigilance.

For example, Gabriel shared his perceived correlation between his excessive worry, his engagement in the traditionalistic sectors of the church, and the messages he received there.

Gabriel: “I do feel weird sometimes. I do feel anxiety sometimes, and it has gotten better. I think the last six months have... because I've been going physically to church, have been really helpful, but I think the anxiety was caused by being in the traditionalist sect specifically, rather than the Catholic church in general.”

Ezekiel disclosed his continued experience of depressive symptoms, and negative thoughts about himself and his sexuality.

Ezekiel: “there were some dark days definitely sometimes if you're depression, you're like am I committing a sin, should I really take communion?”

Lastly, Isaiah discussed his mental health journey and navigating of these messages. He described the support that therapy and mindfulness have been for his mental health.

Isaiah: “Well, I think a lot of what I've been working on over the last several years really is also my mental health because I've had anxiety and depression for probably my entire life, but they really started to hit in the last several years. And it was kind of going through a lot of the therapy and the mindfulness that I started really kind of sorting

through a lot of my stuff, I guess, my own kind of like baggage and trying to deal with that, trying to be a better person.”

Theme 4: Coping with Cognitive Dissonance. All eight participants shared their experience of attempting to resolve tensions and the ways they coped with dualistic messages received.

Within this theme of coping strategies, the following subthemes emerged: A. Sought Affirming Messages/Communities/Church Representatives and Knowledge/Information, B. Engaged in Changes in Religious Identity or Religious Practices, C. Rejecting Negative Messages, and D. Religion as Coping.

Subtheme A: Seeking External Affirmation and Knowledge. Eight out of the eight participants reported seeking affirming messages, accepting spaces, and seeking information to further their understanding of their religious and sexual identities. Many participants shared that they sought affirming churches or communities, LGBTQ Catholic groups or online forums, and sought education through books, religious texts, and spiritual leaders.

For example, John illustrated how these affirming spaces had become much like hospitals for many wounded LGBTQ Catholics experiencing harmful dualistic messages.

John: “My [LGBTQ affirming] church is very much like a hospital. I wish that people didn't get wounded in the first place. That's my hope. I think the way to do that is to live an authentic life as a gay Catholic person, as openly as I can. With prudence and dialogue and hope that from the grassroots up, we're able to result in something. In a transformation.”

Gabriel shared how he seeks out affirming and accepting spaces based on his evolving needs and feelings; such as, when he is feeling a lack of belonging and dissonance between his sexual and religious identities, he may seek out an affirming Catholic space.

Gabriel: “Sometimes I feel weird. I feel like I'm not in the group of Catholic, but then when I feel that way, I go to a more accepting space, and then I remember that I am and that I'm just following my conscience, and that's what the church says. And so their idea of it, where there's no room for individual conscience, that is the incorrect idea of Catholicism or of Christianity, you know what I mean?”

Ezekiel discussed his positive experience of feeling welcomed and accepted when engaging in an affirming Catholic church/community.

Ezekiel: “I mean, ‘affirming church’ was exactly what I needed [when re-engaging with Catholic church] because everybody there was very bubbly and nice and encouraging, and we had a little orchestra going, so it was very nice.”

Lastly, Isaiah disclosed his positive experience engaging in an affirming Catholic church/community, LGBQ church groups, and community-building.

Isaiah: “But so we started going to ‘affirming church’. We started participating in the LGBT group a little bit whenever we had time. And that was a lot of fun. And the choir there was like ... They basically had a rock band. It was more modern music, I guess. And it was really energetic kind of situation. And they were like I said, they were very positive about LGBT issues. They celebrated the transgender day of something rather over at that church. And so they're very, very positive on those kind of things, which was nice to see. And so that got us involved there, and we remained involved with that church for probably one and a half to two years before we moved.”

Subtheme B: Engaged in Changes in Religious Identity or Religious Practices. Seven out of the eight participants reported engaging in changes in their religious identity or altering their religious practices. These participants described seeking or looking to alternative

religions/spirituality to meet existential needs and experienced changes in the frequency of participation in Catholic practices. They took on a more expansive or less rigid idea of Catholicism. These quotes identify the different changes in the participant's religious identity and religious practices that these participants engaged in to cope with dualistic messages.

For example, David described an evolving relationship to faith as his relationship with God changed. He described these changes as necessary in his overall identity development.

David: "I want to say that it has changed, and it has changed. And I think because I've had the privilege of learning about the tradition and teaching the tradition, I've come to see the different aspects of it that can change and are changeable. And mainly because it's all rooted in God. God is ever-changing. God is ever revealing God's self in new ways. And Catholicism provides the lens through which we can see that change and that normalness. So, yeah, to me, of course, it's changed. And I hope it changed."

Gabriel shared his change from more traditional to expansive Catholic practices.

Gabriel: "And a few times, I've had moments where...I've been getting into a more progressive, I guess, idea of Christianity than the one I had before, and that's not to say that I don't believe any of the... It's not to say... I was always scared of that because when you're going to very traditionalist or conservative churches, they're saying, "Well, progressive Christians don't believe that any of it is real," but that's not really true."

Lastly, Noah discussed still engaging in the sacraments at church services but slowly retreating from the more rigid aspects of Catholicism.

Noah: "I still, you know, go for my communion. You know for that part. But as I've said, I still am Catholic. I register as a Catholic. But it kind of loosened up a little bit, as far as that goes. But I still respect it very much, still though."

Subtheme i: Needed to Take a Break from Catholicism to Explore Sexual Orientation.

Within the subset of participants that reported engaging in changes in their religious identity or altering their religious practices, five out of those seven participants reported needing to take a break from Catholicism to explore their sexual identity to cope with the impact of the dualistic messages they received.

For example, John disclosed needing to take a break from engaging in Catholic church and practices after his experience leaving conversion therapy and attempting to change his sexual orientation.

John: “When I left conversion therapy and went to college and tried to be straight for a little bit and really found that it just wasn't working for me. I was feeling incredible despair. Then I just had to explore this gay identity more. So I explored it more sexually. I put my Catholicism on hold.”

Lastly, Isaiah shared his experience returning to the Catholic church after taking a break from Catholicism to explore other religions/spiritualities and practices to cope with dualistic messages.

Isaiah: “But ultimately, we came back because it was ... I've always kind of felt that going to a Catholic Church just kind of feels right. It's not flashy, it's not fancy or anything like that, it's very basic at times, but it just kind of it feels more natural.”

Subtheme C: Rejecting Negative Messages. Seven out of the eight participants reported coping with the impact of dualistic messages by rejecting the negative messages received. Many participants shared their experiences of rejecting negative messages

For example, David expressed his shock and dismay upon receiving negative messages about his sexual and religious identities and then shared his pull to deny the truth of these messages.

David: “I remember I was taken aback [by negative messages] at that moment, and I was like, well, that can't be right. That just can't be right. That's wrong. That can't be right.”

Ezekiel shared that he does not have any current tension between his sexual and religious identities. When tension arises, he can make light of the situation and move past the experience.

Ezekiel: “Thankfully, not anymore [experience any tension]. I think I'm just very confident now, so I just dismiss any... but we still kind of just make fun of it and move on.”

Lastly, Isaiah illustrated his feeling around the power of rejecting negative messages from others around you. He stressed the importance of blocking out the noise of everyone else when individuals are in a situation where they are constantly around these negative messages.

Isaiah: “And so anyone that says that you're a sinner or you're not good because you're gay or whatever, you shouldn't really even listen to those people because that's just nonsense.

And then I think that really, if you're not in a situation where you can find a place to go that's not hostile to your sexuality, then at least just accept the fact that it doesn't matter what anyone else says, that in the end, it's between you and God.

Subtheme D: Religion as Coping. Six out of the eight participants reported utilizing their Catholic faith to cope with the impact of receiving dualistic messages regarding their sexual and religious identities. These participants expressed using religious practices, such as reciting the rosary, attending sermons/mass, prayer/speaking to God, looking for God in experiences, and existential meaning.

For example, John shared how he utilized his Catholic faith and practices to help ground him, build a relationship with God, and guide him.

John: “And I grounded myself in my car, my phone, and partying with my friends. I was like, "What is anchoring my life?" That question was big for me. That's when I realized that I

need a better anchor. A God anchor, basically. I decided to pay more attention to my faith and use these customs as a vehicle to form a relationship with God. Which was really beautiful and fruitful, and from there, I discovered a passion for teaching. I remember looking at my religion teacher and being like, "Oh, he gets to do this for a living. Maybe I should consider being a religion teacher."

Noah described the positive feeling and closeness to God that he experienced after engaging in the Catholic church.

Noah: "And it's always nice at the end of church. And just saying thank you. And you know, it just gives me a good feeling, at that time. And a good uplifting thing. And it's more just being around God, at that time."

Lastly, Isaiah disclosed how his religious practices of prayer and reciting the rosary allowed him to center himself.

Isaiah: "I think that it's become very important and it's been something that helps me be a better person. It helps me to kind of center myself and to be more introspective, especially with Catholicism because they have a lot of practices where you can pray the rosary, and I kind of equate that with meditation almost, where you're just basically kind of repeating the same prayer over and over again and having that physical contact with the beads."

Theme 5: Integrating Conflicting Identities

The main component of this research was to better understand the identity integration development of the participants' Catholic and LGBQ identities. As it was a study requirement, all eight of the participants in this study identified as having integrated their Catholic and LGBQ identities. Participants were asked specific questions regarding their experience of having integrated their sexual and religious identities and ways of navigating conflicts. All eight

participants shared their experiences of integrating and continuing to integrate these identities, reconciling dualistic messages, and creating a authentic self. Within this theme are the subthemes; A. Creating Meaning that Resonates with Self, B. Holding onto Core Meaning in Catholic Teachings, and C. Integration as a Process.

Subtheme A: Creating Meaning That Resonates with Self. Eight out of the eight participants reported engaging in meaning-making that resonates with oneself as a part of their experience of integrating their sexual and religious identities. All participants shared their experience of utilizing the teachings and beliefs they have come in contact with to sort out and create a authentic narrative of the self that resonates with all aspects of their identities, specifically, their Catholic and LGBQ identities.

For example, David shared the self-narrative around the self-being of a tree along several rivers to draw water from to sustain life

David: “So it is this abiding river that's there, that is long, and it's coursed through centuries. It has really deep, beautiful roots and a river, but there are other rivers up there and I'm drawing from those too. I am not me without the nourishment from that water and life-giving water. So what it means to me is that it's just part of who I am. It's like the air that I breathe. I cannot separate it from me. And once I transcend it, I will no longer know what's Catholic and what's not, because my understanding of being Catholic is precisely the fullness or the original meaning of that term, which is universal of the whole. So when I say that I'm Catholic, I'm hopefully saying more and more that I'm becoming more whole with people from other religions, with the earth, with the poor, with people who are rejected and oppressed, with people who are privileged. So yeah, that's what it means to be Catholic.”

John disclosed his experience of creating meaning that resonated with him out of the narrative of Jesus as “radical love” and expressed how he utilized his understanding that came from his exploration of his gay identity to influence and incorporate his Catholic identity.

John: “that way I was like, “Huh, I had never really thought of Jesus as radical love.”

And because I hadn't thought of him that way, I hadn't really been able to reconcile my Catholic identity and my gay identity but with that narrative I was able to really... I guess it's fairer to say that my sexuality helped me construct my Catholicism. Rather than my Catholicism helping me construct my sexuality. When I was allowing my Catholicism to construct my sexuality, it actually tried to deconstruct it. To repress it, at best.”

Gabriel described his experience of creating meaning that resonated with him out of the narrative of “God is not a punitive God” that provided him with the comfort to integrate his gay identity within the system of his Catholic identity that he once didn't feel could co-exist.

Gabriel: “I didn't know how to exist outside of that [Catholic] system, but when you adopt an idea that God is a loving God and not a punitive God, that was willing to throw you into Hell for that kind of thing, then it becomes easier to exist in that system, because when we commit a sin, we're really punishing ourselves, it's not God that going to throw you into Hell.”

Lastly, Paul discussed his use of scientific explanations to aid in creating meaning around his gay identity while incorporating a familiar narrative of science and Catholicism. This provided him with validation, comfort, and a sense of purpose that resonated with him.

Paul: “But I feel like I use science explanations to make sense of the world and make sense of things. And so that really helps with just why things are the way they are. I love when there's an evolutionary explanation for X, Y, or Z. So there are a lot of theories and

"studies" that maybe aren't super backed up, but still are studies about why has homosexuality survived evolutionarily when it doesn't make sense because you don't reproduce if you are homosexual. And so all of that I think is really important to me to just hear that. This maybe sounds bad, but it gives validation, like there is a reason and there is a purpose, maybe even scientifically or evolutionarily."

Subtheme B: Holding onto Core Meanings in Catholic Teachings. Eight out of the eight participants described holding onto core messages, beliefs, and meanings within the Catholic teachings as a part of their experience integrating their sexual and religious identities. All the participants shared experiences of them holding tightly to foundational beliefs of Catholicism, such as that they are loved by God, created by God, God has a greater plan, and that no one can take their sacraments (Baptism, Confirmation, etc.) away from them. Additionally, many participants shared that they held onto more affirming messages within the Catholic teachings and bible.

For example, David shared his experience of holding onto the foundational teachings of Catholicism, such as that he is loved and part of God's family and forgiven for his sins.

David: "And I think it is fundamentally that I knew what the foundations were, and that's all that mattered. So the foundations, meaning I'm loved, I'm part of God's family, I'm a child of God, I'm forgiven, I will be forgiven for my sins, that there's Lent and there's Easter, that there are all these spiritual practices."

Ezekiel discussed how he holds onto the core meaning of Catholicism.

Ezekiel: "And I mean part of it is to just be a good person. Behave and be a good person. That's essentially what I believe that the one commandment that we have love thy neighbors as you love thy ourselves, right?"

Paul also reflected on how he utilizes the foundational teachings in guiding him.

Paul: “So to me, my Catholic faith is my foundation for being a good person. I think it's maybe not why I'm a good person, but it's my teachings for how to be a good person and the importance of being a good person.”

Lastly, Isaiah described his embracing of the core teaching that we are created by God in God's image and holding onto the belief that God doesn't make mistakes.

Isaiah: “I don't think he [God] hates anybody. But I think the most important thing is just to remember that you were created by God. And if you really believe in God and you believe that he's immortal and he created everything, God didn't make any mistake when he made you. And I think that's a good starting point. Any spiritual journey is to know that you're not a mistake.”

Subtheme C: Integration as a Process. Six out of the eight participants reported their experience integrating their Catholic and LGBTQ identities as a process they had to engage in actively. These participants described non-linear experiences of integration that ebbed and flowed.

For example, John described his active work while integrating his Catholic and gay identities.

John: “Sometimes it's like being burnt out. I'm tired because of actual work I'm doing. But as of now, I guess, my conception of the Catholic church where it currently stands is I'm Catholic, this is my home, this is my community, there's people in my family who I don't get along with, like my Grandma's racist and homophobic.”

Ezekiel illustrated the slow and long process of engaging in the steps necessary for him to integrate his Catholic and gay identities.

Ezekiel: “Yeah. It took a while [to integrate sexual and religious identity], it was a long process, but I'm comfortable with where I am now. I mean, it's the debatable whether it's correct by the church standards, but I believe that essentially where Pope Francis is on the topic, he says he has no right to judge.”

Isaiah disclosed his experience of integrating his Catholic and gay identity as an ongoing process as he continues to come in contact with dualistic messages.

Isaiah: “I think it's been one of those things that I think it's going to be an ongoing kind of process of kind of dealing with that. But it's been beneficial to accept that I'm not going to fit into that traditional Catholic morality, being strictly monogamous, being very conventional, things like that. It's just not really who I am, and I'm okay with that.”

Theme 6: Current Engagement in Catholic Practices

As a part of the inclusion criteria for this study, each participant currently identified as Catholic and was asked within the interview what their faith meant to them now. All eight participants reported identifying and practicing Catholicism in diverse ways. Many of the participants reported that they are currently working to obtain or have obtained higher education in fields of Theology, and are employed at jobs that involve their Catholic faith (i.e., Religion/Theology teachers/professors, religious representatives, providing expertise, such as music instructor and technology technician), and engage in volunteering within their Catholic communities. This is in addition to their engagement in Catholic practices and teachings, which varied among participants. This variation includes some participants that attend traditionally versus more expansive Catholic services, engage in Catholic services/mass ranging from daily to holidays, participate in large Catholic community celebrations and gatherings, and participate in Catholic practices. Within this theme are the subthemes; A. Hope for The Catholic Church's

Future, which also encompasses a subset of those participants that reported actively engaging in Advocacy and Creating Safe Spaces, and B. Anticipated Future Tension.

Subtheme A: Hope for the Catholic Church's Future. Five out of the eight participants expressed hopefulness for the future of the Catholic church to become more accepting and affirming of LGBTQ members.

For example, David referenced several Catholic leaders that have aligned with affirming messages about sexuality. He expressed his participation in the growing LGBTQ Catholic community and being a part of a greater narrative within the story of Catholicism.

David: "Now we have the Rainbow Network of Catholics worldwide, the James Martins of the world, the Brian Massingales of the world, and even Pope Francis. So to me, my story is just part of a greater narrative and a greater story that's being told, and that's unfolding right now."

Gabriel shared their feelings about the Catholic church's growth toward more affirming and accepting messages regarding the LGBTQ community and his hope for the church to continue down this path of evolution as before about other aspects of religious teachings.

Gabriel: "And so that's the thing, is that the church moved on with religious freedom. The church moved on with a lot of things where the doctrine today is not what it was before; even if it technically can fit together, it doesn't really, in practice, fit together. And so, I think the church is already on the way to doing that about sex. It's much more accepting of LGBT than it was ten years ago when I first came back into it. It's like, "We're going to stop talking about this, and then we're going to start talking about something else," and that's how the church changes, and I just happen to live in this time

where that hasn't happened yet, fully, the way that it's happened with things like democracy and freedom of conscience and stuff like that.”

Lastly, Noah discussed his feelings about the Catholic church turning towards a more accepting and affirming narrative regarding one’s sexual orientation.

Noah: ‘Yeah. Honestly, the way I feel it is now is that there's a lot less friction between gays and the Catholic church.’”

Subtheme i: Advocacy and Creating Safe Spaces. Within the subset of the five out of the eight participants that expressed hopefulness for the future of the Catholic church to become more accepting and affirming of LGBTQ members, three out of those five participants reported actively engaging in advocacy and creating safe spaces for others who identify as Catholic and LGBTQ. These quotes depict this subset of participants' active engagement in advocating and creating safe spaces for others who identify as Catholic and LGBTQ.

For example, David shared his experience starting an LGBTQ group within his Catholic community that continues to exist today.

David: “There was a movement amongst us Catholics within this group to be like, we should start our group. I decided to call all these Catholic young adults together and say, what should we do? We decided to form a group, and I posted about this group, this LGBT Catholic group existing.”

Additionally, Ezekiel disclosed his role in utilizing both his passion for music and his Catholic faith to create safe spaces for LGBTQ Catholics and his ability to be a role model to other LGBTQ Catholics attempting to engage in the process of integrating identities.

Ezekiel: “Yeah. Well, I mean, it really did make me into a person who really wants to be a philanthropist. And so, that led me down the path of using music to empower kids, right?”

And a large number of the kids in the orchestra identify as bisexual, gay; they're LGBT. Right? And so, it's nice to be able to create a safe space within music for them as well. And it's nice to also be a role model where they feel comfortable to speak to you about how they're feeling and so on.”

Subtheme B: Anticipated Future Tension. Five out of the eight participants reported believing or anticipating that they will encounter future tension throughout their life. Many of these participants shared that they foresee themselves continuing to experience dualistic messages that impact them, predictions of experiencing obstacles when wanting to engage in the sacrament of marriage in a Catholic church, and expecting to experience conflict when exploring different types of relationship practices (e.g., open relationship, polyamory).

For example, Noah shared his anticipation of experiencing tension or conflict between his Gay and Catholic identities if he wanted to get married in a Catholic church.

Noah: “I mean, when I get married, do I plan on getting married in front of a priest, in possibly a church, if that ever happened? I probably would try to. And then I would probably come more upon, actually, the little more of the friction part.”

Isaiah described his current and anticipated future tension of integrating his polyamorous relationship with his Catholic identity.

Isaiah: “Well, it was a conflict that was really on my mind. Because my husband and I, we are polyamorous, and we dated to people before and we had dated to people recently, and we're starting to hit it off and everything like that. I guess it's one thing to be hypothetically polyamorous and actually start dating somebody. And when that became real, it was just one of those things where it's like, "Okay, wait. I'm involved with the

church. How am I leveling my spiritual life with how I'm living my personal life?" But I think that's where we all began."

Mary disclosed her desire to be married in a Catholic church and anticipates that she will never be able to experience that, which causes a great deal of distress and conflict.

Mary: "But that doesn't include me. I'm not allowed to get married in the church even though I desperately want to."

Chapter Five: Discussion

Discussion of Themes

The following section explores how each of the study's emergent themes and subthemes supports or differs from prior findings in the literature.

Discussion of Theme 1: Catholicism as a Part of Family Tradition/Culture. This theme explored the impact and role of traditional practices, customs, and norms within each participant's family of origin and the environments in which they grew up. All eight participants expressed a family connection and a rootedness in Catholicism's traditions and cultural practices. Many participants described an obligation or an ingrainedness of the Catholic practices/traditions within their family of origin.

This finding is consistent with Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith model, which describes the significant role of familial, environmental, intrapersonal, and social influences in the individual's life as a primary aspect of the first three stages of developing their faith. Participants in the current study described those Catholic practices and customs as commonplace and mechanical aspects of family culture that they would engage in without questioning and with a sense of obligation or expectation. In other words, the participants in this study did not choose their religion but were born into it through their family of origin. Additionally, Beit-Hallahmi's (1991) Conceptualization of Religious Identity model illustrates three different affiliations within one's religion's identity, these include: (1) one's religious community (either consciously or unconsciously); (2) one's social identity, and (3) one's ego-identity. Specifically, this study's findings highlight the role of one's religious community and social identity through this study's report on the importance of family connection and a rootedness in the traditions and cultural practices of Catholicism as a significant impact on one's religious community and social identity.

This study's participants shared how this family tradition and culture impacted one's Catholic identity development and eventual integration of their religious and sexual identities. Both of these models demonstrate the significant role of family culture and social/community influences in one's religious identity development, which aligns with this study's findings of the significant role of traditional practices, customs, and norms within each of the participant's families of origins.

Discussion of Theme 2: Dualistic Messages Received Regarding One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity. This theme explored the messages that participants experienced around their sexual and religious identities. All eight participants shared experiences of receiving mixed messages regarding their sexual and religious identities. Participants shared that these dualistic messages came from their family of origin, the Catholic church/community, and societal and political stigma. This theme was comprised of the following subthemes: "Experiencing Negative Messages and Stigma," "Felt or Experienced Rejection," and "Experienced Positive Messages."

Subtheme A: Experienced Negative Messages and Stigma. All eight participants endorsed experiencing non-affirming messages regarding both their sexual and religious identities. Page et al. (2013) utilized longitudinal data to examine the experiences of 170 adolescents and young adults aged 14–24 to identify negative LGB identity as a mediator of the relationships between) religious stress and mental health, and b) gay-related stress and mental health. Page et al. (2013) highlighted that in many LGBQ Catholic individuals, this tension could be partly due to the messages religious institutions convey that LGB individuals are "immoral and second-class." The individual then internalizes these messages (Page et al., 2013). This aligns with this study's findings regarding the experience of negative messages regarding one's

sexual orientation and religious identity through adherence to Catholic tenets, acceptance of non-affirming Catholic scriptures, and from a family of origin.

This study's findings also align with Schuck and Liddle's (2001) findings that LGBTQ Catholic individuals experience severe cognitive and emotional consequences because of oppressive religious doctrine, including guilt, shame, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation. Schuck and Liddle's (2001) mixed methods study of 66 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) respondents examined perceived conflicts between religion and sexual orientation. They found that two-thirds of their participants indicated experiencing these tensions stemming from religious messages that asserted the sinfulness of same-sex sexual attraction, the need for forgiveness, and external celibacy. It is essential to consider the messages that LGBTQ youth receive as they develop their sexual identity within these environments.

Finally, this study's findings are consistent with Ream and Savin-Williams's (2008) study that examined the impact of negative attitudes and messages towards same-sex attraction by most major Christian denominations. Utilizing the responses of 395 cisgender male and female same-sex attracted 13–25-year-olds identified that LGB individuals raised in religious environments that convey non-affirming messages regarding sexual orientation might experience significant cognitive dissonance regarding their sexual orientation and religious identities. A second finding was that the sexual minority individuals in their study had difficulty reconciling their desire for self-acceptance with the negative messages several faith institutions convey. These studies align with the current study's findings by highlighting the many experiences of LGBTQ youth and adults receiving non-affirming messages from the Catholic church, their family of origin, society and politics, and experiences of blatant or direct discrimination.

Subtheme B: Felt or Experienced Rejection. All eight participants identified that they felt or experienced rejection from many different spaces and individuals, such as family, the Catholic church, work, friends and peers, representatives of the church, and society. This is consistent with Page, et al. (2013) findings through their use of longitudinal data from a more extensive study to examine the experiences of 170 adolescents and young adults aged 14–24 that identifies that negative feedback received by LGB individuals from their immediate environment and society at large is often adopted and directed inward as self-rejection. This aligns with this current study's findings of LGBQ Catholic's experience of rejection within these communities and family structures they wish to belong to or be a part of. Additionally, Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczk-Skrypek (2016) examined the experiences of eight Polish gay cisgender males with a Catholic background through semi-structured interviews to explore the conflict between sexual and religious identities. Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczk-Skrypek's (2016) findings align with this current study's findings that experiencing both positive and oppressive messages can create high ambivalence and lead to the individual attacking his parts of self that had previously been directly or indirectly attacked. These findings are highlighted by this current study's findings of feelings of experienced rejection of one's identities.

Subtheme C: Experience Positive Messages. Seven participants reported experiencing positive messages about their sexual and religious identities, specifically from family, the Catholic community, and friends. For this study's participants, this role of experiencing positive messages may have played several roles. Specifically, Schrogg et al. (2018) demonstrated this through their examination of secondary data utilizing Likert scales to measure identity salience, identity integration, identity visibility, and engagement within the LGBQ community to examine wellbeing and identity development among 18–24-year-old LGB individuals. These findings

show that lower social support is associated with negative attitudes toward one's sexual identity and, in turn, with various psychosocial stressors (Schrogg et al., 2018).

Additionally, they found that support for families and friends is essential in the integration process (Schrogg, et al., 2018). This suggests that for this current study's participants, this experience of positive and affirming messages about their sexual and religious identities may have played a role in the active decision to integrate one LGBQ and Catholic identities. In addition to the possible role in the integration process that these positive messages may have, other studies have identified that parental support remains an essential correlate of health-related outcomes during the transition from adolescence to young adulthood (Needham et al., 2010). Needham et al. (2010) examined the experiences of 11,153 individuals in three waves from the ages of 5-26. They found that parental support remains an essential correlate of health-related outcomes when navigating identity development. This role of affirming messages as a buffer in cases where an individual may experience negative social and familial responses to their LGBQ identity may contribute to this current study's finding regarding the impact of their experiences of affirming messages.

Discussion of Theme 3: Impact of Received Messages and Experiences Received Regarding One's Sexual Orientation and Religious Identity. This theme explored the impact of these dualistic messages that these participants experienced and discussed. All eight participants shared several different implications of the mixed messages they received and the cognitive dissonance they experienced throughout their life regarding their sexual and religious identities. This theme was comprised of the following subthemes: "Internalization of Negative Messages," "Suppressing Sexual Orientation," "Questioning Religious Identity," "Lack of Freedom to Explore Sexual Orientation Identity," and "Mental Health Concerns."

Subtheme A: Internalization of Negative Messages. All eight participants shared experiences of internalizing the dualistic messages they had received around their sexual and religious identities. This finding is consistent with Page et al.'s (2013) longitudinal investigation into religious stress, gay-related stress, sexual identity, and mental health outcomes in 170 lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents/emerging adults. This study highlighted the impact of internalization of negative messages religious institutions convey, which can lead to internalized homonegativity—aligning with this study's findings from participants' experiences of accepting negative messages that they received as truth and either unconsciously or consciously accepting negative bias regarding their sexuality.

Additionally, previous studies conducted by Savin-Williams and Ream's (2005) analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health data and Sherry et al. (2010) mixed method study consisting of 422 LGB participants to investigate the relationship and variables between one's religious and sexual identities, found that heterosexist messages from religious sources have been associated with shame, guilt, and internalized heterosexism. This parallels the findings of the current study that participants disclosed experiences of holding on to the belief that they are engaging in sin. This inner battle between their religious beliefs and sexual orientation had significant religious guilt and social pressure to adapt to the heteronormative culture (Page et al., 2013; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2005; Sherry, et al., 2010). This previous research aligns with this study's findings of LGBQ Catholic's internalization of negative messages, such as traditional morality and the need to engage in celibacy due to experiencing dualistic messages around one's sexual and religious identities.

Subtheme B: Suppressing Sexual Orientation. All eight participants reported experiencing a felt need to suppress or hide their sexual identity as an impact of the cognitive

dissonance they experienced regarding their sexual and religious identities. This finding is consistent with Henrickson et al.'s (2007) Lavender Island study of 2,269 responses to a robust survey addressing multiple aspects of experiences of LGB individuals in New Zealand, which identified those individuals with a Catholic upbringing took longer to self-disclose their LGB identity later than those individuals raised non-religiously (Henrickson, et al., 2007). Similarly, Stern and Wright's (2018) study of 376 self-identified sexual minority adults were given measures of religiosity, spirituality, LGB identity, and self-esteem built on this finding to suggest that religious indoctrination may delay the achievement of sexual identity milestones (Stern & Wright, 2018). Many participants shared experiences where they had to hide pieces of themselves due to these dualistic messages, they received to fit into family structure, cultural norms, and safety.

Additionally, this finding of LGBQ Catholic's experience of a felt need to suppress or hide their sexual identity as an impact of the negative messages from society as a whole is consistent with Meyer's (2003) The Minority Stress Model, which includes a discussion of the effects of the negative attitudes and assumptions about one's sexual orientation that is prevalent in society on leading to concealment of one's sexual orientation identity (Meyer, 2003). This assumption about one's sexual orientation that is prevalent in society is known as internalized heterosexism or compulsory heterosexuality. Compulsory heterosexuality was first coined by Rich (1980) in her essay to illustrate the systemically imposed nature of heterosexism on our culture and our society to feel obligated to automatically assume that all romantic relationships are between a man and a woman (Rich, 1908). Therefore, stigma, societal messages, and assumptions should be considered when understanding the felt need to suppress or hide one's sexual identity as an impact of experiencing these dualistic.

However, this study's findings suggest that these eight self-identified as integrated their sexual and religious identities and described their experiences of suppressing their sexual orientation as an impact of the dualistic messages they experienced that they later coped with or resolved. This finding is different from the previous research, as rejecting or suppressing one's sexual identity and compartmentalization were previously identified as two of the four general categories that LGB individuals might attempt to alleviate tension between their LGB and religious identities (Anderton et al., 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). This study's findings suggest that LGBQ Catholics that have integrated their sexual and religious identities engaged in several of these identified categories of alleviating tension as a part of the process of integrating their identities, which leads to the need for further research to possibly re-evaluate the identification of "categories" to a non-linear experience resolving cognitive dissonance and identity conflict.

Subtheme C: Questioning Religious Identity. All eight participants disclosed experiences questioning their religious identity or Catholic practices/belief due to the mixed messages about their sexual and religious identity. Questioning one's religious identity appears to be a normative component of religious identity development that is highlighted in Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith model, specifically in stages four and five. The fourth, individuative-reflective, is the first stage that includes critical reflection of one's faith (Fowler, 1981). Many participants in this current study shared their questioning of the meanings and interpretations of Catholic teachings and practices. The fifth or conjunctive stage typically occurs when an individual recognizes their faith is subjective and multi-dimensional (Fowler, 1981). Some participants in this current study shared their questioning, which led to a broader understanding of their Catholic beliefs and Catholicism. It is essential to mention the critique of Fowler's

(1981) Stages of Faith model conducted by Piper (2002), a minister and adjunct professor at Meadville Lombard Theological School, where he concluded that a complete model of faith development would include a more holistic and nonuniform framework rather than a cognitive-structural, linear, and hierarchical model (Piper, 2002). This critique of Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith model is consistent with this study's findings of these eight LGBTQ Catholics' experiences of questioning as a non-linear process.

As the impact of these dualistic messages experienced by participants around their sexual and religious identity led to all of the participants in this study engaging in the process of questioning the messages they were receiving through the Catholic faith, questioning where these dualistic messages and rules came from, and questioning relationship with the Catholic religion. This concept of questioning one's religious identity is in line with the previous research and model of Shallenberger's (1998) Notion of Integration as a Process. Shallenberger (1998), a professor at DePaul University, qualitatively examined lesbian and gay individuals (n=26) understanding of their spiritual journey. Shallenberger (1998) study highlighted three key issues lesbian and gay individuals grappled with throughout their identity development process and spiritual journey, the first being questioning. In questioning, individuals engage in an extensive (primarily internal) conversation where they question their religious beliefs as they relate to their sexual identity (Shallenberger, 1998). This is also identified as a central piece to the beginning of the integration process (Shallenberger, 1998). Therefore, this pulls for this study's participants to actively question their sexual and religious identities. The messages they received regarding their identities played a significant role in the integration process.

Subtheme D: Lack of Freedom to Explore Sexual Orientation Identity. Six of the eight participants reported experiencing a lack of freedom to engage in an exploration of their

sexual orientation as an impact of the cognitive dissonance they received regarding their sexual and religious identities. This finding is consistent with the research conducted by Levy and Edmiston (2014), where they compared the results of two qualitative studies, the first examining conflict between sexual identity and a Christian upbringing by examining the experience of 15 participants who self-identified as gay, lesbian, and queer and the second investigating conflict between gender identity and a Christian upbringing by exploring the experience of 5 participants who self-selected as transgender, transsexual, and genderqueer (four identified as heterosexual and one as gay).

Here they found that holding both a Christian and LGBTQ identity may affect an individual's identity development by slowing the development of their sexual identity and speeding up their faith development (Levy & Edmiston, 2014). This was demonstrated in this study through the shared experiences of many of this study's participants of devoting much of their time and energy into their faith to distract or suppress their sexual identity due to the lack of freedom within their religion to explore those parts of their identity. Participants in this current study shared several obstacles that had a role in their experience or feelings of not being able to engage in an exploration of their sexual orientation, such as family customs/beliefs, fear of being outed or rejected, physical freedom to explore, and internalized dualistic messages about one's sexual and religious identities. This finding of lack of felt ability to explore one's sexual identity due to experiencing dualistic messages is in line with the research suggesting that cognitive dissonance may affect the pace of one's sexual identity development (Levy & Edmiston, 2014).

Subtheme E: **Mental Health Concerns.** Four of the eight participants explicitly reported experiencing mental health concerns due to the mixed messages about their sexuality and religiosity. In general, it has been well-documented that LGBTQ adolescents experience

behavioral health disparities compared to their heterosexual peers (Meyer, 2003; Page et al., 2013). Specifically, Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Theory aids in the understanding of how stressful experiences related to one's LGBQ identity might impact their health outcomes (Meyer, 2003). Understanding minority stress is the excess stress that people from stigmatized social categories might experience due to their social position (Meyer, 2003).

This study's finding of experiencing mental health concerns as a result of receiving mixed messages around one's sexual and religious identities aligns with Schuck and Liddle's (2001) mixed methods study's findings that LGBQ Catholic individuals experience severe cognitive and emotional consequences because of oppressive religious doctrine, including guilt, shame, self-loathing, and suicidal ideation (Schuck & Liddle, 2001) as well as Longo et al.'s (2018) examination of the relationship between religion and non-suicidal self-injury in 250 youth who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, or queer, between the ages of 13 and 25. Longo and colleagues (2018) identified that this tension between one's sexual orientation and religious belief system could result in "competing selves" with emotional and cognitive conflicts between the two. Unresolved, these competing selves can lead to depression, anxiety, isolation, concealment of oneself, and suicidal ideations (Longo et al., 2018), which align with the findings of this current research study as many of the participants disclosed experiencing symptoms of anxiety and depression, such as negative self-worth, low mood, racing thoughts, and hyper-vigilance.

Discussion of Theme 4: Coping with Cognitive Dissonance. This theme explored participants' experiences of attempting to resolve tensions and the ways they coped with dualistic messages received. All eight participants shared their experiences of engaging in several ways of coping with reconciling experienced tension or dissonance regarding their sexual and religious

identities. This aligns with the research of Festinger's (1962) cognitive dissonance theory that most individuals are motivated to achieve consistency and congruency within themselves (Festinger, 1962). To reduce dissonance, individuals strive to change one or more elements that do not fit together (Festinger, 1962). All eight of the participants disclosed engaging in multiple different strategies for coping with dualistic messages (i.e., seeking external affirmation and knowledge, engaging in changes in religious identity or religious practices, rejecting negative messages, and using religion as coping), which aligns with what Festinger had proposed that LGB individuals engaged in more than one conflict resolution strategy to resolve their religious identity/sexual identity conflict. This theme of coping strategies that participants were involved in to navigate dissonance was comprised of the following subthemes: "Seeking External Affirmation and Knowledge," "Engaged in Changes in Religious Identity or Religious Practices," "Rejecting Negative Messages," and "Religion as Coping."

Subtheme A: **Seeking External Affirmation and Knowledge.** All eight participants reported seeking affirming messages and accepting spaces, as well as seeking knowledge and information to further their understanding of their religious and sexual identities as a way of navigating tension or dissonance regarding their sexual and religious identities. This study's findings are consistent with the research studies discussed previously findings that suggest that when individuals who identify as LGBTQ and Catholic are experiencing both/either external and internal tensions between these two possibly contradicting identities, one of the most utilized cognitive dissonance resolution strategies is: disaffiliating from non-affirming churches or religions and seeking out new organizations, congregations or religions (Anderton et al., 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

This study's finding of seeking affirming messages and accepting spaces as a way of navigating dualistic messages regarding their sexual and religious identities is in line with previous research of Rodriguez and Ouellette's (2000) mixed methods study of 40 members of an affirming Catholic church in New York City that identified that involvement in a gay-positive church could support LGBQ individuals to navigate the conflict between their religious and sexual identity (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Similarly, all three of the sexual identity development models examined by this researcher: Cass's (1979) Linear Model of Homosexual Identity and two nonlinear or dynamic models: D'Augelli's (1994) Model of LGB Identity Development and Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) Nonlinear Model of Homosexual Identity Development, identify engaging with others who identify as LGBQ as crucial in the development of one's LGB identity so that learning from others and modeling/normalizing of behaviors can occur (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; 2006; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Therefore, it demonstrates the importance of finding and developing more community support and friendships by creating a safe and affirming support network of people who know and accept the individual's sexual orientation.

Many participants shared that they sought affirming churches or communities, LGBQ Catholic groups or online forums, and sought education through books, religious texts, and spiritual leaders. This finding aligns with Shallenberger's (1998) Notion of Integration as a Process model identified three key issues LGBQ Catholics grapple with throughout their identity development process (Shallenberger, 1998). Specifically, reintegration and reclaiming are described as being accomplished through reading relevant literature, talking with loved ones, identifying, and approaching other LGBQ individuals grappling with these same or similar concerns, and seeking out safe spaces where they can reconnect with both their LGBQ identity

and their Catholic identity in a community of supportive, like-minded individuals (Shallenberger, 1998). This points to the fact that seeking affirming messages and accepting spaces, as well as seeking knowledge and information to further their understanding of their religious and sexual identities as a way of navigating tension or dissonance regarding their sexual and religious identities, maybe a tool in the integration process of one's sexual and religious identities.

Subtheme B: Engaged in Changes in Religious Identity or Religious Practices. Seven participants reported engaging in changes in their religious identity or altering their religious practices to navigate tension or dissonance regarding their sexual and religious identities. Of the four general categories identified that LGB individuals might attempt to utilize to alleviate tension between their LGB and religious identities, similar to changing one's environment, incorporating new beliefs was a primary strategy being used by LGB participants (Anderton et al., 201; Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Additionally, Barton (2010) examined the experiences of 46 lesbians and gay men ages 18–74 years of age. He found that the conflict they were experiencing between their religious identity and sexual identity motivated them to do their research on scriptural references and question or challenge particular religious tenets. They changed their beliefs due to this process (Barton, 2010). This is in line with this current study's findings of participants seeking alternative religions/spirituality to meet existential needs, experiencing changes in the frequency of participation in Catholic practices, and taking on a more progressive or less rigid idea of Catholicism.

Lastly, it is essential to note that Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory identified that individuals could change their cognitions about the environment without changing it. Still, they would need others who agree with their new environmental perceptions (Festinger,

1957). This factor may have successfully supported many of this study's participants to reconcile and integrate their sexual and religious identities.

Subtheme C: Rejecting Negative Messages. Seven participants reported coping with the impact of dualistic messages by rejecting the negative messages received. Past research highlights the role of one's acceptance of their own identities in one's ability to reject dualistic messages. The three significant models discussed that have been developed to characterize sexual identity development; Cass (1979) Linear Model of Homosexual Identity, D'Augelli (1994) Model of LGB Identity Development, and Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) Nonlinear Model of Homosexual Identity Development all identify a step or process of acceptance of one's sexual identity (Cass, 1979; D'Augelli, 1994; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). Acceptance is not seen as unidirectional; rather a balance of positive and negative attitudes that may oscillate depending on the availability of social support, cultural shifts, or personal experiences (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013). This study illustrates these participants' use of rejecting negative messages to cope with dualistic messages about their sexual and religious identities. Overall demonstrates that rejecting dualistic messages that one receives regarding their sexual and religious identities appears to be an essential and resilient factor in sexual identity development and coping with cognitive dissonance is a complex process.

Subtheme D: Religion as Coping. Six of the eight participants reported utilizing their Catholic faith to cope with the impact of receiving dualistic messages regarding their sexual and religious identities. Religious coping is the process by which people draw on religious beliefs and practices to understand and deal with life stressors, commonly used by many groups in times of stress (Pargament et al., 1998). Pargament and colleagues (1998), through exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, examined three different samples of individuals; 296 individuals

who experienced the Oklahoma bombing, 540 college individuals who experienced a severe adverse event, and 551 individuals coping with a medical illness to identify patterns of positive and negative religious coping—recognizing positive religious coping as religious forgiveness, seeking spiritual support, collaborative religious coping, spiritual connection, religious purification, and benevolent religious reappraisal (Pargament et al., 1998). On the other hand, Pargament, and colleagues (1998) identified negative religious coping as spiritual discontent, punishing God reappraisals, interpersonal religious discontent, demonic reappraisal, and reappraisal of God's powers. Ultimately, findings suggested that these two different coping patterns have other implications for health and adjustment (Pargament et al., 1998).

The participants in this study expressed utilizing religion and religious practices to cope, such as reciting the rosary, attending sermons/mass, prayer/speaking to God, looking for God in experiences, and existential meaning. This finding is consistent with Pargament and colleagues' (1998) finding that religious coping methods mediate the relationship between an individual's general religious orientation and the outcomes of significant life events. Went on to identify that positive religious coping patterns were related to benevolent outcomes, including fewer symptoms of psychological distress, reports of psychological and spiritual growth as a result of the stressors, and interviewer ratings of greater cooperativeness (Pargament et al., 1998). Overall, previous studies suggest that positive religious coping can both provide meaning and decrease the adverse effect on personal identity (Pargament et al., 1998), aligning with this study's finding of utilizing religion as a coping method.

Discussion of Theme 5: Integrating Conflicting Identities. This theme explored the identity integration development of one's Catholic and LGBQ identities for individuals who identified as LGBQ Catholic, their experience of incorporating or integrating these identities, and

ways of navigating conflicts within this integration. All eight participants shared their experience of integrating and continuing to integrate these identities, reconciling dualistic messages, and creating a authentic self. As stated above, existing research has identified four general categories of coping strategies utilized ways to alleviate tension between one's sexual and religious identities: (1) Rejecting ones religious or sexual identity; (2) compartmentalization; (3) identity integration; and (4) seeking a more affirming religious or spiritual faith (Anderton, et al., 2011; Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). This findings of the present study suggest that this is a non-linear, multifaceted, and individualized experience. This theme was comprised of the following subthemes: "Creating Meaning that Resonates with Self," "Holding onto Core Meaning in Catholic Teachings," and "Integration as a Process."

Subtheme A: Creating Meaning that Resonates with Self. All eight participants reported engaging in the process of meaning-making to identify what resonated with them as a part of their experience of integrating their sexual and religious identities—aligning with the previous researchers that proposed that identity conflict can be alleviated when LGBTQ individuals integrate their religious beliefs and their LGBTQ identity into a single, new, workable understanding of the self (Anderton et al., 2011; Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000). Additionally, Minwalla et al. (2005) examined the experience of 6 gay Muslim cis-gender men. They found that some participants believed that religious leaders were misinterpreting specific scriptural passages and often had alternate interpretations for themselves when these messages were belittled or discriminated against by LGBTQ individuals.

This study's finding of creating new meaning that resonates with oneself as a part of the integration of one's sexual and religious identity is consistent with Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance, where he identifies that an individual could change their cognitions about

the environment without changing the environment itself. Still, they would need others who agree with their new environmental perceptions (Festinger, 1957). This aligns with this study's findings of all participant's experience of utilizing the teachings and beliefs that they have come in contact with (e.g., church, a family of origin, LGBTQ community, school, community leaders, etc.) to sort out and create a authentic narrative of the self that resonates with all aspects of their identities, specifically, their Catholic and LGBTQ identities. This study's findings suggest that this meaning-making process within integration aids in creating a new, complex. Yet, coherent identity, LGBTQ Catholic, resonates with the individual.

Subtheme B: Holding onto Core Meaning of Catholic Teachings. All eight participants described holding onto core messages, beliefs, and meanings within the Catholic teachings as a part of their experience integrating their sexual and religious identities. This finding aligns with Jaspal and Cinnirella's (2010) study that conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 Muslim gay cisgender men in non-affirming religious environments that found that participants held the belief that it was a higher power that had created them to be gay and thus, this higher power loved and accepted them for who they were. All eight participants in this study shared that they held onto more affirming messages within the Catholic teachings and bible. This finding suggests that when experiencing dualistic messages, this study's participants could reject negative messages while also holding onto positive messages/beliefs that resonate with the individual as a significant role in the participant's ability to accept and integrate one's sexual and religious identities. This process of accepting one's identities has come to be seen as a non-linear experience of balancing both positive and negative attitudes that may oscillate depending on the availability of social support, cultural shifts, or personal experiences (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

All the participants of the current study endorsed holding tightly to foundational beliefs of Catholicism, such as that they are loved by God, created by God, God has a more excellent plan, and that no one can take their sacraments (e.g., Baptism, Confirmation,) away from them. This is consistent with Sherry and colleagues (2010) mixed method study of 422 LGB participants that investigated the relationship between religious and sexuality variables. Findings are compatible with this study that individuals are effectively able to adjust aspects of the self in practical and adaptive ways that work for them (Sherry et al., 2010), such as holding onto core/foundational meaning and teachings to navigate the integration of one's sexual and religious identities. This aspect of holding onto core meaning and beliefs plays a significant role in the integration process for this study's participants.

Subtheme C: Integration as a Non-Linear Process. Six participants reported their experience of actively integrating their Catholic and LGBQ identities as a process they had to engage in. This finding is consistent with the previous research that suggests that integrating religious and sexual identities is a multifaceted process that requires further research (Anderton et al., 2011; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Based on this study's findings and previous research, understanding integration as a process is an excellent way to understand the complexities of integrating conflicting identities that one holds (Anderton et al., 2011; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). This understanding of integration as a process that is in constant flux took on many different forms for each of the participants.

This study's finding aligns with the non-linear framework of models of identity development, such as Beit-Hallahmi's (1991) Conceptualization of Religious Identity,

D'Augelli's (1994) Model of LGB Identity Development, Lapinski and McKirnan (2013) Nonlinear Model of Homosexual Identity Development, and Shallenberger's (1998) theory of the Identity Integration Process. These identity development models recognize balancing positive and negative experiences as one navigates their identities. However, this study's finding differs from the linear framework of identity development models, such as Cass's (1979) Linear Model of Homosexual Identity and Fowler's (1981) Model of Faith Development. This current study's findings suggest that integrating one's sexual and religious identities is a non-linear experience that ebbed and flowed for these participants.

There have been several aspects and factors identified in this study that have impacted each individual's integration process that has both supported and hindered this process, such as creating new meaning that resonates with the individual, taking a break from religious practices, holding onto foundational and core beliefs of one's religion, rejecting negative messages, and suppressing their sexual orientation or sexual exploration, which aligns with the previous mixed methods study conducted by Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) that found that acceptance of oneself, reading relevant literature, simply talking to other individuals, and even direct intervention by God were identified as possible precipitating factors for the integration of one's sexual and religious identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). To better understand these possible precipitating factors for the integration process, Yampolsky and colleagues (2013) conducted a study with 22 multicultural Canadians to identify the potential connection between identity integration and narrative coherence. This previous study's findings are consistent with this study's findings in that these factors facilitate the integration process through acknowledging perceived similarities between these different identities, as well as understanding and reframing these identities to complement and enrich each identity instead of cause tension (Yampolsky, et

al., 2013). Overall, these study's findings suggest that integrating one's LGBQ and Catholic identities is an active non-linear process.

Discussion of Theme 6: Current Engagement in Catholic Practices. This theme explored the participant's current Catholic identity due to their experience of identity development. All eight participants reported identifying and practicing Catholicism in diverse ways that resonate with them. Many of the participants reported that they are currently working to obtain or have obtained higher education in fields of Theology, are employed at jobs that involve their Catholic faith (Religion/Theology teachers/professors, religious representatives, and providing their expertise for the Catholic community, such as music instructor and technology technician), and engage in volunteering within their Catholic communities. This is in addition to their engagement in Catholic practices and teachings, which varied among participants. This variation includes attending traditional versus expansive Catholic services, attending services daily versus only on Catholic holidays and involvement in Catholic practices. This area of finding within the research explored the gap in the research around more fully exploring or understanding what this experience is like for the LGBQ Catholic individuals experiencing this type of identity tension. This theme was comprised of the following subthemes: "Hope for The Catholic Church's Future," which also encompasses a subset of those participants that reported actively engaging in "Advocacy and Creating Safe Spaces" and "Anticipated Future Tension."

Subtheme A: Hope for The Catholic Church's Future. Five of the eight participants expressed hope for the future of the Catholic church to become more accepting and affirming of LGBQ members. This study's finding that participants shared experiences of felt hopefulness for the future of the Catholic church to become more accepting and affirming of LGBQ members by several participants appears to play a significant role in the integration process. This optimism

for the future of the Catholic faith allowed this study's participants to navigate dualistic messages, identity development, and the integration process.

Within the subset of the five of the eight participants that expressed hopefulness for the future of the Catholic church to become more accepting and affirming of LGBTQ members, three of those five participants reported actively engaging in advocacy and creating safe spaces for others who identify as Catholic and LGBTQ. This study's finding is consistent with Fowler's (1981) Model of Faith Development, specifically, the final stage of faith development, which was identified as universalizing (Fowler, 1981). Individuals in this stage usually stand out as leaders committed to justice, selflessness, and love (Fowler, 1981), which aligns with this study's findings of some of the participant's calls to actively advocate and create safe spaces for others who identify as Catholic and LGBTQ. Additionally, it is essential to note that in Levy and Edmiston's (2014) results of two qualitative studies, this final step is rarely achieved but often strived for (Levy & Edmiston, 2014).

Similarly, this study's finding is consistent with D'Augelli's (1994; 2006) Model of LGB Identity Development (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006). Specifically, D'Augelli's (1994) last or sixth process of his identity model involves entering an LGB community. The previous process consists of a commitment to "political and social action and changing social barriers (Goodrich & Brammer, 2019, p. 155)." This should be individualized based on the comfort levels and interests of the individual, aligning with this current study of a small percentage of participants disclosing active advocacy and creating safe LGBTQ Catholic spaces. Some LGB individuals never take this step, while others take significant personal risks (e.g., rejection, loss of job/housing) to engage in this process (D'Augelli, 1994; 2006; Goodrich & Brammer, 2019).

Subtheme B: Anticipated Future Tension. Five of the eight participants reported believing or anticipating that they will encounter future tension throughout their life. Many of these participants shared that they foresee themselves continuing to experience dualistic messages that impact them, predictions of experiencing obstacles when wanting to engage in the sacrament of marriage in a Catholic church and expecting to experience conflict when exploring different types of relationship practices (e.g., open relationship, polyamory). This study's findings of anticipated tension between one's sexual and religious identities differ from the previous research of Sherry and colleagues (2010) mixed method study to investigate the relationship between religion and sexuality variables in a sample of 422 LGB respondents. These findings suggest that once this tension is resolved through integration (Sherry et al., 2010). Therefore, this current study brings attention to the fact that despite self-identifying as integrating their religious and sexual identities, they are still experiencing some tensions or foreseen tensions between their Catholic and LGBQ identities. Overall, the integration of LGBQ and Catholic identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research.

Clinical Implications

The six emergent themes in this study provide a preliminary framework for further understanding of the experience of LGBQ Catholic experience of integrating their sexual and religious identities. The findings further our understanding of coping strategies (e.g., seeking external affirmation and knowledge, engaging in changes in religious identity, rejecting negative messages, and religion as coping) required when an individual is navigating dualistic messages. The study also identified several impacts of experiencing dualistic messages (i.e. internalization of negative messages, suppressing sexual orientation, questioning religious identity, lack of freedom to explore sexual orientation, and mental health concerns). Importantly, this study

highlights the multi-faceted experience of navigating dissonance and integration as a whole, including creating new meaning, holding onto core meanings of their religious identity, and taking a non-linear approach to integration. Clinicians may be better able to support LGBTQ Catholics by understanding the complexities of the experience of integrating these two possibly conflicting identities, to better identify obstacles LGBTQ Catholics may experience, and help LGBTQ Catholics who decide to merge their sexual and religious identities. In addition, it is essential to note that strategies that work for one LGBTQ client experiencing tension between their sexual and religious identities do not mean that the same process may work for all LGBTQ Catholic individuals experiencing this conflict.

The current study's findings have cultural and societal implications that were brought to attention, such as many participants sharing experiences of rejection, stigma (heterosexism and internalized homophobia), blatant discrimination and laws/policies, and hateful messages. It is essential as clinicians to take the time to listen to and validate these experiences as they are being shared. Additionally, clinicians can encourage individuals to explore what would best support them as they navigate their sexual and religious identities. However, it is essential to remember that choosing or being forced to choose one's sexual orientation over one's religious identity can cause considerable mental health losses (Anderton et al., 2011). Lastly, it is essential to note that one should not make assumptions that a client who identifies as both Catholic and LGBTQ is necessarily dealing with tension in negotiating their identities. Some possible reasons for this lack of tension may be a) never encountered/internalized homophobia or heterosexist religious rhetoric, b) devaluing church teachings, c) coming out at a late age, and d) attending seminary (Rodriguez and Ouellette, 2000).

Limitations

There are several limitations within this current study. Primarily, this study examined the experience of eight self-identifying LGBTQ Catholics, which is a small sample and cannot be used to represent the experience of all self-identifying LGBTQ Catholic individual's experiences of integrating their sexual and religious identities. In addition to the small sample size, there was rigid inclusion criteria (identified as LGBTQ, Catholic, growing up in a Catholic household, experiencing tension between their sexual and religious identities, and recognized as having integrated these two held identities). Despite this rigid inclusion criteria, participants still varied in geographic location of upbringing from across the United States (California and New York) and outside of the United States (Canada and Jamaica). It is important to note that this data's findings lack representation in the sample around gender, as seven of the eight participants identified as cisgender-male, and one identified as cisgender-female, and in self-identification of ethnicity/race, relationship status with five identified as white, one as Latino, one as Filipino Canadian, and one as Mixed Asian/African. With this in mind, future studies must be more representative of a greater range of gender and racial/ethnic identities to build a more robust understanding of queer Catholic's experiences of other intersections of oppression on their identity development.

Additionally, many of the participants reported that they are currently working to obtain or have obtained higher education in fields of Theology, are employed at jobs that involve their Catholic faith (Religion/Theology teachers/professors, religious representatives, and providing their expertise for the Catholic community, such as music instructor and technology technician), and engage in volunteering within their Catholic communities. This may speak to this study's sample's high commitment to one's religious identity. This is to say that this study is limited and cannot be generalizable due to its limited scope. Lastly, there are limitations around the

researcher's active and potential bias during recruitment, data collection, and analysis. Therefore, the interpretations are constrained by the researcher's ability to interpret, reflect, and make sense of the data (Smith, et al., 2009).

Suggestions For Future Research

Future research must address these populations and identities that have historically and continuously been underrepresented in the analysis. This study consists of a majority of cisgender male participants, which aligns with the majority of other studies within the literature on LGBTQ Catholics. Missing from this research is a representation of more broadly examining the experiences of cisgender females, transgender, bi/multi-racial, and individuals who identify as gender fluid or gender questioning who are navigating the integration of their religious and sexual identities. In addition, most of the studies, including this one, examine the experiences of LGBTQ individuals from primarily Judeo-Christian religions, with few studies including participants that were Muslim, other monotheistic religions, and polytheistic religions. Future research should attempt to understand better the experiences of these individuals who have not been represented in the literature thus far.

The research clearly outlines that LGBTQ Catholic individuals experience dissonance between their religious beliefs and sexual orientation and are engaging in various strategies to resolve this conflict. This research aimed to support the gap in research in gaining a fuller understanding of this experience of navigating this conflict between one's religious and sexual identity, as well as a better understanding of the identity integration process that LGBTQ Catholics engage in. However, there remains a gap in the research examining the experiences of LGBTQ individuals who do not experience religious identity and sexual identity conflict. This could

shed further light on how to best support LGBQ individuals experiencing conflict between their sexual and religious identities.

Lastly, it is essential to mention that the previous research identifies four general categories of coping strategies that were presented that LGB Catholics utilized to alleviate this tension: (1) Rejecting one's religious or sexual orientation identity; (2) compartmentalization; (3) identity integration; and (4) seeking a more affirming religious or spiritual faith (Anderton, et al., 2011; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). However, many of the participants in this study disclosed having experienced several of these strategies, which leads to further research to possibly re-evaluate the identification of "categories" versus a non-linear experience.

Conclusion

This present study utilized Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to understand others' experiences through interpretations and bring attention to the focus of creating meaning out of shared experiences. Specifically, to understand and explore more fully: How LGBQ Catholics integrate both conflicting selves; what effect dissonance has on identity development, and how to best support others who are experiencing conflict between their sexual and religious identities or working towards integrating both of these identities harmoniously. The current study aimed to examine this gap in the research to gain a better understanding of the effects of dissonance on identity development and the integration experience for those who specifically choose to remain a part of the Catholic church and identify as LGBQ to understand how to best support others who are working towards integrating both identities.

Aligning with much of the existing research, this study found that participants disclosed many different impacts due to the dualistic messages and dissonance they experienced. Similarly aligning with the previous research, all eight participants shared their experiences of engaging in

several ways of coping to reconcile experienced tension or dissonance regarding their sexual and religious identities. This is important for clinicians to remember as strategies that work for one LGB client experiencing tension between their sexual and religious identities do not mean that that same strategy may work for another LGBQ Catholic individual experiencing this conflict largely because LGBQ and Catholic participants are engaging in several types of reconciliation strategies and often more than one to resolve the conflict. The clinician needs to honor the individual's autonomy and experience in choosing which strategy they wish to engage.

This current study adds to the previous research through its identification that participants reported believing or anticipating that they will encounter future tension throughout their life. Many of these participants shared that they foresee themselves continuing to experience dualistic messages that impact them, predictions of experiencing obstacles when wanting to engage in the sacrament of marriage in a Catholic church and expecting to experience conflict when exploring different types of relationship practices (e.g., open relationship, polyamory). This differs from the previous research findings that reflect that once this tension is resolved through integration, it has gone away, such as the findings that people are effectively able to adjust aspects of the self in useful and adaptive ways that work for them, to successfully negotiate the integration of these two aspects of identity in a way that allows them to feel congruent and free from identity tension (Sherry et al., 2010). Overall, this difference points to the critical understanding that the integration of LGBQ and Catholic identities appears to be a multifaceted process that requires further research.

A significant takeaway from this research study's findings is that the engagement in integrating one's Catholic and LGBQ identities is experienced as a process that they had to engage in actively. Specifically, participants described non-linear experiences of integration that

ebbed and flowed. This integration of these identities has come to be understood as a process rather than simply a two-dimensional or bipolar construct as has been explained in the existing literature (Rodriquez & Ouellette, 2000).

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flier

Study on Catholic LGBQ+ Individuals

If you are between the ages of 25-45 years of age and identify as LGBQ+ and Catholic, you may be eligible to participate in this research study. Please contact Kendal Vaarwerk at kmvaarwerk@usfca.edu or (716) 863-2657

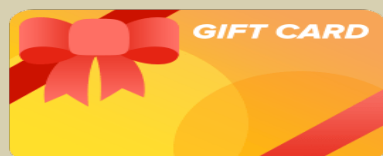
Are you eligible?

- Between the ages of 25-45 years old
- Self-identify as LGBQ+
- Self-identify as Catholic
- Grew up in a Catholic household where you experienced negative messages about your sexual orientation
- Believe that you have integrated being both LGBQ+ and Catholic

Please contact Kendal Vaarwerk at kmvaarwerk@usfca.edu or (716) 863-2657

Participants will receive:

- \$10.00 Gift Card



Duration & Location

- Your participation in this study will involve one interview session that will last around 60 minutes virtually through online platforms.

For Additional Information or Any Questions Please Contact:

- Kendal Vaarwerk, Primary Investigator at kmvaarwerk@usfca.edu

APPENDIX B*Template Email*

Hello _____,

I hope you are having a great day. Well, first I want to thank you for your expressed interest in this study, it consists of about a 45 – 60 -minute-long virtual interview together discussing identity development and integration of specifically your sexual and religious identities. Additionally, you will receive a \$10 amazon gift card for your participation in this study. To be eligible for this study you must be: 1) Self-identify as LGBTQ, 2) Self-identify as Catholic, 3) Grew up in a Catholic household where they experienced non-affirming messages about their sexual orientation, 4) Self-identify as integrating their LGBTQ and Catholic identities, and 5) Between the ages of 25-45 years old.

If you meet all eligibility requirements for this study and are still interested in participating, I would love to schedule a time to meet and speak with you virtually. If you could provide some available times/days, you have to meet for an hour and review/complete the attached brief demographic form and informed consent form prior to meeting. I am generally available _____. Additionally, I have attached the informed consent form for you to review and sign as well as a brief demographic form for you to complete.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to reach out to me. I truly appreciate your interest and hope to get the opportunity to meet and speak with you soon!

Thank you!

Best,

Kendal Vaarwerk

APPENDIX C

Consent Form



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kendal Vaarwerk, a graduate student in the Department of Nursing and Health Professions at The University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Dr. Michelle Montagno, a professor in the Department of Nursing and Health Professions at The University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this research study is to seek to better understand the identity development/integration process for individuals who hold both Catholic and LGBQ identities. I will be examining how LGBQ Catholics navigate identity conflict, what their experiences are/were of attempting to or resolving/integrating these possibly conflicting identities, and the impact of these conflicting identities on their identity development. With the goal to better understand and support individuals who are experiencing identity conflicts and difficulty integrating their many intersecting identities.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, if I agree to be a participant in this project, the following will happen:

- 1) I will be asked to complete a brief demographic form
- 2) I will be asked to participate in a 90 minute open-ended interview with Ms. Kendal Vaarwerk, during which I will be asked about my Catholic and LGBQ identities, and

experiences of any possible tension between these two identities, identity development, and integration of ones intersecting identities.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one interview session that will last around 90 minutes. This study will take place in San Francisco, CA.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

We do not anticipate any risks or discomforts to you from participating in this research. If you wish, you may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty.

BENEFITS:

The possible benefits to you of participating in this study are a \$10 direct benefit to me for participating in this project following the 90 minutes interview experience. Additionally, the anticipated benefit of this study is a better understanding of their Identity Development and Identity Integration experience, both challenging and beneficial, of LGBTQ Catholic.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report we publish, we will not include information that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. Specifically, we will be de-identified any personal information through the use of randomly assigned participant codes to maintain confidentiality.

The data will be organized through Microsoft Word Documents and Microsoft Excel Sheets outlets, and as needed the printing of themes and tables to maintain and establish management of data and coding. This research project will not require any additional software programs or data entry platform to code, analyze or interpret the data from the transcripts. All information will be shredded and destroyed upon completion of this research.

AUDIO RECORDING/PRIVACY

This study involves the audio taping of your interview with the researcher. Neither your name nor any other identifying information will be associated with the audiotape or the transcript. Only the researcher (Kendal Vaarwerk and dissertation chair (Dr. Michelle Montagno) will be able to listen to the tapes.

The tapes will be transcribed by the researcher and erased once the transcriptions are checked for accuracy. Transcripts of your interview may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in

presentations or written products that result from this study. Neither your name nor any other identifying information (such as your voice) will be used in presentations or in written products resulting from the study.

Immediately following the interview, you will be given the opportunity to have the tape erased if you wish to withdraw your consent to taping or participation in this study.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

You will receive a \$10 Gift card for your participation in this study. If you choose to withdraw before completing the study, you will receive \$0.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary, and you may refuse to participate without penalty. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Kendal Vaarwerk at (716)863-2657 or kmvaarwerk@usfca.edu If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE

APPENDIX D*Demographic Form***Brief Demographic Form**

What is your age in years?

How do you currently describe your gender?

How do you currently describe your race/ethnicity?

How do you currently describe your sexual orientation?

Are you currently in a romantic relationship with a partner or partners?

No

Yes: Please Describe: _____

What was/is the religion/faith of your family of origin?

Do you identify as Catholic?

Yes

No: Please Describe: _____

Have you experienced any tensions over the years between your sexual and religious identities?

Yes

No

Do you feel as though you have incorporated or integrated your sexual and religious identities?

Yes

No

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

APPENDIX E

Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule

Go over Informed Consent Form

Intro:

Hello, and thank you for participating in this research project. Today I will be asking you about your sexual identity and your religious identity, your experience over time as these identities developed, and what it means for you to be an LGBTQ Catholic.

Before we begin, I wanted to just tell you a little bit about myself. I am a 4th year in the PsyD program at USF. I am from Buffalo NY, and I have personal, clinical, and academic interest in this project. Through my own journey of exploring my sexuality, gender, and spirituality. But this project actually came to fruition after a year of working with one of my clients who was experiencing a great deal of dissonance at the time of our work together around his intersecting identities. And I am really excited and hopeful that this project will shed light on the difficulty of navigating one's multiple identities within the Catholic religion.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

1. Tell me a little about yourself?
2. Can you tell me about religious life in your family when you were young?

Possible prompts: What was that like for you? How did you feel about that situation? How did you know religion was important for your relatives? What did your Catholic faith mean to you then?

Do you remember having learned anything from your family or the church about what it meant to be ____ [Sexual Identity stated on Demographic Form]? How did you feel?

3. What was it like back then to be ___ [Sexual Identity stated on Demographic Form] ___ and Catholic?

Possible prompts: What impacted your experience of that? What do you think had an effect on this? How has that changed over time?

4. What other aspects of your identities have impacted your sexual and religious development throughout your life?

Possible prompts: Can you describe that a bit more? How, if at all, does it affect the way you think about these identities that you hold? Can you describe how ___ (identity) Can you give an example of ___?

5. Have you ever experienced any tension between your Catholic beliefs and your sexuality? If yes, can you tell me about those tensions?

Possible prompts: Do you still experience some of these tensions? Did any of these tensions resolve over time? How did that happen? Is there anything else

6. Did your involvement or religious practices vary at all over the years?

Possible prompts: What was going on for you at that time? What was it like to go through this change?

7. Would you say that you have incorporated or integrated your Catholic identity and your ___ [Sexual Identity stated on Demographic Form] ___? If so, what was your experience of incorporating or integrating these identities?

Possible prompts: What prompted you to engage in this process? Did you experience any obstacles? What or who has been the most helpful for coping? How did you navigate these conflicts? What helped? What hindered?

8. Did you ever seek professional help when you were navigating any of these conflicts over the years (e.g., a therapist, talking to a priest)?

Possible prompts: What was that experience like for you?

9. What does your Catholic faith mean to you now?

Possible prompts: What impacted this? Has your relationship with your faith changed throughout your life? How so?

10. When reflecting on your experiences around your religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and the relationship between these identities, what piece of information would you want to share with someone who is having a similar experience?

Possible prompts: What do you wish you had known or experienced? Why do you think that is important to share?

11. Is there anything else that I haven't asked about or you feel is important to discuss here today with me?

Possible prompts:

Thank you for your participation in this study! If you are interested, here is a list of resources.