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IN SEARCH OF SPIRIT: THE MAKING AND MEANING OF GAY SPIRITUALITY

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Missouri – St. Louis
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Abstract

Over the past two decades, a substantial number of scholarly studies have examined the confluence of religious and sexual minority identities (Kocet et al., 2011; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellete, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Religious identity was often framed within a traditional Judeo-Christian context. A major limitation of this body of work is the neglect of spiritual identity as a construct separate from religious identity. Many Protestant, Judaic, Islamic, and Catholic doctrines regard homosexuality and gender non-conformity as deviant and view the expression of same-sex attraction as errant and immoral (Haldeman, 2002). While reconciliation of the conflict between religious identity and sexual orientation identity has been related to a number of psychological challenges (Burgard, Cochran, & Mays, 2005; Drabble, Midanik, & Trocki, 2005; Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001) little is known about the convergence of spiritual identity, distinctly defined as separate from religious identity, and sexual orientation identity. This qualitative inquiry, using the in-depth phenomenological interview protocol proposed by Seidman (2006) and a grounded theory data analysis described by Strauss and Corbin (1998), investigated the process by which 9 gay men from a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds constructed spiritual identities outside the realm of institutionalized religion. The findings illustrate a developmental course that led participants from primarily religious identities rooted in a faith of origin to individually constructed spiritual identities that encompass ethical, philosophical, and metaphysical understandings and practices. Results are discussed in terms of potential transferability of the findings with particular attention to expanding the cultural competence of counselors and educators who work with gay men and issues related to religion and spirituality. Limitations of the study and future directions in research are also addressed.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my courageous LGBT brethren, and their allies, whose sacrifice and commitment to social justice changed the course of history and afforded me the opportunity to live fully and completely as a gay man.

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I thank Spirit for walking with me on my journey and inspiring me to shoot for the stars even if they appeared out of reach. I never could have dreamed a dream as big as what God had in mind for me. I remain infinitely grateful for life and commit to pay the blessings forward.

Mom, you have been my biggest cheerleader and never let me lose faith in the larger vision. Your never ending support was often the oil that kept the fire burning in the dark nights of the soul. Janice, my soul mate and confidante – you planted the seed, tended the garden, and now the flower is yours. To my brother Joshua, I thank you for playing the part of student while I fantasized about my future teaching career. You were a trooper to put up with me. Lastly, I want to thank John for supporting me in countless ways, often unacknowledged, but certainly not overlooked. Your generosity of spirit has been, and is, appreciated.

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of this dissertation pushed me to think critically, tighten my writing, and draw firmer conclusions. Thank you.

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Finally, to the men who participated in this study, your voices have not been taken for granted here. I honor and value your stories and feel immense gratitude for the gift of knowing you, even for a brief period of time.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Research has consistently substantiated the positive relationship of religion and spirituality to well-being and mental health (Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004; Rosario, Yali, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2006). Multiple studies have described religion's role in decision making processes, coping strategies, sexual identity development, psychological well-being, reduction in depressive symptoms, and instillation of hope during stress (Ellison, 1998; Halkitis et al., 2009; George, Larson, Koenig, & McCullough, 2000; Levin, Markides, & Ray, 1996; Ross, 1990). One line of inquiry that has received scant attention in the literature pertains to the spiritual dimension of gay identity development.

A number of studies have examined the intersection of religion and gay identity (Kocet et al., 2011; Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005; Rodriguez & Ouellete, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001) but spirituality's impact on gay development is woefully neglected. Social science researchers have tended to avoid the study of spiritual development in favor of exploring religious domains of development that are more amenable to operational definition (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Nye, 1999). Lines of inquiry that focus solely on spirituality on gay identity development are considerably limited.

Most notably, the majority of Catholic, Islamic, Judaic, and Protestant doctrines regard homosexuality as deviant and view the expression of same-sex attraction as errant and immoral. For example, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, wrote an official statement released by the Vatican that declared homosexuals as objectively disordered and inclined toward evil (Ratzinger, 1986). In addition, a number of Bible scriptures are routinely cited as evidence that gay men and lesbians should be prohibited from marrying and raising families – developmental achievements that signal psychological health and well-being.

Both the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the American Psychological Association (APA) hold that attempts to alter a client's sexual orientation (reparative therapy) are unlikely to be successful and involve some risk of harm (APA, 2010). In the face of overwhelming scientific evidence that so-called reparative therapies cause major psychological damage to gay men and lesbians, fundamentalist religious institutions continue to facilitate and mass market these programs (Haldeman, 2002).

Background

The sociological and psychological understanding of homosexuality has undergone cataclysmic shifts in the last 100 years. Early in the 20th century, homosexuality was theorized to be a negative psychological outcome rooted in unresolved aggression, arrested development and ego immaturity (Freud, 1962). By mid-century, researchers, including Kinsey (1948) and Hooker (1957) began to study developmental components of homosexuality, including sexual behavior, desire, and social identification, which in part led to the American Psychiatric Association's declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973 (Bayer, 1981; Minton, 2002). This landmark decision, in tandem with the newly energized gay liberation movement, provided the buttress for the emergence of gay affirmative psychology.

As the gay community gained more visibility, academics began to construct models of identity development specific to gay men and lesbians (Cass, 1979, 1996; Cohen & Savin-Williams, 1996; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Troiden, 1988). These models primarily focused on the resolution of internal conflict related to identification as gay or lesbian and informed what is commonly termed as the *coming-out process* (D'Augelli, 1994; Gonsiorek, 1995). More recent research has focused on the deleterious psychological effects of oppression and how lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals negotiate heterosexist experiences and institutions

(Hatzenbeuhler, 2009; McDavitt et al., 2008). Researchers have also begun to investigate and describe how gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals experience and cope with subtle, covert discrimination commonly described as microaggressions (Nadal, 2008; Sue & Capodilupo, 2008).

Although the LGBT community has made momentous progress in the struggle for civil rights and acceptance in the dominant culture, multiple forms of discrimination persist, evidenced in the literature documenting mental health disparities in the LGBT communities (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2010; Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001).

One of the most daunting challenges faced by lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in contemporary society is the near constant exposure to *homonegativity* – the insidious and pervasive system for stigmatizing non-heterosexual behavior, relationships, and community (Herek, 1990). The harmful effects of sexual and gender stigma are substantiated by the numerous health and social inequalities faced by sexual minorities (Herek, 1990; McDavitt et al., 2008), including increased risk for depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide (Hatzenbuehler, Corbin, & Fromme, 2008; Hatzenbuehler, McLaughlin, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2008; Plo¨derl & Fartacek, 2005; Safren & Heimberg, 1999).

Purpose Statement

Mirroring a near record high of American's who see religion losing influence in America (Gallup, 2010) bodies of work exclusively exploring the spiritual realm have begun to appear, but except for a few seminal works (Fortunato, 1982, O'Neill & Ritter, 1992; Shallenberger, 1996) research on the development of spirituality in gay men is virtually nonexistent. The dearth of literature addressing the role spirituality plays in the lives of gay men is problematic,

particularly in the context of the widely documented history of discrimination and stigmatization of LGBT individuals within Judeo-Christian religious institutions.

Judeo-Christian and Islamic religious institutions have a well-documented history of stigmatizing sexual minorities, often leading LGBT individuals to completely abandon their faith traditions altogether. Despite some gay men successfully reconciling homonegative religious beliefs with their emerging gay identities, survey data suggests only one-quarter of gay men hold a membership in a religious institution (Halkitis, et al., 2009). Consequently, empirical inquiry exploring how gay men replace homonegative religious doctrine with affirmative spiritual practices has a role to play in continuing the struggle for full health and social equity.

Given that LGB individuals exhibit unique concerns regarding the integration of sometimes competing sexual and religious identities, the development of knowledge on the spiritual identity development in gay men may serve to train counselors and other mental health professionals to care for this group more effectively. The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, (ALGBTIC), a division of the American Counseling Association, catalogued a comprehensive list of competencies for working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) individuals and communities, including a section that instructs counselors to recognize spiritual development as important for LGBT individuals (ALGBTIC, 2013).

Significance

Previous studies have indicated that gay and lesbian individuals seek out counseling at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts and generally present concerns and challenges that are different from heterosexuals (Cochran & Mays, 2000; Liddle, 1997). One concern that is consistently identified in the literature is the difficulty faced by some LGBT individuals in

reconciling sexual orientation with religious belief (Barton, 2010; Boellstorff, 2005; Henrickson, 2007; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Miller, 2007; Schnoor, 2006; Smith & Horne, 2007). Religious culture may create homophobic environments, resulting in a struggle to integrate spiritual and sexual identities for LGB individuals, who often leave or feel left by their faith of origin in the process of securing a positive gay identity. The psychological effect of anti-gay doctrine can be devastating to LGB people and spiritual challenges are at the forefront of the gay and lesbian experience (Haldeman, 2002).

The emergence of the contextual paradigm and postmodern thought has broadened the scope of counseling to embrace spirituality as vital clinical factor. Contextual theories support the notion that change is an integral part of reality – that counselors should refrain from eschewing deterministic absolutes and explore the subjective, cultural, and contextual worlds of clients (Cottone, 1992). Multiculturalism has also influenced the infusion of spirituality into the counseling process. From this perspective, religion and spirituality are now conceptualized as "an integral part of many people's racial and cultural identity, shaping their world view and sense of self" (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006, p. 217) and must be assessed and integrated into a culturally vibrant treatment plan (Sperry & Sharfanske, 2005).

As counselors strengthen their clinical competencies, they have an ethical obligation to enhance their awareness of the developmental role spirituality plays in the lives of their gay male clients. Currently, there are few studies that inform counselors and counselor educators on the spiritual lives of gay men who do not participate within a traditional religious framework.

Additionally, the majority of inquiries examining the intersection of religion, spirituality, and gay development consistently group gay men with lesbians, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Despite facing similar societal oppression related to their affectional and gender

orientations, there are important developmental differences between these groups that are beginning to receive the attention of researchers (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2011).

Conceptual Framework

There is substantial debate regarding the definitions of religion and spirituality and it is important for the reader to have a minimal awareness of how scholars and theoreticians differentiate the constructs. Throughout most of history, the definitions of religion and spirituality denoted parallel, synonymous meanings that could be used interchangeably. Sperry and Shafranske (2005) noted that spirituality has come to be known as more of an internal, esoteric experience of God and religion as an external, exoteric description of God. According to Lines (2002), spirituality cannot be understood without "a recognition of the word's predicate – from the Latin word *spiritus*, meaning breath" (p. 104). Lines argued that spirit, in Eastern traditions, has a representation of the transcendental, the idea that life was more than our senses. Jankowski (2005) described spirituality as a multidisciplinary construct that includes cognitive, emotional, metaphysical, and relational elements that influence an individual's self-efficacy and resiliency. Wolfe and Stevens (2002) asserted religion and spirituality are "interrelated but are not exactly alike; once can be religious and not spiritual, spiritual and not religious, as well as spiritual and religious" (p. 67).

From a metaphysical perspective Joel S. Goldsmith, a Western mystical teacher and author of the spiritual classic *The Infinite Way* (1947), wrote "men have always attempted to bring harmony into the discords of human existence through an attempt, by prayer, to contact the spiritual realm and to bring Spirit, or God, to act upon the so-called human existence" (p. 22). Goldsmith went on to argue that spirit is the true nature of the universe. In other words,

spirituality is the true nature of human beings – an idea that has implications for counselors compelled to integrate spirituality within their therapeutic practice with gay men.

Goldsmith's ideas surrounding the supreme nature of spirituality are mirrored by Carl Jung's understanding of psychological problems. Jung (1933) contended psychological challenges are essentially religious or spiritual in nature. Both writers, in addition to a myriad of premier psychologists of the twentieth century including Maslow, Frankl, and Adler, understood spirituality to be an integral part of the human experience – inextricably linked to an individual's ability to transcend psychological and systemic challenges (Wulff, 1997).

Although spirituality and religion evoke a multitude of definitions, what seems to thread each together is the sense that spirituality is a subjective phenomenon that may best be described by the individual; and religion, on the other hand, is a theological organization with sets of structured principles and beliefs that are practiced in community and the public domain. In a study of LGBT respondents at an urban pride festival, researchers found that those queried defined spirituality as a relational enterprise, an individual communion with God/higher power, with self, and with others (Halkitis, et al, 2009). Respondents compared spirituality with the "quest to define a moral frame and to live in accordance with the tenets of that moral code, as well as a quest to achieve insight and wisdom" (p. 260).

Because spirituality can be seen as distinct from religion, cultivating a sense of spirituality separate from faiths of origin may mediate the negative effect of homonegative experiences on the psychological health of gay men and women (Gage-Davidson, 2000). As a result of this evolving distinction between religion and spirituality, it has become necessary to explore the two constructs separately in an effort to delineate how each relates to mental health and general well-being.

Operational Definitions

A number of terms that may appear to have similar identical meanings will be used. The subtle differences in their definitions are delineated in the table below, along with key terms used in the study.

Sexual orientation refers to an enduring pattern of emotional, romantic, and/or sexual attractions to men, women, or both sexes. Sexual orientation also refers to a person's sense of identity based on those attractions, related behaviors, and membership in a community of others who share those attractions (Gonsiorek, Sell, & Weinrich, 1994). Affectional orientation is used both alternatively and side-by-side with sexual orientation. It is based on the perspective that sexual attraction is but a single component of a larger dynamic. To holders of this view, one's orientation is defined by whom one is predisposed to fall in love with, whether or not one desires that person sexually (Crethar & Vargas, 2007)

"Coming out" is a common descriptor used to articulate the process of disclosing one's sexual identity to others in their communities and society-at-large. According to Herdt and Boxer (1993) coming out can be a long, arduous, and challenging process depending on levels of internalized homophobia, social and cultural discrimination, and social location. Coming out is a complex, nonlinear, and never-ending process. Gay identity formation is a reciprocal process in which individuals may or may not translate sociocultural perceptions of sexual identity into knowledge, behaviors, beliefs, and experiences about themselves (Cox & Gallois, 1996). For instance, a man who has sex with other men may not identify as gay or homosexual simply because he engages in same sex intercourse. Whereas a man who engages in same sex intercourse and identifies as gay may attribute many more factors to his sexual identity than

simply his sexual preference. Consequently, sexual orientation may not be synonymous with gay identity.

Heterosexism has been defined as a systemic ideology embodied in institutional practices that work to the disadvantage of sexual minority groups. As a structural phenomenon, heterosexism is relatively autonomous from the prejudice of individual members of society (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 2009). Homophobia is an irrational fear and hatred toward gay people. Gramick (1983) asserted that homophobia has three aspects. 1) fear of homosexual tendencies in self; 2) fear that heterosexuals will be converted to homosexuality; and 3) fear that homosexuality will become socially acceptable which will lead to the extinction of the human race.

For the purposes of this paper, religion is defined as an institutional enterprise with a system of dogmatic beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols that prescribe an ordained channel for believers to understand and connect to an ultimate reality (Koenig, McCullough & Larson, 2001). Spirituality is defined as sense of self that addresses ultimate questions about the nature, purpose, and meaning of life, resulting in behaviors that align with the individual's core values (Kiesling, Sorell, Montgomery, & Colwell, 2006)

This paper would be remiss if it did not define reparative therapy in the context of religion, spirituality, and gay identity development. Reparative therapy (also known as conversion therapy) is a range of pseudo-scientific treatments that aim to change sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual (Haldeman, 2002). The American Psychological Association (2000) and the American Counseling Association (2005) both have ethical standards that mandate practitioners refrain from attempts to change an individual's sexual orientation.

Research Questions

This study will be guided by four primary research questions:

1. How do gay men describe and practice spirituality and what role does it play in their everyday lives?
2. What beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc. influenced their spiritual development?
3. What is the process for integrating beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc., into their spiritual understanding? What is the process for omission?
4. How does their spiritual understanding and practice(s) impact how they view their sexual and affective orientations? How is spirituality integrated with other cultural identities?

The objective of the questions is to generate a description of how participants' spiritual identities developed over time and to learn what comprises the essence of participants' spiritual identities in terms of the cognitive, affective, social, physiological, behavioral, and experiential elements of participants' spiritual identities.

Overview of Methodology

Philosophically, qualitative methodologists suppose that knowledge is horizontal, allowing for conceptualization, extrapolation, and understanding. Creswell (2007) defined qualitative research as "the study of problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 37). A qualitative method is appropriate for the research questions proposed by this study because it seeks to investigate how gay men ascribe "meaning" to their spiritual development outside of formal religious institutions. In determining what specific type of research design to use, numerous options were reviewed to determine which approach would provide the best fit for the research questions. Tesch (1990) pointed out

that there are "at least twenty-six different kinds of approaches to qualitative research" (p.77). The researcher specifically considered phenomenology, narrative analysis, ethnography, grounded theory, and basic qualitative research.

The research problem and subsequent questions are geared for a basic qualitative inquiry because they seek to *explore* the meaning gay men attribute to spirituality and further understand the confluence of spirituality and sexuality in the lives of gay men. A quantitative method would be indicated for research questions that sought to *establish* an association or the cause and effect relationship between multiple variables rather than explore the lived experience of a group of participants (Creswell, 2007). In this study variables will likely not be easy to identify and there are no relevant theories to explain the phenomenon of gay spirituality outside the limited confines of religion. A detailed description of the methodology for this proposed project is located in Chapter 3.

Assumptions and Scope

Researcher bias can influence both the conduct of research and the interpretation of research findings and in some way the transferability and utilization of the research (Moustakas, 1994). Research about LGBT people has been misused and misrepresented to their detriment. Of critical importance is the unbiased dissemination of the research findings that include a rigorous reflexive accounting of the researcher, particularly in a qualitative research design (Warner, 2004). This researcher is currently aware of a number of biases that may confound his unfettered observation and reporting of the data, including: a) a significant number of gay men are psychologically traumatized by traditionally western religions; b) as a result, gay men seek out spiritual outlets and experiences that permit them to connect with a higher power, while at the same time, develop a healthy, integrated gay identity; c) spirituality will be identified by

participants as a separate and distinct construct from religion; and d) participants will be somewhat ambivalent, and in some cases, pessimistic about institutionalized religion. The researcher must attempt to remain aware of his predispositions and how they might impede the accurate reporting of the study's findings.

The final point is not necessarily an assumption but a reaffirmation that scholars have defined spirituality as a distinct semantic and theoretical construct separate from religion. In this vein, the recognition of the differences between the two concepts is essential to understand the individual and cultural experiences of gay men – a significant number of whom have abandoned homonegative religious institutions to develop affirmative spiritual identities. This paper is an attempt to illuminate the intersection of spirituality and gay identity, provide a framework for counselors and other mental health practitioners to build their cultural competence in working with a marginalized topic and community, and ultimately provide novel information that may contribute to the development of clinical interventions that can reduce health disparities in the LGB community.

The following chapters review the relevant literature, describe the study's methodology, describe the results, and frame the investigation's findings in the context of the field of counseling. Chapter two evaluates the academic literature pertaining to spirituality in counseling, sexual minority identity development, and studies examining the convergence of religious identity and sexual minority identity development. Chapter three describes the study's methodological approach and details data collection and analysis strategies. Chapter four reports the results of the in-depth interviews and presents that major thematic categories and relational sub-categories that emerged from the data. Finally, chapter five discusses the findings and

frames the results in the context of the existing body of knowledge on the topic, considers the study's limitations, and recommends directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of Relevant Literature

The following chapter includes sections that consider academic works examining the clinical integration of spirituality and counseling theory, sexual minority development in a homophobic society, and the intersection of religion, spirituality, and sexual minority identity.

The breadth of academic literature exploring the intersection of religion and sexual minority identity is robust (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Kirkman, 2001; Lease et al., 2005; Pitt, 2010; Schnoor, 2006; Smith & Horne, 2007). There is no study that specifically investigates how gay men, who are either disenfranchised from institutional religion or choose to leave their faith of origin, cultivate identities that integrate spiritual understandings and practices in tandem with their sexual identity. Many studies surveying the topic of religion also explore the conflict between religious affiliation and sexual orientation (Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Boellstorff, 2005; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Lalich & McClaren, 2010, Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). The decision to refrain from semantically and philosophically separating the concepts of religion and spirituality, however, is a major limitation of past studies.

Western religious culture often creates homonegative environments that may result in a struggle to integrate religious, spiritual and sexual minority identities (Smith & Horne, 2007). Consequently, previous research has indicated that up to three-quarters of gay male participants said they had turned away from organized religion, choosing instead to accept their sexual identity (Wagner, et al., 1994; Halkitis et al., 2009). These findings contrast with past survey research that suggests that most LGB individuals place an importance on both their spiritual and sexual identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

The psychological and emotional gap between the importance placed on the co-development of healthy spiritual and sexual identities and the marginalization both perceived and

experienced within organized Judeo-Christian religions is the impetus for a number of mental health and social challenges, including shame, internalized homophobia, depression, substance abuse, homelessness, and suicidal ideation (Burgard, Cochran, & Mays, 2005; Drabble, Midanik, & Trocki, 2005; Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). LGB individuals have been shown to seek out counseling at higher rates than their heterosexual counterparts (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Cochran & Mays, 2000).

The current proposal seeks to develop a contextual framework that informs counselors and other mental health practitioners as to how a sample of gay men foster the development and integration of their spiritual and sexual identities. The literature supporting this study emanates from the social sciences and describes the philosophical and empirical intersection of religion, spirituality and gay identity development. The first section of this review provides the theoretical foundation for the study within the counseling field, defines the constructs of religion and spirituality, and examines the clinical integration of spirituality and counseling practice. Section two examines gay identity development and the history of gay affirmative psychology, including the seminal individual identity development models and ecological theories that explain environmental perspectives on identity acquisition. Section three evaluates the literature on the intersection of religion, spirituality, and sexual minority identity development, including a consideration of reparative or conversion therapies. Section four will address the contributions of this study to the scholarly literature.

Clinical Integration – Spirituality and the Counseling Practice

The integration of spirituality and counseling is an emerging force in modern society and the fields of counseling and psychology – evidenced by popular consumption books related to spiritualty, headlined topics of motivational speakers, new age thinking, and scholarly writings

(Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008). In analyzing data derived from Gallup Polls dating back to 1992, the number of respondents indicating the importance of religion in their lives decreased, from high of 61% in 2003 to 54% in 2008 (Gallup, 2009). In fact, the majority of Americans believe that religion is losing its influence on American life. The deterioration of religious influence may indicate a shift in the cultural understanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality. This change in the cultural wind may be explained by the influence of a more diverse American population with respect to culture of origin, ethnicity, values, and traditions (Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008).

With the role of religion declining in American society, the imperative for addressing spiritual issues is frequently falling within the purview of counselors and psychotherapists. Gallup polls have found that two-thirds of Americans, when faced with a serious problem, would prefer to see a therapist who personally holds spiritual values and beliefs than one who does not (Hage, Hopson, Siegel, Payton, & DeFanti, 2006). When questioned further, participants indicated they would prefer a therapist who integrates their values and beliefs into counseling and therapy (Hage et al., 2006). According to Sperry and Shafranske (2005), resistance to reaching out to the institutional church for emotional help is a result of *spiritual homelessness* –a lack on belongingness and a disconnection to the principles and values espoused by the church. Further, Wolfe and Stevens (2001) indicated many people seem to prefer "religiously sensitive psychotherapy" and that this type of therapy may actually be more effective than therapy that does not integrate religious and spiritual sensitivity (p. 69).

The emergence of spirituality in the field of counseling is in stark contrast to the profession's historical roots. In understanding the relationship between spirituality and counseling, one must understand the past relationship between religion and psychotherapy.

Early in the twentieth century, prominent modern writers and theorists, argued that psychology must study only observable phenomena, not consciousness (Corey, 2001). Freud believed that religion was an illusory wish fulfillment and a guilt-centered neurosis (Eliason, Hanley & Leventis, 2001). Albert Ellis supposed religion to be associated with emotional disturbance, irrational thinking, inflexibility, and intolerance (Ellis, 1973). At the time of Freud's conception of psychoanalysis, the fabrics of both Eastern and Western European society were stitched together by strong national identities sustained by powerful cultural connections to the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches (Rizzuto, 2005). Spirituality, separate from religion, began to emerge as the 20th century witnessed the horrors of World War I and II and the ruthless extermination of over 6 million Jews and 250,000 LGBT persons by a Christian state. Religion as the public face of God had lost its credibility. The shift in understanding spirituality as separate from religion signaled a revolution in the psychology of religion – from dogma and empty divinity to personal, subjective experiences related to "sacred realities that suit the individual's and community's experience of them" (p. 32). As a direct result of this adjustment in cultural understanding of religion and in a rebuke to radical psychoanalytic theory, humanism and existentialism emerged as theoretical models meant to modify the psychological emphasis from internal, structured unconscious drives to a subjective, phenomenological stance, descriptions that parallel contemporary definitions of spirituality.

The antagonistic nature between religion and psychology prevalent for most of the prior century is giving way to a symbiotic, fluid relationship between spirituality and counseling in the new millennium (Zinbauer, Pargament, & Scott, 1999). A number of factors have influenced the increased awareness of spirituality as a critical force in the practice of counseling. The focus on multicultural competency in clinical and educational settings in the fields of counseling and

psychology has been a central force shaping the confluence of spirituality and counseling theory. According to Hage et al. (2006), religion and spirituality is "an integral part of many people's racial and cultural identity, shaping their world view and sense of self" (p. 217). Sharfanske and Sperry (2005) argued that religion and spirituality are integral parts of an individual's orienting system and must be assessed and integrated into a culturally vibrant treatment plan.

The emergence of the contextual paradigm and post-modern thought has also served to broaden the scope of therapy to embrace spirituality as vital clinical factor. Cottone (1992) theorized that contextual ideology supports the notion that change is an integral part of reality and argued that counselors should refrain from eschewing deterministic absolutes and explore the subjective, cultural, and contextual worlds of clients – which includes the theatre of spirituality. Counselors practicing within the constructivist paradigm seek to combine empirical data derived from the physical sciences and clinical intuition to build and new way of understanding mental health and the therapeutic process (Cottone, 1992). The conflation of objective and subjective realties parallels Eastern and Western spiritual principles, including ideas regarding: a) the transcendental nature of reality; b) the essential awareness of the here and now; and c) the holistic understanding of the individual, including the interconnection of mind, body, and spirit (Jankowski, 2002).

The literature details a number of descriptions for both religion and spirituality. Throughout most of history, the definitions of religion and spirituality denoted parallel, synonymous meanings that could be used interchangeably. Shafranske and Sperry (2005) noted that spirituality has come to be known as more of an internal, esoteric experience of God and religion as an external, exoteric description of God. According to Lines (2002), spirituality cannot be understood without a recognition of the word's predicate – from the Latin word

spiritus, meaning breath (p. 104). Lines argued that Spirit, in Eastern traditions, is a representation of the transcendental, the idea that life is more than our senses. Lines (2002) went on to describe Spirit as the "inexplicable bridge between the human and the divine" (pg. 104) and differentiated religion from spirituality in the following prose:

> I use the term religious to denote adherence to a group or individual ritualistic acts through perceived instructions from a divine source, whereas spiritual is that part of our inner being that relates to a divine source but is independent of performing particular actions. (p. 105)

In an article exploring spirituality in relation to Adlerian theory, Polanski (2002) distinguished spirituality as a subjective, existential experience of the "transcendental nature of the universe" and religion as the "institutional and religious expression of spirituality" (Polanski, 2002, p. 127). Jankowski (2005) described spirituality as a multidisciplinary construct that included cognitive, emotional, metaphysical, and relational elements that influence an individual's self-efficacy and resiliency. Eliason, Hanley, and Leventis (2001) cited Martin Buber's theory on I/Thou relating, describing the process as a recognition of God in oneself as a means to transcend the trivialness of everyday life and connect with the universal Higher Power. Wolfe and Stevens (2002) asserted religion and spirituality were "interrelated but are not exactly alike; once can be religious and not spiritual, spiritual and not religious, as well as spiritual and religious" (p. 67).

From a metaphysical perspective Joel S. Goldsmith, a Western mystical teacher and author of the spiritual classic *The Infinite Way* (1947), wrote "men have always attempted to bring harmony into the discords of human existence through an attempt, by prayer, to contact the spiritual realm and to bring Spirit, or God, to act upon the so-called human existence" (p. 22).

Goldsmith went on to argue that spirit is the true nature of the universe. In other words, spirituality is the true nature of human beings – an idea that has implications for counselors compelled to integrate spirituality within their therapeutic practice. Goldsmith's ideas surrounding the supreme nature of spirituality was mirrored by Carl Jung's understanding of psychological problems. Jung (1933) contended psychological challenges are essentially religious or spiritual in nature writing:

> A psychoneurosis must be understood, ultimately, as the suffering of a soul which has not discovered its meaning…the cause of the suffering is spiritual stagnation, or psychic infertility. (p. 252)

Both writers, in their own way, understood spirituality to be an integral part of the human experience – inextricably linked to an individual's ability to transcend psychological and systemic challenges.

Although spirituality and religion evoke a multitude of definitions, what seems to thread each together is the sense that spirituality is a higher awareness – an existential, subjective experience that transcends the human condition and neurological feedback. Spirituality is the direct link to the most High – the divine breath that breathes in every individual (Sperry & Shafranske, 2005). Religion, on the other hand, is a means to objectify, rationalize, and humanize the in-quantifiable and is often practiced within the public, societal, and cultural domains (Powers, 2005). As previously described, the two terms are often used interchangeably, but for the purposes of this chapter, a focus was placed on counseling theories and techniques that addressed the *clinical integration* of counseling and religion and/or spirituality. Traditional religious counseling has been omitted from review. Hall and Hall (1997) defined clinical integration as:

> The term, *clinical integration*, broadly defined, refers to the incorporation of religious or spiritual beliefs, values, and methods into the process of psychotherapy that results in a different way of being a therapist, understanding the client, or doing therapy. (p. 86)

The remaining sub-sections will review journal articles and book chapters that describe the process of clinical integration.

Psychodynamic Approaches and Spirituality

Despite Freud's belief that religion should be replaced with science and non-theistic humanism, the psychological paradigm has a rich history of clinical integration (Polanski, 2002). Contemporary psychoanalysis explores both religion and spirituality as it relates to "beliefs, fantasies, God as an object, and other dimensions of transcendent life such as purpose in life, destiny, salvation, and the relationships with others and the world of nature" (Rizzuto, 2005, p. 48). Post-modern psychoanalysts understand that spiritual experiences are understood within the context of ego development and how it creates meaning. They also recognize the limits of psychoanalytic theory in understanding the transcendental nature of the universe (Rizzuto, 2005). Further, psychoanalytic theory claims to influence the understanding of spirituality through the structural operations of the mind, which are inherently subject to the "psychodynamic processes that can be observed and modified through psychotherapy" (p. 49).

Freud. According to Nelson (2009) Freud was no friend of religion from the commencement of his career and his writings cemented his stature as a naturalist. Freud's seminal works on the topic conceptualized a sacred totem as the origin of morality, religion, and spirituality. Freud (1938) believed that the Judeo-Christian God was merely an anthropomorphic projection of the sacred and an attempt by humans to meet their emotional needs for safety, security, and attachment through a primal relationship with a parental object (Slife, 2012).

Freud's initial writings did not directly denounce religion altogether but his belief in the destructive nature of religion grew precipitously as his career wore on.

In his seminal book *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1938) suggested that religion was an insufficient mode for taming the id. Logic and reason, Freud argued, were far superior methods to pacify the animal nature of human beings because they sublimated productivity and cultural growth. Religion, on the other hand, was conceptualized by Freud as primitive attempt by individuals to attach to a God that did not exist and could not benefit society or the cultural good. Freud (1938) believed that libidinal impulse was better sublimated than wasted; logic and science were seen as having greater utility in advancing society (Slife, 2012). Although Freudian theory is ontologically deterministic and qualified religion as a mass neurosis (Polanski, 2002), the facilitation of self-awareness and any subsequent environmental adaptations, hallmarks of the psychoanalytic process, is synonymous with a number of spiritual principals, including self-leadership unencumbered by psychological obstacles.

Jung. In his seminal book *Modern Man in Search of Soul*, Jung (1933) contended spiritual, physical, emotional, and cognitive functioning are equally significant aspects in human development. As a youth, Jung became disenchanted with religion and began to seek spiritual insight through the study of anthropology, theology, myth, the occult, and psychology (Eliason et al., 2001). Jung's theory of psychology was a break from Freudian thought that only accounted for an individual's unconscious drives. Jung believed in a collective unconscious rooted in myth, rituals, symbols, and archetypes (Jung, 1933). Jung also contended that the perils of modern living, a projected manifestation of the unconscious darkness living beneath the psychic surface, was cause for individuals to seek peace and quiet through contemplation of their psychic worlds. Jung's idea of psychology was intuitively embedded in spirituality – a sense that psychology,

psychoanalysis particularly, was the individual's search for his or her soul. In *Modern Man in Search of Soul* (1933), Jung wrote:

> I do not believe that I am going too far when I say that modern man, in contrast to his nineteenth-century brother, turns his attention to the psyche with very great expectations; and that he does so without reference to any traditional creed, but rather in the Gnostic sense of religious meaning. (p. 207)

Jung went on to differentiate between spiritual experience and religious faith, which corresponds to the description of spirituality previously defined. Spirituality was described as rooted in subjective experience and intuitive knowledge while religion stemmed from dogmatic, objective truth embedded in faith. Jung supposed that the individual's interest in his or her inner psychic life was a result of the outer world's inability to answer pertinent transcendental questions, a role traditionally held by organized religion. He summarized his ideology regarding psychology and religion by stating:

> It's from the depths of our psychic life that new spiritual forms will arise; they will be expressions of psychic forces which may help to subdue the boundless lust for prey of Aryan man. We perhaps come to know something of that circumscription of life which has grown in the East into a dubious quietism: also something of that stability which human existence acquires when the claims of the spirit become as imperative as the necessities of social life. (p. 217)

Jungian psychology accounts for the transcendental nature of psychotherapy, a theory of understanding that individuals are more than biological and unconscious sexual drives. The theory was the first to describe human consciousness as a soul expression.

An implication of psychodynamic theories for spiritual development is that individuals may develop a sense of their spiritual selves in connection and continuity with God. Erikson (1950) purported that the parent-child relationship is transferred to a God-spiritual child relationship. Such a transfer has also been described as a projection. Rizzuto (1979) argued that individuals create their image of God from projected images of primary objects such as parents. If such a projection occurs with one's conception of God's image, then a similar projection may take place with one's perceived relationship with God and one's spiritual identity.

Adler. Alfred Adler, who was also once part of Freud's psychoanalytic circle, broke away from the unconscious determinism underpinning psychoanalytic thought to develop Individual Psychology, which promoted the need to understand individuals holistically, rather than as sums of their parts (Corey, 2000). Adler's emergence as a subjective social scientist was in stark contrast to Freud's role as an objective, natural scientist (Polanski, 2002). Adler viewed socially relevant aspects of religion from a humanistic point of view, recognizing their importance to individual development. Central to Adler's understanding of human nature was the emphasized importance of creativity and "the belief that there was something more to humanity than biological and cultural factors" (p. 129). Polanski (2002) went on to state that Adler's view of human nature may correlate to cultural definitions of god and spirit. Polanski declared that both Christian and Buddhist traditions endorse the idea of an ultimate reality – birthed from an "experience of existence as a gift and vehicle for learning and development" (p. 130). Adler's belief in the transpersonal nature of humans resonates with both the Christian and Buddhist perspectives that life is more than corporal experience, the notion that individuals are part of a life force undetected by objective understanding. In this vein, Adler understood

transcendental, phenomenological experience as playing a significant role in human lifespan development (Polanski, 2002).

Adler's theory of individual psychology revolves around two central tenets: social interest and inferiority. More specifically, these theoretical precepts include: (a) humans desire to belong to a broader social and cultural community, and (b) individuals are motivated by feelings of inferiority – driving a need for perfection (Corey, 2001). This need to belong and to seek perfection is evident in historical religious structures, which established "a framework to outline the right path toward the goal of perfection" (Polanski, 2002, p. 130). Polanski affirmed the belief that Adler's notions regarding inferiority are similar to the Christian and Buddhist perspectives on suffering. For both religions, the art of spiritual formation is, to a degree, built on the premise that in order to see the face of God, one must reduce the amount of suffering by people in life. For Christians, the act of suffering can be subdued and/or eradicated through prayer, confession, forgiveness, service, and ultimately salvation through faith in Christ. Buddha himself identified the existence of suffering as one of the Four Noble Truths and taught that the acceptance of suffering was a path to true liberation (Polanski, 2002). Polanski (2002) affirmed Adler's perception of inferiority as providing the impetus for social movement as coinciding with both the Christian and Buddhist concepts of suffering and the human drive to transcend such feelings in an effort to live freer and fuller lives.

Adler's view of social interest can also be related to the Christian and Buddhist views on love and community. A core principle of the Christian faith is the Golden Rule – do unto others and they would have done unto you. Additionally, Buddhist principles support individual refuge within a likeminded spiritual community. Polanski (2002) argued these tenets of both Christian and Buddhist faith correspond to the Adlerian construct of social interest (i.e., the community is

an integral component of human development and the overall existence of society). Polanski (2002) went on to describe how the aforementioned Christian and Buddhist ideals align with Adlerian notions of inferiority and social interest within the therapeutic process, including a focus on the interconnectedness of individuals and deriving meaning from suffering. Polanski (2002) promoted recognizing spiritual development as an integral part of a holistic form of counseling, creating a contemporary hybrid of spirituality and counseling theory.

Humanistic Approaches and Spirituality

Humanistic psychology has a rich history of integrating the spiritual and psychic realms. Founders of the movement in humanism, including Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, Rollo May, Viktor Frankl, and Martin Buber, among others, were committed to developing a theoretical orientation that accounted for an individual's strengths and positive attributes, a stark contrast to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis. Through the late 1950s and most of the 1960s, the proliferation of journals, articles, and professional presentations fueled humanism's rise and classification as the "third force" in American psychology (Elkins, 2005).

Maslow. According to Elkins (2005), humanistic psychology has always integrated spirituality within the counseling process, evident in the early writings of Maslow (1964;1968). Citing Freud's theory which conceptualized religious beliefs as a neurosis, Maslow contended "humanistic psychologists would probably consider a person sick or abnormal in an existential way if he were not concerned with these 'religious questions'" (p. 18). Maslow believed that mystical moments were "peak experiences" and were common occurrences of spirituality (Lines, 2002) and that awareness of these moments can be cultivated through group and individual counseling modalities. Believing that spirituality was a transcendental phenomenon outside the scope of any singular religion, Maslow went on to establish the field of transpersonal

psychology, a modality devoted specifically to the exploration of spirituality and the human psyche (Elkins, 2005).

Existential theorists. Existential theorists, including Viktor Frankl and Rollo May, were interested in exploring humanity's search for meaning and its relation to spirituality. Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, was the best-selling author of *Man's Search for Meaning* (1963) and went on to develop his theory of Logotherapy. Logos, of Greek origin, refers to "meaning," or "word" (Eliason et al., 2001). Frankl's personal experiences in the death camps of World War II Germany profoundly influenced his existential philosophy which included the view "that love is the highest goal to which humans can aspire and the essence of being human lies in searching for meaning and purpose" (Corey, 2001, p. 141). Frankl (1984) wrote:

> Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loved him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential trains and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by this love, the loving person enables the beloved to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true. (p. 134)

Frankl's concept of love rejects Freud's theory of unconscious sexual drive and determinism and establishes a mandate, within the humanistic field of psychology, to explore and integrate spiritual and religious principles related to an individual's quest to find meaning.

Rogers. Carl Rogers' Person-Centered theory also incorporates spiritual applications. Focusing on the subjective, phenomenological experience of the client and an unyielding belief in the individual's inherent good, Rogers pioneered the idea that persons have vast potential to

create positive change in their lives, if appropriate conditions are fostered, including the assistance of a counselor who is empathic and provides unconditional positive regard toward the individual (Rogers, 1980). Of great importance, Rogers defined the quality of the therapeutic relationship, rather than counseling technique, as the primary agent of change in the client (Corey, 2001).

Buber. Martin Buber (1970) theorized there are two ways of relating, which he called I-It and I-thou. I-Thou relating is a deep appreciation for another person – a soul-to-soul connection that transcends mere cerebral understanding. I-Thou relationships are grounded in positive regard, respect, genuineness, and are naturally reciprocal (Buber, 1970). According to Elkins (2005), Buber's philosophy regarding I-Thou relating can be applied to the therapeutic process. When a counselor is able to deepen their awareness of the "holy" encounter with a client, change is inspired. The counselor's spiritual practice and discernment can serve as a conduit for the client's own attunement to their true nature as divine re-presentations of the "Most High". Elkins (2005) went on to say:

> We can touch our clients only as deeply as the place from which we come within ourselves. If we are intimately familiar with our own souls and can access the spiritual dimension of our own being, we will be able to make contact with our clients at a deeper, more profound level and create a relationship in which 'cure of the soul' becomes possible (p. 142).

Contemporary Approaches and Spirituality

Elkins (2005) has developed a clinical application for a humanistic approach to spiritual counseling. The theory is based on two primary assumptions: (a) the client is suffering at the level of the soul; and (b) professional counseling can serve as an apparatus for spiritual healing.

Elkins described the etymology of the word "psychology," which when translated from its Greek roots means "the study of the soul." Likewise, the term psychopathology, when translated from its Greek root, is defined as "the suffering of the soul." From this point of view, one can begin to witness the power of the counseling process and its healing effect on the soul.

The idea that the therapeutic alliance is a critical factor in the success of counseling is not new. In a seminal article that reviews empirically supported treatment modalities, Beutler and Harwood (2000) identified six keys to success to teach therapists in training, including the most important factor, which is the therapeutic attitude of acceptance and respect. Beutler and his colleague found procedures that enhance the quality of a healing relationship are immanently more powerful than the theory-based techniques to which contemporary manuals are addressed. Their work provided further evidence that love, respect, appreciation, and acceptance nurtures the client's soul. Finally, Elkins (2005) argued that in order for spiritual counseling to be effective, clients must develop a commitment to activating their potential both within, and without, of the therapeutic alliance. In other words, clients must become active agents of transformation and spiritual revelation in their everyday lives. In order to become enlightened, the individual must be open to profound change.

Ingersol (2005) contended that spirituality can be contextually described but cannot be objectively defined. In relationship to Gestalt therapy, spirituality is conceptualized as its own gestalt – "a form, configuration, or totality that, as a unified whole, has properties that cannot be derived by summation from the parts" (p. 137). Gestalt's foundation in holism is related to the notion of organismic self-regulation – the idea that individuals are in relation to their environment and that each are part of a natural, universal flow – and are intrinsically motivated to establish balance and equilibrium, both internally and externally. Like many Eastern spiritual

traditions, Gestalt therapy assists the client to focus on the here-and-now and to trust the process as it unfolds. A focus on the here-and-now may serve as a spiritual injunction, enabling the client to shift his or her awareness from feelings associated with past experiences to the perfection inherent in the now moment. Ingersol (2005) asserted "in Gestalt and spiritual practice, dis-ease is strongly related to our ability to dissociate from the present, and many of the injunctions of Gestalt and spiritual practice are designed to bring us back to the present" (p. 140).

Awareness has been described as a key component of spiritual understanding and operates as fundamental concept within the Gestalt framework. Awareness of the present moment draws the individual from ego mind, which from an Eastern and new-age spiritual perspectives, is described as the false-self. The ego, a manifestation of earthly experience, is primarily concerned with self-preservation – a concept that is antithetical to spiritual revelation, which is an active gifting of the soul. Gestalt therapy is inclined to assist the individual to re-member the dismembered parts of their self, a realignment of consciousness though mindfulness of the now moment. Ingersol (2005) described Gestalt therapy and spiritual practice as injunctions to "dwell in the here and now that can lead to the apprehension of oneness that unifies the self with consciousness at large and shows the separate, threatened ego to be just an illusion" (p. 141).

Both Gestalt therapy and Zen Buddhism promote phenomenological understanding as spiritual imperative, rather than relying solely on written word to define truth. From the Gestalt perspective, actions speak louder than words and it is through the action that an individual is able to experience wholeness. If an individual is constantly judging how he or she experiences contact with the environment, the gestalt is unable to fully emerge. A person's thoughts about the experience interfere with the experience itself. Only through the here-and-now can the

individual become fully aware of his or her limitless potential through the active experience of life (Ingersol, 2005).

Mindfulness of the present-moment affords individuals the psychic space required to gain insight into their spiritual nature – we are more than the sum of our parts. Understanding the nature of internal polarities and the function of non-duality is a vital component of both spiritual practice and Gestalt therapy. Ingersol (2005) attributed spiritual growth to the transcendence of polarities and an active practice to cultivate an awareness of the non-dualistic nature of the world. A primary intervention in gestalt therapy is to assist the client to be in touch with their moment-to-moment experiences rather than internally debating the relevance of the experience based on dueling parts of self that were influenced by external conditions over time. Similarly, spiritual growth is the easing of ego identification and the integration of phenomenological experience in the here-and-now. According to Ingersol (2005), spiritual growth is:

> Not a breakdown of the ego, but a breakthrough of the ego. The ego is not obliterated but transcended and included in a greater awareness that one is connected to all human beings, to all living creatures – one is essentially the same and single consciousness that looks out upon the world through billions of eyes (p. 144).

Finding the center between our poles is central to finding spiritual fulfillment, health, and wholeness.

Cognitive theorists conceptualize identity development as a meaning-making process that develops through sequential phases of lacking the ability to reflect upon and see the self objectively, to progressively gaining the ability to objectively perceive and direct the self, and finally to integrating an objective sense of the self and others (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). Healthy identity, according to the cognitive perspective, is attained by gaining greater

objectivity in reflecting upon self and others and by being able to understand and direct one's life according to self-schemas (Markus, 1977; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Mental Cultivation Cognitive Humanistic Therapy (CHT) is a psychotherapeutic modality that aims to assist individuals reach supra-normalcy (Nelson-Jones, 2004). Essentially, the core element of therapy is to inspire individuals to transcend social norms and reach and maintain a higher, spiritual functioning. The purpose of CHT is to facilitate an individual's inner journey to become more fully aware of his or her innate goodness or true spiritual nature. According to Nelson-Jones (2004), supra-normalcy – the ability to vitally respond to natural flow of change and conflict is especially important in post-modern societies.

Mentally cultivated people have a greater awareness of the synergistic relationship between their egos and the environment and their attachment or detachment to effects and objects. Awareness is the means by which individuals are able to make spiritually centered choices that reflect the mental cultivation of spirit. Mental cultivation of the soul affords greater opportunities for compassionate and peaceful responses to conflict. Nelson-Jones (2004) stated, "Mental cultivation CHT seeks inner transformation by reshaping, deepening, and humanizing the self and its ego processes" (p. 80).

An additional important component of mental cultivation CHT is the use of experience and action to facilitate change. Similar to other humanistic modalities, mental cultivation CHT incorporates experiential activities to deepen spiritual understanding. In other words, clients are encouraged to practice compassion, actively give, and seek out spiritual encounters, through religion, nature, groups, and/or relationships, as they reveal more of their inherent humanness.

Mental cultivation CHT also emphasizes the imperative of the therapeutic alliance in an individual's spiritual growth. As with previously detailed therapies, mental cultivation CHT

promotes acceptance, affirmation, and attention as key characteristics of the therapeutic relationship. Based on the account of Nelson-Jones (2004) "clients should experience therapists as compassionate and able to reach beneath their surface distress and to accept lovingly the underlying core of their humanity" (p. 83). Further, mental cultivation CHT strives to empower individuals to engage in their own "self-therapy" – the process of recalling and implementing therapeutic insights in their everyday lives, rendering the therapeutic alliance as secondary in nature.

Systemic and Post Modern Approaches and Spirituality

Marriage and family therapists have been reluctant to integrate spirituality and family/systems theory and have followed a policy of *don't ask and don't tell* (Walsh, 1999). Like modern psychological theory, family systems theory omitted spirituality from assessment and conceptualization protocols. Clinicians practicing within this framework have not been equipped with the tools to incorporate spirituality within the therapeutic process. Walsh (1999) argued the secularism of American society has created a dualism within the field of psychotherapy broadly and family systems theory specifically. A line has been drawn in the sand and never the two sides shall meet; religious/spiritual issues are the concern of clergy and pastoral counselors and professional counselors work within the scope of mental health.

Walsh (1999) illustrated the differences between the concepts of treatment and healing, which in turn, signals the differences between counseling imbedded in a medical, science-based model and counseling that actively integrates spiritual principles. Family counselors and therapists are beginning to conceptualize the therapeutic relationship as core to building the client's resiliency, whether the client is the family, couple or individual. A client's spiritual and

religious understanding is often a source of strength and plays an important role in the development of resiliency.

Walsh (1999) noted that therapists who neglect the potential relevance of clients' spiritual beliefs and practices were likely to be at odds with those they work with and can leave clients feeling fragmented (p. 34). Walsh (1999) went on to assert that spiritual assessment should be a crucial element of the assessment process, much as race, ethnicity, and other cultural aspects of the client's worldview and experience, an argument that is supported by the ethical standards of the American Counseling Association (2005). Similar to existential therapies, family systems theory recognizes faith as a tool to make sense of personal and communal suffering.

Spiritual practices inspire individuals and groups of people to transcend visceral hardships and find solace in the healing power of the "Divine". Walsh (1999) described this process as resiliency – the capacity to rebound from adversity even more strengthened and more resourceful. Family resilience works in the same way enabling families to weather the storm and develop tools that build cohesion and strengthen the unit. Family struggles can be conceptualized as a spiritual distress, the lack of meaning surrounding a particular life trial, including death, addiction, and cultural factors such as poverty and racism. Family belief systems are powerful influences in making meaning of adversity and suffering. Spirituality and religious practices can serve as a source of hope and faith in a chance for a better life. The role of the therapist is to act as a spiritual conduit to revitalize the family and community spirit (Walsh, 1999).

Wolfe and Stevens (2001) cited the potential ethical dilemmas that may result as an unintended consequence of integrating spirituality and family systems therapy. The authors indicated the therapist should avoid dual relationships that may potentially arise as a result of

bringing spirituality and religion into the therapeutic process. The authors argued therapists cannot serve as therapist/spiritual leaders or therapists/spiritual associates and must maintain professionally sanctioned ethical boundaries at all times.

Additionally, the Wolfe and Stevens (2001) contended counselors should remain aware of their own spiritual biases and refrain from "displacing or usurping religious authority" (p. 69). Counselors also have an obligation to understand the legal and ethical limits of their scope of practice. Counselors are mandated to refrain from asserting their religious and spiritual beliefs on clients and must avoid making clinical judgments based on spiritual and religious biases. Further, Wolfe and Stevens (2001) maintained the counselor's responsibility to practice within the boundaries of competence – referring clients to appropriate sources when the counselor's knowledge or expertise is limited.

Integral psychology, developed by Wilber (2000) is a systematic hybrid of traditional psychotherapies and spiritualities, including modern and postmodern counseling theories and Eastern and Western spiritual traditions (Holden, 2004).

> Integral psychology perceives the entire universe and everything in it, including each person, to be consciousness unfolding in an invariant order: matter to body, to mind, to soul, to Spirit, with Spirit being both the most inclusive level of consciousness and the source of all levels of consciousness. (Holden, 2004, p. 205)

According to Holden (2004), Integral Psychology espouses a symbiotic understanding of the individual and collective, subjective and objective, secular and sacred, and the sensory and rational and conceptualizes the universe as incorporating both/and versus an either/or – it is a meta-theory that affords space for philosophical and theoretical pluralism. Holden makes a

strong case for Integral Psychology to serve an instinctive home for the integration and application of spirituality and counseling theory.

Wilber (2000) developed a four quadrant model that is used to conceptualize a client's unfolding of consciousness. The four quadrant model includes the individual/collective and the subjective/objective realms of phenomenological experience. To best understand the four quadrant model, Holden (2004) directs readers to visualize two perpendicular lines that represent a large plus sign with four quadrants. The upper left quadrant is the individual subjective; the upper right quadrant is the individual objective; the lower left is the collective subjective; and the lower right is the collective objective. Holden asserted the importance of assessing developmental levels (matter, body, mind, soul, and spirit) within the context of the four quadrant model, which is described as a 4D perspective – the integration of the four quadrant model and biological, introspective, cultural, and systemic factors that provide context for developmental levels and tasks. The process of spiritual growth is conceptualized through a spectrum of development, including 10 fulcrums, or developmental stages, with multiple lines connecting the varying stages (Holden, 2004). Each developmental stage is categorized within a realm of psychological understanding and associated with a developmental task. The highest realm of psychological understanding is transpersonal in nature and involves spiritual cultivation as the primary developmental task.

Wilber (2000) identified the transpersonal realm, or the experience of non-duality, as the ultimate transcendence of human suffering, which has been described by Buddhists as nirvana – an eternal state of being void of suffering. Holden (2004) described suffering as "the experience of pain without the promise of greater completeness" (p. 209). Holden argued that as a person knows, the person is, citing how children develop understanding through their senses, while

adults know through their education and experience, which serves as the foundation for their world view.

Holden (2004) explained that clients seek counseling when transitioning to a higher level fulcrum, a process that is often motivated by a sense of suffering without the hope for relief or positive change. In essence, clients turn to therapy as a result of a spiritual yearning to reconnect to their innate divinity and reach a level of functioning that transcends corporal suffering. Holden wrote:

> In a sense, one must die to one's way of functioning in order to be born to another. Not yet knowing the benefits of that rebirth, the client is strongly inclined to cling to functioning at the current fulcrum, that functioning having been his or her best means of alleviating suffering and achieving happiness, however inadequate that means might have been (p. 218).

The counselor's role is to assist clients in their inward journey to greater spiritual awareness. The process includes supporting individuals as they master tasks within their developmental levels and serve as launching pads for the upward transition to a higher fulcrum, and in turn, a deeper spiritual understanding. As in other counseling theories, Integral Psychology emphasizes the significance of the counselor's role in building a strong therapeutic alliance, strengthened by the counselor's own spiritual understanding and practice. Holden (2004) suggested counselors employ the 4D model to assess their own developmental growth and spiritual revelation in an effort to serve as a transparent support for the client (e.g., I/Thou relating).

In a conceptual article on spiritual identity development, Poll and Smith (2002) extracted several common themes from four paradigms of counseling, including psychodynamic, cognitive, systemic and narrative theories to construct a theoretical model of spiritual identity

development. The authors synthesized a number of general insights from the confluence of the aforementioned theories, including: (a) individuals seek a sense of self that is connected to and separate from others with whom they interact; (b) individuals seek a sense of continuity and constancy in how they view themselves; and (c) individuals seek to organize and understand themselves in relation to other and to their experiences. These assumptions influenced the authors' conceptualization of spiritual identity development as "a process that involves individual's connection to and separation from God, perceptions of consistent spiritual themes across time and across situations, and spiritual experiences that provide meaning and purpose in their lives" (p. 132).

A number of philosophical understandings served as the scaffolding for the construction of Poll and Smith's (2002) model: God exists, human beings are children of God, humans possess temporal physical bodies and eternal spirits, humans are able to communicate with God vis-à-vis spiritual means, and humans are able to recognize/remember their true nature as eternal beings of divine potential. The first stage of the model was described as *pre-awareness* of the self as an eternal being in relation to God. At this point, individuals do not consciously regard themselves in spiritual terms. The second stage was explained to involve a period of learning, crisis, or conflict that prompts an *awakening* in awareness to the self in relation to God. The third stage, *recognition*, involves recollection of other spiritual experiences and the deepening of one's spiritual identity in relation to others. The fourth and final stage involves an integration of spiritual experiences with self-concept. Individuals at this stage recognize their own spiritual nature, and they perceive and interact with the world accordingly.

The foremost limitation of Poll and Smith's (2002) article is rooted in the philosophical assumptions of the authors, which discounted contextual and cultural factors that establish the

basis for understanding God, religion, and spirituality. The authors supposed that the validity of their model of spiritual identity development depended on the veracity of theistic assumptions, which may or may not be salient for the individual. The content of a spiritual identity is highly idiosyncratic, depending largely on the religious orientation, personality characteristics, and previous spiritual experiences of the person. From this perspective, it is hard to imagine that spiritual identity development could be conceptualized as a linear, essential process similar to the cited models of human and psychological development.

Erikson (1950) noted that a person's optimal aspired identity should be (a) personally relevant, (b) beneficial, and (c) acknowledged and reciprocated by others. Noting the marginalization gay men experience within Judeo-Christian religions, the application of this model to their spiritual identity development would be highly incompetent and boarder on unethical. Poll and Smith (2002) propose further study of spiritual identity development that employs qualitative methods to explore how individuals experience the process and changes of their spiritual identities. A qualitative method, similar to the one prescribed by this proposal, will allow this researcher to assess contexts and influences to spiritual development – a direct contrast to previous conceptualizations that heavily rely on essentialist philosophical models that negate the milieu of environmental and systemic factors that influence identity development, particularly for marginalized populations.

Understanding spirituality and religion as a cultural phenomenon is essential to the counseling process. From a cultural perspective, individual challenges emerge when faced with existential dilemmas that are often explained and mediated through religious and spiritual doctrines. Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) asserted that the spiritual/religious dimensions of life reflect some of the most significant cultural aspects of framing human experience and

commented that spiritual and religious understandings appear to be especially salient for non-Caucasians. The authors explained:

> Some Chicano/Latino populations frame the meaning of health and disease as including spiritual, moral, physiological, social, and metaphysical dimensions, which are viewed as gifts or punishments from God and that African Americans are more likely to involve themselves in church activities and opportunities for prayer (p. 229).

Cultural conceptualizations of spirituality and religion include the idea that both serve as a source of strength and resiliency and can be utilized as an asset in the therapeutic process.

Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) argued for the inclusion of multiple contextual identities within the framework of culturally competent counseling, including spirituality and religion. Ignorance surrounding the role of spirituality within the context of a client's world view was suggested to be unethical and potentially harmful to the client. The authors cited the relevance of the counselor's own internal work to identify biases around cultural orthodoxies, including spirituality and religion, as a means to develop a more competent clinical practice. From a constructivist point of view, spiritual and religious structures can provide vital sources of support for clients experiencing spiritual dilemmas and mental health challenges. The client's reconnection to these support systems is a crucial component of therapy. Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) stated the counselor's need to "establish a culturally integrated narrative of the client that is intertwined with contextual components and multiple identities that define human experience" (p. 232). The integration process must include spiritual and religious identities, as both mirror cultural values. A culturally integrated, inclusive and holistic approach to counseling cannot be understated in the postmodern world. Individuals seeking counseling no longer reflect the homogenous, dominant, American culture (e.g., White, male, heterosexual,

able bodied). Counselors will be exposed to a wide array of cultural narratives and must not only be open to experiencing diversity, but must actively reflect on their own cultures of origin and subsequent judgments and biases. If not, counselors risk pathologizing clients for culturally sanctioned behavioral adaptations.

Conclusion

Clinical integration of spirituality and counseling theory is a reflection of the infusion of postmodern philosophy within the realm of counseling theory (Jankowski, 2002). As the world begins to face rather profound existential dilemmas, the integration of spirituality within the counseling process will become even more imperative than it is today. Although the literature documents clinical integration within contemporary, systemic, and postmodern counseling theories, the need for meta-theoretical approaches to spiritually integrated counseling remains. The multicultural counseling movement has influenced every facet of the counseling field, including the notion that spirituality is an integral part of many people's cultural identity, shaping their worldview and sense of self (Hage, et al., 2011). The current proposal hopes to contribute to the body of knowledge that advocates for the culturally competent clinical integration of spirituality and counseling.

Sexual Minority Identity Development in a Homophobic Society

The development and assessment of sexual identity models is a relatively contemporary phenomenon rooted in the cultural and political upheavals of the latter half of the 20th century. In the first edition of the 1952 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, homosexuality was characterized as a sociopathic personality disorder, and the 1968 revised edition reclassified homosexuality as a deviation from the sexual norm, heterosexuality (Casey, 2009). Prominent physicians including Sandor Rado, the first director of Columbia University's

Psychoanalytic Clinic for Training and Research, believed heterosexuality was the only non-pathological outcome of sexual orientation. He claimed homosexuals should be encouraged to engage in heterosexual sex acts to overcome their phobia of heterosexual sexual encounters (Halpert, 2000).

In a review of a number of sociological reports, Volocchi (1999) detailed the cultural history of homosexuals and the documentation of homosexuality as a medical term that was derivative of Freud's psychiatry of the early 20th century. As a result of the review, the author determined that the heterosexual/homosexual binary was a product of a number of social forces attempting to regain control of a rapidly changing social landscape that included: a) the Great Depression; b) the New Deal; c) World War II and the subsequent flux of immigration to the United States; d) women entering the workforce; and e) the fusion of these social changes with existing gender beliefs and the definitions of masculinity and femininity. The separation of homosexuals from heterosexuals was conceptualized as an effort by the growing middle-class (the majority of whom were White, educated, Christian, employed, and heterosexual) to regain and crystallize their gender roles by pathologizing homosexuality and dehumanizing homosexuals – a movement sanctioned and promoted by powerful social forces, including the fields of medicine, law, and government (Valocchi, 1999).

The term homosexuality, a term that historically indicated medical pathology and cultural deviance, also became a galvanizing force within the gay and lesbian communities, uniting previously separated gay and lesbian groups under an imposed collective identity. During the 1960s and 1970s, the feminist and gay rights movements worked hard to change the negative views on homosexuality from a sickness and rejected the negative and problematic medical models of homosexuality (Casey, 2009). The gay liberation movement fought to change the

notion of homosexuality from pathological deviance to a politically defined, marginalized group of peoples. As they claimed their own sexual identities, homosexuals denied cultural domination over their sexual behavior and practices. By 1973, the American Psychiatric Association responded to the political pressure brought on by the gay rights movement by declassifying homosexuality as a mental disorder (Bayer, 1981; Minton, 2002). This in turn led to an opening for social scientists to begin to explore the development and constitution of a positive sexual identity.

The concept of identity first emerged in developmental literature in the late 1940s (Erikson, 1968) though its roots go back to the early twentieth century and the work of Freud, Winnicott, and Adler (Frew & Spiegler, 2008). During the past 20 years, research and theory on identity development has focused primarily on socially and culturally constructed aspects of identity, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, and disability status. In a number of these areas, including gay identity development, stage models were developed and proposed and much of the focus has been on coming out, sexual identity development, and reaching an end stage within one's development (Casey, 2009). More recently, as the social constructivist paradigm has gained legitimacy within the mental health profession, early biomedical models of identity development have been challenged philosophically. Consequently, contemporary theorists believe that it is particularly important to expand the discussion around the current state of knowledge and theory regarding sexual identity development to include definitions of identity that transcend a simplistic binary distinction between heterosexual and homosexual and include multiple dimensions within sexuality from sexual identification, sexual fantasies, and current relationship (Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Gray, 2000; Klein & Wolf, 1985).

Dworkin (2000) argued that developmental stage models are based on White gay men and then overgeneralized to other minority gays, lesbians, and bisexuals and that the models have only one ending – "a fixed, integrated gay or lesbian identity across all situations" – an ending that is not supported by the research (Dworkin, 2000, p. 163). What has been missing from the literature is a study that explores sexual identity development within the context of multiple cultural frameworks for identity development, including spirituality. Sexual identity development is theorized to occur in tandem with other theatres of development, including spirituality. The following section is divided into three sub-sections and provides an overview of the linear-stage, social-ecological, and minority identity development models, which academics and counselors have employed in conceptualizing gay and lesbian development.

Linear Stage Models of Sexual Minority Identity Development

Mental health professionals' views of gay male sexuality and identity development have changed dramatically over the last 40 years. Developmental stage models (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; McDonald, 1982; Troiden, 1979) defined development as a gradual unfolding from *realization and non-acceptance* of sexual orientation to *acceptance and integration* of sexual identity with overall individual identity. These theories have been reviewed extensively in the literature and most reviews have found that while models provided novel constructs and the subsequent language to describe individual gay identity development, they only partially accounted for the contextual experiences of participants, including the impact of multiple cultural identities on the construction of gay identity (Haldeman, 2007; Liddle, 2007; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002).

A majority of the contemporary research focus has been on the coming out process and reaching an end stage of sexual identity development that includes the integration of a sexual

identity with dominant cultural values. Developmental models have a strong *essentialist* understanding of sexual orientation and frequently conceptualize sexuality as a permanent aspect of being, a definition that continues to persist within the scientific and medical communities despite research that indicates sexual identity and gender expression as more fluid and malleable than previously thought (Casey, 2009).

Cass. One of the earliest and most widely recognized models is Cass's (1979) six-stage model. The first stage, identity confusion, was conceptualized as the individual's initial attempt to move to a first person perspective as a gay man or woman and may be precipitated by his or her questioning of what is personally and/or socially perceived as gay behavior. The primary events associated with this stage were managing confusion related to one's emerging sexual identity and exploring the cultural and personal meanings ascribed to it. Outcomes included foreclosure on a gay identity, a redefinition of identity, or the dismissal of a gay identity.

Stage two was described as identity comparison and is indicated by feelings of alienation and difference, the reconciliation of the cognitive and emotional dissonance related to one's emerging sexual identity and other salient cultural identities imbued with homonegative ideologies and practices, and the management of a host of negative feelings including rejection and grief. Potential developmental outcomes of stage two included the individual's acceptance of a gay identity accompanied by positive or negative affect or foreclosure on a heterosexual identity.

Identity tolerance, the third stage of Cass' (1979) model, was indicated by the person's focus on social, sexual, and emotional needs, considerable self-disclosure, and increased tolerance of self as gay. Critical events of this stage included making contact with other gay people and beginning dialogues with family and friends regarding sexual identity and culture.

Stage four, identity acceptance, was characterized by an individual's sense of peace and fulfillment rooted in his or her acceptance of self as gay, which may be further reinforced by the acceptance of others. Heterosexuality as a privileged norm is generally diffused on a personal level and gay is seen as equally valid. Cass (1979) suggested that some individuals anticipate negative reactions from family and friends regarding their sexual identity and may choose to maintain a level of secrecy, develop behavioral strategies to pass as heterosexual, selectively disclose their identity status, or limit contact with people who might not be as accepting.

Identity pride, stage five of the model, was typified by the individual's marked devaluation of heterosexuality. The emerging gay identity is given preferred status and the individual develops a strong sense of group identification in the gay community. Pride, loyalty, and companionship are fundamental outcomes of this stage.

Stage six was defined as identity synthesis and is exemplified by the positive reevaluation of supportive heterosexuals and a sense of belonging in the world-at-large. Individuals integrate multiple salient identities and can perceive themselves as more than just gay.

Troiden. Troiden (1979) developed a broader model that included a "sociological analysis of homosexual identity formation" (p. 49). The first stage, *sensitization*, begins prior to puberty and is characterized by "generalized feelings of marginality, and perceptions of being different from same-sex peers" (p. 50). In stage two, *identity confusion*, the person experiences confusion related to social stigma, same-sex behavior, isolation, and so on. The third stage is *identity assumption*. In this stage people view their experiences through the lenses of a gay or lesbian identity. The final stage, *commitment*, refers to "self-acceptance and comfort with the homosexual identity and role" (p. 63). The experiences of same sex attraction are integrated into a gay or lesbian identity and the experiences are essentially "a way of life" (p. 63).

McDonald. McDonald (1982) reported on milestone events that function as "stages" in a model that seeks to describe gay male identity development and includes: a) an awareness of same-sex inclinations, b) same-sex activities and experiences, c) an understanding of the meaning of the word homosexual, d) a homosexual self-description, e) the first homosexual relationship, and f) the adaptation of a positive gay identity.

The data derived from McDonald's (1982) survey of 600 men found that for the gay male, same-sex behavior appears to facilitate gay identity synthesis, which is antithetical to Troiden's (1979) assertion that identity commitment proceeds behavior. Additionally, McDonald (1982) found that 15% of his sample did not see themselves as having acquired a positive gay identity and had more negative feelings about homosexuality, were less active in the gay community, and felt more guilt, anxiety, and shame about homosexuality. These findings are important for a number of reasons.

First, this research proposal seeks to explore how spirituality affects the development of a positive gay identity; second, the results reported by McDonald discounted Troiden and Cass's stage models as particularly irrelevant for a significant portion of the gay male population, which suggests that the assessment of identity development requires further investigation. Mental health practitioners and researchers alike are beginning to recognize that more than one model of development may fit the diverse experiences of gay men. Contemporary models of sexual identity development have begun to conceptualize identity within the context of cultural valuative frameworks but continue to generally omit spirituality as a vital cultural variable.

Cox and Gallois. Cox and Gallois (1996) constructed a developmental model founded on the perspective that individual identity is directly related to one's social context. The authors described an individual's identity development in the context of group identity and cultural

values. Self-categorization as gay was perceived to be directly related to the individual's ability to integrate the gay identity into social and relational identities. The model was primarily concerned with social influences on the development of self-concept. Self-esteem was conceptualized to be a product of the interaction between the gay community, including subgroups within the gay community, gay individuals and their additional salient cultural identities, and heterosexuals.

Cox and Gallois' (1996) model of development focused on the interaction between an individual, that individual's social groups, and society. The strength of this model, in comparison to previous conceptualizations of gay identity development, was its constructivist delineation of reality, which believed in the primary importance of social forces in shaping human behavior (Foucault, 1978). The methodological framework and research questions related to this research proposal rest squarely on a primary philosophical assumption – that gay identity development can primarily be understood within individual and group contexts.

Cox and Gallois' (1996) were the first to identify spirituality, apart from religion, as a cultural variable affecting gay identity development. In addition, this model was the first to semantically and structurally integrate environmental and psychological mediators/moderators as equal factors that shape gay male identity. The author did not state nor imply that all gay men will arrive at the same destination. Rather, the theory explicitly stated that gay men will achieve unique identities.

A number of implications for continuing research were identified by Cox and Gallois (1996) including further study of societal influences on gay identity development, cultural frameworks that affect gay identity development, and a greater description and assessment of diverse gay identities. The proposed study expects to address each of the identified areas of

scarcity in the literature and specifically describe the lived experiences of gay men who identify as spiritual and not religious. Research questions seek to assess the cultural framework of spirituality and its relationship to gay identity development in addition to describe a diverse experience within the gay community – neither of which has been documented in the scholarly literature thus far.

Alderson. Alderson (2003) introduced the ecological theory of gay male identity. The theory incorporated both developmental stages and process components in explaining identity formation and included both internal psychological factors and social/environmental variables that influence identity development. The model comprised three stages including *before coming out, during coming out, and beyond coming out*. The graphic representation of the model illustrated a number of psychosocial factors that were theorized to influence gay identity and were comprised of parents/family, culture/spirituality, and peers. Psychological and emotional factors included emotion, cognition, and behavior, while intra/interpersonal variables were described as connection to the gay world, self, and heterosexual cohorts.

Paul and Frieden. Paul and Frieden (2008) conducted a qualitative study to ascertain the meaning of gay identity development as it is experienced in a majority heterosexist culture. The researchers employed a phenomenological method and conducted five interviews with gay men who discussed their sexual identity development within the context of their minority status in a heterosexually privileged society. The authors were interested in the multiple ways gay identity develops and specifically focused on how individuals embraced key experiences that differ from the majority and facilitate or impede overall development.

The central question of Paul and Frieden's (2008) study was rooted in the authors' desire to know how individuals experience self-concept as a member of a sexual minority group. The

five participants ranged in age from 35 to 55, were mostly White but included one participant who identified as Latino, and varied in educational backgrounds and work experience. All were recruited from LGBT community centers in the southern United States.

A number of methodological strategies were employed to strengthen the study's credibility and trustworthiness, including the researchers "bracketing" (Husserl, 1931) their personal beliefs prior to commencing participant interviews. Interviewer reflections were subsequently analyzed along with the data from participant interviews to ensure that the bracketing process was consistent throughout the research. The authors also conducted two pilot studies to practice suspending their personal suppositions as not to advertently influence the meanings described by the participants. Finally, trustworthiness was established through memo writing and the separate review of the transcripts by each of the authors, which resulted in the development of concepts built on inter-rater reliability.

A variety of themes were identified as important to participants in their search for self-acceptance in the context of their status as a sexual minority. Five domains were discovered including: (a) crisis or pain as related to development; (b) importance of relationship or connection to others; (c) experience of a dual identity related to gay and straight worlds; (d) a new construction of spirituality; and (e) the journey to acceptance as worthwhile. Of most relevance to this proposal is the theme related to spirituality. Each of the men interviewed for this study were raised in families who were or had at some time been affiliated with a Christian religious denomination. All five of the participants described some type of judgmental message from their religions of origin that was related to sexual minority identities. All five of the men identified themselves as "currently spiritual or religious" and three of the men found it important to redefine religiosity as separate from spirituality (p. 40). Though the emergent theme was

experienced in nuanced ways by each participant, it is important to note that each man reported that his earlier religious beliefs had changed in some way as he had come to accept his gay identity. One of the central implications of Paul and Frieden's (2008) study is for researchers, counselors, and counselor educators to "redefine spirituality" (p. 44).

Gay men interviewed as part of the aforementioned study described the importance of an early separation from homonegative constructions of religion that stigmatized their sexual identities to gay affirmative frameworks that allowed for more inclusive spiritual connections. Paul and Frieden (2008) recommended that counselors assist their clients to find relevant ways to reconstruct their religious/spiritual beliefs in confluence with their sexual identities. The authors' only prescriptive intervention was to refer a client struggling with his spirituality to a gay-affirming faith community. Noticeably, there was no mention of further inquiry into spiritual understandings that may not include religion. Therefore, the authors neglected to indicate how men who identified as spiritual and not religious would be conceptualized and assisted in a clinical setting. This omission is further evidence to support the need for the proposed study to explore the construction of a spiritual identity that is removed from religion.

Minority Identity Development

In the United States, White, male, heterosexual, Protestant, able-bodied, English speakers are a majority group that can be experienced as both privileged and oppressive by those who do not share these demographic traits and cultural identities. The cultural power of this group and the resulting dominant discourse about race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, religion, class, and language affect the ways individuals and groups make meaning of, adopt, or struggle with issues of identity development (Paul & Frieden, 2008).

Historical models of identity development may serve as useful conceptualization tools for clinical practice only if the practitioner considers multiples aspects of an individual's cultural identity, including the impact of oppression and minority stress on the development of multiple social identities. The complexity of multiple identity elements inevitably has led to a breakdown in linear models, more evident in light of the constructivist paradigm, which currently has a powerful influence in how counselors conceptualize client challenges. The profession's relatively new found focus on the impact of multiple oppressions on the psychological and systemic levels has certainly influenced the new understandings of identity as a relational and cultural process.

Sue and Sue. Identity is truly multidimensional and race and ethnicity are components of a much larger identity construct. Sue and Sue (2003) developed a racial/cultural identity development model that describes what oppressed individuals encounter as they develop integrated cultural identities. Stage 1 is the *conformity stage*, in which minority members prefer the values perspectives of the dominant culture. Stage 2 is the *dissonance stage*, in which an oppressed individual begins to question dominant values and beliefs as a result of a specific event that creates cognitive and emotional disequilibrium. Stage 3 comprises *resistance and immersion*, which includes the immersion of self in a minority culture and the active resistance of dominant values and social mores. Stage 4 is the *introspection stage*, in which people begin to more deeply understand their minority culture and how they may synthesize their multiple experiences and identities related to minority and dominant cultures. Finally, in Stage 5, the individual exhibits an inner sense of pride while appreciating multiple expressions of culture.

Cutts and Parks (2009). To illustrate how racial and ethnic identities affect sexual identity development, Cutts and Parks (2009) explored religious involvement among Black men

self-labeling as gay. The authors noted that most research conducted on Blacks had documented a positive relationship between religious involvement and life satisfaction and psychological well-being (Levin, Chatters & Taylor, 1995). Cutts and Parks (2009) were interested in how marginalization from one's racial or ethnic identity as a result of sexual identity might negatively impact an individual's psychological health and well-being. Their findings were mixed but the authors concluded that Black gay men that sought out gay affirmative religious congregations did so because the institutions were structured to support both their racial and sexual identities. These findings are important because they reemphasize the pressing need for the development of a fully integrated gay male identity model that integrates multiple salient identities, including spirituality.

Heaphy, (2001). In a qualitative exploration of gay identities and the culture of class, Heaphy (2011) provided evidence to support class identities as centrally important to gay ones. Heaphy noted "while the relationship between gay classed identities and social and economic positioning is not straight forward, such identities illuminate how cultural, social, and economic oppression promote distancing from working-class form is existence and strong attachments to middle-class ones and to the idea of gay class transcendence" (p. 42). In a cross-section of interviews with gay men in the United Kingdom, Heaphy (2011) delineated how class and gay identities were constructed relationally through each other and found that men's narratives of class were generally weaker than their stories related to sexual identity: class accounts were less obviously rehearsed and participants mostly perceived them to be less important to "who they were" (p. 51). In some of the narratives, men felt as if class identities were incompatible with gay identity and that working and middle-class identities have limited value in the gay community. Other men described being gay as synonymous with classlessness. One man stated

"I suppose gay tastes tend…not to be working class. Let's face it. It's the power of the pink pound" (p. 56). Further, it was noted by some men in the study that cultural capital within the gay community is related to education, qualifications, mannerisms, and tastes, all of which are strongly associated with upper-class values and mores. Men in the study associated being gay with class mobility.

Appleby, (2001). In an ethnographic study of gay and bisexual working class men in the United States, Appleby (2001) found a number of important themes among the men interviewed, including negative identity, secrecy and isolation, lack of access to relationships and social resources and dealing with change and coming out. The author concluded that social class, gender, and race and ethnic differences divide gays. All gay men do not have money, education, and employment, which are important in gay middle class consumer society. One working-class gay male described the difficulty he had in developing a positive gay identity in relation to his class roots. "What does Hollywood show us (gay male)? Raging queens [men] and super butch [women]…it was just too much, I just closed off all relationships…I denied it and defended myself" (p. 57). Some men discussed social class differences in terms of what they did not care for about their middle-class brethren. Middle-class gay men were described as the "uptown crowd" and the "smart set" (p. 60). One participant indicated "every middle-class fag wants to snag a doctor. Working-class men are more apt to experience discrimination from the middle-class queers than from the straights" (p. 60).

As a result of participant accounts of class and sexual identity development Appleby (2001) determined working-class identities are devalued and classified as "other" within the middle-class gay communities. This illuminated differentiation between class and sexual identities needs further exploration in relation to other valuative frameworks, including

spirituality. Appleby's study provided more evidence to support the integration of social factors as critical variables in the construction of gay identity.

Minority stress, including covert and overt experiences of discrimination, can also affect psychological processes that mediate identity acquisition and expression. Meyer (2003) postulated that multiple stressors including discrimination, expectations for rejection, concealment or disclosure of sexual identity, and internalized homophobia create a number of unique demands that exacerbate general stressors.

Hatzenbuehler (2009) built on Meyer's theory by isolating emotional regulation, social, and cognitive processes that result from stigma related stress and ultimately mediate positive or negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety and depressive disorders and chemical dependency. Both theorists hypothesized that stigma related stress that results in maladaptive coping strategies confers risk for psychopathology including sensitivity to anger, difficulty understanding negative affect, inappropriate expression of emotions, rumination, hopelessness, pessimism, and lower satisfaction with social support networks. These models are influential in the body of scholarly literature because they add crucial context to the conceptualization of identity development.

Each of the previously reviewed development models neglected to specifically consider the impact sexual stigma has on sexual identity development. Overt and covert experiences of discrimination, either distal or proximal, mediate psychological outcomes. Hatzenbuehler (2009) was able to take the model one step further by expounding upon the cognitive, affective, and social factors that mediate stigma related stress and therefore mediate psychological outcome. Together, these two fundamental frameworks challenged the notion that sexual identity development could be conceptualized as a solely linear, individual process that operated on an

alternate plane separated from the systems of societal discrimination and psychological risk factors.

In a study that surveyed the effects of subtle heterosexism on gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer (2005) provided a sample of 175 LGB men and women with 13 different one-sentence scenarios of heterosexuals saying or assuming things that might be offensive to gays or lesbian women. The scenarios were developed to what the authors believed were representative of what LGB people frequently encounter. The scenarios were also piloted on small groups of LGB people who agreed on the face validity of their content. A seven-point Likert-type scale was used to indicate the extent of agreement with four statements attached to each of the scenarios: (a) I would be offended; (b) I would be less likely to be open about my sexual orientation; (c) I would assume that a heterosexual who says or does this is prejudiced against gay men; (d) I would assume that a heterosexual who says or does this is prejudiced against lesbian women. The closer to the rating was to "7", the more strongly the participant agreed that she or he would be offended. In general, participants agreed that they would be offended by the scenarios. The mean (N=167) of the 13 offensiveness ratings was 5.8 (SD = 1.1). The authors' hypothesis, that LGB individuals are offended by indirect antigay harassment exhibited by heterosexuals, was supported. A summed index of likelihood of coming out ratings was created ($\alpha = .97$) and participants' ratings indicated that hearing such remarks would not affect the likelihood that they would be open about their sexual orientation (N = 164; M = 4.2; SD = 1.8). A post hoc Spearman's rho, however, revealed that perceived offensiveness was associated with a decreased likelihood of coming out (r_s (164) = .25, $p \leq .001$), which was consistent with past research that shows LGB people are less likely to come out in hostile environments.

Despite the relevance of Burn, Kadlec, and Rexer's (2005)findings, there were several methodological shortcomings. The authors lacked evidence of their measure's construct validity. Although there appeared to be a high level of face validity, as the scenarios were judged by the pilot groups to be representative of remarks made by heterosexuals, the authors lacked data on how common such scenarios were and may have left out some important ones. The authors also neglected to include assessment statements related to bisexuality, despite a number of participants indicating such an identity. It seems that this omission would affect the internal validity of the study.

The authors were some of the first to examine the impact of subtle heterosexism on the degree of stigma and stress experienced by LGB people. The finding that LGB people are less likely to come out in hostile environments is important to the proposed project because it corresponds to a central tenet of the majority of gay identity development models: coming out. This specific result provides more evidence to support the ongoing development of sexual identity models that account for the effect of stigma, oppression, and heterosexism on the developmental process of LGB individuals. Systemic pressures, specifically heterosexism, are now a proven factor in the milieu of developmental variables. More generally, the study's findings reinforce the theory that sexual minority identity development is a multilayered process that may, but probably does not, evolve in a linear fashion. Attending to sociocultural variables, that may include spirituality, appears to have merit.

Conclusion

Sexual identity development is now commonly conceived to be a dynamic process that ultimately cannot be explained linearly. Over time, theoretical models have expanded to include a variety of factors that account for a substantial percentage of the total variance of what

constitutes sexual identity. Culture, valuative frameworks, stigma-related stress, and psychological processes are now considered to be critical components of the sexual identity matrix. Counselors and other mental health professionals now have access to updated frameworks that do not prescribe all sexual minorities to follow a predetermined developmental sequence. Rather, sexual minority development is assessed within a holistic context. The proposed study operates within this emerging paradigm of sexual identity development. It seeks to expound upon the understanding of a specific cultural factor (i.e. spirituality) that may mediate identity formation and hopes to build upon the body of knowledge that has previously explored multiple layers of identity development.

The Intersection of Spirituality, Religion, and Sexual Minority Identity

Over the last 20 years, a number of research studies have been published indicating that LGB individuals, couples, and families of LGB individuals are experiencing religious identity /sexual orientation conflict (Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Boellstorff, 2005; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005) . This discord occurs when an LGB individual experiences conflict between his or her religious identity and an emerging or present sexual identity that is non-heterosexual (Festinger, 1964). The incongruence experienced between the two identities often results in having to choose between one aspect of one's identity over another, an outcome that has been demonstrated to have negative psychological consequences (Haldeman, 2002; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989).

The systemic costs of such a choice can be dire and may precipitate the loss of family, friends, religious community, and religious identity. To manage the dissonance that results from the conflict between two salient identities, many LGB individuals change religious environments, including seeking out new organizations, congregations, and religion; focus on the

development of a spiritual identity rather than a religious one; or abandon religion and spirituality altogether (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Henrickson, 2007; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Love et al., 2005; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Smith & Horne, 2007).

On the flip side of the coin, a number of gay men and lesbians have been victimized by supposed psychotherapeutic interventions that sought to reverse or repair an individual's homosexual orientation. Treatment modalities practiced by so-called conversion therapists have run the gamut, including prayer, psychoanalytic therapy, hormone treatments, and masturbatory reconditioning (Murphy, 1992). Despite the declassification of homosexuality as a mental illness, conversion therapies are rooted in the archaic assumption that homosexuality is an abhorrent, pathological condition – a premise that has been rejected by professional bodies regulating the mental health profession (American Counseling Association, 2005; American Psychological Association 2000).

It is beyond the scope of this review to comprehensively evaluate all of the literature on conversion therapies, but a special focus will be placed on religious-based conversion programs as they generally relate to the topic-at-hand – especially because the existence of these programs support the premise that a real conflict, at times, exists between religion, sexual identity, and the perception of mental health.

The following section will assess the literature that has studied the intersection of religion, spirituality, and gay identity development. This section will briefly examine the religious/sexual identity conflict literature and have a particular focus on studies that specifically addressed spirituality within their methodological frameworks and/or assessment strategies. The section will conclude with a limited review of the literature on conversion therapy.

Contextual Counseling Frameworks – Case Studies

Barret and Barzan (1996) provided an explication of the challenges facing gays and lesbians and draw from the authors' experiences exploring the spiritual lives of sexual minorities in their clinical practices. The authors noted that, in their experience, gay men and lesbians frequently mirror the spiritual trajectories for heterosexual individuals. Some of their clients had participated in traditional religious organizations, while others had sought out more individual and creative expressions of their spirituality. Several of their clients had abandoned spirituality altogether due to judgment from others in the community or unrequited pain associated with homonegative religious experiences.

Barret and Barzan (1996) suggested that a fundamental struggle for gay men and lesbians is to find ways to overcome the clash between homophobic religious organizations and personal spiritual experiences that connect them with a *Supreme Being* who offers love and acceptance. For many of the authors' clients, the struggle began in adolescence and continued into adulthood. The tension between inward feelings and religious doctrinal expectations was conceptualized as a mediator that may push gay men and lesbians to either reconcile their religious and sexual identities, develop a spiritual identity in tandem with their sexual identity, or completely reject either their religious/spiritual identity or sexual identity in favor of the other. Consequently, the authors asserted that most counselors would benefit from a theoretical model that helps them understand the difference between spiritual and religious authority because by separating these two experiences clients are better able to see that their own life events can be a source of authority.

Significantly, Barret and Barzan (1996) provided an early foundation for the idea that studying gay and lesbian spirituality requires the researcher to differentiate religion and

spirituality. The two concepts, the authors argued, must be semantically separated due to the shame and stigma experienced by many gay and lesbian individuals within their faiths of origin. Despite the lack of scientific rigor of the paper, the authors were able to provide a conceptual model for future studies focused on gay spirituality and encouraged practitioners to think differently about religious and spiritual issues facing gays and lesbians. The authors contended that rejection from traditional religious institutions could be a moment of liberation for some gay men and women and afford and opportunity to reflect on and integrate their own life experiences into a more meaningful spiritual understanding. Their idea was novel at the time and set the tone for future investigations of the topic.

Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) wrote an article that explored gender and culture within the context of spirituality and the inherent implications for counselors. The authors noted that the profession's broad focus on diversity issues and multiculturalism has propelled counselors and counselor educators to broaden their base of understanding human development. The paper pinpointed the dearth of literature exploring the intersection of gender, culture, and spirituality and argued that failure to integrate appropriate assessment and intervention strategies to address these often salient identity constructs for clients is an area for growth in the counseling profession. A large section of the paper was dedicated to discussing the reciprocal effect that gender, culture and spirituality have on one another. Spirituality was described as part of "one's cultural milieu and informs meaning, value, and direction of human issues" (p. 225). The authors noted the growing movement to acknowledge spirituality as a distinct construct similar to but separate from religion, which is evidenced in society-at-large by the increased number of writings, popular book, headlined topics of motivational speakers, new age thinking, and scholarly writings.

A number of counseling implications were discussed by Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) including the argument that globalization has resulted in the cross-over of religious and spiritual narratives into the realm of counseling and psychology. The authors cited the historical rejection of religious and spiritual concerns by a secular counseling profession, and contended that counselors can increase their cultural competency by integrating spirituality and spiritual identity development into their treatment repertoire. The authors argued that addressing the multidimensional context of identity development is essential when working with clients who do not fit within the Western, essential, linear models of development. The paramount point the authors promoted was the vital and necessary need to integrate a conceptual knowledge base in counseling theory relative to religion and spirituality. The authors successfully argued that instruction and practice in the "spiritual lives of individuals can add a holistic foundation to effective therapeutic work that can fortify other areas of a client's life history" (p. 236).

The position advocated by the Passalacqua and Cervantes (2008) supports the questions posed here in the proposal. Developing a deeper understanding of the spiritual lives of gay men can have a meaningful impact on the movement toward greater multicultural competence within the counseling and mental health professions. The current study intends to focus on a marginalized group within the scholarly literature (i.e. gay men) and expand the academic and cultural understanding of the meaning they ascribe to spirituality. This study also hopes to add to the growing conceptual knowledge base in counseling relative to spiritual identity develop in relation to, rather than separate from, sexual minority identity development.

A recent article authored by Kocet, Sanabria, and Smith (2011), provided a conceptual framework for integration of sexual identity and spiritual development for LGB individuals. Similar to prior papers reviewed, the authors asserted that spiritual identity is a critical part of

human development and that LGB individuals often find it hard to integrate their sexual identities with their spiritual beliefs due to non-affirming messages espoused by certain religious organizations. The authors explained that now, more than ever, counselors are faced with addressing spiritual and religious issues with their clients and described the growing importance of clients' needs to discover various forms of spiritual expression.

Kocet et al. (2011) advocated for the integration of sexual identity models and spiritual identity models to allow practitioners to better understand an individual's progression in both developmental domains simultaneously. Connecting with community was cited as a mode of spiritual practice within the LGB community and included community service and volunteerism as a source of "inner purpose or sense of fulfillment" (p. 168). Community was depicted as an imperative element of the LGB spiritual experience because it replaced the deep sense of family and community that is lost when the LGB individual is either excommunicated from or chooses to leave his or her faith of origin. The authors went on the employ a single case study to demonstrate a four part counseling framework when working with LGB individuals including the following objectives: 1) understand the importance of spirituality in the context of human development in general and for LGB individuals specifically; 2) explore unresolved feelings related to growing up in a homonegative religion; 3) integrate sexual and spiritual identities, and 4) connect sexual minorities to salient communities.

A number of suggestions for assisting sexual minorities on the path of spiritual development were proposed by Kocet et al. (2011). First, when integrating LGB identity with spiritual identity, counselors were advised to remain mindful that sexual and spiritual identity is an ongoing process. Second, when assisting clients with connecting to community resources, counselors were directed to think outside the box and not rely on traditional referral sources.

The authors recommend that sexual minority clients be assessed to determine what communities and leaders within those communities would be best suited to assist them in their current developmental state.

One of the major limits to the Kocet et al.'s (2011) article was the employment of a single case study to illustrate the four-part framework. Although the described framework was supported by a number of seminal articles on the topic of sexual minority spiritual identity development, the framework itself lacked sufficient description, which might inhibit its application. Additionally, the case study examined by the authors described a client who presented for reparative therapy but failed to cite any literature on the history, ethics, and negative psychological implications of the now discredited religious and psychological movement.

Despite the consistent dialogue about spirituality, religion became the focal point of the article. From the perspective of this writer, the authors, while advocating for inclusion of spirituality as a topic of assessment and discussion in the counseling office, missed an opportunity to highlight a case in which religion was not the central issue; rather, spirituality as the core topic of dialogue. Herein is more evidence to support the questions proposed by this investigation: how is spirituality integrated and practiced in the daily lives of gay men and how do gay men perceive the relationship between their sexual and spiritual identities?

Empirical Studies

Schuck and Liddle (2001) conducted a qualitative and quantitative study of 66 lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents and examined perceived conflicts between religion and sexual orientation. The survey method included five closed-ended and four open-ended questions that focused on: faith and religious attendance; perceived conflicts between faith and sexual

orientation; responses to or resolutions of any such conflicts; degree of difficulty in accepting an LGB sexual orientation; helpful resources in dealing with conflicts; and positive experiences related to faith. Of the total respondents (*N=66*), 32 were gay men, 26 were lesbian women, 7 were bisexual women, and 1 was a bisexual man. Eighty-five percent were White, 5% were Hispanic, 3% Asian American, and 3% multiracial. Three participants did not indicate their ethnicity. Respondent age ranged from 18-65 with a median of 35.

Qualitative analysis indicated that 64% (*n=66*) of respondents indicated a conflict and responded to the open-ended question. A number of themes were generated and subsequently organized into categories that included sources of conflict, cognitive and emotional consequences, and resolutions. The most common source of conflict involved religious teachings about homosexuality. The oppressive atmospheres of homonegative religious denominations also resulted in a number of "serious cognitive and emotional consequences, including the belief that respondents would go to hell or that God had rejected them" (Schuck & Liddle, 2001 p. 70). A number of respondents reported feeling 'guilt and shame about their sexual orientation and several reported severe depression, self-loathing, or suicidal ideation" (p. 70). Among respondents who perceived a conflict between their sexual orientation and religious teachings, by far the most common response was to stop attending the offending religious institution.

Although some respondents abandoned religion altogether, others found ways to maintain their connection to religion by temporarily rejecting their faith of origin only to return after nurturing the emergence of their sexual identity, finding individual congregations within their faiths of origin that were relatively gay affirmative, or by seeking out and affiliating with a gay affirmative denomination, including the Unitarian Universalists or the United Church of Christ.

Other respondents chose to remain within their faiths of origin and rejected anti-gay teachings on rational grounds.

Helpful resources were identified as friends, family members, romantic partners, therapists, clergy, books, and organizations. Positive experiences were most frequently associated with interactions with gay affirmative congregations, clergy, and religious institutions. A number of respondents described more internal experiences, saying that having had to work through the apparent conflict between religion and sexual identity led them to a more well thought out or deeper spirituality. One respondent stated "I have had to thoroughly question the foundations of my faith and belief in God. I believe I have become stronger personally and in faith for the experiences" (p. 74).

In the quantitative portion of the study, respondents were first asked about what religious denomination, if any, they most identified with in grad school, the year before coming out, and the time the survey was completed. Results indicated a shift over time from mainstream Catholic and Protestant denominations toward gay affirmative denominations or non-belief. To examine the relationship between religion and conflict, the research team performed a chi-square analysis examining religion the year before coming out and whether the respondent perceived "a conflict between your emerging sexual orientation and your religion at the time (yes or no)" (p. 75). The test revealed a significant relationships, x^2 $(7, N=63) = 14.52$, $p \leq .005$. Catholics and Protestants were very likely to perceive a conflict, whereas atheists, agnostics, and Jews were relatively unlikely to. To examine the relationship between the presence of religious conflict and difficulty accepting an LGB identity, a one-way ANOVA was run, with religious conflict (yes or no) as the independent variable and difficulty accepting an LGB identity as the dependent variable. The mean difficulty rating for those who reported religious conflict was 4.4 compared

with 3.3 among those without religious conflict. The difference was determined to be statistically significant, F (1, 64) = 4.50, $p \leq .05$.

The study's results are limited in terms of generalizing its findings to a broader population, noting the sample size and omission of the effect size and subsequent statistical power of the findings. Although the investigation found that nearly two-thirds of the respondents reported that at the time they were coming out they perceived conflict between their religion and emerging sexual identity, the relationship between the two is tepid at best, accounting for the relatively small variance in difficulty ratings (r^2 = .07). The qualitative data was substantially more informative and certainly provided context for the shaky quantitative results, particularly the finding that many LGB respondents experienced conflict between their faith of origin and their burgeoning sexual identity. What was missing from this study was a deeper exploration of how respondents differentiated between religion and spirituality, particularly for the large number of respondents who reported leaving religion altogether.

The vast majority of studies reviewed here have consistently found that LGB individuals experience a conflict between religious doctrine and institutions and their sexual identity. A sizeable number of those individuals remained under the umbrella of organized religion but those who leave organized religion, thus far, have been omitted from scholarly inquiry. Remaining mindful of the plethora of evidence demonstrating the psychological and cultural values of spirituality in the lives of LGB individuals, it is surprising that there has yet to be a study on spiritual identity development beyond the confines of religiosity. The current proposal seeks to remedy the overall lack of scholarly interest in a topic that is vital to developing culturally nuanced understanding of the juxtaposition of spiritual and sexual identity development.

A study conducted by Sherry, Adelman, Whilde, and Quick (2010) investigated how LGB individuals negotiate the intersection of spiritual and sexual identities. The authors conceptualized identity development within the context of postmodern constructivism, which provided a theoretical foundation for defining identity as non-essential and socially constructed. They hypothesized that spiritual and sexual identities were in conflict with one another, a result of homonegative religious culture that inevitably disenfranchised LGB constituents. The study cited survey research that indicated most LGB individuals place an importance on both their spiritual and sexual identities (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), but that 69% of gay male participants said they had turned away from organized religion, choosing instead to accept their sexual identity (Wagner, et al., 1994). The investigation employed a mixed methodology and blended both quantitative and qualitative methods.

A total of 373 respondents completed the quantitative measures and 422 respondents completed the qualitative questions. From a statistical perspective the researchers were interested in the extent to which religious variables predicted internalized outcomes for LGB participants. The investigators employed two instruments to measure covariants. The Religious Emphasis Scale (Altemeyer, 1988) is a 10-item measure intended to measure the extent to which one's parent emphasized the family religion as one was growing up. The internal consistency coefficient alpha estimate for the sample was .94. The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison, 1983) asked people to rate on 6-point scale both their religious and existential well-being. The internal consistency alpha coefficient estimate for the sample was .94.

Demographically, a total of 29.3% (N = 312) of respondents said they converted from a non-affirming or affirming religion, 14.5% said their beliefs were already affirming, 10.5% said they rejected God/religion, and 12.4% said they continued their beliefs but felt shame/guilt.

Nearly 20% of participants stated concepts of God/religion were dealt with before coming out, 20% were always comfortable, and 10% said they still struggled although they were out.

A correlation analysis was conducted using the religion variables, including the two previously cited measures, and a single-item measure of whether the participants' childhood religion was rated as conservative or liberal on a 7-point scale as predictors of the internalizing outcome variables (shame, guilt, internalized homophobia). Collectively, the study found that the full model across all functions was statistically significant $F(15, 839.61) = 2.84$, $p \leq .001$, yielding an effect size of .128. Quantitative results indicated that the more one experienced religious doubts as positive, viewed the church in which they were raised as liberal minded, and the less ready they were to face existential questions, the less shame and internalized homophobia those participants experienced. The finding, while interesting, only accounted for 12.8% of the variance; despite its statistical significance, the clinical application is tentative at best.

The data analysis procedure resulted in the development of seven categories, including two that are pertinent to the study at hand. Sherry et al. (2010), described the first category as "sexuality issues made me question my religious beliefs" (p. 115), which was indicated by 170 responses, and suggested that sexual identity was the catalyst for questioning, and subsequently shifting religious beliefs. The second category, "spiritual but not religious" (p. 115) contained 75 responses that talked about being spiritual rather than religious and discussed God as a loving and accepting being.

Notably, this study indicated that a substantial number of LGB individuals identify themselves as spiritual and not religious. It also supported the idea that the mediation of the

dissonance experienced at the confluence of homonegative religious doctrine and an emerging sexual identity was a catalyst for identifying as spiritual and not religious.

There were a number of limitations of this investigation, which will certainly inform the methodology proposed for the current study. First, the survey relied on one question rather than several and did not allow for extrapolation on the part of the respondents or follow-up on the part of the interviewer. Additionally, the sample was mostly White, Euro-American and was limited to people with internet access. The dual finding that many of the respondents either leave their faiths of origin for more affirming organizations or replace their religious identity with a spiritual one affords more evidence to support the research proposal here. The LGB experience within queer affirmative religious groups is well documented in academic writings, yet, there are few studies that exclusively explore spiritual identity development beyond the domain of religion.

A number of researchers explored the experiences of 7 lesbian and 5 gay male college students in the area of spirituality (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). Research participants shared the challenges they faced while developing a spiritual identity and how spiritual identity development related to their sexual identity. Employing a constructivist approach to qualitative inquiry, the authors produced descriptive analyses of spiritual and sexual identity interaction among the participants, including a working definition of spirituality as “a drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence and involves one’s self-awareness and the desire to connect with others” (p. 197).

Love, et al. (2005) argued that counselors intentionally define spirituality as separate from religion because many LGB individuals have experienced pain and loss in relation to religious organizations. The credibility of the project was enhanced through what they described as prolonged engagement, including five months spent recruiting participants and collecting data,

18 months in data analysis, and two years from initial review to the final analytical report, peer debriefing, and member checks. Trustworthiness was established though the process of data analysis and construction of an audit trail of transcribed interviews, analytic memos, emergent themes, and findings. One of the major findings of the investigation was the difficulty participants had differentiating between religion and spirituality, despite the pains researchers took to distinguish the two. What eventually materialized was "a description of gay and lesbian students' sense of spirituality emerged or stalled from their experiences, or lack thereof, with organized religion" (p. 198).

A number of categories were determined to best describe the experiences of the participants, including reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity. Each of the participants were assessed by the research team to have a substantial degree of identity development, an evaluation based on Levine and Evans (1991) synthesis of gay identity development models, including having exited from a previous heterosexual identity, established a personal lesbian or gay identity status, developed a lesbian or gay social identity, and all described themselves as committed to working on issues of social just related to sexual orientation.

Some of the findings that particularly have a relationship to the current research proposal are rooted in the findings on reconciliation. One participant noted that "Achieving self-acceptance was the most important accomplishment in his coming out process and was essential to his success and spiritual growth" (p. 199). Other participants reported drawing strength from the spiritual aspects of their lives, particularly related to facing the challenges of oppression and discrimination. One participant indicated, "a lot of times, my spirituality is the only thing I have; it is my source of strength" (p. 199). In terms of the interaction between spiritual identity and

sexual identity, most of the participants acknowledged a conscious interaction between who they were as a sexual being and who they were as a spiritual being, with one participant disclosing "my spirituality and my sexuality are both very important parts of my life and there are a lot of lines that they cross together" (p. 199). Despite most participants using spirituality and religion interchangeably in conversation, they also expressed an intellectual and practiced distinction between religion and spirituality, with one contributor stating, "Spirituality is almost an inner peace with yourself…a general belief in a force that is stronger than you. Religion tells you that this is what it is and you just blindly accept what people say" (p. 200).

Of most relevance were the researchers' extrapolations that identity development, especially within the context of spirituality and sexuality, is a fluid, non-linear process and is influenced by multiple levels of ecological environments in which gay and lesbian individuals exist. This important assertion powerfully influenced the theoretical foundation of the proposed study. The author will work from the philosophical premise that spiritual and sexual identity development are not necessarily exclusive, linear processes; that in fact, the two identities can be parallel processes for the individual. Love et al. (2005) also found that participants who had a religious foundation as children were more likely to have develop an integrated spiritual and sexual identity. At some point, a differentiation process occurred that eventually separated religion from spirituality.

This finding is important because part of what makes the proposed study unique is its sole focus on spiritual identity development outside the domain of traditional religious organizations; yet, the identification of a potential participant's religious history will be employed as a method for differentiating religious and spiritual identity development. In other words, eliminating religion from the methodological vernacular would be a disservice to the

participant because religion may likely be the underpinning of his spiritual identity. For this proposal, appropriate language will be included in the selection criteria, informed consent, and subsequent interviews that presents potential participants with a series of definitions of spirituality that include religious foundations.

In one of the first studies to investigate the meanings ascribed to the terms religion and spirituality by LGBT individuals, Halkitis et al. (2009) employed a mixed methodology and collected data via a cross-sectional survey consisting of open and closed-ended questions among 498 LGBT individuals attending an annual gay pride event in a large northeastern city. A number of measures were included in the quantitative analysis including stand-alone questions regarding socio-demographics, religious affiliation, salience of religiosity and spirituality, non-organizational religious involvement, and organizational religious involvement. Of the 498 participants, 80.3% (n = 400) identified as gay or lesbian while the remaining 19.7% (n = 98) identified as bisexual. Ninety-eight percent of respondents identified as either male or female with only 2% indicating a transgender identity. Participants ranged in age from 18-73 (M = 37, SD = 11.22). The women in the sample were significantly younger than the men (F (2,841) = 14.17, $p \leq .001$). The majority of participants, 75.7% (n = 372) were raised as Christian, approximately 10% (n = 49) were raised as Jewish, and 9% (n = 43) identified as Atheist/Agnostic. The remaining respondents were raised in an Eastern religion (2.4%, n = 12) or failed to provide the data (4.4%, n = 22). The mean scores on the indexes of subjective religiosity and subjective spirituality were 2.45 (SD = 1.21) and 3.41 (SD = 1.28) respectively. These scores indicated that participants considered themselves to be significantly more spiritual than religious (t (481) = 16.27, $p \leq .001$). A series of repeated measures analyses indicated that this pattern emerged regardless of sexual orientation, gender or race/ethnicity.

In addition, the researchers sought to assess the salience of religion and spirituality in the lives of the participants. Again, respondents indicated that spirituality was more important in their lives than religion (t (486) = 15.75, $p \leq .001$). Specifically, the mean level of importance assigned by participants to religion was 2.53 (SD = 1.32) and the mean level of importance assigned to spirituality was 3.50 (SD = 1.34). There was no interactive effect of this pattern across race/ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. Importantly, particularly in the context of the proposed study, the study found that only 24.5% (n = 122) reported that they currently hold a membership in a religious institution such as a church, synagogue, or mosque. Non-membership in a religious organization was unrelated to educational level, race/ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

Nine qualitative themes were extrapolated from 428 responses to the question "What does spirituality mean to you?" (p. 256) and included: 1) belief in, knowledge of, or relationship with a higher power; 2) understanding self, accepting self, being in touch with self; 3) prosocial orientation, positive emotions and attitudes; 4) interconnectedness between self, others, nature, and the universe; 5) belief in soul, spirit, transcendent dimension of life; 6) meaning , purpose, and understanding; 7) specific practices, contexts and experiences; 8) nothing, cannot explain, or did not know; 9) coping and resilience. Eleven themes emerged from the 421 written responses that provided definitions of the word religion and included 1) organized way of practice and group worship; 2) belief in, knowledge of, relationship with a higher power; 3) political, social, or economic institution; 4) negative or destructive force; 5) manifesting goodness in the world; 6) meaning, purpose, understanding; 7) nothing, cannot explain or did not know; 8) understanding self, accepting self, being in touch with self; 9) interconnectedness between self,

other, nature, or the universe; 10) belief in soul, spirit, or transcendent dimension of life; and 11) other.

The study made a number of contributions to the scholarly literature. The survey method employed was the first of its kind to access a relatively large sample of LGBT respondents, which aided its overall credibility. A key result of the investigation was the finding that a substantial number of LGBT individuals surveyed considered themselves to be more spiritual than religious and that spirituality was more important in their lives than religion. The data also suggested that despite three-quarters of respondents having been raised in religious households, only 24.5% reported that they currently hold a membership in a religious institution. The low-level of membership may owe to a number of factors including generally lower levels of religious participation among urban-residing adults or may be a deliberate decision of respondents to distance themselves from organized religion. The uncertainty related to lower levels of religious involvement among survey respondents highlights one of the major limitations of the investigation.

While the number of survey respondents was fairly robust for a quantitative analysis, the sample was relatively homogenous with regard to ethnicity and religious identification. Although gender did not have an interactive effect with the mean level of importance assigned to spirituality, the study did not qualitatively differentiate responses by gender to the question "what does spirituality mean to me," which may have provided critical developmental context for the design of future follow-up studies. As part of their discussion, the authors cited Marler and Hadaway (2002) who posited that expressions of religious commitment must be considered in tandem with indicators of spiritual commitment because individuals cannot generally be characterized as exclusively religious or spiritual. The authors' reassertion of Marler and

Hadaway's (2002) theoretical supposition in their discussion of the results appears to be in stark contrast to their findings. Respondents clearly differentiated between religion and spirituality in their answers to the open-ended qualitative questions. The quantitative measures indicated both a statistically and practically significant difference between the degree of importance religion and spirituality played in their lives – spirituality clearly had the upper-hand.

In a quantitative investigation that assessed affirmative faith experiences and psychological health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) compared two models of the relations between psychological health and current faith affirmation experiences, internalized homonegativity, and spirituality. Participants included 583 LGB individuals who identified themselves as currently affiliated with a faith group. The authors cited a number of studies that suggest LGB individuals sometimes experience internal conflict between their religious faith and sexual orientation – conflicts that are associated with increased shame, depression, suicidal ideation, and difficulty accepting an LGB identity (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Consequently, the researchers argue, LGB affirming faiths have evolved, either by altering tradition faith doctrine to be inclusive or creating entirely new faiths specifically serving LGB communities (e.g., Metropolitan Community Church).

Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier (2005) acknowledged the considerable debate surrounding the definitions of religion and spirituality but cited an emerging body of literature that has documented a reformulation of spirituality among LGB people (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002) reflecting numerous spiritual pathways including integration of traditional religious practices or a new order of spirituality altogether. One of the philosophical underpinnings of the Lease, Horne, and Noffsinger-Frazier's (2005) supposition is that spirituality can be seen as a separate construct from religion and that developing a sense of spirituality apart from more

formalized religious experiences may mediate the effect of negative religious experiences on the psychological health of LGB individuals. Given the distinction that had developed between organized religion and spirituality, the investigators felt it necessary to consider the separate constructs as they related to psychological health. This study was the first to examine the role of affirming faith group experiences on the mental health of LGB members, rather than focus on the previously studied conflicts LGB individuals experience between sexual and religious/spiritual identity. The study was designed to test partially and fully mediated models of the relationships among current faith affirmation, internalized homonegativity, spirituality, and psychological health.

A number of measures were employed to assess the interrelationship between the four variables. Affirming faith group experiences were evaluated through a series of 18 items regarding feelings of affirmation, support, and acceptance by a participant's religious group and behavioral manifestations of the religious organizations' attitudes toward homosexuality. A subscale of the Homosexuality Attitudes Inventory (Shidlo, 1994; $\alpha = .83$) was used to assess internalized homonegativity. Spirituality was measured with three instruments including the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (Plante & Boccaccini, 1997; $\alpha = .95$) the Spiritual Involvement and Beliefs Scale (Hatch, Burg, Naberhaus, & Hellmich, 1998; $\alpha = .75$) and the Intrinsic/Extrinsic – Revised Scale (Gorsuch & McPherson, 1989; $\alpha = .77$). Psychological health was measured by the Psychological Well-Being Scale (Ryff, 1989; $\alpha = .96$), the Satisfaction With Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; $\alpha = .84$), and the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Radloff, 1977; $\alpha = .92$). Fit statistics for the model indicated that the data fit the model adequately (RMSEA = .046, GFI = .96, standardized RMR = .09), $x^2(44, n = 583) = 98.19$, $\rho \leq .05$. In the final model, standardized

values of factor loadings ranged from -.57 to 1.00, and all the *t* tests of factor loadings were significant.

Examination of the squared multiple correlations (R^2) reported for each observed variable indicated that the measures were moderately strong to very strong indicators of the latent variables (ranging from .33 - 1.00). The partially and fully mediated models testing the relationship of current affirming faith group experiences and psychological health did not differ significantly and the fully mediated model was chosen to be the more "parsimonious" of the two (p. 384). The fully mediated model indicated that the presence of current affirming faith group experiences was indirectly related to psychological health in tandem to lower assessments of internalized homonegativity and higher scores on the spirituality construct. Analogous to previous studies (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Nicholson & Long, 1990; Ross & Rosser, 1996), the investigation indicated a strong negative relationship of internalized homonegativity to psychological health. The study provided the novel finding, in relation to the population being studied, which indicated that spirituality was associated with psychological health and that membership in a faith group and spirituality were not perfectly correlated. This discovery supported the authors' hypothesis that spirituality is a significant factor in greater psychological health among White, LGB individuals.

The primary limitation of this study was the restricted selection criteria that only included those who had remained active in their faith groups, which resulted in a sample that had largely positive experiences with their current faith groups, omitting those LGB individuals who had abandoned religion all together. Future quantitative studies may study the relationship among additional variables, including level of education, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, and residential location.

Conversion Therapies

The theory and practice of conversion therapy was formed at the intersection of counseling, psychology, gay rights, religion, and public policy. Since Freud's conceptualization of homosexuality as a form of arrested development, other modalities have followed suit in their understanding of same-sex attraction as a mental disorder that begs to be cured (Haldeman, 2002; Nicolosi, 1991). Seeming treatment interventions have devolved as the paradigms of psychology supposedly evolved. Aversive behavioral techniques included electric shock to the hands and genitals, nausea-inducing drugs, masturbatory reconditioning, and social skills training (Murphy, 1992). A number of academics have reviewed the literature on conversion therapies (Haldeman, 1991, 2002; Murphy, 1992), with a specific focus on treatment modalities and outcomes.

In a particularly relevant review of the literature, Whitman, Glosoff, Kocet, and Tarvydas (2006) found that the majority of the studies on the topic had been expository in nature and that there was no credible empirical data to support the efficacy of treatment modalities that seek to change an individual's same sex attraction. In fact, in a paper detailing 20 years of clinical experience working with gay men who had participated in conversion therapy, Haldeman (2002) found that his clients consistently exhibited signs of chronic depression, low self-esteem, difficulty sustaining relationships, and sexual dysfunction. Consequently, every major mental health organization regulating the ethics of the profession, including the American Counseling Association, has strongly discouraged practitioners from employing conversion therapies (ACA, 2005; APA, 2000).

Noting that peer-reviewed studies on the psychological and behavioral outcomes of conversion therapies have been discredited on both ethical and methodological grounds

(Whitman et al., 2013), there is no imperative to review what we know are debunked findings here. Yet one study in particular is reflective of the scientific façade conversion therapy has hidden behind and the subsequent lifting of the veil.

In a seminal study published in the Archives of Sexual Behavior, Spitzer (2003) hypothesized that some version of reparative therapy would enable individuals to change their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual. The author explored how individuals who had undergone reparative therapy described changes in their sexual orientation. The central question was methodologically problematic because its qualitative nature prohibited a generalization of the findings. The author offered a number of unconvincing explanations in support of the study's credibility but his assertion that the reader could reasonably trust the participants' self-reports and not confuse the results as self-deception or outright lying was an assault on the scientific method at best, deception at worst. In a recent letter to the editor of the journal that published this infamous study, Spitzer (2012) admitted the study had a fatal flaw: there was absolutely no way to judge the credibility of subject reports of change in sexual orientation. He went on to apologize to the gay community for "making unproven claims of the efficacy of reparative therapy" and for the wasted time and energy invested by gay men and women undergoing some form of conversion therapy (p.757).

Conclusion

The reviewed studies have made a number of contributions to the understanding of the intersection of religion, spirituality, and sexual minority identity development. Spirituality has been described as a multidimensional concept that overlaps substantially with religion for some individuals, whereas there may be very little overlap for others. What's missing from the literature is an in-depth investigation of how a specific subgroup within the LGBT community

(i.e. gay men) develop spiritual identities over time. More knowledge can be gleaned related to how gay men transition from a primary religious identity to one that is mainly spiritual. Not much is known about the psychic and behavioral practices of gay spirituality and its significance in everyday life. Applying qualitative methods to explore the meaning and manifestation of spirituality in the lives of LGB individuals may be the first step in developing culturally sensitive quantitative measures that more accurately assess the mediating effect of spirituality on psychological health and well-being – a central philosophical tenet of the planned investigation.

Conclusion

The topics of religion and spirituality have a long history in the annals of counseling and psychotherapy (Eliason, Hanley & Leventis, 2001). From Freud's conception of religion as mass neurosis to Wilber's 4-quadrant model of clinical integration, the subjective and objective effects of religion and spirituality have been argued, proven, and sometimes discredited by scientists and theoreticians alike.

The chapter began with a review of scholarly works that described the theoretical and clinical integration of religion, spirituality and the therapeutic process. A particular emphasis was placed on clinical applications that addressed spirituality as a distinct concept separate from religion. Seminal models of gay identity development were examined and compared. Identity models that accounted for ecological and systemic factors as potential mediators on the developmental process have set the theoretical and conceptual foundation for this project. As such, the proposed study will operate from the framework that identity is not static and that the construction, experience, and practice of spirituality is a critical factor that mediates gay identity development and any subsequent psychological outcomes.

Stigma, oppression, and violence resulting from heterosexism and homonegativity have been demonstrated as decisive variables in the construction of a gay identity, resulting in myriad of emotional, psychological, and social challenges (Paul & Frieden, 2008). Traditional Judeo-Christian religious institutions have been established as primary perpetrators of macro and micro level invalidations against the LGBT community (Lease et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001) Conversion therapies, most of which were developed and marketed by evangelical Christian organizations, are the most striking examples of institutionalized homophobia perpetrated by the church (Whitman, Glosoff, Kocet, and Tarvydas, 2013). As a result, a substantial number of gay people have chosen to leave their faiths of origin for queer affirmative religious organizations or to develop spiritual identities beyond the oppressive scope of a faith affiliation (Halkitis et al., 2009; Lease et al., 2005; Love et al., 2005; Sherry et al., 2010).

As was noted throughout the chapter, the scholarly literature, thus far, has lacked a substantive examination of spirituality outside the domain of religion. Noting the large number of gay men who abandon their faiths of origin, the proposed study may be particularly relevant in assisting counselors and other mental health practitioners to develop a context for discussing spiritual issues related to sexual orientation in clinical encounters and the classroom. The proposed study intends to contribute to a growing professional movement that advocates for the ongoing clinical integration of spirituality as vital factor in the assessment and practice of counseling. The paramount goal of the investigation is to describe a subsection of gay men who have forged a spiritual identity despite the negative message received regarding sexual orientation within their faiths of origin – institutions that may have correlated spirituality with religious doctrine and practices that dehumanized gay people.

Chapter 3: Methods

Chapter two depicted a dearth of scholarly literature exploring the context of spirituality in the lives of gay men, particularly those who have abandoned their religions of origin or practice outside institutional places of worship. Little is known about the ways in which gay men conceptualize or practice spirituality in their everyday lives and how spiritual practice is integrated within other cultural frameworks, including sexual identity. The purpose of this basic qualitative inquiry was to investigate the process by which gay men constructed spiritual identities outside the domain of institutionalized religion. Key goals of the study included an assessment of how gay men test spiritual beliefs and rituals that have been handed down, keep what is helpful, change what is not, and experiment with ways of being that develop into healthy spiritual identities.

Methodology

The qualitative method includes research about lived experiences, cultural and social phenomena, and dialectical interaction (Denzin, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggested that, with many diverse approaches to doing qualitative research, the term itself can be confusing because it has different meanings for different people. Phenomenology and grounded theory, the two methodological frameworks driving this basic qualitative study, share similar philosophical understandings of the nature and limitations of knowledge, including the idea that there can be numerous explanations of reality and that the researcher must assume responsibility for his or her interpretive role as social being involved in a social process (Wuest, 1995). A description of the essence of the phenomenon under investigation herein was ultimately co-created by the researcher, participant, and eventually, the reader, through the process of language and community practices (Gergen, 1985). In other

words, no singular truth emerged from this study; rather, readers are presented with a framework for interpreting the phenomenon through their own social locations.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) offered five reasons for doing qualitative research: (1) the conviction of the researcher based on research experience, (2) the nature of the research problem, (3) to uncover and understand what lies behind any phenomenon about which little is yet known, (4) to gain novel and fresh slants on things about which quite a bit is already known; and (5) to give intricate details of phenomena that are difficult to convey with quantitative methods. The researcher was committed to the research questions because of his personal and clinical experience that elucidated a dearth of knowledge on the topic of gay spirituality – a phenomenon that would be difficult to describe quantitatively because little is yet known on the subject.

The research problem and subsequent questions were geared for qualitative inquiry because they sought to *explore* the meaning gay men attributed to spirituality and further understand the confluence of spirituality and sexuality in the lives of gay men. A quantitative method would be indicated for research questions that sought to *establish* an association or the cause and effect relationship between multiple variables rather than explore the lived experience of a group of participants (Creswell, 2007). In this study, variables were not easily identified and there were no relevant theories to explain the phenomenon of gay spirituality outside the limited confines of religion.

This project began with broad, general questions to ascertain a holistic, comprehensive understanding of spirituality in lives of gay men. The researcher was interested in the quality of experiences, rather than numeric summaries, that crystallized gay men's knowledge, perceptions, feelings, actions, behaviors, activities, and interpersonal interactions related to spirituality. Qualitative studies are suggested for research that is descriptive and emphasizes the importance

of context (Merriam, 2009). For these reasons, a qualitative method is probably the best approach to investigating the research problem.

Research Questions

A number of questions framed the conceptualization of this project:

1. How do gay men describe and practice spirituality and what role does it play in their everyday lives?
2. What beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc. influenced their spiritual development?
3. What is the process for integrating beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc., into their spiritual understanding? What is the process for omission?
4. How do their spiritual understanding and practice(s) impact how they view their sexual and affective orientations? How is spirituality integrated with other cultural identities?

Design

A qualitative design, combining the best practices of both phenomenological, in-depth interviewing proposed by Seidman (1996), and grounded theory data analysis described most thoroughly by Strauss and Corbin (1990; 1998) was chosen for this study. One of the major challenges of a basic qualitative research project is the establishment of consistency between the varying tenets and procedures borrowed from different schools of qualitative methodology (Althof, 2011). Varying modes of qualitative research inherently have common qualities. Basic qualitative research values the wholeness of human experience, searches for meaning attributed to experience, generates first-person descriptions of the essence of phenomena, and finds merit in questions and problems that reflect the interest and personal commitment of the investigator (Moustakas, 1994).

Merriam (2009) described a qualitative research project as one that subscribes to a certain epistemology; generally, basic qualitative designs are founded and the philosophical premise that individuals construct reality in concert with their social worlds. Basic qualitative researchers are curious about (1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). An argument can be made that all qualitative inquiries share these characteristics but specific qualitative methods, including phenomenology and grounded theory have additional dimensions, as described in the following paragraphs.

Both the phenomenological and grounded theory models reduce participant narratives to essential categories, themes, or patterns as the principal mode of data analysis (Patton, 2002). One source of conflict between the two methods is that pure phenomenological research tends to omit outliers in the data set because they do not reflect the essence of the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). On the other hand, the grounded theory approach integrates all data uncovered during the course of data collection (Charmaz, 2010). Despite a small degree of incompatibility between the two methods, they are more similar in data collection and analysis strategies than not, which reinforces the choice to combine select methods from each methodological discipline.

Sampling Protocol

Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in-depth on a relatively small sample that is purposefully chosen (Patton, 1990). For this study a purposeful selection criteria was picked to identify participants who could answer the research questions in a meaningful and detailed way and included a group of nine men who self-identified as gay, described themselves as spiritual, were over the age of 18, grew up in a faith tradition but did not currently attend or belong as a

member, and were able to provide detailed information about their experience. The paramount point of purposeful sampling was to identify participants that could provide information-rich descriptions of the questions under study; in this case, gay men who could describe, in detail, their spirituality and its significance in their lives (Patton, 1990).

There are a number of theoretically supported criteria for the number of participants to include in qualitative studies, including sufficiency (i.e., is there a sufficient number of participants to mirror the range of diversity and cultural environments that make up the population from which the sample was drawn?) and saturation – a point in the study where no new information is coming in (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Seidman (2006) argued that determining a number of participants for a study is an "interactive reflection of every step of the interview process and different for each study" (p. 55). Limited access to resources and an incentive to complete the project in a relatively succinct amount of time precluded an adherence to either construct of sufficiency or saturation. The predetermined number of men to be interviewed was ten, with nine ultimately participating in the study. The most important point was to maintain homogeneity of the sample. The purpose of a homogenous sample was to describe a subgroup in depth; for this study, the sampling protocol was intended to bring together a specific group of gay men who could construct a shared description of spiritual identity development.

The principal of homogeneity was the paramount rationale for limiting the study sample to gay men. There is also a theoretical argument that calls for differentiating the experiences and identities of LGBT people. Fassinger and Arseneau (2011) supposed that, although LGBT people may face similar challenges related to cultural oppression as a result of their sexual and gender minority status, there are particular facets of experiences that separate the four groups in

important ways, “shaping and group-specific trajectories for the development and enactment of identity” (p. 19). Despite contextual similarities, Fassinger and Arseneu (2011) advocated for the assessment of within group differences between LGBT individuals, including the expansion of research methods that give a voice to the effects of gender orientation, sexual orientation, and cultural orientation on the respective members of the LGBT consortium.

Participants who met the selection criteria were identified through a purposeful sampling procedure that relied heavily on the researcher’s contacts through an academic listserv. The listserv members were asked to forward the request for research participants to students and colleagues. Over 20 men responded to the query. In the end, nine participants fit the criteria for selection and were also able to commit to the lengthy interview procedure.

Once a potential participant was identified, the researcher attempted to schedule a contact phone call to determine appropriateness for the study. The contact phone call served a number of purposes including to: (1) provide a general description of the study by the researcher; (2) appraise the potential participant’s interest in and willingness to participate in the study; (3) assess the degree to which the potential participant meets the selection criteria by asking the questions (a) “how will I know that you are spiritual?” and (b) “what will I see that makes you different from a purely religious person?”; (4) review the informed consent protocol; (5) gather demographic information via a participant information form, and (6) determine times, places, and dates of future interview. The participant information form included the following assessment parameters:

1. Participant contact information including full name, address, telephone numbers, email address, the best time to be in touch, and level of discretion the researcher must use when making contact.

2. Demographic information including prior and current religious affiliation(s), subjective description of current spiritual identity (e.g., how do you define spirituality and what makes you spiritual?), sexual orientation, age, race, ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, level of education, and current place of employment.
3. Time availability including days and times generally best suited for an uninterrupted 90-minute interview.

Data Collection

Philosophical phenomenology was initially described as early as 1765 (Moustakas, 1994). A number of philosophers, including Kant, wrote on the topic but it was Hegel (1976) who specified the basic tenet of phenomenology as "describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experience" (Kockelmans, 1967, p. 24). Husserl (1931, 1970) later developed the central concept of Epoche – the suspension of suppositions and judgment on the part of the investigator in order to bring light to the subjective consciousness of the research participants. In the Epoche, the investigator will attempt to bracket his prejudgments, biases, and preconceived notions regarding the research topic and move toward seeing things as they really appear (Moustakas, 1994).

In an effort to be transparent, this researcher is aware of a number of biases that may confound the Epoche, including the expectation that: a) a significant number of gay men are psychologically traumatized by religion; b) gay men seek out spiritual outlets and experiences that permit them to connect with a higher power and simultaneously develop a healthy, integrated sexual and spiritual identity; and c) participants will be ambivalent about institutionalized religion. Through the process of reflexive memo writing, the researcher

attempted to remain vigilant as to how his predispositions on this subject moderated the accurate reporting of the research findings.

In-Depth, Phenomenologically Based Interviewing

An in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviewing protocol first described by Seidman (2006) guided the data collection process. In-depth, phenomenological interviewing combines life-history and focused interviewing strategies informed by assumptions embedded in classic phenomenological methodology. The IPI approach uses primarily open-ended questions designed to draw out participant responses for the researcher to explore and build upon. The fundamental goal of this strategy is to have the participant reconstruct his experience with spirituality. An essential feature of the IPI approach is the application of a three interview protocol, which was described by Seidman (2006) as a tactic to increase a study's credibility and trustworthiness. Each interview can be up to 90 minutes in length and should be spaced from three days to one week apart, depending on the schedules of researcher and participant.

The first interview was intended to establish the context of the participant's experience and is a focused life history. Participants were asked to tell the researcher about their life up until the time they began to transition from their faith tradition to a spiritual orientation. Participants were asked to reconstruct their childhoods, particularly important relationships and memorable encounters in various life arenas. A special emphasis was placed on questions regarding experiences within their faith of origin and the coming out process. Questions for the first interview included:

1. Tell me about important childhood experiences. You might think about your family, friendships, school activities, your neighborhood, or anything else that comes to mind.
2. Please describe your early religious and/or spiritual experiences.

3. Tell me your "coming out" story.

In essence, the first set of questions sought to identify the participant's familial origins, coming out process, and early religious beliefs and experiences.

The second interview was designed to allow participants to reconstruct the here-and-now details of their experience with spirituality (Seidman, 2006). The goal was not to ask for opinions but rather the specifics of their present lived experience. Participants in this study were asked to comprehensively describe their spiritual lives. The researcher asked for explicit stories about their experiences as a method for describing meaningful details. The set of questions in this interview explored intrinsic spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and practices and included:

1. How do you describe spirituality?
2. What role does spirituality play in your life?
3. How do you practice spirituality?
4. Please describe the rituals and customs of your spiritual practice.
5. Please describe the impact your spirituality has on your sexual identity. What about other relationships you have (i.e. family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances)?

The third and final interview was intended to promote participant reflection on the meaning their experience held for them (Seidman, 2006). Meaning was not defined in terms of satisfaction or reward but rather in the sense of emotional and intellectual connections between the participants' up-to-date experience and where they are heading. Questions in this set were future-oriented and included:

1. What does your spirituality say about you as a person? As a gay man?
2. How do you see your spirituality developing in the next year; five years; ten years?

3. How do you think your spirituality will impact your relationships and community in the coming years?
4. What have we not talked about that is important for the reader to know regarding your story?

Overall, the majority of the interviews were conducted over the computer application *Skype*, which allowed the researcher to interview research participants from many regions across of the United States. Three of the men were interviewed in their homes in San Francisco, CA. As described earlier potential participants were initially contacted by phone. After determining their appropriateness for the study and consenting to participant, each were scheduled for the first interview. All of the interviews were recorded with a digital hand recorder that captured participant narratives and the researcher's questions and responses. At the conclusion of the first interview, the second one was scheduled. If a third interview was necessary it was planned after the second one was completed.

Each digitally recorded interview was shared with a transcriptionist through the password protected file sharing platform *Dropbox*. The interviews were consistently transcribed within a week and resaved to the shared file. The researcher then reviewed each transcription for accuracy and went on to begin the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

In grounded theory data analysis, the researcher starts by reviewing the interview transcripts and then begins the process of open coding, defined by Strauss and Corbin (1998) as the part of analysis in which "data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences" (p. 102). During the open coding process, the transcripts were reviewed to discover critical events, experiences, and actions/interactions that

were then compared with one another to identify similarities and differences. Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined the procedure of making comparisons and asking questions of the data as the constant comparative method. Phenomena that are perceptibly similar were given conceptual labels that become the basis for the development of categories and sub-categories.

Categories are groups of concepts that appear to relate to the same phenomenon but Strauss and Corbin (1998) point out that any apparent relationships between phenomena are provisional until supported over and over again by subsequent analytic procedures. Categories were described in terms of their properties (i.e. characteristic or attributes) and dimensions (i.e. location of the characteristics along a continuum) which formed the basis for making relationships between categories and subcategories.

After moving through the transcripts and initially forming categories, the process of axial coding began. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined axial coding as "the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding, relating categories to their subcategories and testing their relationships against the data" (p. 124). A coding paradigm was employed that sought to identify conditions, contexts, strategies, and consequences regarding a phenomenon, which subsequently assisted the researcher to posit hypothetical relationships between categories. The selective coding procedure was not employed in this study. The data analysis protocol generated mainly descriptive results that did not render themselves to identifying a core analytic category.

Trustworthiness

The relevance of terms such as validity and reliability, in the context of qualitative research, has been debated within certain academic circles. Maxwell (1994) argued that validity is a goal, rather than a product and is ultimately relative; it must be evaluated in relation to the

purpose and conditions of the overall project rather than live as a "context-independent property of methods" (p. 105).

Several methodologists (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) have argued for the reconceptualization of the terms validity and reliability to more closely match the philosophical, ontological, and epistemological assumptions of the qualitative method, including the ideas: a) reality is subjective; b) the researcher makes an effort to minimize the distance between self and participant; and c) the researcher investigates the topic within its context and employs an emerging design (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2009). For this study, the concepts described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as *credibility*, *consistency*, and *transferability* were adopted to address the issues related to what has traditionally been described as internal validity, reliability, and external validity.

According to Merriam (2009), *credibility*, similar to validity, is established in this project by the use of the constant comparative method, development of empirical categories rooted in the language used by informant interviews, and integration of reflexivity and memo writing to bracket researcher bias and subjective perceptions of participant reports of spirituality. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), memos represent the written forms of abstract thinking about data and begin at the inception of a research project and continue until the final writing.

The three interview structure of the IPI model also strengthened the credibility of this project (Seidman, 2006). By interviewing a number of participants, comments could be cross checked against one another and the multiple interview protocol attempted to account for idiosyncratic days and checked for the consistency in reports over time. Credibility was reinforced as participants made sense of their experience over the course of the interviews.

Consistency is tantamount to reliability and is apparent when "outsiders concur that, given the data collected, the results make sense" (Merriam, 2009, p. 221). An audit trail – a method that details how data were collected and organized, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry – is a standard trademark of consistency in the qualitative method (Creswell, 2007) and was employed in this study. The consistency of interviews over a period of time "leads one to trust" that the participant is not being insincere about his experience (Seidman, 2006, p. 25).

Finally, *transferability* is comparable to the concept of external validity and was demonstrated by a highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the findings of the study (Creswell, 2007). Importantly, the qualitative researcher is interested in projecting, extending, and expanding into an area not known or experienced so as to arrive at a usually conjectural knowledge of the unknown phenomenon. The question of significance can be viewed in terms of a theory's relative importance for stimulating further studies and explaining a range of phenomenon. Seidman (2006) argued that transferability is apparent when both researcher and reader gain a sense of discovery and learning from the individual passages and the paper as a whole. Corbin and Strauss (1990) believed that transferability of a paper employing grounded theory "should be judged in terms of the range of variations and the specificity with which they are analyzed in relation to the phenomena that are their source" (p. 18).

Ethical Considerations

A number of ethical issues may have surfaced during data collection and it was critical for the researcher to adhere to the ethical standards of the University of Missouri – St. Louis and the American Counseling Association (2005). According to Lipson (1994) ethical issues can be grouped into informed consent procedures; deception or covert activities; confidentiality towards

participants, sponsors, and colleagues; benefits of research to participants over risks; and participant requests that go beyond the social norms. The informed consent protocol included: 1) a description of the primary investigator and contact information including email and phone numbers, 2) a short description of the purpose of the research project including what research participants can expect as a result of participating in the project (i.e. relevant research questions, time structure, and site information), 3) the rights of the participants, and 4) disclosure of potential hardships that participants may face as a result of participating in the study.

Researcher bias can influence both the conduct of research and the interpretation of research findings and in some way the transferability and utilization of the research. Research about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people has been misused and misrepresented, at times to their detriment (Warner, 2004). Of critical importance is the unbiased dissemination of the research findings that include a rigorous reflexive accounting of the researcher. Memos, both reflexive and theoretical, are very specialized types of written records that help the researcher to gain "analytical distance from materials" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 218). Reflexive memos included the researcher's thoughts on coding procedures, hypotheses related to relationships between categories and sub-categories, reflexive accounts of researcher bias, and operational observations.

The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, (ALGBTIC), a division of the American Counseling Association, catalogued a comprehensive list of competencies for working with LGBT participants and noted that counseling research has had a limited but real history of pathologizing these individuals and their communities and that every effort must be taken by the researcher to strengthen the competency of methodological

procedures including the informed consent protocol, the data collection strategy, and transparency about limitations to the transferability of the findings (ALGBTIC, 2013).

Conclusion

The method adopted by this study was a basic qualitative design that integrated phenomenological data collection strategies proposed by Seidman (1996) and grounded theory analysis described by Corbin and Strauss (1990) and Strauss and Corbin (1990, 1998). A case was made for the integration of terminology aligned with the epistemological underpinnings of qualitative research to account for the credibility, consistency, and transferability of the findings reported by this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, ethical considerations, including the informed consent protocol and strategies to safeguard the unbiased interpretation and dissemination of the research findings in relation to studies involving LGBT participants, were detailed.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the results of the analysis of 20 interviews conducted for this study following an interview protocol that was generated to answer the four primary research questions guiding this study including: 1) how gay men describe and practice spirituality and what role does it play in their everyday lives; 2) what beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc. influenced their spiritual development; 3) what is the process for integrating beliefs, rituals, images, customs, texts, leaders, etc., into their spiritual understanding and what is the process for omission; and 4) how does their spiritual understanding and practice(s) impact how they view their sexual and affective orientations and how spirituality is integrated with other cultural identities?

The personal stories analyzed for this study were generated through semi-structured interviews with nine men, all of whom identified as gay in some manner, between the months of April and June 2014. Participants were ultimately given pseudonyms here to maintain their confidentiality and anonymity. Each of the men agreed to be interviewed on three separate occasions but over the course of the interview process, both the interviewer and participants found that two interviews were sufficient to explore the number of questions outlined in the interview protocol. All but two of the participants were interviewed twice with a total of 20 interviews completed during the two months of data collection. Six of the men were interviewed via Skype and the other three were interviewed in their homes. All of the men were recruited through the academic listserv CESNET and resided in a variety of states across the United States, including New York, Oklahoma, Connecticut, Virginia, California, Minnesota, and Arizona.

Participants self-identified in the following ways (see Table 1): 1) every participant indicated their racial identity as White; 2) ethnic identities were described as Irish, Hispanic,

Greek, German, Italian, British, and American; 3) ages ranged between 24 and 70; 3) socio-economic status included working-class, middle-class, upper-middle class, and upper-class; 4) educational levels ranged from completed bachelor's degree to completed doctorate; 5) almost every participant was currently employed in a variety of professions and one man identified as retired; 6) religions of origin included Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, Episcopal, Southern Baptist, Catholic, and generally as Christian; and 7) the language used to describe current spiritual orientation included Realist, In-flux, Yogi, and Spiritual.

Table 1: Participant Demographics

Name	**Race**	**Ethnicity**	**Age**	**SES**	**Education**	**Employment**	**Religion of Origin**	**Current Spiritual Identification**
Adam	White	British/ American	24	Middle-class	MFA	Theatre Tech	Protestant	Spiritual
Anthony	White	Italian/ German	24	Middle-class	BS	Engineer	Lutheran	Spiritual/ Realist
Derrek	White	British	30	Middle-class	MS	Education	Unitarian	Spiritual
Ellis	White	N/A	33	Middle-class	MA	Counseling	Southern Baptist	Spiritual
Joshua	White	N/A	27	Middle-class	MA	Counseling	Christian	Spiritual
Manny	White	Irish-American	70	Middle-class	Ph.D.	Counseling	Roman Catholic	Spiritual
Robert	White	Germanic	67	Upper-class	BFA	Singer	United Church of Christ	Spiritual/ Yogi
Randy	White	Greek/ Cherokee	64	Upper-class	MBA	Retired	Greek Orthodox	In-flux
Thomas	White	Non-Hispanic	35	Middle-class	Ph.D.	Education	Episcopal	Spiritual

Data Analysis

Each of the interviews were reviewed by the researcher immediately following transcription to determine their accuracy and to begin the open coding process. The researcher looked for similarities and differences between participant experiences, understandings, actions and interactions, and outcomes related to their answers to the interview questions. As part of the

constant comparative method, provisional labels were given to data segments that appeared to have similarities. As the data segments were continuously supported by participant reports, broad categories and interrelated sub-categories began to emerge. The categories and sub-categories were shaped in terms of their properties (i.e. attributes) and dimensions (i.e. range of characteristics).

The axial coding process included the integration of the researcher's reflective memos and supported hypotheses regarding how the dissected data sets, categories, and sub-categories related to one another. For this study, the categories were organized in a sequence that captures the conditions, context, strategies, and outcomes related to the phenomenon of spiritual identity development after immersion in and transition from a religion of origin.

The chapter is organized into six sections that describe five categories developed through the grounded theory data analysis procedure and a final section detailing additional findings. The first section, *Origins*, describes significant childhood relationships and interpersonal perspectives from participants' adult vantage point.

Section two, *Religious Experiences*, exemplifies participants' early religious education, level of immersion within their religions of origin, foundational beliefs, practices, and homonegative messages and their aftereffects.

Section three, *Transition*, illustrates motivating factors that influenced the men to transition from their religions of origin to a spiritual identity and include unanswered questions, philosophical hypocrisy, perspective change, spiritual mentors, oppression, and sexual identity emersion.

Section four, *Spirituality*, covers the men's understanding and definition of spirituality and illuminates the transcendental, interpersonal, and fluid nature of spirituality in their lives.

The section also incorporates descriptions of values related to spirituality, how the men perceive and understand the notion of God, how they practice spirituality, and the subsequent outcomes of their practice.

Section five, *Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities*, portrays the confluence of spirituality and gay sexuality, with particular emphasis on how the two identities converge, diverge, and influence sexual and affective relationships.

Finally, section six, *Additional Findings*, entails the men's current characterization of their self in relation to spirituality, insights related to their developmental journey, future direction and where they are headed, and perspectives on the intersection of religion and spirituality.

Table 2 – Analytic Categories, Sub-Categories, and Properties

Category	**Sub-category**	**Property**
Origins		
	Kinship	
		Mother/grandmother
		Father
		Siblings
		Childhood friendships
	The First I AM	
		I AM different
		I AM dazzle boy
		I AM student
	I AM Gay	
		Pre-awareness
		Awareness
		Disclosure
Religious Experiences		
	Foundational Dogma	
	Homonegativity	
	Community	
	Religious Practice	
	Reflections on Religious Experience	

Transition		
	Unanswered Questions	
	Hypocrisy	
	Perspective Change	
	Mentorship	
	Intersection of Religion and Spirituality	
Spirituality		
	Spiritual Understanding	
		Transcendental
		Interpersonal
		Fluidity
		Values
		God
	Spiritual Practice	
		Visiting sacred spaces
		Body
		Mind
		Community
		Kindness and generosity
		Gratitude
		Sacred objects
	Spiritual Outcomes	
		Freedom
		Connection
		Serenity
		Courage
		Separation
Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities		
	Sexual and Spiritual Compatibility	
	Sexual and Spiritual Separation	
	Conscious Sexuality	

Origins

This category details the men's significant early childhood relationships, including those with parents and grandparents, siblings, and close childhood friendships and closes with an account of the participants' first recognition of their own sexual and gender identity.

Kinship

This sub-category comprises participants' early childhood relationships, specifically with their mothers, fathers, grandmothers, siblings, and significant childhood friendships.

Mother/Grandmother. Invariably, participants described the relationships they had with their mothers as good, close, and important to varying degrees. Joshua talked about the interests he shared with his mom, even at an early age.

> I guess mom and I, we had a lot of similar interests. We both really liked to read. It kind of seemed like we just connected in that way. We just enjoyed similar things. We would have good long talks. I guess I would say that it felt like she was the one that I talked to or went to if anything came up. So it was a nice relationship. It was a good relationship. (JC 45-49)

Other men described a closeness they experienced with their mothers. Ellis portrayed the relationship with his mother as "very close. We were always close growing up. Even today I talk to her at least two or three times a day because she is still very much a part of my life and who I am" (EJ 51-52). Anthony also recalled the close dynamics of his relationship with his mother.

> Mom has probably been the most dynamic relationship. As a younger child, you could describe it again is the middle child the second son kind of, I wouldn't say mama's boy, but definitely a close relationship with my mom than my older brother had. Very closer to friend than just an authoritative parent. (AM 174-178)

Despite having reported a close relationship with their mothers, a few of the participants expressed some mild critiques of mom. Adam believed that his mother was good to him but also

had a difficult time trusting her because she, at times, broke his confidence as a teenager by meddling in what he believed were his private affairs.

> Growing up it was pretty good. It was up-and-down. She was always very very very good to me. It's good. It's really good. I'm not open with her I'll say that. I felt like in high school for my entire childhood I was I had a lot of trouble with my parents and I felt there were many times where I felt like I wanted to keep things private and I was not able to. (AK 129-134)

Manny spoke about the affection he felt for his mother but also discussed what he experienced as intense smothering.

> But part of that is my mother essentially smothered me. I can remember everything that I did was about her. My mother told me she would die to protect me and I was in fact the crown prince. (MH 40-43)

Derrek also concurred that the relationship he had with his mother was the most significant of his childhood but also was left with unresolved feelings of abandonment.

> I loved my mom so much as a child. She was my everything; my shining star. I looked like her, I walked like her, and we had very similar dispositions. We pretty much were mirror images of one another. She taught me to love the outdoors, to eat with gusto, to get dirty and play hard. She taught me how to live at that young age. I was never quite sure why she abandoned me after my parents were divorced. I never stopped wondering what I did to make her go away. (DM 108-114)

As a group, the men represented the relationships with their mothers as considerably intimate and loving, although some of the men also felt smothered and abandoned by their mothers despite the coinciding recognition that the relationship was good.

Some of the men discussed the strong influence their maternal grandmothers had early on in their lives. The impact of these relationships varied but what was clear across participant accounts was how grandmothers often served as early role models and teachers. Ellis not only described his grandmother as having a strong effect on him growing up but also felt an emotional closeness to her.

> My relationship with my grandmother growing up was very close. There was actually a point where I lived with her for about a year while my mother went to a college program in Dallas for a little bit and then she came back. But growing up I was very close with my grandmother. She was a huge influence on me. (EJ 85-88)

Thomas also labeled the relationship with his grandmother as close. He disclosed that his grandmother accepted his gender non-conformity and became a role model for how to live a life of tolerance.

> Growing up I was also pretty close to my grandmother, my maternal grandmother in Texas. She was a really religious woman but she always kind of accepted me for who I am. Never really expected me to be anything other than myself and so I think as a result I spent a lot of time in Texas with my grandmother growing up. (TG 6-10)

Manny recalled that his grandmother was really his first teacher and connection to what he currently understands as having spiritual qualities.

> My grandmothers – that's where my connection was - They are the ones who taught me to cook. They are the ones who taught me to sing. They are the ones who taught me to dance. They are the ones who taught me to tell stories. So there is that. So I am relating more to that. (MH 62-65)

Derrek also believed that his grandmother was a spiritual mentor.

> My grandmother was not just another woman in my life. She was my soul mate. She taught me how to sing in the rain. We jumped in puddles, climbed trees, and took walks in nature. We looked out the window and stared at the ocean for hours. That's when I first learned that God wasn't some man in the sky. God was everywhere and could be experienced at any time. My grandma taught me that. (DM 196-200)

Grandmothers, like mothers, played a critical role in participants' lives and served as more than matriarch but sources of close emotional support, acceptance, and mentorship.

Father. Seven of the men described feeling different from their fathers and subsequently experienced a relational separation from them. Thomas recalled the relationship with his dad and stated, "sometimes I think back about why I wasn't close to my father. I think on some level he kind of realized that I was different. That there was something different about me" (TG 5-6). Thomas' curiosity about his lack of closeness to his father became a running theme many of the men touched on - an intuitive feeling that they were fundamentally different from their dads. Joshua believed that his father disapproved of his lack of stereotypical gender dispositions and failed to relate to his natural abilities.

> I would try the things that he enjoyed. Like I tried playing golf but then got so frustrated by the time I was 12 and I was just terrible that I just gave up. I was like, "I can't hit the ball in the air and this is just embarrassing." He did his best. I always wanted his approval but I never quite fully – I knew academically was my way to excel and although he acknowledged that it always like, that's from mom's side, because mom's family had a bunch of psychiatrists and all these brainiac people and he was much more of a blue collar background kind of guy. (JC 63-73)

Manny also believed that he failed to meet his father's gender expectations, which triggered a sense that he was very much unlike his father.

> My father takes me out as a kid to try out for little league. It is one of the worst experiences of my life. I hated it. My father takes me once and gives up. He's not going to put me through that again. (MH 65-67)

Each of these men's experiences crystalized an early awareness that they were not only dissimilar to their fathers but also indicated an initial awareness of gender expectations and the relational effect of failing to fit within a stereotypical gender mold.

Emotional and physical distance also emerged as a property related to participants and their fathers. The property ranged from fathers who were physically and emotionally removed from the participants' lives to those who were physically present but emotionally distant. Ellis revealed that his father was, and continues to be, non-existent in his life.

> Dad was never in the picture. I knew of him and where he lived, but he was never around. Part of that as an adult discussing it with my mother, it kind of came down to that was her option because she wasn't one to accept child support or anything like that. She was very independent and did it on her own. Like I said, I always knew where he was but he was never involved. (EJ 44-49)

Derrick commented that although his dad sometimes reemerged in his life, he was, for the most part, completely absent.

> My dad has never been there for me. Once my parents were divorced, he sorta fell off the planet. He pops up from time to time but he never taught me a single thing about life. I can't remember him ever holding me. I can't remember him ever picking me up and

> helping me dust it off. I just remember him being completely and totally uninvolved in every facet of my growing up. (DM 226-230)

Although Ellis and Derrick reported the complete absence of their fathers, Anthony had a nuanced perspective of his father's lack of presence, including empathy for his dad's personality, cultural upbringing, and work ethic.

> On the other side of that my dad was always the, has been pretty, the more stoic character, and that's just his personality which has kept that relationship until the last few years pretty stoic. Not disengaged and unconnected, but very reserved and very, you know, he's the stern older father, the adult male that comes from an Irish Catholic home, so that kind of quintessential idea that you don't show emotions, you work every day, that's just the way life is. (AM 174-187)

Robert also provided a reflective understanding of his father's lack of presence in his life growing up and recalled that his dad "worked so much. In the 50s fathers were a little more absent I think than they are today, but he seemed like a very absent father to me. Loving but absent" (RB 100-102).

Across narratives, the men conveyed a profound feeling of differentness in relation to their fathers that was perceived to result from a failure to meet gender expectations and lack of similar interests. In addition, a number of the participants believed that the physical and emotional separation from their fathers was rooted in societal mores that govern male behavior, exemplified by Anthony's and Robert's observation that their fathers were raised in a generation that valued men's limited expression of emotion and dedication to a strong work ethic.

Siblings. Sibling relationships were primarily described by the men as protective, while other participants reported varying degrees of closeness and intimacy with their brothers and

sisters. Three of the men recalled their elder sisters as protectors who shielded them from bullying in elementary school. Thomas remembered that his sister would stick up for him when older peers made fun of him for perceived gender non-conformity. At one point during the interview he recollected, "my sister always – even though she was the younger sister she always defended me quite a bit so my positive memories with school are often with my sister" (TG 20-22). Manny also narrated an early childhood memory that starred his older sister as his public defender and shared, "I don't know that we were close, but we weren't completely distant either. She became my protector - she was four years younger than I was - through elementary school" (MH 107-108). Derrek recalled that his younger brother would fight off would-be bullies and came up with elaborate plans to outwit neighborhood tormentors.

> I wasn't very close to my brother but he always stood up for me. I remember on the last day of school there was graduating sixth grader that always picked on me. My brother and I were walking home and this guy was following us. I could feel my anxiety skyrocketing. My brother came up with this plan to walk into the library and as the bully walked through the entrance we would slip out the exit doors on the other side of the building. I felt so much fear and shame I was ready to break down and cry. But my brother's plan worked and we ran all the way home. I'll never forget that. (DM 302-308)

Sibling relationships also appeared to have varying degrees of intimacy that were primarily related to age difference and physical proximity. Joshua's sister was only two years older than him and they were home-schooled together, which provided a foundation for their closeness.

> So it was just me and an older sister for the first 11 years of my life. So we were really close growing up. I think too, being home schooled, we were home schooled our lives pretty much, so my sister and I have always been pretty close. (JC 13-18)

Anthony was the middle child in his family and described the relationships with both his brother and sister as close at different times in his life. Initially he was closer to his older brother and said, "my brother and I were pretty close when I was eight or nine years old to right at the end of elementary school, third and fourth grade" (AM 24-26). Around that time Anthony's older brother was diagnosed with Epilepsy and the relationship and overall family dynamic changed. Anthony and his younger sister found support in one another and they learned to cope with a completely altered family system. He recalled, "Tanya and I became very close, very intimate, and that stayed true through about high school. But that really started around the time my brother had his first seizure" (AM 59-61).

Randy's relationship with his older brother was primarily effected by physical proximity.

> I guess that's an interesting part of the relationship. When I was 3 years old and my brother would be just approaching 5, but he would be in kindergarten, we lived out in the country. In the middle of that school year my parents' bought a tavern in Portland and so my brother wanted to finish the school year out in the country and we had an aunt and uncle, not real aunt and uncle, but a friend of my father that we called my Uncle John and Aunt Mabel. My brother, Ron, stayed with them through that school year. We moved into town. Then he continued to stay with them for the next 11 years until they died. (RD 55-62)

Generally, participants reported that sibling relationships were important elements in their life narrative and provided protection, support, and meaning to their overall stories.

Childhood friendships. Participants mostly reported loose childhood friendships and shared that, although they were friendly, typically did not have many close friends. Ellis described himself as social but not necessarily one to have close friendships.

> Like I said, I was the type that I was friends with everybody but as far as having really close friendships that just wasn't me going through elementary school and middle school and high school. I wasn't one to go and hang out with people or do the sleep overs or anything like that. I was more of the social person as far as go to the birthday parties or people came to my birthday parties but nothing where I would say, "Oh this was my best friend in high school or this was my best friend through grade school," or anything like that. (EJ 55-60)

Derrek also reported a lack of intimate friendships growing up, despite being well-liked by his peers.

> I was a popular kid. I guess you could say that I was a natural born leader. But that never translated to friends. I always felt like I was closer to my teachers than my peers. I can't really describe it. In the classroom I was a cool kid but in the playground I was bullied. So I never really trusted anybody. But then again, a lot of my lack of friendships had to do with my family. We were constantly moving and my mom didn't have many social outlets. I didn't play sports or act. I just went to school and went home. That was my life, for the most part. (DM 63-69)

Adam had a similar experience with friendships growing up.

> I was friends with everybody but not really a joiner. I didn't jump in and I wasn't a part of all the clubs and academic stuff like my brother was. I just wanted to survive high school. That was my thing. I wanted to be done with it. (AK 51-53)

Descriptions of friendships came up in response to an interview question that queried early childhood relationships. What is striking about the nature of the responses is how minimally important these early friendships were and how that contrasts with the high degree of importance placed by the participants on community and relationships in their adult lives. The lack of strong connections to friends and peers and in childhood may also relate to how the men perceived their young selves as being different from their contemporaries at the time, as detailed in the following section.

The First I AM

Similarly to all children, participants' individual identities and sense of self began to emerge in early childhood and generally paralleled their developmental progression through elementary and middle school. Unique to the participants of this study was the profound feeling of differentness in relation to their families and peers. This section includes descriptions of the men's experiences of feeling intrinsically different, their strong academic proclivities and tendencies to dazzle their families and peers, and concludes with an account of the men's first awareness and disclosure of their gay identity.

I AM different. Three of the men described having an intrinsic sense of being different from their families and friends. The feeling often stemmed from an internal recognition that who they were and how they expressed themselves was at odds with what was expected of them. These expectations were often tied to cultural and familial values related to gender roles and behaviors. Manny described how his sensitivity, intuition, and polished attire was unconventional within his family system.

> Because they recognized that somehow or other I'm different from the rest of the folks in the family. I'm the sensitive one. I'm the one who is intuitive. I'm the one who always

> dressed well. That's a family joke. I'm the one who always has a book with me. For a long time that book was Catcher in the Rye. (MH 165-170)

Joshua also reported his lack of gender rigidity as a basis for feeling different from his male peers.

> Yeah, I felt like a bit of an outsider and loner. I think that was more internal. I tried to connect with other people and I had friends but I never felt like I was a part of the guys and growing up it was so gender segregated. The boys hung out with the boys and the girls hung out with the girls so I never really felt like one of the guys, I guess. (JC 84-87)

Thomas believed that people knew that he was gay from an early age because of his effeminate mannerisms. He clearly recalled the shame he felt as a result of feeling different.

> I think the folks as I grew up – because they knew I was a little bit different too – I didn't come out until I was – well I came out officially to my family at 18, but everybody pretty much knew at school…I know growing up I felt the shame of being different. I think I felt that shame more than the shame of being gay at least until my adolescence. (TG 18-20; 77-79)

Stereotypical gender role and behavior divergence appeared to be the impetus for many of the men's narratives related to feeling different within their families of origin and the various communities in which they dwelled.

I AM dazzle boy. Four of the participants illustrated a picture of themselves that resembled what Joshua described as "Dazzle Boy" (JC 243). Although the other men did not use the word dazzle specifically, they did speak about perennial good behavior and their endeavors to be perceived as virtuous. Joshua talked in depth about others' perception of him as the model child.

> I remember one of my friend's mom's describing me as a stellar kid. Our parents were very quick to pass that along to us, any positive feedback of how nice we were or polite or great kids. So I was kind of like the model child in that way. Always the good one, the nice one, the polite one. The one that helped with the dishes after a meal. The one that was so thoughtful, which at the time I guess I appreciated the attention, but my sister is the one that brought me back down to earth. Her nickname for me was Dazzle Boy. (JC 238-243)

Randy also had a reputation for being the good little boy. He shared that he was the only one in his immediate family that would attend church with his extended family on a regular basis. In addition, Randy reported that he began working in his parent's tavern at the age of 7, solidifying his role as the good child.

> I think it's because I was always the good little boy. I was always the one that was sort of involved with a lot of things and religion was part of my life as a youngster. I was an altar boy at one time and began working in my parent's tavern washing glasses at the age of 7. (RD 84-86)

Service was always part of Derrek's life and he claimed that his reputation as a good kid was not a conscious front.

> I mean, I think that opening doors for old ladies, helping my mom with my little brother, and keeping my grandmother company in her garden was just a big part of my personality. I was born a helper and enjoyed it from the very beginning. I think as I've matured and developed that natural altruism has been coopted in some ways by the shame I sometimes feel about who I am as a person. Helping became a way to prove my worth but in the beginning I was just naturally good. (DM 402-407)

The propensity to be perceived as having merit and value within their family and cultural systems was reported by these men to be meaningful elements of their self-understanding and manifested as both thoughtfulness and service.

I AM student. Four of the participants in this study described themselves as excellent students and found school to be a place of solace, despite some being intermittently bullied. The men's recollections of their intellects as sources of pride and praise provide context for their achievements at school. All of the men in this study have at least a bachelor's degree and most have master's degrees and doctorates in a variety of fields. Thomas recognized the safety school provided in that that his teachers nurtured the part of himself that was a good student; although, he now wishes that his teachers had advocated for and nurtured the part of him that felt different.

> School was something that – I had a love hate relationship with it somewhat because while it was still…in some ways I was teased by others at school but on the other hand I found it in some ways to be a safe place too because I had teachers and others that while I don't know that they nurtured the part of me that was different they certainly nurtured the part of me that was a student. (TG 107-112)

Manny was encouraged by his family to cultivate his intellect and found an intense love of reading early on in his school career.

> I am this quiet kid who becomes very academic. One of the clear messages I got from my father was that I was intelligent so I shouldn't fight. I should be able to fight with words and not with fists. So I became the kid who by the second grade had read everything in the children's library and I was going into the adult section of the library. So my way home from school, elementary school, I wouldn't go directly home, I'd go and read at the library. (MH 11-16)

After Derrek's parents divorced right before he began kindergarten, school became a venue where he sought refuge from the chaos that was overwhelming his home life.

> My life was completely chaotic from kindergarten through third grade. Not that it goes much better after that but thank God for school. I always felt safe, even when I was picked on from time to time, because I knew my teachers saw my potential and would stick up for me. I always had perfect grades and looked forward to getting up and going to school every day. I was that kid, beginning in early August, who would ride my bike to school everyday to see if classes had been posted. I wanted to know who my teacher was that badly. Needless to say, school was my shepherd, and it took me all the way to the Promised Land. (DM 309-316)

The identity as student emerged as a salient part of self at an early age for a number of the men interviewed. Their role as a student appeared to be both a source of pride and praise for them as boys and continued to impact their lives as adults.

I AM gay. The men's path to identify as gay included progressive levels of awareness, moments of disclosure, and generally affirmative receptions from family members and friends.

Pre-awareness. Participants generally reported an early awareness of feeling connected to same gender friends but only in hindsight could they identify the connection as probably sexual or affective. Joshua talked about a friendship that began in middle-school and in hindsight described it as a crush.

> There was this kid in 8th grade that I was really obsessed with. Lucas. We hung out together and did all this stuff together. At the time I just thought, "Oh, he's a really good friend." But I would think about him all the time and just look forward to the next time I got to see him and all these things. This is funny for me to look back and be like, "Oh

> my God, I totally had a crush on him." But at the time I didn't even realize it as such. (JC 362-367)

Anthony also discussed a childhood friendship that represented the first time he experienced feeling connected to a specific boy in a deeper and more passionate way than other friends.

> So I knew—so to go back to the childhood experiences, we'll just start chronologically. That's when I realized that I, I don't know if I would've called it gay at the time, but I understood that my friend Sean that I had that really important childhood friendship with, I understood that as we were about to move those feelings weren't the same as I felt about leaving Brian or leaving Daniel or Cody or any of these other friends that I had. There was something about being separated from Sean that felt tangibly worse, that felt pretty bad. And now I can look back at that and understand that was the first time I think I realized that I connected with men in a different way. (AM 469-478)

Ellis recognized that he was attracted to other boys at a young age but did not have a word to describe what he was experiencing, despite knowing other gay people who were friends with his mother.

> Where I can say that I can remember at 10, 11 years old and noticing other boys, to be honest at that point I had never placed a name on it. I didn't know really what gay meant. My mother had friends who were gay that were around pretty frequently but they were just my mother's friends. She never had to explain anything to me because I really didn't care at that age. I was still playing with my action figures and going on. (EJ 235-249)

Awareness. The men quoted generally became aware of their same sex attraction around puberty. Thomas recognized his attraction to other boys in middle-school and eventually labeled himself as gay in high school.

> Of course I knew in high school, or even in middle school probably at 12 or 13 that I was more interested in being friends with the girls and not interested in them in any other way. I got a sense of that pretty young. I started to put a label on it more around 15, 16. (TG 52-54)

Adam began to have sexual fantasies about other boys and men in elementary school but only came to identify his sexuality as gay in the 10th or 11th grade.

> I remember being in elementary school and walking around Las Vegas. Definitely I was sexualizing men but didn't understand it was a gay thing until 10th or 11th grade. Even when I did [become aware] it was the sort of thing that I would think about to stimulate myself. Even in heterosexual encounters I was focused on the men. (AK 272-275)

Anthony realized he was gay when he connected what he was feeling sexually with what he heard from the sermons preached at church.

> Uh, that was that moment, and then around 11 or 12 was the point where I can remember knowing that I was gay because the pastor's son in our church was this kid, Christian, and that's when I knew that, like, what I was feeling, I understood at that point that this is, that I'm gay and this is not what other people think is okay. So I didn't think Christian was at all, but I kind of had, just because he became my best guy friend after moving. (AM 496-502)

Disclosure. Once the men became aware of their sexual and affective orientation, they moved to disclose their identity to close family members and friends. Joshua first came out to his older sister who claimed that his disclosure was not a surprise, a response that he found to be affirming.

> So I finally had this big conversation with them about the fact of I am gay, I'm not just…Well actually I came out to my sister first. Okay, so I come out to my older sister. This was fun. I come out to my older sister and I was like, "Hey you know what? I'm attracted to guys." And she was like, "Oh I knew you were gay." And I had never used that term to describe myself because I was like, "That's a bunch of flag waving, promiscuous." I'm not super flamboyant. I don't want to be [wraaa], I'm just me. So that was really weird to hear her describe me as gay but it was really affirming too for her to be like, "Like I knew that." I was like, "How did you know?" So we had this really fun discussion of her for years just wondering when's Joshua going to come out? (JC 431-443)

Thomas disclosed that he was bisexual to his sister, a sexual orientation identification that he believe was aligned with is lack of sexual experience.

> When I was 16 I came out to my younger sister so I first told her that I was bisexual because I thought that, I think I thought that that was a more comfortable thing to do than come out as gay, but at that point in time I hadn't had any relationships, like anything, so course my sister questioned well how do you know. She also told me that she loved me and she accepted me. (TG 150-154)

Adam also came out as bisexual and noted that he did so for two reasons: 1) he was dating a girl at the time; and 2) he believed that is was better to be bisexual than flat out gay.

> But this other guy was somebody I knew already and he was very cool so he was the first person I told. The next person I told was my girlfriend and I told her I was bisexual because I believed that was a good thing and that's a very common belief to have. (AK 254-257)

> Adam went on to explain that once he came out the flood waters broke through the cracked dam. And then after that I started to tell more people it's the sort of thing that felt like once there's a crack in the dam it felt good to tell people because of that time most of my friends were pretty supportive. No one ever said they wouldn't talk to me. Mainly people were fine with it. (AK 263-266)

Ellis recalled that he anticipated the coming out experience to be much more dramatic than it actually was.

> It wasn't as exciting or dramatic as I think I thought it was going to be, to be honest. I really thought there was going to be this huge battle with it and really it turned out to not be that big of a deal. I had made it a bigger deal than it really was to anybody. I just really anticipated it being a horrible, horrible story that was going to come out that I got kicked out of my house by my mother or people quit talking to me and it really wasn't. I was kind of just everybody waiting until I was at the point to tell them, "Hey I'm gay," and everybody seemed to already know except me. (EJ 148-155)

Robert summed up his coming out experience by describing an incident in which a gay family member was described in homophobic terms. The following is what transpired next.

> My mother lurched, nearly lurched out of the front seat saying, "He is a member of our family and I will not tolerate anything like that being said about him." I remember I was about 12 or 13. I already knew I was gay and I remember thinking, "Oh I'm safe. I don't have to worry." My dad was so quiet and passive that I knew he'd go along with whatever she said. (RB 438-445)

This section described the participants' first perception of self – the original I AM – and detailed the feelings that resulted from the belief that they were different from family members

and peers; the tendency to be the best little boy in the room, possibly in response to feeling different; an aptitude for academics that in some ways became the first affirmation of the participants' true self; and the first awareness and disclosure of their sexual identity. The next category details participants' experiences within their religions of origin.

Religious Experiences

This section is a report of participant experiences within their religions of origin, all of which fell under the Christian umbrella. Participants shared certain religious creeds related to their understanding of Christianity but also differed in their interpretations of Biblical precepts and what were believed to constitute faithful religious practice. The following sub-categories contain descriptions of foundational education, the importance of community, religious practices, subtle and overt homonegative doctrine, and the men's reflections on how it all relates to where they are on their spiritual journeys today.

Foundational Dogma

Dogma can be defined as set of irrevocable tenets and precepts that defines a group position and serves as the primary basis for an ideology (Nelson, 2009). The participants were generally divided in reports related to the fundamentals of their early religion. Some of the men were educated to believe that their eternal salvation rested in a belief in Jesus Christ and did not necessarily command righteous deeds. Other participants were taught to know God as unconditional love. There appeared to be a distinct contrast between these two religious perspectives with limited intersection. Ellis was raised as a Southern Baptist and contended his belief in Jesus was all that mattered, despite some cultural pressure to live a righteous life.

> Then again, in Southern Baptists we also have this belief of once saved always saved which meant once you were saved by Christ or God no matter what you did that wasn't

> going to take your salvation away so that also kind of lessens some of the crime against things. But there was still that judgment involved with if you do these certain things you are going to be judged by the church or your peers that go to church so you just didn't. (EJ2 62-67)

Thomas also believed that his faith in Jesus Christ was the path to salvation and that prayer and a request for forgiveness were methods for carrying out his faith. It is important for the reader to note that Thomas did not recall explicit homonegative doctrine emanating from his faith tradition, a theme that will be explored further in a coming section.

> In my church we believed in Jesus Christ and in salvation and that there was I think for the most part in the churches that I attended that there was a belief that we could behave however we wanted to behave in life as long as we ask for forgiveness, as long as we were saved and as long as we prayed the prayer of salvation and asked to go to heaven. So in some ways the churches that I attended they didn't say that you're going to hell because you're gay, per se. (TG 126-130)

Other participants had what one man described as a "benign" experience within their faith traditions. These men talked about God as love and reported a limited preaching on sin and salvation. Robert remembered that his minister preached that God is fundamentally love and rarely lectured the congregation on what Robert perceived as "bad things".

> I had a really good early church beginning because the minister, who just spoke at my mom's service when she died in July, was this wonderful, loving man – my take away from that church was that God was love, period. There was no hell. There was no talk of bad things. So I really had a really pretty much benign sense of God without judgment. (RB 128-132)

Anthony recalled that his early religious indoctrination consisted mostly of lighthearted sermons on the power of unconditional love and community. He did not recall any explicit sermons or religious discussions regarding what he described as controversial theological canons.

> It was very, I like to think of it as, easy religion. It was very just kind of lighthearted, you know, God loves you agape, let's focus on the easy text, that community. I never really saw it as the hard-hitting, like, let's tackle issues like gay marriage, let's tackle issues like abortion. Those kinds of conversations were not even at the pulpit really talked about. There was never really any preaching on those matters. It was always focusing on the community. (AM 296-303)

The following section details explicit and implicit homonegative messages communicated within the participants' faith tradition. The researcher specifically chose to separate *Fundamentals* from the following section on *Homonegativity* because the men seemed to perceive the two as distinct domains within their early religious experience.

Homonegativity

Three of the men heard explicit negative messages preached from the pulpit and demonstrated by family members while others picked up subtle cues that living as gay was not acceptable. Thomas, who identified as a Southern Baptist growing up, knew that identifying as a gay person was not tolerated by his faith community. He recalled, "I heard it from the pulpit. I heard the church talk about deviance. I don't remember exactly how they worded it but I heard them talking about the gay agenda as part of the major evils of the world" (TG 66-68). Anthony never encountered explicit homonegative messages while growing up in the Unitarian Church but his family's actions implied that identifying and living as gay was not a morally appropriate lifestyle.

> Probably about 12 years old or 13, our church, because of the UCC went open and affirming as a congregation, as a nationwide congregation, but because of the church structure, it's not a top-down authority structure. So each of the individual churches and conferences had to accept that decision, and it became a big issue in the south central conference, which is where I grew up in. As one of the northwest Houston churches that really pushed for the open and affirming, meaning that we not only accept homosexuals and the LGBT community into the faith community, but we also are okay with them as pastors, and we celebrate that involvement. So it's more than just tolerance. It was a celebration and an affirmation of LGBT faith being a real thing. So that I think is an interesting point because we ended up leaving the church during that decision. And my whole family told me that it was always—or told us as kids that we weren't leaving because of the gay issue, we left because it was celebrated and put in their face every weekend. Once we became open and affirming, it was thank you for our new members who are, you know, our new gay members who have come to a new home where they can finally be free to be both who they are both in spirituality and sexuality. And after a couple of months my family left that church, and we ended up going to a Methodist church, which was much more adamantly against that. So in my eyes, whatever they said, the actions to me spoke a little bit more clear to their true intentions. (AM 436-458)

Joshua reported that homosexuality was framed in his faith tradition and family of origin as a sin and therefore a choice. He recalled a conversation he had with his parents at the age of 15.

> In the Christian world being gay was just seen as a struggle or a sin that you worked through. She was like, "Well other people are alcoholics." I opened up to my parents

> about it too, just like, "Hey, I'm attracted to guys." And my dad was like, "Well I have a problem with anger and I just got to work hard at not being angry." (JC 389-394)

Thomas' father also perceived homosexuality as a behavior that had to be overcome through faith in God or psychological reparation. The insinuation was that homosexuality was immoral and psychologically pathological.

> My dad saw it kind of as a behavior that should be overcome through either faith in God, reconciling your relationship with your father or your mother. He thinks that homosexuality in men in particular is due to a domineering mother and passive father. (TG 368-372)

Older participants were less likely to experience explicit homonegative messages as part of their religious backgrounds, mainly because, as some of the men reported, homosexuality was not a culturally acceptable topic of conversation prior to the 1970s. The gay liberation movement and the subsequent fight for gay civil and social rights had not yet taken place. Despite the absence of explicitly pejorative messages, a few of the men developed an awareness that homosexuality was not morally aligned with their faith traditions. Manny grew up within the Catholic tradition and could not recall ever hearing the word gay until he went to college. Yet, he had an intuitive sense that his attraction to men was incongruent with church teachings.

> I grew up in the Catholicism of the 1940s and 50s. I graduated from high school in 1961. You didn't talk about any of that stuff. So I knew that my attraction to men was something that was not congruent with the church, with the church's world view, but there was never any overt condemnation of it. (MH 325-329)

Robert, on the other hand, did not receive anti-gay messages in the United Church of Christ and believed that was due to a lack of cultural focus on the topic. He surmised the focus on

homosexuality and the Christian church shifted after Anita Bryant used her national platform to be an outspoken evangelical critic of homosexuality.

> But I want to get back to your question which is that connection between I think the religious cues that I may have gotten when I was young and sort of my view of being gay growing up. Do you know, I just don't see the two of them connected together until I'm much older, because I wasn't getting any antigay…Well they weren't teaching that in our age group. It's your age group that started getting the brunt of that. After post-Anita Bryant. I never connected the dots until we just did that with Anita Bryant because she was a big member of the era when she created the start of the antigay sermons. I don't think before that, gay people weren't talked about in the 50s and 60s. It wasn't discussed. I remember saving somewhere, I have an early Newsweek Magazine that I saved that talked about homosexuality. I think it was late 70s. Then I have one about the AIDS epidemic, like 1983, but before that we weren't talked about in the national area. (RB 465-492)

What is most surprising about participant reports regarding homonegativity within their faith traditions is that only a minority of the men were victims of it. This finding is in stark contrast to a number of previous academic studies that have found homophobic messages to be an integral part of the LGBT religious experience (Barton, 2010; Boellstorff, 2005; Haldeman, 2002; Henrickson, 2007; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Miller, 2007; Schnoor, 2006; Smith & Horne, 2007).

Community

Five of the participants expressed the importance their religions of origin placed on community. The idea of community was a broad theme across all narratives regardless of the

specific theological ideologies of the men's religious sect. Community was described to include family, the broader group of believers, and the public at large. Thomas recalled that the value of family was preeminent in his early faith and concluded that the depiction of family was strictly heterosexual in nature.

> I'd say that to a large extent in the churches that I grew up in family was important and anyone who didn't follow along that path of marrying young and having children and having a family was definitely on the outside. (TG 135-137)

Joshua evoked the image of his parents as religious mavericks who frequently shifted religious sects in line with their expanding theological views. Community, specifically family, remained at the center of their faith understanding and practice throughout.

> Then there was some weird falling out there so we went to this house church, so it was very much like the Book of Acts where the believers were just gathered in someone's home. So the dads would take turns teaching and then one of the moms played guitar so we'd sing some songs and then we'd have a meal together. We did it Sunday nights. So there is probably only 5-7 families in the group. So it was a very inward focused, mostly on raising your kids and your family. (JC 309-314)

Anthony's report also substantiated the high value placed on family in his early religious upbringing. He reminisced about the values learned growing up in that environment.

> So just that kind of atmosphere where we all grew up really close with the same group of kids each week. As a community we were all concerned about was the family aspect of being Christian and being in a community of trust and a community of faith. (AM 296-306)

Certain participants broaden the description of community to include social justice practices that benefited to collective good. Manny was taught early on to practice his faith by promoting the welfare of the less fortunate.

> Getting back to the community, is starting in high school I was a part of a group that did work with poor kids. Kids who were in the orphanages in Central Massachusetts and I would spend a couple days a month working with these kids who didn't have parents. The experience of the faith then was that belief that you became involved in making the world better for those people who had it less fortunate than you. (MH 202-206)

Derrek was inspired by his mother who instilled a deep respect for the downtrodden in their metropolitan community. He described an early lesson that would later motivate his career as a mental health counselor.

> My mom was always attempting to practice what she preached. I mean, we went to church every Sunday but that's not where it stopped. Her mantra was something like "because we are blessed we must now be the blessing" and that took shape as helping the community. For every holiday dinner we would find a little old lady at the local senior center that didn't have family nearby and invite her to eat with us. Every Saturday morning we would wake up at the butt crack of dawn and go help feed the homeless and the local shelter. I would say community activism was the glue that bound our entire belief system together. (DM 327-334)

The value of community, in terms of family, co-believers, and the public, was a thread that bound these men's accounts of their early religious beliefs. The act of promoting social advocacy within the broader public sphere can be linked to a number of spiritual practices outlined in the section titled *Spirituality*.

Religious Practice

Participants, and their families, practiced religious traditions in a number of ways that mirrored the fundamental beliefs of their faith. The men who were immersed in dogma that centered on salvation and sin were more likely to practice their faith vis-à-vis prayer and righteous living. Joshua recollected his family's ambition to live holy and righteous lives.

> We were nice people. Good Christian kids and there were certain, almost like puritanical, but there were certain rules that we were supposed to abide by or things that we were – it was a very censored life in the movies that we'd watch or the music that we'd listen to. Our whole environment was definitely about, "Your goal is to be holy and to be a righteous person," so you had to be very careful about what you exposed yourself to so you didn't sin. (JC 211-216)

He also described the practice of prayer and its role in meriting eternal salvation. He reported, "Religious practice had something to do with, it contained trusting, praying that Jesus was your Lord and Savior and trusting him for your salvation and admitting you were a sinful person and accepting his forgiveness" (JC 267-269).

Adam frequently prayed as a child and recalled his prayers were often spoken to alleviate that intense shame and guilt he experienced in relation to preventing the devil from infiltrating his thoughts and body.

> I was scared to death of the devil. I believed that the devil was real and could enter my mind and that whenever I had an impure thought…I mean it could be something as simple as eating a piece of cheese without asking and I would think I stole it. I use to stare at some of the men in church and think about what they looked like naked. I was quite positive the devil was coming to get me. I prayed morning, noon, and night that

> God would protect me from such an awful fate. I really wanted to go to heaven. (AK 218-223)

The men who grew up in Christian denominations that focused on God as unconditional love and promoted service in the community were dissimilar to the men who developed in traditions that concentrated on salvation through belief and prayer. Derrek's family practiced yoga and meditation as a means to commune with God and community. He contended that living a pure life was never part of his religious understanding; rather, his family believed that they needed to live their best life.

> My mom was pretty new age. We attended this church called Astara. It was all about living the best life God intended for you and that we were unique emanations of the most high. We practiced Yoga as a way to tune into that still small voice that is only at the center of the storm that is our ego as it chatters incessantly throughout the day. Yoga was a pathway to quiet the mind and find the ultimate reality. I only practiced Yoga on Sunday evenings but I pretty much meditated every day, especially as I became a teenager. (DM 415-420)

Altruism was also identified as an early religious practice and mirrored doctrines that focused on love as a primary doctrine. Anthony talked about practicing the Golden Rule: Do onto others as you would have others do onto you.

> I think that goes back to the number one kind of tenet I took from my young faith which was to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And therefore I was a compassionate person that tried to be caring and sacrifice myself for the betterment of others with no intention or expectation of repayment. I mostly practiced this in sports, at school, and through the various social projects my family was involved in. Mostly

> though I was taught to be respectful of everybody, no matter who that person was. Because in that way I was being as, you know, Christ-like, God-like as altruistic as possible. (AM 775-782)

Manny, as described in the previous section on community, was trained in the great social justice tradition of the Catholic Worker Movement.

> So being religious at that point in my life means really going out and doing some kind of community work. I start reading Catholic Worker Dorothy Day stuff about liberation theology, when the earlier stuff becomes liberation theology, and the social activism kind of stuff. So that makes up a big part of who I am in high school and college. (MH 210-213)

In this section, the fundamentals of the participants' religious ideology, including the experience of implicit and explicit messages related to homosexuality, importance of community, and shared early religious practices that often mirrored the fundamental beliefs of their faith, were reported. The following section features a sub-category depicting the men's adult perspective on their religions of origin.

Reflections on Religious Experiences

Participants were asked to reflect on the significance of their religious experiences and how they perceived their faith traditions from an adult perspective. Three of the men reported reticence to criticize their religion of origin out of respect for its positive influence on their families. Adam shared that his mother is an especially religious person and that her faith was as source of strength.

> My mom was very religious but not like a superstitious, it was more of like this was what gave her filled needs for her and that's one of the reasons that it's hard for me to be

> critical of religion because obviously there are many people that I'm close to for whom it is a useful thing. (AK 190-194)

Joshua also attempted to refrain from disparaging religion completely, despite his anathema to the lack of tolerance within his faith tradition for varying points of view. He went on to say, "I think that too is a part of the whole perspective thing. I still want to try and cultivate a respectful attitude towards those who do have firm convictions because I think that's admirable, but misguided maybe" (JC 631-636).

Derrek confirmed that despite loathing fundamental religiosity, he agreed that he had to accept, not necessarily respect, family members who believed in some of the less tolerant teachings of evangelical Christianity.

> You know, I have moved through a variety of feelings about some family members who believe that who I am is wrong or a sin. At first, I just hated them. Now, I see them as ignorant with limited tolerance for ambiguity. Their minds are closed and they live a life that is consumed by hate and bigotry. From my perspective, they're missing out on all the beauty and joy that might come from a stronger relationship with me. But you know what? I have to accept them for where they are and who they are. Their religion does a bit of good as well – it's not all bad. (DM 456-462)

Other participants sought to distance themselves from religion, particularly in the context of their current spiritual identity. Ellis viewed religion as "the process of controlling other people. I see it as almost the polar opposite of spirituality" (EJ2 181-182). Adam did not hide his contempt for religion and cited its lack of intellectual rigor as a primary source of his disdain.

> How would I define religion? It's superstition to me. It's a bad idea. To me, I don't want to say it's like a disease but it is. Really though. Not in the sense of…I shouldn't

> say a disease. It's viral just in the sense that viral media is viral, you know. Religion to me is sort of memetics. Memetics is the generalization of evolution to ideas so basically ideas that are more likely – in other words for example chain mail, if you look at chain mail, ideas that people like more are more likely to be replicated. Basically the truth of an idea or something you are asserting doesn't necessarily impact its likelihood of being spread. (AK2 72-78)

Likewise, Robert did not understand how religious people remain stuck in beliefs that are not scientifically supported.

> How come their faith doesn't grow as they mature and understanding how the world works, how can they stay in the same path that doesn't question how the universe works? But I know traditional churches are changing from within and I think that's because some of the people want to stay on the path, but there are saying…because there are more progressive Catholics. (RB 301-311)

Other men took a less derisive approach to differentiating religion from spirituality. Anthony believed that religion was beneficial because it served as an access point for developing a deeper spirituality.

> I think ultimately, I define religion very closely to traditional concepts of church and ritualistic practices and canonized text that tell you the answers and I see spirituality more as a journey and an experience in getting to build a relationship with the creator, for lack of a better term. (AM2 229-237)

Joshua saw the benefit of religion as a means to establish a shared understanding of God and live by a moral code.

> So I guess perceive the benefit of religion as a way to share an understanding of God. It somehow contains this prescribed theology that explains the deity that is and human's relationship with him and prescribes the way to live the right life. Within religion I see an inherent part of it there is this good and bad and how do you be good and avoid the bad and it's very laid out and there are various ways to cross that beam of some kind of code of living, code of ethics and usually it is mediated by some hierarchical power – some human organization to it. (JC2 283-289)

The previous section presented sub-categories that organized participant descriptions of meaningful factors that constituted their early religious experience. Factors included a set of foundational beliefs, subtle and overt encounters with homonegativity, the importance of community, and religious practices. The men of the study also reflected on the meaning they ascribed to religion from an adult perspective. The subsequent section explores circumstances that influenced the participants' transition from a primary identification as religious to a primary identification as spiritual.

Transition

The identification and report of factors associated with a gay man's transition from his religion of origin to a primary spiritual identity is a unique outcome of this study in relation to the studies reviewed in Chapter 2. Participants described a variety of experiences, insights, and actions that influenced their spiritual evolution and development. The elements that had the greatest effect on the participants' changeover are described in the following sub-categories and include narratives related to unanswered philosophical questions, limited tolerance for hypocrisy, perspective change, and mentorship. The final sub-category addresses the men's perspective on

the intersection of their early religious identities and current spiritual identities – setting the stage for the succeeding section, *Spirituality*.

Unanswered Questions

A number of participants reported growing up with natural curiosity and keen minds. As was documented in a previous section, many of the participants described themselves as strong students and it is probably not a coincidence that they thoughtfully observed logical errors in the sacred texts and sermons of their faith traditions. As their observations coagulated into questions, four of the men recounted that their inquiries were met with resistance and apathy. Left with unanswered questions, these men began to seek answers outside of the scope of their faith tradition and thus began their transition to a spiritual identification.

Right around puberty, Thomas began to question some of the religious doctrine that governed his family life and sought out answers from his pastor father, which was met with opposition.

> I think some of it was that I grew up in a house were you weren't really allowed to question anything. You weren't allowed to question dad – I mean mom to some extent, but definitely not dad. I think during my – especially mid-teenage years – I started to rebel against that. Some of it may be what I was going through developmentally but I started to resist that and I think I stopped believing. Stopped believing in some of it. (TG 83-87)

Ellis had a similar experience in the Southern Baptist church. He recalled the first time he observed that the truths proclaimed by Bible scripture and ensuing sermons were not supported by science. When Ellis attempted to question these truths, he was met with a defiant minister, an experience that ultimately triggered his transition out of religion.

> I can remember asking our pastor one time about a scripture in Revelations where it says something along the lines of God will ride in on a unicorn or something like that and I thought I was being very intellectual as a kid, but my question was well if unicorns don't exist, why are they in the Bible. You teach us that these are not things to believe in but yet we're supposed to believe in the Bible and it's in the Bible so what's up with that? I was also a very science oriented type kid so I had questions like we had the entire creation of the world but I'm not seeing any discussion of dinosaurs, but we have bones. We have proof. Those were the things that made me really start questioning things. They sound really, I guess, naive and stupid in a lot of ways as an adult to say that's what triggered me to step away from the church but those were the things that got me to thinking and exploring other areas. And I think what kind of prompted me to start exploring more was the fact that instead of having a pastor who could sit down and talk and say, "Hey I don't know," I found that Southern Baptist pastors tend to get very defensive when you ask them questions and so that kind of helped support me and pushed me into looking at other things. (EJ 256-269)

Anthony believed that his church community did not afford the opportunity for questions. He believed the intention was to immerse believers in a manner that prevented them from seeing the forest through the trees. Anthony thought the result was a fractured belief system that eventually gave way to radical disavowing of his religion of origin.

> Every significant moment in your life the church is part of it, which to me always felt like those moments when I started questioning everything, to me that felt like the wool that was being pulled over our eyes was to make every significant part of your life centered

> around the church felt kind of cheating like they're not allowing you the opportunity to question and come back into the fold and truly believe that. (AM 945-951)

Robert explained that he was always questioning his place in the world and believed from an early age that he was connected to a divine presence that was most profoundly experienced in nature, rather than within his early faith tradition.

> I think what was interesting about my path is that I was always questioning. I knew that I had some kind of connection with something divine and growing up in the country I think there is something about when you grow up in these wide open spaces, nature is just so prevalent and the weather played into the crops and this sense of nature and the seasons and so much of it is out of our control, when you're growing crops and raising livestock, so I think maybe that is why rural communities people are more religious, or something. (RB 255-260)

Questions related to the theological tenets of the participants' faith tradition, as well as, questions regarding that nature of the universe, were reported as factors that triggered the beginning of a migration from religion of origin to a spiritual perspective that embraced philosophical inquiry and rigorous debate about the merits of an espoused truth.

Hypocrisy

Four of the participants indicated that hypocrisy within their faith tradition was an impetus for transitioning away from their religions of origin. Joshua noted that despite his awareness that religious doctrine was riddled with hypocritical statements, he continued to accept it as truth until he was no longer able to because to do so would be what he considered inauthentic.

> There was a lot of hypocrisy and the uncertainty in presenting it as a certainty and for a long time I was just very firm in this is what I believe. This is what's going to happen and we can know it's true because of this, this and this. But then I realized that to believe what inherently didn't make sense did not align with the person I was becoming. (JC 631-636)

Ellis shared a similar impression regarding hypocrisy within his original religion, particularly in relation to what he perceived as the failure of some within that community to practice what they preached or what was preached on Sunday mornings.

> That's the funny thing, in Southern Baptists community I think I mentioned before that as a kid, and especially as a teenager, one of the things that I saw was a lot of hypocrisy that went along where people would badmouth other people for doing certain things but turn around and do it themselves. I think that was kind of what happened if you did try something or you did do something, it was kind of that social impact of, oh you broke some rule, even though a dozen other people in the church may be doing it, you were socially impacted with that. (EJ 53-58)

Derrek reported feeling a sense of intense discomfort the first time he encountered hypocrisy within his religion of origin. He recalled attending a Christmas Eve service at the evangelical Baptist church some of his family members attended. The minister suggested that only those in world who believed in Jesus Christ would have access to heaven and the afterlife. After the service, Derrek asked his aunt how the minister's words could be true.

> I just couldn't wrap my head around what he said. I mean, there are billions of people in the world and the majority of them are not Christian. To top it off, I couldn't make sense of how an all loving God would condemn two-thirds of his children to a fiery hell. The

> hypocrisy of that was just unbelievable. Honestly, it was then and there that I knew Christianity, at least in that form, was not for me. (DM 489-494)

Anthony observed hypocrisy in what he perceived as a discrepancy between what the church preached about unconditional love and their real time actions, especially related to how they treated LGBT individuals and families.

> There was a conflict there, and I didn't understand the hypocrisy of defining God as unconditional love on one Sunday and then going out and protesting your gay neighbor the next. I would say that…as a personal principle I gathered from that relationship was that there's conflict in everything and that there's not always an easy answer. Things aren't black and white. Even God becomes gray as you try and figure out what it is. (AM 410-414)

The incongruence between beliefs, values, and actions, observed by a number of participants in their faith traditions and subsequently labeled as hypocrisy, were found to be a significant motivating factor in their transition from religion of origin to a primarily spiritual identity. The following sub-category will address how the experience of oppression related to sexual identity also drove participant's migration from their initial religious organizations.

Perspective Change

As participants found that their theological questions met authoritarian resistance within the church and the uneasiness related to the inconsistency between beliefs and action intensified the men began to seek out alternative spiritual perspectives. In adolescence, Ellis read a book on Native American shamanism that changed his religious perspective.

> There is actually two books that I found very interesting. One was one that I read probably around 13 or 14. I've got a copy of it today it's called *In the Shadow of the*

> *Shaman* by Amber Wolfe. It really is a story about a lady who goes through the experience of learning Shamanism from a Native American tribe in Arizona and it put a huge emphasis on the meditation factor and being out in nature and it really tugged at me a lot. I learned a lot from that book I feel like. (EJ 395-400)

Joshua, in his early 20s, realized that he was living a double life as both gay and Christian, two identities that he felt were incompatible at the time. His newfound awareness changed his perspective on religion and eventually motivated him to supplement his faith tradition with universal spiritual models.

> I just felt like I was leading a double life, because I was like I can't really support this because I'm not harming anyone. I think that's what it really got down to. I had this big conversation with my parents about it. They were real hard on me. I was like I don't think Jesus never talked about this. He cares more about the way in which we interact with others and the nature of our relationship in that is not hurtful or whatever. You know, I'm not doing any harm and if I'm in a positive, healthy, encouraging, supportive relationship does God really care what parts I've got and what parts my partner has? So I think finally having the courage to really voice that to myself and realize that I can't lead this double life anymore. (JC 515-523)

Robert's religious perspective changed when he moved to a new city, left his religion of origin, and was exposed to the ideology of the Science of Mind organization. Science of Mind practitioners believe that each individual has the power to manifest their ultimate good through an intentional belief that it is already a forgone conclusion in the mind of God.

> So then about when I moved to Portland, when I left the Episcopal Church, about a year later a client of mine – I went to a radio program and I was working in radio – and a

> client of mine said, "I really want you to go to my church. It's a Science of Mind Church." I said, "Well what's that." She said, "Well, it's how I was raised and I think you'd find it interesting from what you've told me about you're a seeker." The first one I went to I just thought well my God I've never been exposed to anything like this. It was it. It was like God is everywhere and God is not in the sky and God expresses through creation and we co-create with this universal presence and power. We can use it for our good and we can use it not for our good and there is no judgment either way. It's just a different way of being, of expressing. It all made sense to me. (RB 311-320)

Randy also had an epiphany about his religious perspective once he moved away from home and began to attend college. He realized that the pomp and circumstance and the distance placed between himself and God, either by religious doctrine or his own understanding of his role as a parishioner within the Greek Orthodox Church, no longer made sense to him.

> But for the most part it was just a lot of babbling, gobbledy gook and smells and bells. Then there is the priest. He is God incarnate on earth. Lots of respect for them. The distance. For me the priest always created a distance between me and my sense of faith and my faith in God. That was probably me. I'm sure that wasn't the intension but that's how it seemed to me. Then my last 4 or 5 years that I was in Chicago I did not go to church. (RD 205-211)

Participants described a number of aspects that created a perspective change in their lives, particularly related to their faith traditions. These factors included exposure to alternative ideas and changes in the environment, including moving away from their families and religious communities. The next section explains the importance of mentorship in the transition from a primarily religious to spiritual identity.

Mentorship

Mentorship emerged as a prominent feature of the participants' transition from religion of origin to their developing spiritual identities. Derrek described his first spiritual mentor who happened to be his yoga instructor. She invited Derrek to help her set up the yoga studio prior to the arrival of the other students. It was during those quiet times that they would have conversations about the nature and reality of God. Derrek reported that their relationship ultimately served as the gateway to a new spiritual understanding on his part and sustained it along the journey.

> Sandy was really the first person that introduced me to new thought/ancient wisdom concepts. I learned that God was not some old man in the sky – that God was part of my every breath and closer than my neck vein. I became aware of my thoughts and realized that I had dominion over my mind and could choose to see the glass half empty or half full but that in the end it didn't really matter. There was always a pitcher available to fill the glass up either way. I learned that the universe was abundant and could meet my every need. I didn't need to know the how, I only needed to know the what. (DM 503-509)

He later revealed that Sandy continued to expose him to new books and ultimately introduced him to his current spiritual home.

> Sandy gave me a book that truly changed my life: Ernest Holmes' This Thing Called You. She also introduced me to my favorite movie Aliens. I say this because it was a spiritual metaphor for me. I related to the character Ripley because she was confidant, dedicated to doing what was right, and wasn't confined by the corporate system. She did what was right. I can't tell you how many times I thought of Ripley when I needed to

> find my own courage. After many years of friendship I moved away but she did introduce me to Agape, which is my spiritual home today. She truly was a mentor to me. (DM 529-534)

Joshua met a pastor, described as a maverick, who helped him come to terms with the double life he felt he was living. The pastor's kindness and support cultivated an opportunity that allowed Joshua to begin reconciling his religious, spiritual, and sexual identities.

> I talked to my pastor at the time who actually offered me a job at the church. So my sister, we had this conversation and then two months later the pastor of our church says, "Hey we need someone to work with the youth." And I had done that before at another church and I was like, "That would be great but you should know I'm gay and I don't really know what I believe about God." Thinking okay, "I don't have to say no to that job because he won't offer it to me after he hears that." But he's kind of a maverick pastor himself and he was like, "Okay. That doesn't bother me." So I ended up taking the job. So for the next year I worked at the church while still unresolved in my own religious spiritual understanding. But he was really affirming of my sexuality which is interesting. He was like, "Hey that's great. We will continue this journey together figuring out how you feel about God, but I want you to know you don't have to pick God or gay. You can be gay and still be Christian". (JC 470-481)

Anthony also had a positive experience with a youth pastor at a Lutheran college he attended in North Texas. The pastor led an underground study group that explored Biblical texts and their relationship to anti-gay propaganda within the church. It was during this experience that Anthony realized that the Bible was written by fallible men and contains an immense amount of subtext that is rarely discussed in traditional religious houses.

> So the campus pastor, and there were probably 7 or 8 of us for a few weeks, the first few times and then a few more and few less over the next few months, but we did an underground. I think I briefly mentioned that, but we did an underground study session where Pastor Greg broke out the Leviticus and broke out the Biblical texts and the story of Joshua and David, right? And that purported what was that relationship? We watched the movie [?]. Yeah. And there were countless other little 30 page books here and there that he would pull lessons from and we would just talk about them. It was kind of in the sense what you are doing. We would read it. We would be silent for a second. Pastor Greg would say, "How does that make you feel? What does this scripture mean to you? What do you get out of this? What do you think was the intent of writing this dialogue?" And that was right before I came out to my parents. That's what got me ready for it. (AM2 410-435)

Mentorship emerged as a property of these specific men's transitions from their faith tradition to a spiritual identity. The remaining men did not disclose having spiritual mentors but discussed other transitional factors that often occurred in tandem. The following section details responses to a question that asked the men to reflect on the intersection between religion and spirituality and how that juxtaposition inspires their spiritual identities today.

Intersection of Religion and Spirituality

Participants mostly described religion and spirituality as separate and distinct but noted that sometimes the two blend together in meaningful ways. For instance, Ellis described his transition out of the Southern Baptist faith but recognized that his method for communication with a higher power is truly founded on what he learned in his religion of origin.

> I would say today while I'm not part of the Southern Baptist doctrine there are some foundations that I still believe I hold true. I think there are certain commandments that are definitely worthy of maintaining and I think it created a foundation for me to continue to have communication with a higher power, whoever that may be. I think those foundations are definitely the power of prayer, being able to get things out and speak it and talk. Also faith that there is something more out there, beyond just my own little existential place. (EJ 281-290)

Adam also retained some components of the religiosity of his youth, despite his wholehearted assertion that religion is a bad idea.

> There are a lot of things from growing up that are still part of how I think about ethics. Things like turning other cheek those sorts of things and it's not because they came from that origin that they persisted. In other words when Jesus says to turn the other cheek it's not because he said it but it's good. It's just a great idea. (AK 567-571)

Similarly to Adam, Joshua maintained many of the universal human values he learned as part of his religious education, particularly those that govern how he treats others. In the example below, he advocates for a spiritual practice that is less constrictive than his religion of origin but not too loose that it permits unwarranted sexual behavior.

> I don't want to feel constricted by my spiritual understanding in some ways, but also I don't want to treat others, I don't know, there's some aspect of me that just like, "Well if I have gotten rid of God saying how I should behave sexually then I can do whatever I want and just have crazy monkey sex with whoever I want and not really have any regard for anything because whatever. There is no God holding me back." And yet, I guess I still found those deeper values that I still hold to of how I interact with humanity and I

> still want to as best I can be authentic in my interactions and I guess that still informs my sexual identity too in realizing that I still value giving and loving and caring and things like that within my sexual identity and not just be so self-centered and focused that it's all about me. (JC2 36-44)

Manny observed that religious prophets are sources of inspiration who inform others on how to connect to the life force that, although described differently by various religions, seems to tie together universal values. In other words, he believed the study of these religious icons informs and sustains his spirituality.

> I believe – okay – that there have been great spiritual healers in the world. Christ was one of them. Gandhi was one of them. The Buddha is one of them. So there are people who are connected to whatever this life force is who live exemplary lives and from whom we can learn. That's very different from being Christian or Buddhist. Mohammad was probably one of those men. There is something about these people who identify these religions who on some level they live lives that are more closely connected to the life force and I would like to be more like them, I guess. (MH 443-452)

A variety of factors, including unanswered theological questions and doctrinal hypocrisy, were reported to motivate the men to look for alternative spiritual understandings. Spiritual knowledge was accessed through exposure to information and environmental changes that ultimately created a change in religious perspective. Mentors were also identified a critical influences on the men's transition to stronger spiritual identities. Finally, participants provided their perspective on the confluence of religion and spirituality and how religion shaped their current spiritual identity.

Spirituality

The categories presented throughout the chapter, thus far, have exemplified experiences related to the participants' significant early childhood relationships, their initial sense of self and the coming out process, the fundamental beliefs and practices of their religion of origin, and factors that influenced the men to migrate from their faith traditions to a primary spiritual identity. The following section presents a category that explains how participants comprehend and practice spiritualty in their everyday lives. The section is comprised of sub-categories that describe how the men understand spirituality, how it is practiced, and the perceived outcomes associated with that practice.

Spiritual Understanding

Participants presented differing constructs for comprehending spirituality in their lives. This section encapsulates responses to questions that asked the men to reflect on their definition of spirituality and what it means to them. The section presents a number of properties that define the men's understanding of spirituality, including statements that it is transcendental in nature, values the interpersonal, is fluid and not rigid, integrates personal values, and incorporates an interpretation of God.

Transcendental. One-third of the men reported that their spiritual understanding included a belief in the transcendental, or that which is not part of the material, sensual world. Joshua remarked, "So I guess that's what it means to me now, is to be open and to explore but yet also to believe in some dimension other than the material world that I can observe" (JC 591-593). Adam also believed that spirituality encompassed a discernment that there is more to the world than what meets the eye. He stated, "So that's where I would say I draw most of my spirituality. It's appreciation of the universe and things that transcend that's what comes to mind

for me" (AK 349-350). Thomas noted that he did not suppose there was one approach to practicing faith and that spirituality was more concerned with the soul, which could only be known outside the body.

> To me anything that is spiritual means something that is outside of the body and has to do with the soul and the spirit and in some ways I feel like there is not a single way to practice this faith. (TG 209-211)

Randy contemplated that spirituality is the leftover parts of self once the intellectual, physical, and emotional senses are quieted. He believed that spirituality dwells in that space.

> Well I would say it is what you have left after you have accounted for your physical body and your intellectual consciousness and your emotional consciousness. It's what's left over and hopefully there's a lot. It's as simple as that. I don't know what's left over after all that, but there is something and that's what I would call my spirit. (RD 937-940)

Anthony believed that there were larger forces at play in the broader universe. He did not believe in an anthropomorphic God per se, but he intuitively recognized that the interconnection between all living beings was on purpose and not coincidental.

> I understand that there's something, or I believe that there's something bigger than us as disconnected organic tissue moving around inside whatever molecular space we're in. I feel like there is ascension being out there that may not be an enlightening idea that there's a, you know, clock ticking that he's built, but I think there are hands of, there are signs I feel of larger things and larger forces at play. (AM 743-749)

These men perceived spirituality as an understanding that cannot be discerned vis-à-vis the five sensory inputs. Spirituality was generally described as transcendental – that which exists entirely separate from the body.

Interpersonal. Four of the participants defined spirituality as an interpersonal enterprise with a focus on the cultivation of relationships in a variety of life theatres. Anthony reported that his religion of origin inspired a value of community that he maintained in his current spiritual understanding. Anthony had recently transitioned out of his faith tradition and identified primarily as spiritual but continued to filter much of his experience through the prism of his early religious understanding. A large portion of his spiritual understanding mirrored his original religious beliefs, but he no longer identified as a Christian because of a disagreement with oppressive church doctrine.

> Because I think that knowing that God—like I said a minute ago, I think, I believe that we are the vessels of God's love, and as such, we can get closest to God by being in community with one another. And I think that goes back to a really basic understanding what I was taught and what I understand the first church to really be, which was a community that took care of other each other. (AM 859-864)

Thomas defined spirituality "in terms of relationships with others. Showing respect for one another. Doing justice. Treating people with dignity. Treating other human beings with kindness" (TG 235-237). Joshua concluded that learning from others was an critical piece of his spiritual understanding and said, "Maybe just having mutually beneficial relationships of not pressuring you to understand things my way and yet I think I value learning from other perspectives and in a curious, and giving and sharing of ideas way" (JC2 179-187). Despite a primary belief spiritual belief in the logic of mathematics and scientific reasoning, Adam also saw value in interpersonal relationships and incorporated that value into his wider spiritual understanding.

> And then separately in terms of things we value I do value math but there is another aspect to spirituality in terms of interpersonal even though what you value in terms of being good and that's a separate thing I feel like. (AK 350-353)

Interpersonal relationships were described by these men as having considerable merit in their broader spiritual understanding. The cultivation of relationship also appears as a significant spiritual exercise in a following section detailing the participants' spiritual practices.

Fluidity. The recognition that spirituality is a work in progress was a description used by four of the participants. Although not as descriptively substantial as some of the other properties of *Spiritual Understanding*, it emerged as an expressive topic of discussion that merited inclusion here. Thomas reported his spirituality did not require a philosophical anchor and truth could be received from a variety of sources.

> I don't know that it's rooted anywhere, other than maybe a perspective on the world. Like a perspective of having this humanistic point of view. I don't know. I think for me that's where it's rooted. It's just a personal belief that it doesn't have to be rooted in one single place. (TG 247-249)

Derrek described his understanding of spirituality as similar to water running in a stream.

> It bumps up against the rocks, flows around the bend, maybe even becomes trapped behind a damn. In the end it never changes its composition. It retains its essence. Spirituality is the same. It's fluid but it's made up of the same stuff we're all made of, which is the life force that runs through our veins and connects us all, despite the ego perception that we're different in some way because we speak a different language or have a contrasting skin color. (DM 832-836)

Joshua also described spiritual understanding as fluid and believed that there were multiple sources of spiritual truth; that no one religion or sacred text had a monopoly on truth.

> I think it's still very much a fluid thing, but I think that's one of the defining parts of it now is that it can be fluid and that I'm comfortable with how little I really know and understand about the spiritual dimension and a much deeper respect for other perspectives and viewpoints. (JC 542-545)

What became apparent across the quoted participant narratives was an understanding that spirituality was a fluid process and did not require foreclosure on a single set of principles or texts. Randy suggested that his depth of knowledge did not mean he had all the spiritual answers. He continued to learn about his spirituality as he matured. The the idea of fluidity as an element of spiritual understanding was exemplified when he declared, "I'm still figuring it out. I'm very much a work in progress. What I do know is that I experience a fair amount of euphoria in my life" (RD 596-597).

Values. There was some mention about the intersection of values and the participants' spiritual understanding. Adam reflected that his values were an integral component of his spiritual understanding. He disclosed, "I define my spirituality part of it to me is about values. It sort of is about the things that you value" (AK2 52-53). Randy and Robert both believed that the value of generosity was a meaningful part of their spiritual understanding. Randy said, "you get back what you give, and I really believe that" (RD 786), while Robert agreed when he restated a similar spiritual value, "that's the greatest thing is can't ever out-give God. The more you give the more you get. The more generous you are, the more comes to you. And I'm not just talking about money" (RB 783-785). Although values were conceived to be part of spiritual

understanding, these participants' values were defined in terms of spiritual exercises that are delineated in the following section on spiritual practices.

God. Discernment and connection to a higher power was reported by four of the men to be a major element of their spiritual understanding. These men no longer relied on anthropomorphic descriptions of God and generally believed It to be a creative life force that was at the center of every living thing. Only two of the men identified as agnostic and their perception of God is also accounted at the conclusion of this subsection.

Randy believed in a higher power but also concurred that his understanding of that power continued to be in flux.

> I think that's still in process. I don't think I can really say where I am, but I believe there is a higher power, because there is too much continuity in the world. There are too many things that seem to be of some divine ordinance. So I would say that I would lean toward a higher spirit in some way. But I also believe that we embody it. I believe it comes from us. (RD 668-671)

Robert also shared his understanding of the divine as a work in progress and believed that to describe God would limit its awesomeness. He assumed most human beings have limited capacity to describe and define the divine.

> For me, spirituality is my ever growing connection with the divine, whatever that is. I can't begin to say what it is, because that would limit it. That's another thing about American organized religion. We anthropomorphize God. We give God personal attributes with a pronoun and then that God would be pleased. God wouldn't be pleased or not pleased or anything – that's making it like some human thing. (RB 947-951)

Joshua made similar statements regarding the limited utility of the physical senses and human constructs when attempting to describe God.

> I definitely don't describe it in terms of gender anymore, which was really eye opening for me to be like, "Wait a minute. If God's not a man, how empowering for half of the world." I think that was really – I had kind of personalized it so much in my understanding of God as like this masculine figure who is very powerful but caring and kind of creepily knowledgeable of my inner thoughts and I think now I would understand God to be a less personal creative force. I guess the more I think about it, the less I want to say because I'm so not even sure of how to quantify or describe – I don't know. It's so subjective. Some people share about stories of where these all these unexplainable things and it seems like there is an invisible force at work but yet a lot of that is just emotion. The more we understand about the human brain I think the more we realize…what is reality? It's so subjective. I'm not even quite sure how I would describe it. (JC 669-679)

Anthony detailed his understanding that God is in everything and the ultimate source of life.

> It goes back to that same idea that God is infinite. God is – I wholeheartedly believe that it's in everything. Whatever cosmic origin, point and being and source of life that there is, I think it can be found in everyone and everything. (AM2 224-226)

As previously related, two of the men did not believe in God; therefore, God was not a factor in their spiritual understanding. Adam commented that God is a bad idea and people's belief in it is destructive.

> God is just a bad idea. Not even a good idea because some people wish it were true and it's the kind of thing where you don't realize what things are until you're so far away from

> them and then you come back and say of like Christianity is a cult of human sacrifice and it obviously is. (AK 453-456)

Thomas reported a sense of acceptance regarding his fledgling belief in God. Ultimately, he believed that he does not need a God to have a spiritual understanding.

> I don't know that I still have one. There was a period, and I think some of this was influenced by my partner. My partner is very agnostic. He's involved with some of the community service that a church does in the area. Another contradiction or another, yeah contradiction. But I think that at least for the past maybe 5 to almost 10 years that's where I've been sitting to some extent. Kind of questioning whether there is a God at all. I don't know that there is. I sometimes don't know that there is not either. But I think for me it's okay to not. I don't feel like that I need a God to worship. (TG 313-320)

When examined as a collective, nearly half of the participants continued to have a strong sense of God as part of their current spiritual understanding but different from the prescribed anthropomorphic constructs of their faith traditions. God was perceived by these men as universal continuity, divine ordinance, indescribable, as part of everything, and the ultimate life force. As noted above, a limited few did not believe in a god and questioned its very existence.

Spiritual Practice

In addition to reporting their understanding of spirituality, the men also described spirituality in terms of how it is practiced. The category is detailed below and includes properties that pertain to visiting sacred spaces, physical activities, mindfulness, community, kindness and gratitude, and idols.

Visiting sacred spaces. Environment appeared to provide significant context in relation to the practice of spirituality in the lives of the participants. Entering a natural setting as a

spiritual exercise was reported by four of the men as a vital part of their spiritual routine. Manny lives in the desert Southwest and stated that living in that environment provided endless opportunities to practice his spirituality. He shared, "At night, before I go to bed, I go out in the backyard and I just look around and I inhale the scent of what it means to live in a desert" (MH 474-476).

Ellis reported that by accessing nature he was able to cultivate that part of his spiritual understanding that believed in something bigger and greater than himself (i.e., a higher power).

> To me part of nature is disconnecting. When I say just disconnecting I mean when I find that spot where I got out to nature it is no cell phone, no electronics, just to be there and to see how nature works. I mean, nature doesn't rely on all the things [technology] that we seem to have to have to survive and it's nice to be able to learn from that and rely on it. And to just feel like you are part of it and not just part of the work-to-school-to-back-home scenario. To know that you are part of something bigger and greater. It's very grounding. At least for me anyway. (EJ 356-362)

Joshua found that being intentional about getting away from his everyday routine and enjoying the outdoors was a way to practice his spirituality.

> I went for a hike in a cemetery and found that to be really meaningful and I think that's something I want to make a more regular practice, is just, being among the dead in a way. I feel like there's such – I found that it brought a sense of peace and also perspective on my stress of the day and my thoughts that were swirling. I think purposeful – I would say cemeteries and nature and actually if they can be together that's the ideal are the times where I most feel most alive and connected to the world and myself and the other spiritual dimension that I'm still trying to define. So I would say just really being

> intentional about being out and getting away. This winter I guess I kind of just adapted by season. This winter I went snowshoeing out in the woods. (JC 773-781)

Derrek also commented that nature was an access point for deepening his spiritual practice.

> I've always found the nature surrounding Southern California to be my spiritual muse. I spend time hiking, surfing, sailing, and generally contemplating in and around nature. To me, it is the closest I can get to God. I would also say that finding solitude in nature is a big part of why it's so important to me. That the space that I can hear that still small voice that I define as my higher power. (DM 616-619)

These men reported visiting sacred spaces to be an integral component of their spiritual practice, particularly immersion in a natural setting. Immersion appeared to make up only part of the process and ultimately provided a space for additional exercises that included hiking, surfing, disconnecting from technology, and connecting to what has been described as the divine.

Body. As was reported in the above subsection on visiting sacred spaces, the men engaged in a number of physical activities that included biking, running, hiking, surfing, snowshoeing, and sailing as part of their spiritual routine. This sub-section delineates participant reports that specifically indicated body activity as the spiritual practice, rather than visiting a sacred space as the primary focus of practice. Joshua discussed how running connected his mind, body, and spirit and stimulated the feeling of bliss he experienced after completing the first few miles.

> Yes, because running for me connects kind of the mind, body, because there's definitely a part of me that in some ways it's almost the discipline of it is meaningful and almost symbolic…for me it kind of symbolizes the pain and effort and almost suffering in a way still has meaning and still can have redemptive qualities, because the first few miles of

> running is kind of not super fun. The body aches and hurts in all these placed and then I get to this one really blissful period where I hit my stride and I'm just cruising. (JC 811-816)

Robert's yoga practice was stated to be the pillar of his overall spiritual routine. Through the practice of yoga he was able to touch the divine by delving deeper into the meditative process.

> Then about the same time, I've always been involved in yoga, and I started – one of the reasons I love yoga is the body, mind, spiritual connection of the path, and when I'm in my yoga practice I have this sense – not every practice – but frequently a sense of the divine when I'm in the yoga practice. It's a 90 minute, pretty aggressive, practice of maybe 25 poses. But those poses were created for early Yogi's to go deeper into meditation. It opens up the body and opens up the mind and quiets the chatter of the mind, so you can more easily connect with something higher. So now I say that I'm in the Church of Yoga. And the yoga students are on their own spiritual path. (RB 334-341)

Manny incorporated breathing and stretching as a method for relaxing his body and resetting his mental attention.

> Okay, when I go to the gym I go through this breathing ritual, where I'm stretching. I've integrated some stuff from a former yoga teacher, guys who have been my trainers. So I have this kind of body relaxing, refocusing kind of thing I do for about 45 minutes before I work out with my training, and I do that before I ride in the morning on my bicycle. (MH 485-488)

This section outlined participant reports that centered on physical exercises that engaged the body as a means to practice spirituality. The exercises were attributed to relaxation and a refocussing and quieting of the mind.

Mind. Meditation, mindfulness, and reading were described by participants as spiritual practices that comprised the mind. Joshua reported a desire to strengthen his meditation practice but currently employed mindfulness as spiritual ritual. He shared, "so ideally I want to get into meditation stuff. I've been doing more like mindfulness exercises myself. I guess that's been empowering. I guess maybe in some ways it's more of a humanist spirituality." (JC 595-597). He also talked at length about using positive affirmations as a way to be mindful about changing behaviors that were no longer productive.

> Or sometimes I'll repeat things to myself that I believe about myself or want to. Like you are strong, because I'm dealing with being a people pleaser but also finding my voice, I guess. So I guess part of me – daily just trying to – which gets into almost a behavioral self-therapy of telling myself these things that I believe to be true but I think it's more in a…I don't know if that really was clear, but… (JC 711-719)

Anthony combined the practices of meditation and mindfulness as exercises to relieve his mind from the angst he experienced in stressful times.

> There are, I think, for lack of a better term, meditations that really hit home with me. I find myself at really a good moment when I was around 17 or 18, I realized that I at least grew up in a very religious place was during a really bad storm, and I really thought that one of those moments where it's like the trees could come down, lightning could strike, tornado could be here any second, I felt myself getting really agitated and really agitated. Before I realized it, I was singing Awesome God over and over again in my head. And it

> didn't necessarily make me feel connected and like I was now completely safe, but what it did was it took my mind off of that uncontrollable personal fear of self-preservation and allowed me to think rationally and logically. In that same vein, when I get completely bogged down or when I'm feeling just, you know, I've had a really bad—a friend of mine and I have been in a really bad fight and we no longer talk where I feel lost and I need direction, my dad read me the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling as a high school senior, and over the last seven or eight years I've probably read that and made pledges of my fraternity read that, you know, 2000 times. Because for me, I read through that, and it would be just like doing a, you know, bowing to the east and repeating a prayer. (AM 895-913)

Reciting the mantra "Awesome God" was reported to help him think rationally and logically. Although it may be difficult to believe this claim at face value, it is not hard to imagine that his practice of mindfulness could clear his mind in such a way that he would then be able to use logic and rationality in his decision making processes.

Ellis reported that he too included meditation as an element of his spiritual ritual.

> I do a lot of meditation. I have found that with my spirituality I kind of slowly gravitated and kind of absorbed pieces from here to there that kind of work for me. So meditation is one of those. (EJ 305-307)

Derrek also meditated as part of his daily spiritual practice.

> I meditate at least three times a day. Meditation for me is an opportunity to get out of my head and to realize who and what I am. My ego can be so oppressive sometimes. It's like a looping tape that tells me I'm not good enough or that I'm not handsome enough. It's crazy but true. Meditation helps me to realize the truth about my existence. That I'm

> a unique emanation of God and that I'm here to be a beneficial presence on this planet through releasing my gifts and talents in the world. To be a creative source for good. Meditation keeps me centered in that reality. (DM2 17-23)

Other men reported reading spiritual texts as a central component of their spiritual routines. Randy described the spiritual benefit gained by reading authors who promote spiritual principles in their writings.

> I read [Jane Beech's] thought for the day, every day. It's a very rich experience to read it. It's usually about four or five pretty substantial paragraphs each day that she writes five days a week. What I find is that I read them and it sort of sets my tone for the day. It gets me thinking about what's important because that's what she focuses in on. If you were to sort of capsulate what she has to say I believe that kindness and gratitude would be a great part of what she has to say. (RD 686-689; 720-724)

Ellis revealed that he followed the Dalai Lama's writings and speeches.

> Like I said, I continue to read. There are individuals like the Dalai Lama who every time I get a chance to hear the Dalai Lama speak or do a presentation, even if it's online, I try to because I think there is some wisdom and some great things there. (EJ 419-421)

Joshua found that reading books with a secular, philosophical perspective assisted him in the development of his spiritual identity. He talks about forbidden books that he believed to be any books that were not propagated by his religion of origin.

> I've been reading this book by Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*. It's pretty good. I definitely want to get into more these forbidden books because I think it's been really helpful. He had another book called *Free Will* that I read too last week and it was really

> good. So I guess I see myself exploring more secular, philosophical works in an attempt to deepen my spiritual perspective. (JC2 123-127)

Whether they practiced meditation, mindfulness, or read spiritual writings, these men reported participating in spiritual rituals that engaged the mind. These practices were often associated with positive outcomes that are detailed in a subsequent section on outcomes.

Community. Interpersonal relationships were factors that shaped the participants' spiritual understanding. This subsection describes how the men cultivated and participated in community as part of their spiritual routine. Anthony declared that fostering relationships was an essential part of his spiritual practice and is one of the ways to know God.

> So that idea, that fact to me says the only way to—you know we don't find God by looking into ourselves. We find God by experiencing his creation, by experiencing the people around you. And I think that's why relationships to me are so important on a spiritual level. (AM 870-874)

Joshua reported that rather than attend a traditional religious church, temple, or synagogue to celebrate his spirituality, he chose to have brunch with a group of close friends on Sunday mornings.

> In that way it's been really liberating to create a … me and some friends we have a non-church-goers brunch club now. Sunday mornings we just get together and enjoy a brunch on a Sunday morning and just enjoy our friendship and our time together and good food and that's kind of become our new spiritual practice in a way. That community and that connection with others, just is genuine and authentic because we enjoy each other. (JC 685-689)

Ellis explained that spending time with close friends was a spiritual practice. He reported that their discussions about spiritual principles and their spiritual journeys was not only a way to build community but was also a method for expanding his individual spiritual knowledge.

> But also my network of friends. I have some very close friends who have very similar views and we talk about spirituality quite a bit. Kind of, where we are on own journey and what we've read new or what they've read new. (EJ 421-424)

Derrek attended a spiritual center in his native Los Angeles and believed that the community there was a great spiritual resource. His participation in a variety of activities there positively impacted his overall spiritual practice.

> Agape [spiritual center] was truly a gateway to my newfound spiritual identity. I had so many dark nights of the soul in my early and mid-twenties. I knew as soon as I entered the building for the first time that I had found my spiritual home. Now I'm a member of the organization and attend events and services throughout the year. For me, being part of a larger community really enhances my spirituality and is a practice in and of itself. (DM2 214-217)

Interpersonal relationships and community were identified as both a core part of these participants' spiritual understanding and their spiritual practice as well. Relationship to others appeared to be a conduit for experiencing the divine and created a space for strengthening their spiritual identities.

Kindness and generosity. Five of the men talked about kindness and the act of giving as modes of practicing their spirituality. Anthony believed that the act of kindness was akin to an act of God.

> The most spiritual thing you do is being kind and I'm reminded on a daily basis by other people's kindness and compassion. Other people's willingness to sacrifice. That reaffirms that own belief that I have that ultimately I think that if God is anything, God is a source of good and by seeing those random acts of kindness in the street. (AM2 26-29)

Manny shared that the act of kindness is a spiritual exercise that takes shape in giving compliments to the people he encounters as part of his work as a therapist.

> That when I meet someone I find something about them that is really attractive or positive and I share that with them. I make a point of letting people know that I appreciate who they are. It's really spiritual to be kind to people. And it may be something like, "Hey, I love your smile," or "That color looks great on you." Back to my days of a tie and socks matching kid. But it's the simple stuff. It's to recognize that there is this thread of hope and joy in every encounter we have. (MH 462-467)

Joshua stated that his practice revolves around creating heaven on earth now, rather than waste his time in an attempt to convert others to a particular belief system that emphasizes heaven as a terminal destination.

> The heaven thing. Now I'm realizing that I don't want that to be my motivator – to convert everybody to my way of thinking so we can enjoy this wonderful magical place someday but to realize that this world is kind of messed up and I want to be a part of making it better now. So I guess it's maybe more about a humanistic perspective of attempting to work towards alleviating pain and suffering now because I don't want to be caught up in escapism. Being kind to others is how I can create heaven on earth now. (JC 614-619)

Generosity also emerged as prominent spiritual ritual practiced by the following participants. Anthony shared that he gives his time and money to causes that he believes in and in doing so is able to cultivate spirituality in his life.

> I do a lot of pro bono things. I do a lot of—the Camp for the Spiritual Pride project is probably as close as I get to going to church and being spiritual every year besides church camp. And all that is free of time services, money, everything donated to it. It's all very, like, this is a mission I believe in, which is telling, you know, is helping people in need. So, I will give freely of myself to make that happen. And through that you feel fulfilled. (AM 795-801)

Derrek reported practicing generosity by helping friends in need or giving to organizations that help the less fortunate. It is through these acts that he believes he experiences God.

> It's about the interactions with people and casual conversation and, you know, you get a phone call from a friend saying I need help this Friday. Yeah what do you need? I'm going to go do this. I'm going to drop some stuff at Good Will and take some books to this school. Those are the kinds of things where I feel like I encounter God and are the moments that I need to be present for that are going to launch me into understanding why someone else feels the need to be compassionate. (DM 605-609)

Likewise, Robert reported that he and his partner are very generous with their financial and personal resources and tithe their money and time to philanthropic causes that they believe in. He said, "we're very generous in terms of money we give to various things and our time and our talents and it's all circulating" (RB 779-780).

Both kindness and generosity materialized as vital spiritual practices that cultivated these men's spiritual understanding through acts of compassion that were meant to make the world a

better place for all. Though these spiritual exercises the men appeared to touch the divine and strengthen their sense of spiritual wellness.

Gratitude. The expression of gratitude was reported by three of the participants to be a meaningful spiritual practice. Derrek talked about his daily routine that incorporated what he described as gratitude prayers.

> When I was a young man I saw an episode on Oprah. Her guest was Maya Angelou. She said that if your only prayer was thank you, that was enough. I wasn't a big prayer at the time and thought that I might try it. So now, throughout my day, I say thank you for whatever it is I'm experiencing. Even the hard times, I let out a gratitude prayer recognizing that God puts a rainbow in every cloud. (DM 731-734)

Joshua also recognized the act of gratitude to be an integral part of his spiritual practice. He was intentionally grateful for the here-and-now moments that he reported were filled with beauty and joy.

> I want the practice of gratitude to still be a part of my life, but I don't want to attribute it to a defined being as the Christian God. So I guess it's now cultivating that in my practice I want to recognize the beauty of life and the joy of living whether it's when I'm eating or when I'm on a run or when I just see something amazing or experience a deep connection with another person to be grateful for it and to soak in that moment and to maybe recognize the finiteness of life too and that this moment is all that I have, and so to really enjoy that without any expectation for anything else. (JC 600-609)

Robert was overwhelmed by the feeling of gratitude when he practiced yoga. In those silent moments he became aware of all that he was grateful for and allowed himself to experience the joy that came with it. He went on to say, "When I go into that place sometimes I'm just

overwhelmed with gratitude and it will just be this flooding of unconditional love that I think happens when I leave my body, that ultimate time" (RB 521-523). The sensation of gratitude that overcame him during his yoga practice translated to other areas of his life.

> I think it's an appreciation for the moment and to embrace it. I want to say it's a gift, but I catch myself. I'll be walking to work and I just start praying and I'm like, "Oh God, thanks for the day and thanks for this and that." (RB 525-527)

The act of gratitude was defined as a pivotal spiritual practice by these men. Gratitude was exercised throughout the day as prayer and remembering to be grateful for the present moment, whether or not it was experienced as good or bad.

Sacred objects. Three of the participants described how spiritual idols played a role in their spiritual practice. Sacred objects in this instance included books and what might be considered traditional religious idolatry. Ellis reported that he displayed spiritual idolatry that represented being true to oneself and exhibiting kindness to others including statues of well-known religious figures and books related to Christianity, paganism – what has been traditionally understood as indigenous and/or polytheistic religious practices, and Wicca – a modern pagan witchcraft tradition.

> Absolutely. I mean, I think if you were to look around my house you would probably see that I am very eclectic in a lot of ways. I have statues of Buddha and I've got statues of Ganesh because I think that there is a lot of truth in the energy behind believing in some of these individuals because they all had very common teachings of being true to yourself and being kind to others. I think if you looked at my library of books you would find everything from topics of Christianity to Paganism and Wicca and everything in between

> because I think it's part of who I am to be able to look at those and learn from it and go, "That kind of rings true to me and it's something that I can incorporate". (EJ 373-380)

Ellis owned and personally exhibited idols that represented that land he grew up on and the Native American traditions that were part of his early childhood experience. He also maintained a library on Christian theology.

> Growing up in Oklahoma Native American stuff is everywhere so I have quite a bit of those. I do have a lot of books on Christianity still. I would say I've got several books on Catholicism because I think the belief and understanding of the different saints is very fascinating and interesting. I haven't incorporated any of the religious practices of the saints into my own spirituality but I still find it fascinating. (EJ 387-391)

Adam's spiritual understanding was mostly rooted in mathematical theory and he practiced his spirituality by collecting books of original works by the great mathematicians.

> I love having books of original works. I have lots of books. I also have this is a better example this is a book by Bertrand Russell and I also have but one of the first mathematical texts was from the Greeks and I have that somewhere. (AK 515-520)

Robert also had an extensive library of books by the spiritual masters of the new thought/ancient wisdom tradition and religious science. His library provided an opening to delve below the surface and truly deepen his spiritual understanding.

> Oh yeah. I'm not dabbling on the surface. You go in my library, you'll see. I have a whole library of spiritual books and I had a whole library I gave away, in 1996 when we took a trip around the world. (RB 350-352)

The aforementioned participants identified spiritual idols, including books and traditional religious and native idolatry, as playing a meaningful role in how they practiced spirituality. The

next section describes the outcomes related to the men's spiritual understanding and spiritual practices.

Spiritual Outcomes

Participants reported a number of outcomes related to their spiritual practices, which originated from their broader spiritual understandings. Outcomes were organized into the following subsections that describe the properties of freedom, connection, serenity, courage, and separation.

Freedom. Three of the participants identified the expression of freedom as a palpable outcome of practicing their spiritual understanding. Ellis believed that his spiritual perspective allowed him to explore the parts of his sexuality that were off limits in his religion of origin.

> You know, I think there are a lot of things in my previous religion, being a Southern Baptist that we were brought up as being wrong. For example, things like pornography or even being able to talk about sexual experiences or read a book or graphic novel about topics like that. So with my spirituality where it is now, I have that ability or that chance to explore and not be afraid of, "Oh well if I watch this video to learn something new or just because it's something I enjoy," it's not detrimental to who I am spiritually. It's not going to cast me into the pits of hell somewhere. (EJ2 33-39)

Thomas' spiritual outlook contributed to his decision to limit the contact he had with his homophobic father, who was also a minister.

> I am free from thinking about him again, because honestly he occupied a lot of my thinking space growing up and even during my 20s, he occupied a fair amount of my space in terms of wanting him to accept me for who I am and then I decided I'd had

> enough. So for me the best way that I can survive is by focusing on the relationships that are nurturing for me and he's not one of them. That's what I call freedom. (TG 385-389)

Derrek experienced freedom from his ego and believed that living for the moment has given him some freedom from suffering.

> For so many years of my life, I was trapped by my ego. I was never good enough, I didn't have anything to offer in a relationship. I had to settle for the bottom of the heap because I thought it was the best I could do. I'll tell you that was a tremendous amount of suffering. My spiritual practice really freed me from the cell of self-torment. I sometimes go back in from time to time but I try to keep my attention focused right here and now. That way I'm free from the old stories that try to keep me in that suffering. (DM2 103-107)

The experience of freedom is probably summed up by Manny who exclaimed that his spirituality gave him the freedom to dive into life because he ultimately knew that there was a divine force that would catch him if he were to fall (MH 436). Spiritual understanding and practice afforded participants the freedom to explore their sexuality, set positive boundaries in destructive relationships, and frequently break free from the shackles of suffering.

Connection. Four of the men talked about how their spiritual understanding and practice positively impacted the connections they had to others, particularly intimate relationships. Ellis believed that spirituality played a leading role in how he and his partner have co-constructed their relationship.

> I think a lot of that has come through in my relationship. My relationship with my partner and I. We've gone through a lot of explorations and discussion on what we want in a relationship. What we don't want in a relationship. And spirituality has been a big

> drive in that because it has given us both the voice to be able to say hey this may not be necessarily what we think of as an American type relationship with the house and the white picket fence but it's us and it's what works and it's worked for 13 years. (EJ 172-177)

Joshua reported that the relationships with his siblings have strengthened as a result of his spiritual understanding, which ultimately allowed him to come out to his parents and begin a discussion about his fundamental disagreement with some of the doctrines of his faith tradition. His migration to a spiritual identity, and the subsequent practices, changed how his family system communicated and deepened their intimacy.

> But also valuing my siblings are all a lot more open and less religious than my parents. So that's been fun too to have conversations with them about God and Christianity and me being gay and all of these things. So I think that's led to a deepening of our friendship as siblings. (JC2 267-270)

Ellis provided an example of how his spirituality provided a framework for maintaining equilibrium in his relationship with his brother. As a result of the application of the spiritual framework, Ellis experienced greater peace and sanity.

> Um, I think probably a good example would be probably with my older sibling. I have a brother who is 10 years older than me and we do not see eye to eye on pretty much anything in existence in the world. Spirituality kind of gave me that framework of is it healthy to keep both of us in this constant conflict and struggle or what do I do in order to resolve this and step away from it and that spirituality is kind of what for that situation gave me the frame work to be able to step back and away from it and not engage in the

> argument of who was right and who was wrong and to keep my own peace and sanity with the situation. (EJ2 99-105)

Adam also supposed that his understanding of spirituality geared him up for healthier relationships because he was open to them.

> I think that ultimately it sets me up for a little bit healthier relationships because I can make room for where everybody's coming from because I'm not – I don't feel locked in to quantified beliefs that tell me this isn't true, that at best I've discovered things that have rang true to me my entire experience. (AK2 258-261)

Connection to others, including intimate relationships with life partners and family members, appears to be a positive outcome related to these men's spiritual understanding and practice.

Serenity. Serenity surfaced as an outcome related to three of the participants' spiritual understanding and practice. Serenity was conceptualized in terms of peacefulness and calmness. Thomas reported that the spiritual practice of visiting sacred houses of worship and listening to certain styles of music conjured strong feelings related to serenity.

> When I'm in that space I feel almost a sense of emptiness. It sounds kind of depressing to say it like that, but I get so wrapped up in work and in my life that I don't really get to experience that place of serenity, of emptiness until I'm in those spaces. Perhaps that's what's always been familiar to me. Maybe that's why I find those places to be sacred places. But I can get that experience when I'm listening to any type of music like Mariah Carey. I heard her on the radio this morning on the way to work and it was just kind of – I had this moment of solitude – honestly I don't really care for Mariah Carey that much but it happened to be in that moment that this was that place of serenity. (TG 301-311)

Ellis shared that he experienced calmness and peace when practicing his spirituality, particularly in relation to contact with the natural world and awareness of the moment.

> There's a sense of calmness and peace and for me there is something about being able to – even if it's my own backyard to be able to step out on the grass barefoot and just feel the sun on your face and the wind as it blows and know that you are here right now in this moment and that's all that matters. It's what is right that second. (EJ 365-368)

Derrek demonstrated the serenity he enjoys when meditating at a sacred lake deep in the hills of Malibu.

> I travel up the coast once or twice a month in a pilgrimage to the Lake Shrine. It's hard to describe the feelings that I experience there: deep connection to the divine; a peacefulness that transcends mere words; and a centeredness that stays with me for days to come. It's as if the film from my eyes is removed and I can see. That's one of the best parts of practicing spirituality: peace. (DM2 353-357)

A range of participants confirmed serenity as a meaningful outcome related to spiritual practice. The peace the men experienced as a result of their applying spiritual understanding appeared to be a factor that benefited relationships and overall personal wellness.

Courage. Three of the men reported that application of their spiritual understanding inspired them to be courageous. Joshua recounted his skepticism that God would really care about the sex or gender of his partner. Through his new understanding of spirituality and an expanded perception of God, he was able to find the courage to come out to himself and eventually stopped living what he determined was a double life.

> You know, I'm not doing any harm and if I'm in a positive, healthy, encouraging, supportive relationship does God really care what parts I've got and what parts my

> partner has? So I think finally having the courage to really voice that to myself and realize that I can't lead this double life anymore. Emotionally I can't the strain of it. It was really driving me to…I wouldn't say I had depressive symptoms but maybe if I let myself, but I just kept up this whole – I don't think I realized until after I worked through that how much happier and just at peace and relaxed and comfortable with myself and the world around me I was that I hadn't realized how withdrawn and guarded and filtered I had become, because I guess it was that gradual building. All this pressure was building up and I didn't realize how much of a strain it was placing on me until it was removed and I all the sudden I was like, I feel great. (JC2 520-528)

Ellis reported that part of his initial spirituality was the recognition that he had to create stronger congruence between what he believed, how he felt, and how he behaved. His spiritual practice gave him the courage to come out.

> I think if it hadn't been for my spirituality I'm not sure if I would have had the courage to come out, because part of that spirituality was really understanding that I had to be true to who I was and not act as somewhat others expected of me necessarily. So to me spirituality has given me a backbone to be who I am and to shape that in a way that others are accepting of it. I can continue to be me. (EJ 449-453)

Adam stated that he now completely refrains from lying, which was a major change in his behavior. He reported that as a young person he would lie all the time to cover up the guilt and shame that he would experience. Adam believed he failed to meet the strict moral expectations of his faith tradition (i.e. sexual thoughts for a person of the same sex were abhorrent).

> I do have…there are specific things that I feel like [my spirituality has given me]. I don't lie anymore ever. I hate to do it and it's not worth it to me because growing up I was so…

> it was just a huge burden to have to think about and constantly be hiding everything and that sort of thing. (AK 397-400)

Courage to come out of the closet, fully embrace their sexuality, and to be more honest was an evident outcome of these men's spiritual understanding and practice. The following section details a negative outcome associated with the men's spiritual practice: separation.

Separation. Three of the participants reported that their spirituality was a cause of intimate separation from their families of origin and certain friendships because their newly developed spiritual ideologies were sometimes incompatible with those whom they were in relationship. Anthony shared that he believes that his "wandering" spirituality falls outside what his family considers to be normal; therefore, he is more "definitive" in his description of his spirituality to limit "falling out of the loop" with his family. He minimized his "wandering" spiritual identity to leave more room for his sexual identity to be affirmed. As a result, Anthony felt separated from his family in his spiritual development.

> With my family, I feel like I have to be a little more definitive than I want to be with my spirituality because I am already openly gay and somewhat out of the social norm of the family to be also the least religious would put my on like two scales of the most out of the loop with everybody . So I kind of choose my battles with family. I know I'm not compromising on my sexuality. I know I'm not compromising the conversations that will arrive from that because my parents and my family still say things that I think are ignorant about gay issues and – to take scriptural word – evangelize the gay issues to them. So in order to maintain that balance and that relationship I compromise a little bit on how much I talk about my wandering spirituality. Sometimes I feel really alone in this. (AM2 113-121)

Joshua, too, recognized that a distancing of some of his current and former relationships had begun to take place – an outcome he related to his conscious decision to view the world from a spiritual perspective.

> I think there's just that kind of painful reality that it is going to lead to a distancing for a lot of my current and former friendships and even family relationships. I'm already sensing that now. It's kind of this open disconnect. They're still talking to me as if we have this shared understanding and the shared values and spiritual beliefs and I don't share that anymore with them and now I have consciously made that decision that that's not how I see the world anymore and yet I feel like I'm coming out all over again in that way. (JC2 232-238)

Adam thought that his identification as an atheist created distance between him and the American public at-large. He also reported that his atheism influenced who he chose to date.

> Also the fact that I am atheist and that makes me strange. Most people find it taboo and it distances me from people. I couldn't date someone who was religious. I couldn't date them because I cannot understand effectively but I can't empathize with believing God. How does 99% of this world believe this? It's so blatantly false. It's so it's like I cannot understand it. (AK 594-598)

The category of *Spirituality* was exemplified as understanding, practice, and outcomes. Spiritual understanding was portrayed as a belief in: a) that which is transcendental; b) interpersonal relationships; c) the fluid nature of spiritual development; d) spiritual values; e) a higher power frequently labeled as God. Spiritual practices included the act of accessing nature, kindness and generosity, gratitude, activities geared toward the mind including meditation and mindfulness, activities geared toward the body including yoga and running, the cultivation of

community, and the procurement of spiritual idols. Spiritual outcomes were described as freedom to live authentic lives, deeper connection to others, internal and external serenity, courage to speak their truth, and sometimes results is separation from others. The following section begins a review of the results related to questions that pertained to the intersection between spiritual and sexual identity.

Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities

This category provides a descriptive account of the intersection between the men's spiritual and sexual identities. A number of participants believed that the two identities danced in harmony with one another; while others perceived the two parts of self as separate and distinct.

Sexual and Spiritual Compatibility

The men were asked to respond to questions that asked them to describe how they navigated the confluence between their spiritual and sexual identities. Four of the men reported the two identities as intimately connected to the other. Manny recalled that many of the shamans and medicine men of indigenous cultures were considered two-spirited and would probably be described as gay or queer in the American society. Ultimately, he believed that sexuality and spirituality were one in the same.

> I don't think it's accidental that in many indigenous cultures the spiritual feelers; the Shamans, the Medicine Men, are people who in contemporary Western culture would be identified as gay, and that part of being a gay man is being one of two spirited people. That we carry that energy that comes of masculine/feminine and that whole rainbow in between within the very core of our being. So to be gay, queer, homosexual, whatever

> word you use – at the very core is to be in the world in a very different way. (MH2 22-28)

Joshua stated that he began his spiritual journey in response to what he experienced as the incompatibility between his sexual identity and faith tradition. His spiritual identity was truly birthed from his sexuality and both continued to have a symbiotic relationship.

> I guess because of the [prior] rejection of my sexual identity self I'm not willing to live in the tension of that so it's led me to create a place where I can have that peace, that harmony between how I see myself in the world and interacting with the spiritual realm, not being in conflict with the whole me including my sexual self. (JC2 20-26)

Anthony agreed that his spiritual understanding inspired him to feel a greater sense of peace about his sexual orientation. He reiterated that he did not feel any conflict between his sexuality and spirituality.

> But I think that spiritually knowing that I feel as if I am on good terms being homosexual with whatever that divine entity is – whatever that origin source is for the universe – since I feel like I'm in line with that that is kind of the basis for being able to put my sexuality first and see myself as a positive being because at the underlying factor, you know my third dimension of self or whatever it is, that eternal concept, I feel like on that spiritual level, that ambiguous level, I feel like I am in a good place. I don't feel a conflict with that. (AM2 79-87)

Derrek believed that sexuality was the essence of spirituality and that the two parts of self were inseparable and, therefore, highly compatible. He also noted that the religious and cultural messages he received as a young person stigmatized sexuality in general and gay sexuality specifically.

> The feeling I experience when I'm in love with another man, although I'm familiar with the physiological changes that stimulate the lust and passion I experience toward the beginning of the affair, is so profound that I can only call it God. Its love that I would die for. Love that I would give the shirt off my back for. Love that I would fight for. How could that be wrong? How could who I have sex with be separate from who I pray to? It's all connected; I don't see how they two could be separate from one another. (DM2 171-175)

The men cited were clear about their strong perception that sexuality and spirituality existed closely together and were expressed and practiced in tandem with one another. The other men perceived sexuality and spirituality to be separate and distinct from the other.

Sexual and Spiritual Separation

Three of the participants reported their spiritual and sexual identities as having a somewhat inverse relationship. These particular men felt that, although the two identities were not completely foreign, there were minimal opportunities for collaboration. Anthony compared his spiritual and sexual identities as neighbors on a cul-de-sac with limited contact.

> You could call them neighbors on a cul-de-sac and occasionally the party brings cars that block your driveway and you kind of talk it out and sometimes you might barbeque together but all in all I think that I do – with the sole exception of the Spiritual Pride project have those as two kind of – I'm trying to think of the word – they are not exclusive communities but they are also not deeply intertwined. So – yeah – I don't know how to describe that other than I think the neighbor analogy is probably pretty good for my point. (AM2 152-158)

Adam reported that he understood spirituality and sexuality to exist on separate plains; the former on the macro level and the latter or the micro level.

> It's hard for me to connect the two mainly because when I think of things spiritually I think of things such as humanity and these sorts of universal things and sexuality to me is very specific and it's hard for me to think of the terms as related. (AK 576-579)

Thomas shared that he rarely thinks about his sexual identity and one of the only times it corresponds to his spirituality is in the context of choosing to attend a church community that is gay affirmative.

> I don't know that it does that much now other than if I'm attending a church I make sure that I attend a place that is affirming. I don't feel like that there is, especially with attending church and listening to what's being said, I don't feel like that I can – for lack of a better work – in good faith, I don't feel like that it's something that I can do anymore. I don't really think about being gay that much. It's certainly part of my core being but it's not something that I think much about. I can go a few days without really thinking about it that much. (TG 324-331)

These participants believed that their spiritual and sexual identities were not conflated and mostly existed on separate plains; although, Thomas did suggest that his sexuality motivated his decision to attend gay affirmative places of worship.

Conscious Sexuality

Three of the men talked about how their spirituality emerged within their sexual and romantic relationships. Derrek recalled experiencing intense orgasms with his partner of five years and the post coital bliss he experienced afterwards.

> Man, it's no joke. I don't know how other people describe God but when I would make love to my partner and experience the deepest feeling of intimacy and trust – it was so good. It was as if I was at the center of the universe; totally content; totally alive; totally myself; totally in love; totally free; totally whole. That's how I perceive my spirituality as connected to my sexuality. God is good love making man, I'm telling you. If you haven't tried it, I highly encourage you to. (DM2 53-56)

Manny described the profound energetic connection he experienced that superseded the physiological explosion of an orgasm when intimately partnered with another man.

> The piece that became alive for me was that when we let our heads get out of the way the energetic connection of what it means to be alive becomes really strong and that energy is very, very sexual and that's also the place from within who we are that our creativity comes so that creative energy, that connection to what it means to be alive gets manifested in our behavior and our attractions then there is that piece of it and when the person or persons with whom we share that energy are of the same gender then that energy is so much stronger than just behavior that leads to orgasm. (MH2 14-20)

Anthony stated that his spiritual understanding motivated his choice of healthy romantic relationships that are less about how his partner identifies religiously or culturally and is more concerned with what that person values.

> I think that sets me up for healthy romantic relationships because, at least from my end of it, you know I won't be sitting there saying I have to marry someone who is Catholic and they have to go to the same parish as me and that's super important to who I am and what I believe. They could potentially – you know I came from a Christian background – they could be Islamic or Muslim and that theoretically has no point of contention for me

> because they are in the way that makes sense to them the most ultimately looking for those same answers and ultimately trying to move forward. It's those spiritual factors that I think primarily affect my relationships. (AM2 267-274)

This section encapsulated the participants' reports related to the intersection of their sexual and spiritual identities. These men believed that the two identities were intimately intertwined, while others did not perceive the two to be connected in a meaningful way. Finally, some of the men described how spirituality occurred in their intimate relationships.

Additional Findings

All of the participants were queried in the final interview to reflect upon their developmental journeys from an early faith tradition to a primary spiritual identity. The subsequent subsections describe how the men characterized themselves in relation to their spirituality, the insight they gained along their passage from religion of origin to a spiritual identification, their final thoughts on the topic of religion and spirituality, and the future direction of their spiritual development.

Self-Awareness

In one of the last questions of the final interview, the men were asked what their spirituality said about them as a gay person. Responses illustrated the participants' commitment to remaining open to other viewpoints, their perception of themselves as truth seekers, and a general pledge to make the world a better place. Anthony shared that he continues to seek answers to his questions and the mere fact that he has not foreclosed on a singular truth is the fundamental definition of his spirituality.

> That I'm young. That I am still searching, more so than anything. My spirituality is very loosely built on those few truths we talked about last time and as such I think that if

> anything it says that I am in development. That there hasn't been enough in my life that has made me feel confident to draw out my platform and stand on it, I think. The flip side to that, is it says that I am active and engaged as opposed to passive and resting on the experiences I have already accumulated to tell me what I think. That I am actively searching for experiences that are going to help define that. (AM2 358-364)

Randy agreed that his spiritual practice confirmed that he was a person who questioned the nature of reality and the assumptions of truth that stemmed from social consensus.

> I think that it says a lot about how I see myself. That is I am very much a questioning person. There are very few things I don't question and some of them I try to move away from the ego as much as I can. (RD 733-735)

Ellis reported that his spiritual beliefs established that he would never have all the answers to every question but that he would continue to learn from others and their collective perspectives.

> I'm at because I know that it continues to grow and continues to change and I think that's the exciting part about it is I don't have all the answers. I'll never have all the answers. I hope I never have all the answers because I want to be able to continue to learn from other people and other experiences. (EJ 426-429)

Robert believed that his spirituality suggested that he was a perpetual seeker of the divine and to know God in deeper and more meaningful ways as he grew in his spiritual practice.

> I'm a seeker. I think it goes back to when I was 8, 9, 10 years old and it's never stopped and I don't think it ever will stop and I completely feel open at the top. I'm not committed to any particular dogma but I am committed to meeting the divine more frequently and for longer periods of time. (RB 796-798)

Joshua summed up the men's collective narrative related to seeking truth, remaining open to other perspectives, and helping to make the world a better place.

> I am a thoughtful philosopher of the meaning of life and have pondered the meaning of my death and existence here and I am not firmly resolved in any kind of concrete knowledge but I am more in tune with the present and the moment and embracing that. I am open and in active dialogue with other perspectives and I am constantly seeking to refine and adapt my understanding within my lived reality and I am seeking to make this world a better place for the time that I am here. (JC2 136-140)

Spirituality and Religion – Differences and Similarities

Participants were also asked to discuss how they perceived religion and spirituality to be similar and different. This sub-section is different from the sub-category Intersection (p. 38-39) in that it is the result of the analysis of answers that asked the men to address the differences and similarities related to religion and spirituality from a global perspective versus their own individual experiences. Several of the participants agreed that both enterprises were geared toward answering life's biggest questions related to how and why life exists. Religion and spirituality also were observed to provide meaning and purpose to individual and community practitioners. Some of the men believed the two belief styles are different in that religion appeared to be an exclusive set of principles that discriminated against non-believers while spirituality was described as a more fluid endeavor that was open to multiple truths and practices. Joshua articulated how he perceived the similarities and differences between religion and spirituality.

> So I guess the similarities I see are shared understanding of something other than the physical and some kind of connection with a deeper part of ourselves, but some other part

> of ourselves that can't be – an intangible almost – sense of meaning and purpose within ourselves and also seeking to explain the deeper questions of our existence. I think they both seek to create some sort of framework for meaning and purpose but also I think to guide our actions with our fellow human and our interactions with the broader world. You know, people's spirituality and religion kind of guide how we treat the earth and how we treat the physical material world. Also, they are very different in the ways of how it's lived out. Religion usually is much more exclusive and I'm right and they're wrong. It kind of creates an otherness group and speaks to dominance on some level or conversion whereas I feel like spirituality is much more open to multiple truths instead of one absolute right way to live or to understand. I think spirituality is much more fluid in the way that one understands it and one lives it out and practices and the spiritual practices are much more diverse. (JC2 294-307)

Anthony complemented Joshua's observation and added his opinion that religion and spirituality were primarily similar in that they were seeking to identify and know life's original source.

> Ultimately they are both geared toward answering a question, which is are we alone and where do we come from, what's our origin? So at the most basic level the spirituality and religion are both looking for that. I think they are very different in the fact that religion to me suggests the idea of getting behind a set of defined ideas and principles that we are going to call as fact and truth and we are going to keep searching into the unknown from that dock. Whereas I think spirituality is very different because it's more like we found the edge of the ocean and everybody's diving in looking for things themselves and as we all go out and touch more and more into the darkness we can collectively bring those experiences together that define our boundaries. (AM2 239-247)

Ellis's statement mirrored the previous two and included the reflection that a spiritual journey is individual in nature because the process mirrors the person's unique questions and the parallel steps he takes to find the answers.

> You know I think it is that idea that there is a difference between religion and spirituality because I really think spirituality is such a personal journey that we all go through and it can be part of a religion, absolutely I think, but I think we all have our own steps that we take and I think that was my big thing that I wanted to be part of this information to show that as a gay man we do have our own spiritual journey and what we go through that sometimes it does affect our sexuality and where we go with it but it also affects our life and it drives us in a lot of ways. (EJ 471-476)

Derrek cited Plato's Allegory of the Cave as a metaphor to illustrate the differences between religion and spirituality.

> I guess the two are similar in that they are attempt to describe and know the divine. I suppose that both have ethical and moral values in common, particularly ideas related to do no harm. Other than that, I would say that religion is like Plato's Allegory of the Cave. You have a group of people who are hypnotized by projected shapes that are only reflections of objects moving across light. Their only reality is what they've been shown to believe. It's like a group psychosis. Spirituality is listening to that inner voice that says 'this can't be real' and then turning one's attention to the ultimate source: light. I stood up, broke the religious chains that shackled me, and busted my way out of that cave to see the true reality. We're all the same. (DM2 186-193)

These men largely concurred that there were similarities between religion and spirituality but mostly defined the two as singular and distinct from one another, as described in the prior section on *Spirituality*.

Personal Insights

The participants personal insights related to religion and spirituality reflected the perils of religion and the conflict that can arise between internal human desires for love and connectivity and the external pressure to maintain exclusivity for how desire and love is shared with others. Thomas believed that a fundamental belief in any type of dogma creates a vacuum in which the individual discounts the core of himself in deference to an external locus of control.

> When you become a fundamentalist of any kind you give up your sense of who you are and the danger for all of us is to lose ourselves in some kind of belief system that is not grounded in the core of who we are. That we just take it from the external – external focus is in control rather than an internal focus of control. I'm a believer that the challenge for me is to balance the external and internal. I can't speak to whether that's the challenge for everybody but I'm inclined to think that it probably is. I would have to talk to a fundamentalist about that. (TG2 199-204)

Adam also described the importance of knowing why he believes a certain precept or theory and reiterated his conviction that religion promoted a lack of reasoning that led to stupidity.

> It's complicated in some ways, but I think it's a debate that is not unlike other debates that people have internally and externally, like trying to make some sense out of what we believe and why we believe it. But making sense of the why is the key expression. Religion is dangerous in that it promotes stupidity and we all have seen how religious recklessness harms lives. (AK2 154-156)

Anthony failed to understand how dogmatic conditions could interfere with an individual's natural inclination toward compassion and love.

> Even if I had all the answers and had all the rules written down in my head about what is right, what is wrong, what is God, what is not, ultimately I think that I would try to express that faith at the same level, which is by being active and helpful and concerned about others. It's hard for me to understand how any religion could advocate to hate a gay family member: brother, son, cousin, uncle, whatever. I don't know how I would turn my love off because some old book told me to. (AM 785-788)

Derrek reflected on the memory of his Evangelical aunt and her complete exclusion of him as a close member of her inner circle. The trauma Derrek experienced as a result of his aunt's rejection was evident in his report.

> I'll never forget the day she had the talk with me. My aunt was like a second mother to me. I actually had more in common with her at the time than I did with my mom. I was like a surrogate brother to her two children and considered them my babies. My aunt found out I was gay through the family grapevine and called me to her home for a lunch date. After the meal, she went on to tell me that she vehemently disagreed with my choice to be gay and that if I continued down that road she would have no choice but to remove her children from my influence. She hit the nail in the coffin when she said that I would never be able to drive her kids again because if we were ever to get into a car accident she didn't want her children exposed to my HIV positive blood. Which, by the way, I was not nor am I HIV positive. She was just completely ignorant. That event really changed my life. It was the first negative response I received to my sexual orientation and I never expected it from her. She broke my heart. Now, I will never

> understand how she could turn off her love for me. I will never understand how my years of love and care for her children could be erased because I have sex and love men. I will never understand how religious ideology proceeds blood, or love, or just plain kindness and compassion. This is the problem I have with religious fanatics. The world would be a much better place without them. (DM2 389-403)

Participant narratives mirrored their beliefs that specific religious precepts can interfere with an individual's innate desire to love and care for people in their lives. Overall the men seemed to agree that the exercise of religion, as it related to the battle between internal and external loci of control, could be a perilous enterprise for both the practitioner and the recipient of the religious practice.

Future Direction

Participants were asked to describe the anticipated direction of their spiritual development in the next five to ten years. The men indicated that their spiritual growth would include the development of meaningful relationships and the continued inquiry into life's grand questions. Anthony believed that the future of his spirituality was entrenched in interpersonal connectivity and delving into multiple sources of information that would broaden his spiritual knowledge.

> Ultimately I think that my search even in the future is rooted in interpersonal interaction and I think that will stay true. Something to me about the idea of reading ancient text and books for things like politics and economics and math and science, all of that makes perfect sense to me. (AM2 343-347)

Joshua thought that his spiritual growth would include the cultivation of rich and meaningful relationships in which he can practice authenticity and be himself.

> But yet also there's hope because I want to create new ones there that's not and that gives me hope for the future because these new friends that I'm making in the program, or hopefully my roommate in Minneapolis, they're just wonderful open people that we can just share life together and we don't have to have the same spiritual practices or beliefs and so that has to lend to some really rich and meaningful relationships where I can be authentic and relaxed and there is never that "oh we don't talk about that" zone, or I'm going to talk about it because I assume you agree with me and then you'll just sit there uncomfortably writhing inside because you don't know what to say. So I guess that gives me hope for the future is the creation of new interactions with… (JC2 257-265)

Adam agreed that interpersonal connectivity would anchor his spiritual development in the future because he anticipates less stigma attached to the idea of spirituality; therefore, people might open to his lack of religious identification.

> So the way I would see myself deepening is that I think I may have a little more commiseration than I do now. I will be able to share it with other people and right now I feel like I am limited in sharing it with other people because there is social pressure to conform to the traditional dogmatic religions. (AK2 37-42)

As previously mentioned, other participants believed that their spirituality would continue to develop because of a continued exploration of spiritual questions that may not have an exclusive, singular answer.

> I know that it [spirituality] continues to grow and continues to change and I think that's the exciting part about it is I don't have all the answers. I'll never have all the answers. I hope I never have all the answers because I want to be able to continue to learn from other people and other experiences. (EJ 426-429)

Anthony also suggested that his spirituality would continue to grow as a result of his belief that he would never know the truth about all of life's mysteries; hence, the probability that he might never rest in his spiritual quest. He uses the term conservative spirituality as a moniker to describe his conservative approach to claiming any belief he encounters in his wandering spirituality as truth.

> I'm spiritual and because I admit that I am fallible and there are things that I could be mistaken about – things that I think are truth that I know to be fact could potentially be wrong. I don't know everything. I don't know the entire answers to the entire universe so there are occasional moments especially when feeling insecure about any of my spiritual convictions and conventions that if I can be wrong about those or if I am feeling uncertain in what I would consider a fairly ambiguous spiritual identity, then that leaves room for conservative spirituality. (AM2 5-12)

Joshua noted the further exploration of the meaning of life and death and the finiteness of the human experience would ensure that his spirituality will expand in the coming months and years.

> I'm still so intrigued by this whole existential thing and I don't even know, I don't know, just this week I was overwhelmed by these thoughts of meaning and purpose and death. I don't see that going away because I think that's a continual reality of being human and our finiteness. But I see myself exploring that more and doing more reflective journaling and just more intentional exploration of my concepts of how I'm going to reconcile finiteness of this life and what deep meaning or purpose, and I think maybe trying to more expand upon what do I see as my guiding purpose for this life. (JC2 117-123)

This final section detailed the participants' perspectives on the similarities and differences between religion and spirituality, described what their spirituality says about them as

gay men, provided an account of religion as a perilous enterprise that is established in the conflict between internal drives and external constraints, and ended with a report of how they expect their spiritualty to develop in the future.

Ideal Types

This section is a presentation of two *ideal types* of participants. First proposed by Max Weber, ideal types is a methodological approach that may serve as a tool to discern similarities and differences in concrete cases (Kimmel, 2006). This analytic approach was integrated into the study in lieu of the traditional theoretical analysis that is a standard element of grounded theory – a rationale for which is presented in *Chapter 5* in the section on *Limitations*. The researcher reviewed participant narratives to identify complete or partial patterns that included certain characteristics and elements of this investigation. The intent of this section is to provide the reader with additional perspective regarding variations within each category and how they blend together across categories. Two patterns of participant narratives will be used to illustrate the ideal types: 1) men whose religious tradition falls under the evangelical Christian umbrella (i.e., Southern Baptist and other evangelical Christians; and 2) men who claimed that their religious understanding of God was closely related to love.

Evangelical Christians – Ellis, Joshua, and Thomas

Three of the men – Ellis, Joshua, and Thomas – were raised as evangelical Christian traditions. The term evangelical is used in this context to define Christian religious traditions that seek to maintain the essence of the Gospel, including the theological principles of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ's atonement (Bebbington, 2007). Both Ellis and Thomas identified their religion of origin as Southern Baptist while Joshua branded his faith tradition as Christian.

What these men had in common was their description of the theological doctrine that shaped their religious experiences.

Each of the men presented examples of dogma that included principles related to salvation and atonement. Ellis shared his early religious belief that "once you were saved by Christ or God no matter what you did that wasn't going to take your salvation away" (EJ2 63-65). Thomas was taught to believe that his faith in Christ was a direct route to salvation in the afterlife and that praying for atonement was a religious practice that exemplified his faith. He said "in my church, we believed in Jesus Christ and in salvation" (TG 126). Joshua grew up with parents who he described as "religious mavericks" (JC 189) but whose religious beliefs originated in the Episcopal and Presbyterian traditions, respectively. Joshua claimed, "the Bible was our foundation and guidebook for life" and that his father, who would become a Seventh Day Adventist minister, would preach about the end times, coming of the Anti-Christ, and the Rapture.

Their upbringing in evangelical denominations was not the only religious experience these men had in common. Thomas and Joshua were two of the three men who reported exposure to homonegative doctrine within their faith traditions. Thomas remembered hearing explicit messages from the pulpit and other church members about the "gay agenda as part of the major evils of the world" (TG 68). Joshua was taught to believe that homosexuality was a sin and, therefore, a choice. His father equated homosexuality to alcoholism and thought it was an ailment that required behavioral mastery. The findings of this study suggest that the men who were educated in evangelical religious traditions were more likely to experience explicit modes of homonegativity within the church setting and their family system.

Thomas and Joshua also represented two of three men who reported that they felt different growing up. Joshua said that he felt like "a bit of an outsider and a loner" and attempted to relate to other boys but never believed he was "one of the guys" (JC 84-86). Thomas described himself as an effeminate child and recalled that folks "knew I was a bit different too" and that his experience of differentness manifested as a feeling of shame (TG 18). Both of these men suggested that their gender role and behavior strongly related to their feeling of being different from their family and community members. A direct, causal relationship between their experience within an evangelical Christian denomination and the differentness that they felt cannot be claimed but such a pattern is apparent in their reports.

In terms of the factors that influenced their transition away from their faith tradition, Ellis and Thomas were two of the four men that reported unanswered philosophical questions as a principal reason for their migration. Thomas reported that he grew up in a house where questions were unwelcomed. At puberty, he began to rebel against that precept and "stopped believing" some of the religious lessons he was taught (TG 87). Ellis remembered his attempt to question some of the truths espoused by the Bible. His minister was defiant when queried. Ellis could not reconcile the fact that paleontologists had proof that dinosaurs existed but the Bible failed to account for that fact. His ministers defensiveness about the question pushed Ellis to look "at other things" (EJ 269).

Hypocrisy also emerged as a transitional factor that coincided with the evangelical Christian type. Joshua talked about his early observation that his religious education was peppered with hypocritical statements and actions and that he finally realized that those early lessons "inherently didn't make sense and didn't align with the person I was becoming" (JC 635-636). Ellis witnessed what he described as "hypocrisy that went along where people would

badmouth other people for doing certain things but turn around and do it themselves" (TG 54-56). This experience, and those similar to it, eventually motivated Ellis to transition away from his Southern Baptist denomination and develop a predominantly spiritual identity.

The evangelical Christian type were more likely to identify fluidity as the principal feature of their spiritual understanding. Joshua and Thomas were two of the men who described fluidity as part of their spirituality. Thomas claimed that his spirituality did not require a philosophical or theological anchor and that truth was ultimately subjective. He went on to say that his spiritual understanding did not require roots "in one single place" (TG 249). Joshua used the word fluid to specifically describe his spiritual understanding and thought multiple sources of truth existed. He later stated that he is "comfortable with how little I really know and understand about the spiritual dimension and a much deeper respect for other perspectives and viewpoints" (JC 543-545).

The spiritual practices of visiting sacred spaces, mind activities, and community all appeared to correspond to the evangelical Christian type. Ellis sought out natural settings to nurture his spirituality. Nature was the inspiration for what he described as his process for "disconnecting" from technology and connecting to "something bigger and greater" (EJ 356-362). Joshua shared that he would visit cemeteries and his walks there would bring a sense of "peace and also perspective on the thoughts of the day" (JC 775-776). Ellis reported that meditation and mindfulness were components of his daily spiritual practice; however, Joshua who had dabbled in both but was inclined to develop a more structured routine in the future. Community, in the form of friendships, was also associated with the evangelical Christian type. It manifested in the form of intimate friendships rather than belonging to larger spiritual organizations. Joshua believed that his spiritual understanding had liberated him to create a

brunch club with friends who share similar spiritual beliefs. He said "that community and that connection with others is genuine and authentic because we enjoy each other" (JC 688-689). Ellis also reported that spending time with close friends had become a spiritual practice and that they "talk about spirituality quite a bit" (EJ 422). These specific spiritual practices emerged as at least a partial pattern that was related to the evangelical Christian type.

Freedom and courage appeared to be spiritual outcomes associated with the evangelical Christian type. Ellis suggested that his spirituality permitted him the freedom to explore parts of his sexual-self that were off limits to him while he identified as a Southern Baptist. He said that he was not afraid to explore his sexuality because he no longer believed it was "detrimental to who I am spiritually" (EJ2 38-39). Thomas reported that his spiritual understanding gave him the freedom to establish emotional and physical boundaries with his homophobic father and that he was able to "focus on the relationships that are nurturing for me, and he's not one of them" (TG 388-389).

Courage was demonstrated by Joshua by voicing his belief that God did not care about what sexual parts his partner had; rather, God cared about the love they shared. He had the courage to live more openly as gay man and later said, "I didn't realized how much of a strain it was placing on me until it was removed and all of a sudden I was like, I feel great" (JC 526-528). Ellis said that his spiritual understanding inspired him to strengthen the congruence between what he believed and how he behaved. His spiritual practice inspired the courage to "understand that I had to be true to who I was and not act as someone others expected of me" (EJ 450-451).

The evangelical Christian type, exemplified by Ellis, Joshua, and Thomas, appeared to have a number of narrative reports in common. First the three men originated from an evangelical Christian denomination that encouraged literal interpretations of the Gospel and

espoused religious doctrine that focused on salvation and atonement. At least two of the three men shared similar narratives that included responses related to: (a) exposure to homonegativity within their faith traditions; (b) a feeling of differentness growing up; (c) unanswered questions and hypocrisy as factors that motivated their transition away from their faith tradition; (d) description of fluidity as a principal spiritual understanding; (e) visiting sacred spaces, mind activities, and community as spiritual practices; and (f) freedom and courage as spiritual outcomes.

God as Love – Anthony, Derrek, Manny, and Robert

The second ideal type – *God as love* – constitutes the reports of Anthony, Derrek, Manny and Robert who claimed they were educated in religious traditions that advocated God as love rather than the predominant promotion of salvation and atonement described by the evangelical Christian type. Robert recalled that the minister of his childhood church preached sermons that defined God as love and rarely focused on negative topics like hell. Robert went on to say that he grew up with a "benign sense of God without judgment" (RB 132). Anthony shared that the sermons he remembers in his faith tradition highlighted the power of unconditional love and community. He could not remember any explicit homonegative communication. Although Derrek grew up around extended family members who identified as evangelical Christians, he was mostly inspired by his grandmother who subscribed to the teachings of Mary Baker-Eddy, the founder of Religious Science. He reminisced about finding God in the simple joys of life, including walks in the rain, in which his grandmother told him "this is God; right here, right now. That was love" (DM2 29). The men affiliated with this type reported their spiritual development was founded on an early religious education that endorsed God as love. This religious principle appeared to be related to other elements of their spiritual progression.

The religious experience of community, as reported in *Chapter 4*, seemed to be associated with the *God as love* type. Community was defined differently by this group of men who consistently described it in terms of social equity. Manny was raised in an Irish-Catholic community in the Catholic Worker tradition. His definition of community was much broader than the parish he attended or the neighborhood in which he lived. By the time he was in high school, Manny would spend a few days per month with "kids who were in the orphanages of Central Massachusetts" and his faith rested on "the belief that you became involved in making the world better for those people who had it less fortunate than you" (MH 202-206). Derrek's mother lived by the mantra "because we are blessed we must now be the blessing" and that shaped the way Derrek perceived community. He later said, "community activism was the glue that bound our entire belief system together" (DM 333-334).

The importance placed on community by their early faith tradition also influenced the ways they practiced their faith, which was qualitatively different from the reports of the evangelical Christian type. Rather than atonement, the men of the *God as love* type were more likely to practice their faith through alternative means, including yoga and altruism. Derrek began practicing yoga and meditating at a young age and Anthony was raised to live by the Golden Rule, which was to do unto others and you would have them do unto you. Manny reinforced what he had said previously when describing his foundational dogma: that community activism was the most significant precept of his religious understanding and practice. He went on to say, "Being religious at that point in my life really means going out and doing some kind of community work" (MH 210-211).

The *God as love* type represents four of the six men who identified kindness as a spiritual practice and two of the three men who reported gratitude as a spiritual practice. Again, no causal

relationship can be claimed here but there seems to be a meaningful connection between the religious foundation of the *God as love* type and the tendency of these men to report kindness and gratitude and principle spiritual practices. Anthony suggested that the act of kindness was similar to an act of God. Manny found that giving compliments to others was a spiritual practice and he would "find something about them that is really attractive or positive and share it with them" (MH 462-463). Derrek practiced kindness through intentional giving of his time and money. He said, "those are the kinds of things where I feel like I encounter God" (DM 607-608). Robert also reported tithing money and time to philanthropic organizations and causes that he believed worthwhile.

Two of the three men who reported gratitude as a spiritual practice are affiliated with the God as love type. Derrek recalled an episode of Oprah that taught him about the spiritual efficacy of a gratitude journal, and practice that he has exercised consistently since. Now he says "thank you for whatever I'm experiencing. Even the hard times I let out a gratitude prayer recognizing that God puts a rainbow in every cloud" (DM 733-734). Robert said that, when he practiced yoga, "I'm just overwhelmed with gratitude and it will just be this flooding of unconditional love" (RB 521-523). A partial pattern has been identified that connects the narratives of men who were taught to believe that God is love and the latter development of spiritual practices of kindness and gratitude.

Finally, the men affiliated with the God as love type were more likely than the evangelical Christian type to perceive their spiritual and sexual identities as compatible and engage in conscious sexuality. Manny did not believe it was an accident that many indigenous cultures believed that the people who carried the masculine and feminine energy were the "spiritual feelers, the shamans, the medicine men" and more than likely would be perceived as

gay in American society (MH2 22-23). Anthony believed that his spirituality allowed him to feel a greater sense of peace about his sexual orientation and Derrek suggested that his sexuality was the very essence of his spiritual identity. He said "the feeling that I experience when I'm in love with another man…is so profound that I can only call it God" (DM2 171-173).

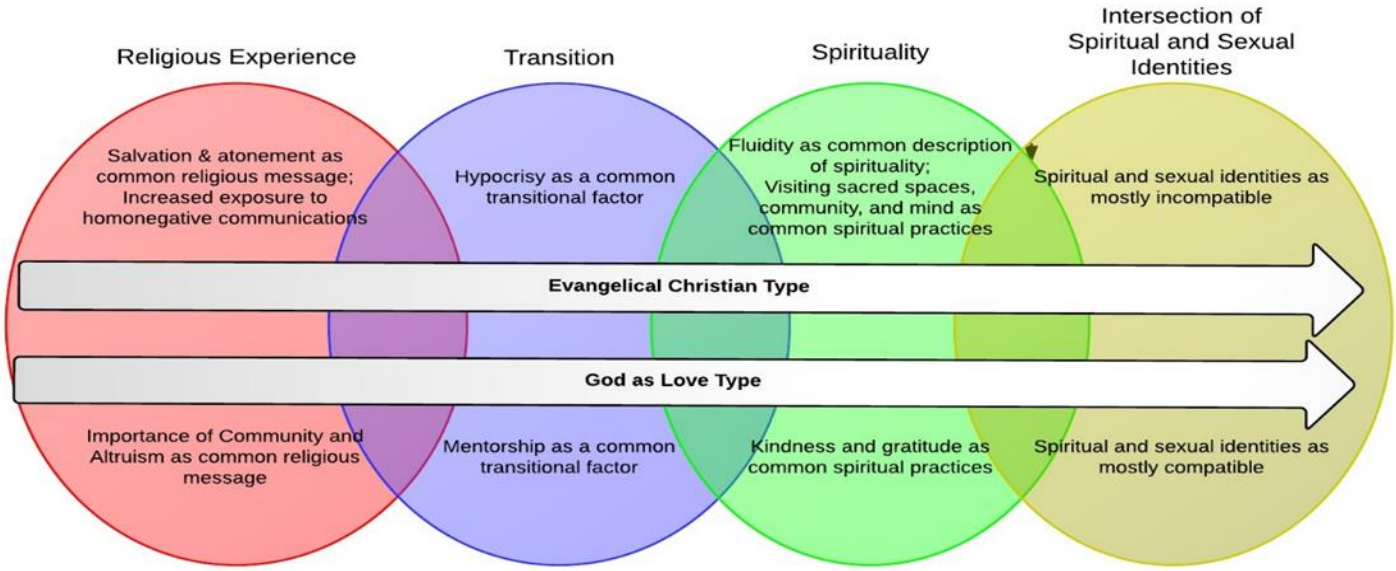
Manny, Derrek, and Anthony were the only three men who spoke specifically about conscious sexuality. Manny related the energetic explosion of a sexual orgasm to the release of creative energy. He later said that "what it means to be alive becomes really strong and that energy is very, very sexual and that's also the place from within where our creativity comes" (MH2 15-17). Derrek believed that his sexuality influenced his spirituality by opening doors to intimacy and trust that he related to experiencing God in the flesh. He recalled sexual encounters with his partner and said, "it was so good. It was as if I was at the center of the Universe; totally content; totally alive; totally myself; totally in love; totally free; totally whole" (DM2 53-56). Anthony affirmed that his spirituality influenced his decision making process regarding healthy romantic partners. He had grown to be less focused on a potential partner's religious values and more interested in that individual's personal values. Anthony looked for men who were "ultimately looking for those same [spiritual] answers and ultimately trying to move forward" (AM2 273-274).

The men of the *God as love* type were raised on a religious foundation that advocated God as love. They were more likely than their cohorts affiliated with the evangelical Christian type to identify community as an integral part of their early religious experience and often defined community in terms of social equity. Religious practice was also exercised in the context of community and included acts of altruism, yoga, and meditation. The religious foundation and practices of the *God as love* type are in stark contrast to foundation and practice

of the evangelical Christian type, who were more likely to experience homonegative messages and employed prayer and confession as methods of atonement.

The differences between the two types does not end there. Kindness and gratitude were more likely to be reported as spiritual practices by the *God as love* type and accounted for four of the six responses supporting that sub-category. Additionally, the *God as love* type accounted for all of the responses related to conscious sexuality and two of the three responses supporting the sub-category spiritual and sexual compatibility. Of interest was the lack of relationship between the category *Origins* and any of the other categories. Most of the participants claimed they had distant relations with their fathers, close relations with their mothers and siblings, and lacked close friendships growing up. Only feeling different appeared to have a relationship with the *evangelical Christian type*; no relational patterns emerged between the sub-categories *I AM Student*, *I AM Dazzle Boy*, or *I AM Gay* and the two ideal types. Although the two ideal types in no way show a causal relationship between any of the categories and sub-categories, there remains patterns of responses that illustrate the categories' relationships across narratives.

Table 3: Conceptual Model of Spiritual Identity Development for Ideal Types



Conclusion

The chapter presented the several categories that organized participants' responses to questions that attempted to elucidate the process by which gay men transition from an early faith tradition to a primary spiritual identity. Over the course of multiple interviews, participants provided information that was later analyzed through the prism of grounded theory and assembled into five major categories and their interrelated sub-categories. *Origins* provided description of the participants' vital childhood relationships and their first understanding of self. *Religious Experiences* reviewed multiple aspects of the men's early faith tradition, including foundation beliefs, practices, and homonegative messages. *Transition* detailed factors that motivated the participants to migrate away from their religion of origin. *Spirituality* specified how the men defined and practiced spiritualty and explained subsequent outcomes. *Intersection of Spiritual and Sexual Identities* described the confluence of the two identities. The final section, *Additional Findings*, provided the participants' insights related to their journey from a faith tradition to their current spiritual understanding and practice. Finally, two ideal types were observed, including the *evangelical Christian* and *God as love* types. The intent of section on ideal types was to present an evaluation of similarities and differences between participant reports and how they coalesced as patterns and themes.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore how gay men, who were raised in a faith tradition, pivot away from their religion of origin and construct a spiritual identity. Survey data have suggested that three-quarters of gay men do not affiliate with an organized religion (Halkitis et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 1994) and several studies have documented the conflict many LGBT individuals experience when attempting to reconcile their religious and sexual identities, often leading the individual to choose one identity over the other (Barton, 2010; Beckstead & Morrow, 2004; Boellstorff, 2005; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Most of these investigations have conceptualized religion and spirituality as parallel constructs but there is an emerging body of thought in the fields of counseling and psychology that argues the two should be separated, particularly in light of the negative connotation religion holds for some LGBT individuals who have experienced homonegativity within their faith traditions (Love, et al., 2007; Paul & Frieden, 2008; Smith & Horne, 2007).

Although a number of academic publications have singularly focused on the homophobia experienced by LGBT people within religious institutions and their subsequent transition to gay affirmative branches of their original faith or other denominations altogether (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Kocet et al., 2011), there remains a dearth of scholarly studies that examine the multiple factors that may motivate LGBT individuals to migrate away from their faith tradition and develop a spiritual identity that is subjectively constructed. This investigation has attempted to expand the academic discourse on spirituality and the role it plays in the lives of gay men who no longer identify as religious. The selection protocol for this study was limited to gay men; a methodological decision that was rooted in an argument that the assessment and description of

cultural differences between LGBT people is a vital component in the development of competent macro and micro level interventions (Fassinger & Arseneu, 2011).

The research questions that organized this inquiry were designed to ascertain how gay men describe and practice spirituality in their everyday lives, elucidate the processes and experiences that influenced their spiritual development, and explore the intersection between the participants' spiritual and sexual identities. The significance of this research is rooted in the profession's ethical commitment to multicultural competency and a growing agreement that the assessment and integration of spirituality within counseling practice is culturally imperative (ACA, 2005; Passalacqua & Cervantes, 2008; Sharfanske & Sperry, 2005; Walsh, 1999).

The following sections will situate the findings of this study within the context of previous investigations related to religious and spiritual identity development among LGBT individuals, review individual case studies to illustrate variations within each category and how participant narratives are related across categories, discuss the study's limitations and implications, address its significance in the counseling profession, and make recommendations for future research.

Discussion of Findings

In Chapter 4, the results of the investigation were organized in six sections that feature categories and interrelated sub-categories that were inductively developed through a grounded theory data analysis procedure. Each of the categories and subcategories were supported by at least three participant reports, or 1/3 of the participant pool. The intent of this section is to review the results described in Chapter 4 and discuss them in context of the previous research reviewed in Chapter 2.

The first category, *Origins*, depicted the men's developmental beginnings, with a particular emphasis on early childhood relationships with their parents, grandmothers, siblings, and friends. Participants reported the relationships with their mothers as both close and important to varying degrees and the relationships with their fathers as sometimes distant, which was frequently attributed to not meeting their father's expectations related to gender roles and behaviors. An unexpected result emerged with the demonstration of the importance attributed to some of the men's relationships with their maternal grandmothers. Grandmothers were portrayed by some of the participants as robustly positive influences who served as early spiritual role models and teachers.

Previous research supports this study's discovery that the majority of participants had particularly close relationships with their mothers. LaSala (2010) recalled early psychiatric theories that hypothesized homosexuality was somehow caused by enmeshed relationships between mothers and sons. The author's research found a significant correlation between mothers and their gay sons but the relationship was not causal; in other words, having a close relationship with mother does not make an individual gay, but identifying as gay does have some effect on the degree of closeness between a gay male and his mother (LaSala, 2010).

These findings, coupled with what participants frequently described as distant relationships with their fathers, suggests gay boys find safety in relationships that mirror their nuanced gender interests and expression, particularly in relation to fashion, art, education, and intimacy in relationships, which a number of the participants reported as similarities they shared with their mothers. Whatever the cause, it appears that close mother/son relationships is a common experience between gay boys and their mothers, specifically to this study, and generally.

Origins also included the sub-category, *The First I AM*, that detailed the men's differentness within their families and peer groups. Feeling different was perceived to be rooted in their failure to meet gender expectations as children. Some of the participants discussed their tendency toward good behavior and a desire to be perceived as "dazzling". A majority of the men described themselves as stellar students, an identity that often instilled a sense of pride in their childhood selves and more often than not followed them into adulthood. All but one of the participants had earned graduate degrees at the time of the interview.

The Best Little Boy in the World hypothesis was first put forward by Tobias (1973) who posited that young gay men deflect attention from their emerging sexuality by investing in recognized markers of success including good grades, stellar behavior within the family system, excellence in higher education, and elite employment. The theory is that gay men overcompensate in competitive arenas to mask feelings of inferiority they experience as a result of hiding or minimizing their sexual identities. A number of participants in this study exhibited behaviors that mirror Tobias' (1973) hypothesis, most exemplified by some of the men's desire to be perceived as dazzling, their demonstrated excellence in education, and the attainment of prestigious careers.

Finally, the coming out process was described in terms of an early awareness of their emerging sexuality, generally between the ages of 6 and 10; disclosure of their sexual identity, which varied in terms of age and mostly reflected generational differences among the men (e.g., younger men generally disclosed their sexual identity in their teenage years, while older men came out in their late twenties and early thirties); and the generally affirmative reactions they received from family, friends, and opposite sex partners. The linear coming out process, reported by a number of the men, parallels the early stage model literature that initially described

gay identity development as a gradual transition from recognition of same sex attraction to the integration of sexual identity with other salient cultural identities (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1979).

One of the major criticisms of the early stage models is their reliance on White gay men as theoretical subjects. All of the participants in this study identified as racially White, a circumstance that did not afford further consideration of the multicultural merits of the gay identity stage models in relation to spiritual identity development. This study, however, did contribute to the ongoing dialogue related to the validity of linear gay identity stage models that do not integrate multiple cultural constructs of identity (McDondald, 1982; Paul & Frieden, 2008). Multiple identity development models, including those that account for race, social class, and group orientation, are beginning to gain prevalence in the identity development discourse (Alderson, 2003; Appleby, 2001; Cox and Gallois, 1996).

The second category, *Religious Experiences*, described multiple dynamics pertaining to the men's faith tradition, including foundational beliefs, homonegative doctrine, and religious practices and their perceived effect on identity salience (e.g., what does it mean to be gay; what does it mean to be gay and Christian). All of the men reported originating from a Christian tradition but belonged to various denominations that had differing dogmatic precepts, customs, and rituals.

Foundational dogma was described by participants as a set of irrevocable tenets that demarcated a group position and served as the primary basis for an ideology. Participant descriptions of the dogma that founded their belief systems varied and included two primary properties: a) a conviction that salvation came through a belief in Jesus Christ and righteous acts;

and b) a belief that God is, at its core, unconditional love. As reported in *Chapter 4*, there appeared to be little convergence between the two contrasting ideologies.

Participants also shared conflicting reports related to the incidence and prevalence of homonegative doctrine within their faith traditions. Some of the men experienced explicit negative messages, in both sermons and interpretation of Biblical scriptures, while others received subtle communications that living as gay was a sin. Older participants were less likely to experience explicit homonegativity within their religion of origin, which was attributed to cultural factors that prohibited public discourse on the topic.

The findings related to how the men experienced homonegativity in their faith traditions are in some ways dissimilar to previous studies that have explored the topic. Multiple studies have investigated the intersection of religious and sexual identity and found that a significant number of LGBT individuals believed that their religious and sexual identities are in conflict with one another (Haldeman, 1991, 2002, 2007; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). Barton (2010) and Smith and Horne (2007) found that LGBT people experience both implicit and explicit verbal and non-verbal communications that signaled homosexuality was perverse and incongruent with religious norms and expectations. Haldeman (2002) observed that anti-gay religious doctrine had a negative psychological effect on the LGBT clients he served. The men of this study reported exposure to both covert and overt expressions of homonegativity, particularly Ellis, Joshua, and Thomas, who made up the ideal type, *Evangelical Christian*.

Schuck and Liddle (2001) generated multiple themes from their study on religious conflicts experienced by LGB people that included sources of conflict. The most common source of conflict identified by Schuck and Liddle (2001) involved religious teachings about homosexuality, which were reported to result in a number of "serious cognitive and emotional

consequences, including the beliefs that respondents would go to hell or that God had rejected them" (p. 70).

Although some participants of this study reported exposure to homonegative messages in their religions of origin, the majority of the men did not cite religious teachings as a major source of conflict in the relationship between their religious and sexual identities. There may be various explanations as to why this finding is in contrast to previous studies. First, the homogenous sample for this study was purposefully selected to describe spiritual identity development for a limited segment of the gay male population. The men chosen for this study were mostly White, educated, middle to upper-class, and employed. Had the study broadened the sample selection criteria, this researcher imagines the findings related to the impact of homonegative messages may have been more strongly reflected the results of previous investigations. Further, the majority of the men had graduate degrees or were currently in graduate school, which may have had an effect on the primacy of *unanswered philosophical questions* as the primary transitional factor, in lieu of homonegativy.

The subcategory *Homonegativty* described mixed results. One-third of the participants reported experiencing either implicit or explicit form of homonegativity within their faith tradition but the majority of the men did not perceive it to be a major element of their religious upbringing. This finding may have been affected by generational differences of the participants. Three of the men over the age of 60 agreed that homosexuality was not a topic of discussion, especially within religious organizations, prior to the Gay Liberation Movement that was prevalent in the late 1960s and 70s. A deeper examination of how generational differences effect the conflict between religious and sexual identity and its subsequent result on spiritual identity development is a potential avenue for future research.

The importance of community was also reported to be a vital element of the participants' faith traditions regardless of individual denomination. Community was largely denoted as family but also included the broader group of the faithful and society at large. A number of the men also detailed their religious and familial commitment to social justice and promoting the common good.

Joshua, Adam, Manny, and Randy cited a number of examples of community orientation that was related to their religious and ethnic communities. Randy and Manny had very strong ethnic identities, as Irish and Greek, which were closely related to their religious cultures, Irish Catholic and Greek Orthodox, respectively. Joshua's religious affiliation changed multiple times over the course of his childhood but the community his parents cultivated around their religious beliefs remained relatively stable throughout the family's transition. Adam's biological family, including aunts, uncles, and cousins, mostly lived within a one-mile radius of his home and they all attended the same church. In fact, he claimed that his childhood church constituted nearly 50% of his family members.

Religious practices were demonstrated in a variety of ways and participants who were educated in denominations that promoted dogmatic principles related to sin and salvation were more likely to practice their faith vis-à-vis traditional prayer and living a life as free from sin as possible. Men who were reared in religious institutions that focused on God as unconditional love practiced their faith through living and loving in supportive communities, yoga, meditation, and acts of kindness.

As part of the interview protocol, the men were asked to share their adult perspective on their faith traditions. Participants were reserved in their criticism or renunciation of religion overall out of respect for the perceived benefit it provided to their families and its influence on

their spiritual development. Although some of participants agreed that religion and spirituality have multiple intersections, others believed that the two were distinct and separate constructs – a conviction that is fleshed out in later sections. These two perspectives seemed to be related to the degree to which the participant perceived religion as having beneficence. The men who believed religion as sometimes maleficent, including Anthony, Ellis, and to some degree, Joshua, were more likely to have grown up in evangelical faith traditions and reported more frequent exposure to homoengativty, in comparison to the men who grew up in more inclusive traditions.

Factors that motivated the men to migrate from their faith traditions and develop a spiritual identity were detailed in the third category, *Transition*. The identification and report of factors associated with a gay man's transition from his religion of origin to an identity that was primarily spiritual is a novel result of this study. A variety of circumstances influenced the participants to move away from their religion of origin including unanswered philosophical questions, limited tolerance for hypocrisy, perspective change, and mentors.

A number of the participants reported a natural tendency to ask questions, which may have been related to their salient identities as students. The men's philosophical and theological questions were often rebuffed by family and clergy members. A low threshold for dogmatic hypocrisy was also described by many of the participants as a key factor that motivated their transition away from their faith traditions. Hypocrisy was portrayed as the incongruence between beliefs, values, and actions and was observed by a number of participants in their religion of origin.

Both unanswered theological questions and the dogmatic hypocrisy the men observed within their faith traditions often led them to seek out alternative perspectives that reflected their emerging value systems. This change in perspective may have been precipitated by an exposure

to alternative ideas through books and environmental changes. Perspective change was sometimes coupled with mentorship – a key element that influenced the men's transition to a primarily spiritual identity.

The study of homonegative elements within religious institutions and their impact on faith disillusionment has been the focus of prior scholarly investigations. To manage the dissonance that results from the conflict between religious and sexual identities, many LGB individuals change religious environments, including seeking out new organizations, congregations, and religion; focus on the development of a spiritual identity rather than a religious one; or abandon religion and spirituality altogether (Barton, 2010; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Henrickson, 2007; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Lalich & McClaren, 2010; Love et al., 2005; Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005; Smith & Horne, 2007). The participants' choices to cultivate a spiritual identity rather than a religious one supports previous findings that suggested some men do indeed choose to foster spiritual identities outside of religious affiliation.

The results of this study contradicted the Schuck and Liddle (2001) investigation that found that nearly two-thirds of survey respondents reported that, at the time they were coming out, they perceived a conflict between their religion and emerging sexual identity and that conflict was the source of their migration away from their religion of origin. Likewise, Sherry et al. (2010) found that sexuality issues made survey respondents question their religious beliefs and that sexual identity was the catalyst for questioning religious beliefs. The findings of this study suggest that sexual identity was not the primary motivator for challenging their religious understanding. Participants identified unanswered questions, hypocrisy, perspective change, and mentorship as more salient factors in their pivot away from religion.

The third category, *Spirituality*, detailed the men's understanding and practice of spirituality and its perceived outcomes. No other peer reviewed research study has qualitatively reported how gay men describe and practice spirituality. The category was built on the reports of several participants who believed that spirituality was transcendental in nature, integrated the interpersonal, and was fluid in the sense that it did not require foreclosure on a certain set of dogmatic precepts. A number of the men also indicated that spirituality is related to personal values, the perception and experience of God, and various exercises that together compose a spiritual practice.

Spirituality was defined by some of the participants as transcendental – or that which cannot necessarily be perceived through the senses and exists separately from the body. Some of the men talked about spirituality as an interpersonal enterprise that inspired them to cultivate meaningful relationships with relatives, friends, and co-workers. The interpersonal nature of spirituality is similar to the sub-category *Community*, presented under the category *Religious Experiences*, which several of the men identified as a foundational principle of their faith traditions. Fluidity also emerged as a component of spiritual understanding and was recognized as a belief that spiritual development is not terminal; it is a process that continues to evolve and develop as the individual seeks answers to life's monumental questions. Several of the men believed that the fluid nature of spirituality is one of the factors that separates it from religion. Spirituality, it was reported, did not require foreclosure on a single set of principles or texts.

A belief in a higher power emerged as a meaningful component of a number of the men's spiritual understanding. A majority of participants did not subscribe to an anthropomorphic perception of God and described it as the life force that is at the center of every living thing. Additional perceptions of God included universal continuity, divine ordinance, indescribable,

and the ultimate life force that is part of everything. Only two of the men described themselves as agnostic.

These results parallel Jankowski's (2002) assertion that spiritual principles include ideas regarding the transcendental nature of reality and Polanski's (2002) suggestion that spirituality is a subjective, existential experience of the "transcendental nature of the universe" and that there was something more to humanity than biological and cultural factors (p. 127). Halkitis et al. (2009) reported on survey results that asked respondents to describe their spirituality and included a belief in or knowledge of God and a prosocial orientation. One of the findings that is unique to this investigation is the report by four of the men that spirituality is a fluid, rather than terminal, process. Joshua talked about his spiritual development as a "never-ending adventure" that did not require foreclosure on a specific set of truths (JC 546). He was not alone in his description of spirituality as fluid as three other participants conceptualized spirituality it this way.

Spirituality was also described in terms of how it was practiced by the participants. A number of practices were documented and included demonstrations that pertained to visiting sacred spaces, physical exercise, activities of the mind, the cultivation of community, kindness and generosity, gratitude, and idols.

Visiting sacred spaces appeared to be a significant component of some of the men's spiritual practices. Sacred spaces included natural settings or buildings that housed religious or spiritual significance. Physical activity, including biking, hiking, running, surfing, snowshoeing, and sailing, were all identified as means to practice spirituality. The exercises were attributed to an expanded awareness of the divine and focused mental attention. Likewise, activities that integrated the mind were identified as important spiritual practices and included meditation,

mindfulness, and reading. Studying spiritual texts also emerged as an element of several of the men's spiritual routines. Spiritual texts were described quite broadly and even included seminal works in mathematics. This finding was limited by the number of participants of the study but also provided some context for the construction of spiritual identity without the benefit of an existing enterprise. In other words, some of the men in this study created spiritual identity in a vacuum of sorts and relied solely on their interests, desire, and intuition to determine what constituted spirituality and how it was operationalized in their lives. From this perspective, the reader may develop a truly novel understanding of what spirituality can look like in lived experiences of gay men.

A focus on the interpersonal was determined to be a principle of several of the men's spiritual understanding and the cultivation of community was also reported as a component of their spiritual routines. Relationship with others, in a variety of forms, appeared to be a conduit for experiencing the divine and strengthened the men's spiritual identities. Kindness and generosity were also described as spiritual practices that exercised spiritual understanding and were meant to make the world a better and more equitable place for all. A number of the men reported that promoting kindness and generosity assisted the deepening of their spiritual understanding and provided an apparatus to touch the divine.

Gratitude emerged as a meaningful spiritual practice and was exercised by some throughout the day as prayer, affirmation, and a determination to remain grateful for the present moment, whether or not the moment was labeled as good or bad. Spiritual idols, defined by a few to be material objects that were regarded with a certain level of devotion, were reported to be important ingredients in the men's spiritual practice. Idols included historical texts and what would be considered traditional religious paraphernalia.

Halkitis et al. (2010) identified practices, contexts, and experiences as a component of spiritual understanding among LGBT respondents but did not flesh out the identified themes with participant examples. Kocet et al. (2011) cited connecting with community as a mode of spiritual practice within the LGB community and Schuck and Liddle (2001) identified helpful resources that included books and supportive individuals.

In a seminal book on the topic, De le Huerta (1999) identified a number of gay spiritual archetypes that were mined from the hundreds of historical documents reviewed in preparation for development of the book. The author placed gay spirituality in the context of mythology and spiritual heritage that was often linked to indigenous religions, particularly those of the Native Americans.

De le Huerta (1999) identified ten roles that he suggested gay people have played for millennia, which included transformers, gatekeepers, caregivers, keepers of beauty, and others. The archetypes that were identified supported by one or two examples, were not scientifically vetted and were primarily metaphorical in nature. None of the participants utilized language that supported De le Huerta's (1999) assertions that gay spirituality is archetypal, although the research questions were not developed to do so. The men did, however, describe themselves as different, which may correspond to the author's inclusion of the "outsider" archetype.

Finally, a number of outcomes were associated with the men's spiritual understanding and practices. Spiritual outcomes included freedom to be more authentic and set appropriate boundaries in relationships; a stronger inclination to develop meaningful connections with their families and likeminded people; a sense of serenity that included a peaceful mind and calm behavior; and courage to live as openly gay and cultivate congruence between words and actions. However, some of the men, experienced a separation from their families of origin and certain

friendships due to the incompatibility of their spiritual and religious belief systems. This contrasting trend may be best illustrated by Joshua's report that his spirituality brought him closer to his sister, who shared similar spiritual views as him. He also acknowledged that there was a "distancing" from friends and family who continued to engage him as if he still subscribed to the principals of his former faith tradition. There are no other studies that systematically explored and identified outcomes related to the spiritual practices of gay men who do not belong to a religious institution.

Participants were asked to discuss their perspectives on the intersection of their sexual and spiritual identities. In the section presenting the fourth category, *Intersection of Sexual and Spiritual Identities*, a number of understandings were reported by the men. Participant reports contrasted between those who believed that their sexual and spiritual identities existed in harmony with one another, and those who were convinced that the two identities were separate and distinct.

The men who reported the two identities as coinciding believed that sexuality and spirituality shared a symbiotic relationship – one could not exist without the other. Spirituality was depicted as a source of inspiration for some of the men to be open about their sexual identities, although others claimed that their sexuality invigorated their spiritual practice. A number of the participants asserted that their sexual and spiritual identities as having a somewhat converse relationship; however, although not completely foreign to one another, the two identities did not often intersect. As Anthony stated, sexual and spiritual identities were like neighbors in a cul-de-sac – they lived in the same neighborhood, saw each other on special occasions, but were rarely in conversation. The participants who reported a more symbiotic relationship between their sexual and spiritual identities tended to grow up in faith traditions that

developed their perceptions as God as love rather than God as judgmental – a notion that was fleshed out in the section on *Ideal Types*.

Love et al. (2005) found that participants of their study acknowledged a conscious interaction between their sexual and spiritual identities with one participant disclosing that "my spirituality and my sexuality are both very important parts of my life and there are a lot of lines that they cross together" (p. 199). This statement contrasts Anthony's account of the intersection between his spiritual and sexual identities but mirror's Derrek's account that he cannot imagine his spirituality and sexuality as separate entities.

The act of sex and the expression of romance was also observed by some of the participants as related to their spirituality. Two of the men openly associated physical orgasms with experiencing the divine. Anthony believed that demonstrating love and affection was intimately connected to his spirituality. De le Huerta (1999) suggested that "human beings' hunger for sexual union is ultimately an expression of a subconscious spiritual drive for wholeness and completion" that was most readily experienced in the womb (p. 98). This symbiotic interchange between organisms was argued to be a source of "freedom, expansion, and unlimited union with All-That-Is" (De le Huerta, 1999, p. 98).

The words used by De le Huerta in his conceptualization of the intersection between sexuality and spirituality are similar in meaning to the words participants used to describe the outcomes of their spiritual practice, including freedom, interpersonal connection, and serenity. More research is necessary to illuminate the meaning of these findings and illustrate a more precise picture of the confluence of spiritual and sexual identities.

Finally, the men were queried to provide their adult perspective on the global development of their spirituality, from early childhood experiences and their religion of origin to

their transition away from their faith tradition, all the way up to and including their current spiritual understanding, practices, and outcomes. In other words, the men were probed to make some meaning out of their whole experience related to religion and spirituality.

Participants were asked to talk about what their spirituality said about them as gay men. What materialized was a commitment to remain open to other viewpoints and ways of believing, a perception of themselves as truth seekers, and a pledge to make the world a better place through spiritual acts of kindness and generosity. Asked to describe how religion and spirituality are similar and different, the men generally believed that both enterprises were geared toward answering life's biggest questions regarding the source of life and what transpires after death. Religion and spirituality were thought, by some of the men, to serve as constructs for purpose and meaning in the lives of its practitioners. The two belief systems were perceived to be different in that religion was understood to be an exclusive social community with a definitive set of principles and customs and often discriminated against non-believers. Spirituality, on the other hand, was thought, by several of the men, to be a more fluid endeavor that remained open to multiple truths and practices by individual practitioners and communities.

Participant descriptions of the similarities and differences between religion and spirituality, for the most part, mirrored other definitions that were cited in *Chapter Two*, including the idea the spirituality is a subjective enterprise that is concerned with relationship to and connecting with the divine and others, while religion is a theological organization with sets of structured principles and beliefs that are practiced in community and the public domain (Halkitis, et al., 2000; Jankowski, 2005; Lines, 2002; Love et al., 2005).

The men also disclosed their personal insights related to religion and spirituality. Participant reports reflected what they believed to be the perils of religion and the conflict that

can arise between internal drives, such as sexuality or a personal reaction to the perceived hypocrisy between words and actions that was described as a factor that motivated a transition from faith tradition to spirituality, and the external, dogmatic pressure that limits innate, or what might be considered, spiritual expression.

Finally, the men were asked to talk about the anticipated direction of their spiritual development in the next five to ten years. Participants recognized that they had limited answers and foresaw an unrelenting appetite to seek spiritual knowledge related to life and death. Further, participants imagined that they would anchor their spirituality by fostering meaningful relationships with family, friends, and like-minded people in their lives.

Implications

Chapter Two cited several studies that documented the conflict LGBT individuals may experience when reconciling their sexual, gender, and religious identities. Barret and Barzan (1996) suggested that the tension between inward feelings and religious expectations was a mediator that pushed gay men and lesbians to either reconcile their religious and sexual identities, develop a spiritual identity in tandem with their sexual identity, or completely reject either their religious or spiritual identity in favor of the other. Gallup polls ranging from 2003 to 2008 found that respondents indicating the importance of religion in their lives dropped from 61% to 54% respectively (Gallup, 2009) and survey data has suggested that 69% of gay men said they had turned away from organized religion altogether (Wagner et al., 1994). Studies that address the spiritual domain of gay identity development are limited, with only a handful of investigations published on the topic (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Halkitis et al., 2009; Kocet et al., 2011; Lease et al., 2005; Love et al., 2005; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Sherry et al., 2010).

The previous studies on spiritual identity development made several contributions to the literature including several publications (Halkitis et al., 2009; Lease et al., 2005; Passalaqua & Cervantes, 2008) that suggested the definitional reformulation of religion and spirituality among LGB individuals, particularly the semantic and theoretical separation of the two constructs due to the stigma often attributed to religion by LGBT individuals. This current study focused on exploring the participants' spiritual development and intentionally differentiated between religious and spiritual constructs. Participants provided their perspectives regarding the similarities and differences between religion and spirituality. Some of the men believed the two intersected in meaningful ways but were ultimately separate systems of beliefs, practices, and outcomes.

Implications for counseling research

The detailed description of spirituality and its meaning to gay men specifically was a contribution of this study. Previous investigations have implemented surveys or single case studies as the primary tools for data collection (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Kocet et al., 2011; Love et al., 2005; Sherry et al., 2010) and may have missed meaningful information that can be captured by an interview protocol that uses primarily open-ended questions designed to draw out participant responses for the researcher to explore and build upon.

The in-depth phenomenological interview procedure employed in this project established the context for development of the ideal types of spiritual identity development, with particular attention paid to how early religious experiences are related to transitional factors, spiritual development, spiritual outcomes, and the perception of intersection between sexual and spiritual identities. In addition, this is one of the only studies to focus solely on gay men, a methodological decision geared to address the contextual differences between gay men, lesbian,

bisexual, and transgender people (Fassinger & Arseneu, 2011). The context provided by the in-depth phenomenological interview protocol is a meaningful contribution of this study and a unique addition to the extant literature on the topic of spiritual identity development among LGBT people generally and gay men specifically.

The identification and description of multiple transitional factors that were detailed in the section *Transition*, is a new addition to the theoretical literature related to spiritual identity development. As previously discussed, the majority of past studies have addressed conflict between religious and sexual identities, conflated religious and spiritual identities, and commonly focused on religious homonegativity as the primary mediator affecting transition away from original faith. A substantive finding of this study is that homonegativity was not the strongest factor to arbitrate the men's migration away from their religion of origin; although it did appear as an element of their religious experience. Future research ought to specifically investigate transitional factors that motivate men to transition away from their faith traditions and determine how the factors relate homonegativity, both perceived and experienced, within the men's religion of origin.

This study also generated data to describe the outcomes related to spiritual understanding and practice, an outcome that adds to the academic discourse in a new way. Previous studies have described spirituality and the meaning it holds for respondents but none have attempted to detail its outcomes. In the future, researchers ought to consider delving deeper into to the contextual nuances of each transitional factor and begin to assess their correlation with spiritual and psychological outcomes. Moreover, additional research is needed to further explore and quantify spirituality's effect on gay men's wellness overall, including measures of relationship satisfaction, self-efficacy, and career adaptability and development.

Finally, the overlap between spirituality and sexual and affective relationships remains an area for future investigations. Participants talked about how these identities are similar and different, but little was discussed regarding how spirituality creates a context for purpose, engagement, and aspirations related to sexual and affective relationships.

Implications for counselor practice and training

Religion and spirituality are argued to be integral parts of an individual's sense-of-self and a growing number of theorists believe spiritual factors are imperative components of the clinical assessment process and subsequent development of a culturally vibrant treatment plan. Spiritual issues are frequently falling within the purview of counselors as more Americans pivot away from religion (Hage et al., 2006). Wolfe and Stevens (2001) found that their respondents preferred "religiously sensitive psychotherapy" and that this type of therapy may actually be more effective (p.69). The American Counseling Association and the American Psychological Association have stipulated ethical competencies that address spiritual and religious issues in counseling (ACA 2005; APA, 2000). The outcomes of this study forwards the profession's recognition and appreciation of the diversity and cross-cultural contexts of gay men, particularly in relation to spiritual identity development. The results of this investigation can be employed in conjunction with other evidenced based counseling approaches that align with the best practices in the counseling field. The following sections address the competencies promoted by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC, 2009).

As a result of this study, counselors and counselor educators may have a greater ability to differentiate between the concepts of religion and spirituality and more competently discern the meaning attributed to the two, particularly in relation to gay men. Counselors have a broader

context to conceptualize gay male spiritual identity development, how it intersects with former religious affiliation, and its confluence with sexual identity.

The idea that spirituality can be an integral part of the gay man's worldview is a particularly meaningful implication of this study. Counselors may utilize the results of this study to better understand the what constitutes spirituality, its practices and outcomes; how spirituality influences sexuality and vice versa; and how early childhood relationships and religious experiences overlap gay spiritual identity development.

The results of this investigation may assist counselors to identify the limits of their understanding of religion and spirituality and hopefully remain open to their clients' diverse religious and/or spiritual perspectives. Counselors may now begin to conceptualize religion and spirituality as distinct constructs but are encouraged to integrate a comprehensive assessment strategy to explore gay men's religious and spiritual understandings, practices, and anticipated future directions that may, or may not, align with the results of this project.

Additionally, the outcomes of this study might motivate counselors to become acquainted with alternative spiritual resources and leaders that could be potential referral sources for gay men who do not identify as religious and are developing a distinctly spiritual identity. Specific resources that were exemplified by this investigation include books, mentors, sacred spaces, idols, and several practices that were reported to stimulate the participants' sense of freedom to make choices, serenity of mind and relationships, deeper connection to others, and courage to be more of themselves. Traditional religious referral sources, including the Metropolitan Community Church and other gay affirmative faith denominations may not be the most appropriate for gay men who are developing a spiritual identity because they may not mirror a

client's definition of spirituality, which must be assessed prior to making a referral recommendation.

Counselors may now be able to better recognize spiritual and/or religious themes in client communication and develop a stronger capacity to address these issues with gay men in a way that is therapeutically relevant. Language is a vital component of the therapeutic encounter and choosing words that align with the client's perspective is a cultural imperative. For instance, counselors may have a specific ideas related to heaven, an anthropomorphic God, and religious doctrine and philosophies that are likely rooted in their own religious and/or spiritual perspective. These personal beliefs could be similar to those of their gay male clients but may not accurately reflect client understandings related to the transcendental nature of spirituality, God as divine energy rather than an anthropomorphic figure, and the fluid quality of spirituality that does not require specific adherence to doctrine or theology.

Counselors can have access to additional research that supports clinical recognition of spiritual perspectives and practices as potential enhancements to client well-being. This investigation developed analytic categories supporting outcomes related to spiritual understanding and practices that appeared to largely benefit the client. Counselors could potentially set goals, some of which might resemble the spiritual practices reported by participants to have positive outcomes, with gay male clients who are transitioning away from their faith traditions and/or developing a spiritual identity of their own. The identification of alternative spiritual perspectives and practices and their intersection with sexual identity – all of which may be new information to the client – could also be a helpful intervention while assisting gay men to identify goals related to their spiritual identity development.

Limitations

Several limitations of the study are acknowledged. The sample inclusion criterion, which included a purposeful sampling protocol chosen to identify and include a homogenous group of gay men that could construct a shared description of spiritual identity development was unsuccessful in the recruitment of a racially, ethnically, economically, and educationally diverse sample. Each of the study participants identified as White, labeled their ethnicity within the Anglo-Saxon continuum, classified their socioeconomic status as middle or upper-class, and all had earned a bachelor's or graduate degree. This was primarily the result of the study's use of a narrow sampling technique that relied heavily on the researcher's access to an academic listserv, which was the source of over 70% of the participants. Participant demographics precluded a broader assessment of the interaction between multiple cultural and sociological factors and spiritual identity development but ultimately was the correct choice. Although the researcher is able to draw conclusions for this segment of society, there remains a dearth of knowledge related to the impact cultural factors have on spiritual identity development. Further investigations in this area are most warranted.

Working with a strictly homogenous sample also created additional methodological limitations within the confines of grounded theory. The final step in the analytic process in grounded theory protocol is to sample from a theoretical perspective (Charmaz, 2010). The process requires the researcher to hypothesize relationships between categories and sub-categories, which becomes a preliminary theory, and then test the theory out on a sample of heterogeneous sample to either confirm or refute the tenets of the preliminary theory. Through this process, the researcher can posit and re-posit relationships, test them, and ultimately prove or disprove the grounded theory. This study only partially applied the theoretical sampling

protocol. Certainly, the researcher hypothesized a preliminary theory (i.e., ideal types of spiritual identity development) but did not theoretically sample to confirm or refute his hypothesis. This analytic omission was primarily the result of the study's time constraint and limited scope. The researcher intends to theoretically sample *God as love* and *Evangelical Christian types* in a future study to either confirm or refute the model of spiritual identity development for ideal types that was posited in *Chapter 4* (p.210).

The purposeful sampling protocol limited the diversity of the sample in other ways. The specificity of the selection criteria did not allow for the identification of discrepant cases, which may have strengthened the trustworthiness, described in *Chapter Three* (p. 101), of the project (Patton, 2002). The detection of alternative narratives, particularly of those men who are not at all interested in spirituality or men who have sex with men and do not identify as gay, may have added meaningful context to the findings of this study and improved its credibility and transferability (Merriam, 2009).

The project began with the goal to create a level of trustworthiness through implementation of the constant comparative method, reflexive memo writing, employment of participant language in the construction of analytical categories and sub-categories, and the bracketing of the researcher's biases related to participant reports. Although all of these strategies were integrated in the study, there are additional strategies that may have been useful in this endeavor.

One strategy that may have benefited the study' credibility is the utilization of respondent validation of the study's results (Merriam, 2009). A brief outline of *Chapter Four* could have been created to share with three or four of the participants to determine its narrative accuracy.

Due to the time constraints related to the project's deadline, this strategy was not incorporated in the methodological procedure.

Challenges with the phenomenological in-depth interview procedure also emerged during the course of the study. The initial procedure detailed in *Chapter Three* (pp. 94-97) established a three-interview protocol, which was ultimately unsuccessful. Participants were reluctant to agree to participate in three lengthy interviews. Participants reported lack of time as the reason for non-agreement. All but two of the men were interviewed twice with the total sum of interviews equaling 20. The lack of accordance with the original interview protocol, although a challenge, did not appear to have a negative impact on either the participants or the results. The second interview was able to incorporate all of the questions scheduled for the third interview, which presumably accounted for its omission.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore gay male spiritual identity development, specifically of those men who had transitioned away from their original faith tradition. Nine participants from several U.S. states and Christian religious denominations provided narrative reports of their spiritual identity development that were analyzed and organized into conceptual categories and sub-categories that classified their 1) developmental origins, including (a) relationships with their primary caregivers, siblings, and friends; and (b) first self-concepts that pertained to their perceptions of themselves as different, excellent students, and good boys; 2) religious experiences related to education, practices, and homonegative doctrine; 3) factors that influenced migration from their religion of origin, including unanswered questions, hypocrisy, perspective change and mentorship; 4) spirituality including (a) understandings that characterized its nature as transcendental, interpersonal, fluid, related to God and pertaining to

personal values; (b) spiritual practices that included visiting sacred spaces, activities that exercised the body and mind; building of community, acts of kindness, generosity, and gratitude; and finally spiritual idols; and (c) outcomes related to spiritual understandings and practices that included freedom, connection to and separation from others, serenity, and courage; 5) the intersection of spiritual and sexual identities, how they are compatible or disparate, and spirituality's influence on sexual and romantic relationships; and 6) detailed the participants' perspectives on the differences and similarities between religion and spirituality, personal insights related to their spiritual development, and anticipated future direction of their spiritual development. The final section described the ideal types, including *evangelical Christian* and *God as love* types.

There were a number of acknowledged limitations of the study. First, the researcher adopted a selection criterion designed to recruit a homogenous sample of participants that could accurately describe the phenomenon of gay male spiritual identity development. Accordingly, the researcher had hoped to recruit a culturally diverse sample that may have aided in the broader description of the interaction between sociological variables such as race, education level, socioeconomic status, and spiritual identity development. The addition of these variables might have contributed to the crystallization of potentially important patterns in participant reports (i.e., would African American men who identified as spiritual have reported similar transitional factors as white men?). Due to a strong reliance on one narrow sampling technique, the project did not recruit a culturally diverse sample. Finally, the project did not integrate methodological approaches that may have strengthened its trustworthiness including the incorporation of discrepant cases and participant validation.

Several implications of the study were presented. First and foremost, the investigation added to the field of literature that has argued for the definitional reformation of religion and spirituality. Further, the study systematically organized participant responses into categories and sub-categories that attempt to inform the process by which gay men transition from an early faith tradition to a primary spiritual identity. A number of transitional factors and spiritual outcomes were demonstrated and are argued to be unique findings of this study.

The findings are significant in that they forward the profession's recognition and appreciation of diversity and the cross-cultural contexts of gay men, particularly in relation to spirituality. They may provide counselors with a greater ability to differentiate between the concepts of religion and spirituality and also have a broader understanding of how religion and spirituality intersect in meaningful ways for gay men. A more nuanced awareness of the role spirituality plays in the lives of gay men, including how it's understood and practiced is a significant result of the study. This awareness may assist counselors to integrate language that reflects their clients' beliefs, develop culturally sensitive assessment procedures that account for spiritual identity development among gay men, and identify non-traditional spiritual resources that may be helpful to gay male clients who identify as spiritual and not religious.

Finally, future directions for research were identified. Prospective studies might look at how the research questions of this investigation might apply to lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender individuals. A larger quantitative study is invited that seeks to determine the degree to which some of the findings of this study, specifically related to transitional factors and spiritual outcomes, that can also generate results that are generalizable to a broader population of gay men. An exclusive exploration of spiritual outcomes and their impact on psychosocial wellbeing is necessary as the profession develops culturally sensitive interventions for gay men

who struggle with spiritual identity development. The more data to support the positive impact of spiritual practices on the lives of gay men the more relevant spiritually integrated treatment is for the professional counselor.

Lastly, a study on transitional factors is needed to determine the degree to which each factor mediates the choice to transition away from a faith tradition. This may be important as the profession seeks to broaden the discussion of religious migration beyond what might be the limited context of homonegativty. This type of study is particularly relevant as more men grow up in gay affirmative faith traditions but desire to move away from their faith tradition anyway.

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Appendix A – Informed Consent Form

Department of Counseling and Family Therapy

One University Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
Telephone: 314-516-5782
Fax: 314-516-5227
E-mail: dwhtz4@umsl.edu

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities
In Search of Spirit: The Meaning and Making of Gay Male Spirituality

Participant _____ HSC Approval Number _____

Principal Investigator: David Hart, MS PI's Phone Number: (314) 600-3536

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1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by David Hart, MS and Mark Pope, Ph.D. The purpose of this study is to describe the role spirituality plays in the lives of gay men who have transitioned from mainly identifying as religious to identifying as spiritual. The study is interested in exploring how gay men define and practice spirituality, the process by which they transitioned from identifying as religious to identifying as spiritual, and the relationship between their spiritual and sexual identities.

2. a) Your participation will involve

   - Two, 60 minute interviews over the course of 1-2 weeks that will ask you to describe in detail:
     - Early childhood experiences specifically related to religion;
     - Stories related to reconciling your emerging sexual orientation and religious affiliation as a young person;
     - The developmental course that led you from a primary religious identification to one that is spiritual;
     - The role spirituality plays in your life today;
     - The relationship between your spiritual and sexual identity.

   - Interviews will be conducted, for the most part, in-person at a location that is convenient for you. The only definitive requirement is that the location be mostly free from distraction. Locations might include a private office, residence, reserved private space at a local lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender center, and/or a meeting room on a university campus. Skype is also a potential option with the same requirement for a distraction free environment.

   b) Approximately 10 participants will be asked to participate in three, 60-90 minute interviews that explore their experiences with spirituality. Participants can expect to spend a maximum 4.5 hours and a minimum of 3 hours participating in this study. Each interview will be audio recorded.

3. There are no anticipated risks associated with this research. It is possible that talking about experiences related to reconciling religious affiliation and sexual orientation could bring up painful feelings such as sadness, anger, or anxiety. If you feel overwhelmed and want to discontinue your participation in the interview, please let me know. I am a trained psychotherapist and can talk with you regarding feelings that may emerge as a result of participating in this study or refer you for additional therapy if needed.

4. There are no direct benefits to you for taking part in this study, including any payment for participating. I hope that the results of this study will help the counseling field better understand the role spirituality plays in the lives of gay men.

5. Your participation is voluntary and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

6. By agreeing to participate, you understand and agree that your data may be shared with other researchers and educators in the form of presentations and/or publications. In all cases, your identity will not be revealed. In rare instances, a researcher's study must undergo an audit or program evaluation by an oversight agency (such as the Office for Human Research Protection). That agency would be required to maintain the confidentiality of your data. In addition, all data will be stored on a password-protected computer and/or in a locked office.

7. If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator David Hart, MS at (314) 600-3536 or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Mark Pope at (314) 516-7121You may also ask questions or state concerns regarding your rights as a research participant to the Office of Research Administration at (314) 516-5897.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

Participant's Signature	Date	Participant's Printed Name
Signature of Investigator or Designee	Date	Investigator/Designee Printed Name

Appendix B – Interview Questions

Department of Counseling and Family Therapy

One University Blvd.
St. Louis, Missouri 63121-4499
Telephone: 314-516-5782
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The first interview is intended to establish the context of the participant's experience and is a focused life history. For this study, the first interview will ask participants to tell the researcher about their life up until the time they began to transition from traditional religious affiliation to a spiritual orientation. Participants will be asked to reconstruct their childhoods, particularly important relationships and memorable encounters in various life arenas. A special emphasis will be placed on questions regarding experiences within their faith of origin and process of coming out. Questions for the first interview will include:

4. Tell me about important childhood experiences. You might think about your family, friendships, school activities, your neighborhood, or anything else that comes to mind.
5. Please describe your early religious and/or spiritual experiences.
6. Tell me about your "coming out" story.

The second interview is designed to allow participants to reconstruct the here-and-now details of their experience within the context of the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 2006). The goal is not to ask for opinions but rather the specifics of their present lived experience. Participants in this study will be asked to comprehensively describe their spiritual lives. The researcher will ask for explicit stories about their experiences as a method for describing

meaningful details. Questions in this interview set will explore intrinsic spiritual beliefs, attitudes, and practices and will include:

6. How do you describe spirituality?
7. What role does spirituality play in your life?
8. How do you practice spirituality?
9. Please describe the rituals and customs of your spiritual practice.
10. Please describe the impact your spirituality has on your sexual identity. What about other non-sexual relationships you have (i.e. family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances)?

The third and final interview is intended to promote participant reflection on the meaning their experience holds for them (Seidman, 2006). Meaning is not defined in terms of satisfaction or reward but rather in the sense of emotional and intellectual connections between the participants' up-to-date experience and where they are heading. Questions in this set are generally future-oriented and will include:

5. How do you define spirituality? Religion? What are the similarities/differences between the two?
6. What does your spirituality say about you as a person? As a gay man?
7. How do you see your spirituality developing in the next year; five years; ten years?
8. How do you think your spirituality will impact your relationships and community in the coming years?
9. What have we not talked about that is important for the reader to know regarding your story?

Appendix C – Participant Information Form

Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions:
Please complete this demographic form to the best of your ability. Answers will be used to generally describe the range of research participants' backgrounds and will not be attributed to the individual. In accordance with Institutional Review Board protocol, demographic information will remain confidential and private.

Last Name: _____ First Name:_____

Address (Street, City, State, Zip):

_____

Email Address: _____ Phone: _____

Gender: _____ Age: _____ Employment Status:_____

Level of Education: _____ Sexual Orientation:_____

Household Income: _____ Race:_____

Ethnicity: _____

Prior Religious Affiliation(s): _____

Current Religious Affiliation(s): _____

Best days/times for 60-90 Minute Interviews:

_____

Questions:

1. How will I know that you are spiritual?

2. What will I see that makes you different from a strictly religious person?

Appendix D – Social Media Advertisement

Social Media Advertisement Language

Attention Gay Men! Your help is needed. If you identify as a gay male, are over 18, grew up in a religious household but now consider yourself more spiritual than religious, your participation is needed for a study on Gay Male Spirituality. This is an opportunity to provide your personal insights related to this important topic and a chance to have your voice heard. If interested or for more information please contact David Hart by email at dwhart03@yahoo.com.