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Undergraduate Catholic Lesbians: The Intersection of Religious and Sexual Aspects of Identity

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Running head: INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL ASPECTS OF IDENTITY

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DISSERTATION

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DISSERTATION COMMITTEE PAGE

The undersigned have examined the dissertation entitled:

UNDERGRADUATE CATHOLIC LESBIANS: THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL ASPECTS OF IDENTITY

presented on March 26, 2015

by

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Abstract

The following is a qualitative study designed to shed light on the experiences of undergraduate Catholic lesbians. The study focused on the unique ways in which these women negotiate the intersection of the religious and sexual aspects of their identities. Research shows that religious and sexual aspects of identity often conflict. In-depth research aimed specifically at the negotiation of religious and sexual identity dimensions is needed. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with undergraduate Catholic lesbians who had the opportunity to speak about the ways in which they negotiate the potentially conflicting religious and sexual aspects of their identities. Given their immersion in the developmental task of identity development, undergraduate women served as the participants for this study. Within a constructivist paradigm, interpretative phenomenological analysis was the chosen methodology for this study. As a result of the analysis, seven superordinate concepts emerged that represent the ways in which participants hold both religious and sexual aspects of identity. The seven concepts are: (a) experience of internal conflict, (b) compartmentalizing aspects of identity, (c) personal meaning-making within Catholicism, (d) limiting the scope of Catholic beliefs and religious participation, (e) shifting identification and openness about identity in response to the context, (f) use of specific actions and thoughts to cope, (g) personal construction of identity dimensions. These concepts elucidate the unique ways in which these women understand and cope with these identity dimensions and, ultimately, reconcile the two.

Keywords: identity, sexual orientation, religion, Catholic, lesbian

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> *It has become essential that to truly understand individuals who make up the multicultural world in which we live, we must begin to examine, conceptualize, and treat according to the multiple ways in which individuals identify themselves.* (McNeill & Gallardo, 2009, p. xxvii)

Chapter 1

Attention to Multiple Aspects of Identity Important in Multicultural Psychology

Models of identity development abound in the multicultural psychology literature. Many of these models focus on singular aspects of identity, for instance: sexual identity (Cass, 1979). By focusing on the development of solitary identity dimensions, these models are insufficient when it comes to describing individuals as "whole" beings (Rice & Nakamura, 2009, p.163). Though descriptions of specific types of identity formation have contributed to the field, they also seem to discredit the intentions that lie at the heart of multicultural psychology. Diversity is at the heart of multiculturalism; therefore the heterogeneity within, and interactions between, different aspects of individuals' cultural identities must not be ignored.

Multiculturally competent psychologists should "recognize that all individuals are cultural beings affected differently by their dimensions of personal identity and contextual factors" (Fouad & Arredondo, 2007, p. 16). Some contemporary identity theories include "cross-contextualization," the integration and consideration of multiple aspects of identity (Stanley, 2004, p. 163). Stanley articulated this well: "The goal is not to create further segmentations based on isolated identifiers, but rather to work toward understanding the interrelated and integrated aspects of multiple identities and thereby the unique whole of the person" (p. 160). Models of bicultural identity are perhaps the best example of examining multiple identity dimensions within the existing literature (Benet-Martinez, Leu, Lee, & Morris,

2002; Chen, 2015; Cheng & Lee, 2013). However, the dimensions of identity considered are usually racial or ethnic and, though the existing bicultural identity research may pertain to other aspects of identity, "further research is desperately needed" (Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2010, p. 105). Psychologists can better understand individuals by considering the intersection of their various identity components (Roysircar, Arredondo, Fuertes, Ponterotto, & Toporek, 2003).

Potential Conflict between Religious and Sexual Identity Dimensions

At times, intersecting multiple aspects of identity do result in conflict. This is often the case when an individual identifies as religious or spiritual and as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) (APA, 2009; Rosario, Yali, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2006). Most people are exposed to religion or spirituality while growing up (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001) and many Western religions deem homosexuality sinful (Barret & Barzan, 1996). While the importance of attending to the conflict between religious or spiritual and LGB dimensions of identity is recognized by the American Psychological Association (APA; 2000) in *Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients*, very little research has been dedicated to the interaction between religious or spiritual and sexual aspects of identity (Rosario et al., 2006; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). A polarized view of religion and non-heterosexual identities within the field of psychology itself, which includes sexual orientation change efforts (SOCE), may in part be to blame (Phillips, 2004). Contrastingly, APA (2009) advocates for the use of affirmative therapy for sexual minorities, as opposed to SOCE, and considers identity integration to be a goal of therapy. Perhaps in recognition of the lack of research in this area, APA (2009) has called for research that considers religion alongside sexual identity and that focuses on identity integration in "religious sexual minorities" (p. 91).

Catholic Lesbians Face Potentially Conflicting Identity Dimensions

According to a 2008 survey, 78.4% of Americans age 18 and older identify as Christian and 23.9% of those individuals identify as Catholic (Lugo et al., 2008, February). Approximately 3.5% of Americans age 18 and older report identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and 1.7% of those identify as lesbian or gay (Gates, 2011, April). The percentage of Catholic lesbians in America is unfortunately unknown. This gap in research potentially can be understood in light of the Catholic Church's official stance on homosexuality; homosexual acts are considered unnatural and not approved of by the Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009). At a time when political, social, and religious voices add to debates about issues such as same-sex marriage, the potential discord between these aspects of identity seems clear.

Those who identify as Catholic and lesbian may also be looked down upon by the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community because of their religious affiliation (Swanson, 2004). In addition to coping with two potentially rejecting communities, Catholic lesbians must navigate the cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) resulting from the intersection of their religious and sexual aspects of identity (Rosario et al., 2006). Cognitive dissonance can be eliminated, usually by changing thoughts or behavior in response to the environment (Festinger, 1957). "It may not always be possible, however, to eliminate dissonance or even to reduce it materially by changing one's action of feeling" (Festinger, 1957, p. 19). More recently, Montell (2001) wrote:

> when confronted with inconsistent belief and behavior affecting our (mostly positive) sense of self, we are motivated to bring the belief and behavior into some form of compatibility, reduce the dissonance, and avoid information likely to increase it. This motivation is especially strong when the dissonance involves beliefs vital to our

> self-concept and worldview. (p.124)

Montell then made the case that cognitive dissonance may not apply, or may apply differently, to religious beliefs; because of their ties to existential issues, religious beliefs are often distinct from other types of belief. Thus, though cognitive dissonance offers a useful frame for considering the experience of tension between religious beliefs and LGBT issues, it is important to note that it may not be fully representative of this tension due to the complexity of religious belief.

Young Adulthood a Critical Period for Identity Development

Identity development typically spans adolescence through young adulthood and it is often particularly salient in the college years (Garrod, Smulyan, Powers, & Kilkenny, 2005). The process has been called a "struggle for meaning and a quest for wholeness" (Garrod et al., 2005, p. 7). Young adults must assess different options and choose those that will become a part of their identities (Garrod et al., 2005). Arnett (2000) proposed the term "emerging adulthood" to capture the period of development between ages 18 and 25 and defined it as such:

> a time of life when many different directions remain possible, when little about the future has been decided for certain, when the scope of independent exploration of life's possibilities is greater for most people than it will be at any other period of the life course. (p. 469)

This population engages in the search for a harmonious way of living that incorporates multiple aspects of identity (Jones, 1997).

According to Erik Erikson: "The process of identity formation emerges as an *evolving configuration*….from a mutual adaptation of individual potentials, technological world views, and religious or political ideologies" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 74). Marcia & Josselson

(2013) described four statuses within identity formation: "identity achievement," "moratorium," "foreclosure," and "identity diffusion" (pp. 620-621). Identity achievement includes "management of conflict" related to identity and individuals in this category "have explored alternatives and made occupational, ideological, and relational value commitments" (p. 620). When individuals experience "identity crisis…struggling to find positions to commit to," they are said to be in moratorium and when they not only fail to commit but also cease "meaningful exploration," they fit the status of identity diffusion (pp. 620-621). Finally, those who are in foreclosure "are strongly committed to their identity positions, but they have adopted unquestioningly beliefs and values that have been bestowed upon them by authority figures" (p. 620).

Providing a counterpoint to Erikson's theory of identity development, Carol Gilligan (1982) called for the "recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle," rather than overemphasizing masculine ideals of individuation and autonomy in development; identity formation takes place within relationships (p. 23). While negotiating multidimensional identity can be seen as a fluid, ever evolving process occurring throughout the lifespan (Jones, 2009; Marcia & Josselson, 2013), young adulthood is a foundational time for identity exploration and decision-making.

Catholic Lesbian Undergraduates Negotiate Identity Formation Challenges

When potentially dissonant dimensions of identity intersect, it complicates the developmental tasks of identity formation for many college students. For undergraduate Catholic lesbians, identity formation may include exploring sexual and religious aspects of identity and their co-existence (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005). In terms of lesbian identity development, "A successful outcome of the coming-out process will likely involve the

integration of one's LGB identity into one's overall sense of self" (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004, p. 233). Integration is often mentioned as a goal in the existing research on multiple dimensions of identity (Crisp, 2010). The term "integration," however, may not be appropriate for describing the negotiation of religious and sexual dimensions of identity; "reconciliation" better fits the struggle to navigate these potentially incompatible aspects of identity (Love et al., 2005, p. 200). Additionally, reconciliation is distinct from resolution, as it suggests an ongoing process rather than an end point. When spirituality or religion is important to a lesbian's sense of who she is, she may move toward the reconciliation of her dimensions of identity (Love et al., 2005, p. 199). An increasing number of lesbian Catholics are embracing both the sexual and religious parts of their identities (Davidson, 2000) and the zeitgeist in which they negotiate these aspects of identity is marked by religious and political conflict.

Some literature addresses the broad ways that lesbian college students work through the dissonance between their religious and sexual identity dimensions, including the use of meaning-making capacities (Abes & Jones, 2004). "Identity negotiation," the process of meaning-making around multidimensional identities, is considered to be fluid and ongoing (Jones, 2009, p. 298). Other options for coping with identity conflict include separating spirituality from religion, turning away from religion and spirituality or sexual identity altogether (Love et al., 2005), or finding an accepting religious community (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004). "In-depth research" concerning the ways in which lesbian undergraduates perceive multiple dimensions of identity alongside sexual orientation is largely absent from the literature (Abes & Jones, 2004, p. 613). Furthermore, research regarding the ways in which Catholic lesbians cope and make meaning out of their multidimensional identities is sparse.

Qualitative Research Essential in Understanding Multidimensional Identities

The experiences of Catholic lesbians, in relation to navigating multiple aspects of identity, have generally not been represented in depth in the literature. Developmental models that outline religious identity development *or* sexual identity development fall short of describing the experiences of Catholic lesbians. These women experience the intersection of these aspects of identity in unique ways that are important to consider and understand.

In order to address gaps in the multicultural psychology literature regarding the topic of multidimensional identities, I conducted a qualitative study exploring the ways in which undergraduate Catholic lesbians experience the religious and sexual aspects of their identities simultaneously. This research contributes to a greater understanding of the experience of two potentially dissonant aspects of identity and their intersection. Given the salience of identity development for this population, undergraduates were the focus of this study. The struggle to hold two potentially dissonant aspects of identity is particularly meaningful and important for those moving through a developmental period marked by identity formation.

This study sought to increase multicultural awareness in the field of psychology regarding the intersection of potentially dissonant aspects of identity, as well as improvements in psychologists' abilities to help individuals effectively, especially young adults, who identify as both Catholic and lesbian. In contrast to the vague presentation of choices for negotiating religious and sexual identity dimensions presented in much of the literature, this study serves to illuminate the specific and personal ways in which Catholic lesbians are able to hold and negotiate both elements of identity amidst the potential for conflict.

Research Question

How do undergraduate Catholic lesbians negotiate the potentially dissonant religious and

sexual aspects of their identities?

Chapter 2: Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to illuminate the experiences of undergraduate Catholic lesbians as they negotiate the potentially dissonant religious and sexual aspects of their identities. I conducted qualitative research in order to explore thoroughly these elements of cultural identity, as "Investigating culture requires discovering and understanding the meanings that people give to their experiences" and "Uncovering these meanings, beliefs, values, and assumptions requires the prolonged contact, in-depth interviews, and empathic listening employed in qualitative research" (Love, 1998, p. 301). A constructivist paradigm and qualitative interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology were ideally suited to address the research inquiry. A qualitative rather than quantitative methodology was most fitting to explore the deeply personal and complex processes of negotiating potentially dissonant religious and sexual elements of identity. Additionally, in the current absence of research and information available about the studied population, quantitative research was not a viable option.

Design

Paradigm. The constructivist paradigm served as the foundation for the study. As aptly summarized by Gergen (2009), "what we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part" (p. 2). Through this lens, it is a researcher's objective to understand the experiences of participants from their points-of-view (Mertens, 2010).

The exploration of individual meaning-making proved to be a valuable approach, as I focused on Catholic lesbians' individual experiences negotiating multiple aspects of identity. First, many see identity as continually constructed (Jones, 2009). Second, multiculturally sensitive psychologists "recognize that all individuals are cultural beings affected differently by

their dimensions of personal identity and contextual factors" (Fouad & Arredondo, 2007, p. 16). In the study, the different ways in which undergraduate Catholic lesbians interpret experiences and construct meaning in terms of the religious and sexual aspects of their identities were understood by exploring their individual viewpoints.

Within the constructivist paradigm it is recognized that researchers, through interactions with those whom they study, inevitably influence the research (Mertens, 2010). Thus, hermeneutics, "a way to interpret the meaning of something from a certain standpoint or situation," is an essential part of this paradigm (Mertens, 2010, p. 16). A double hermeneutic was present in the study, as I interpreted the participants' interpretations of their experiences (Smith & Osborn, 2008). For example, in this study, participants spoke about their experiences based on their own perceptions of these and I made sense of their narratives, through my own lens as a researcher and as a person, as I listened during interviews, transcribed and reviewed the transcripts, and formulated the study results.

Methodology. The process whereby one negotiates his or her religion and gay or lesbian sexual orientation is likely to be personal and individualized (Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach to research that "attempts to explore personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 53). Therefore, IPA was used to explore undergraduate Catholic lesbians' experiences of the intersection of their religious and sexual aspects of identity. IPA was used to gain knowledge about the participants' psychological worlds (Smith & Osborn, 2008) and, thus, the ways in which Catholic lesbian undergraduates cope with, and make meaning out of, the intersection of these aspects of identity. This is particularly important as a "complex meaning-making capacity" has been posited to facilitate "the ease with which sexual

orientation…peacefully co-existed with other dimensions" of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007, p. 6). As part of IPA, I aimed to empathically understand undergraduate Catholic lesbians' experiences and, concurrently, gain understanding by making sense out of these experiences through interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Within IPA, the researcher plays an active role in the research process, bringing much of him or herself into the interview, analysis, and all other parts of the research (Smith & Osborn, 2008). As part of the study, I reflected often about my own biases and feelings about Catholicism and sexual orientation, as well as the religious and sexual aspects of my identity, and the potential effect that these had on the research at hand. IPA recommends that researchers make their preconceived notions, assumptions, and biases explicit before conducting research so that attention will be paid to minimizing the influence of these on the processes of the study and so that, if these do influence such processes, this can be examined and reported.

This topic of study is meaningful to me. I was raised Roman Catholic and practiced devoutly for much of my life. I was in a romantic relationship with a woman who was also raised Catholic at the time I began my research. Upon entering into a same-sex relationship, I began to feel dissonance between my sexuality and Catholic faith. In the past five years, I have called into question the dogma of the Catholic Church and continue to grapple with the role of Catholicism in my life. In many ways, I have separated from the Church given the incongruence between Church doctrine and my beliefs about sexuality. I do not believe that non-heterosexual orientations or behavior are sinful. I believe that all individuals are created by God, in his image, and worthy of the same rights and respect in our world. Yet, I have not entirely rejected my faith and I consider many elements of the religion to be meaningful. Though I have grappled with the sexual and religious aspects of my own identity, I hope that the two can co-exist in a meaningful

way and need not be mutually exclusive.

I was attentive to the ways in which these biases and beliefs, including my personal experience with the topic of study, influenced the ways in which I collected, analyzed, and reported data. In order to be mindful of this, I self-reflected throughout the research process and repeatedly examined my interview questions, analyses, and manuscripts for any personal biases or beliefs that may have leaked in. I sought collaboration from a peer and my dissertation chair in order to screen for anything I missed. This was accomplished through discussions about my biases and beliefs with these individuals and a subsequent collaborative review of the research process and analyses. My collaborators and I made notes when it was believed that my biases and beliefs influenced the research in any way and these are transparently presented in the discussion section.

Participants

Inclusion/exclusion criteria. Per Smith and Osborn's (2008) suggestion, the sample size for the proposed study was five to eight participants. Due to difficulty recruiting the proposed number of participants, four participants were recruited and recruitment attempts were terminated after approximately a year and a half of efforts made to recruit participants from various colleges and universities. The four participants were selected using the purposeful sampling procedure of criterion sampling, in which the researcher determines a priori inclusion and exclusion criteria and then recruits and selects cases that meet such criteria (Mertens, 2010). In order to take part in this study, participants had to be enrolled undergraduate students at a college or university in New England whose lesbian and Roman Catholic identity dimensions are both important to them. Originally, recruitment criteria were proposed to include student status at Catholic colleges or universities. This was widened to include secular colleges or universities

due to difficulty recruiting individuals from Catholic institutions. Individuals who did not fully embody the criteria were excluded from the study. Criteria were verified through brief phone conversations with each participant prior to interviews.

Recruitment. I recruited participants through LGBT groups and via university employees affiliated with campus LGBT populations at two universities in New England. Attempts were made to recruit from three additional colleges and universities, all of which are Catholic institutions, but these attempts proved fruitless. Three participants were recruited from the first university and one from the second university. This method of recruitment was designed to increase the likelihood of finding participants who met the inclusion/exclusion criteria and were interested in participating in the study. I contacted employees affiliated with the LGBT campus communities, described the proposed study, and explained my interest in recruiting individuals for the study. I requested that these employees disseminate the recruitment flyer (see Appendix A). Individuals who were interested in, and qualified for, participation were instructed to contact me. The first four individuals who met the outlined criteria were selected to participate in the study.

Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews (Mertens, 2010; Smith & Osborn, 2008). All interviews were recorded for the purpose of transcription and analysis (Mertens, 2010). Semi-structured interviews allowed for a type of dialogue between the researcher and participant; an outline, or interview schedule, was created with specific questions of interest, but, as the researcher, I was flexible and further explored responses, including other areas of interest as they arose (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This method of data collection afforded the participants the "maximum opportunity to tell their own story" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 59). At the same

time, this method ensured that the research questions were explored in the interview (Smith & Osborn, 2008). The interview schedule was created with the research question in mind and feedback was gleaned from my peers through a convening in my Doctoral Research Seminar. The interview schedule can be found in Appendix B. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately one hour in duration. Each of the four participants was interviewed once, individually. Plans were made to regard the first interview as a pilot if it was discovered that the interview schedule needed considerable modification after the first interview. This was not the case and the first interview was not regarded as a pilot.

Standpoint of the Researcher

My relationship with the topic of study, as previously described, was present during the interview process. I felt a certain affinity with the four participants. As participants described their Catholic upbringings, I found myself nodding in recognition of Catholic terminology, doctrine, rituals, and practices. My familiarity with these seemed to be clear to participants; several participants commented on the fact that it was apparent I knew what they were talking about when referencing Catholic culture. This mutual knowledge of, and experience within, the Catholic Church helped to create a sense of connection between participants and myself. When several participants mentioned feeling conflicted about attending Mass with their partners, I recalled my own struggle around this when I was dating a woman and trying to maintain ties with my Catholic heritage. I also felt empathic throughout the four interviews. My identity as a psychotherapist was present, as I brought warmth and attentiveness into the interactions, as well as curiosity and a desire to understand participants' experiences as fully as possible. I believe this facilitated participants' openness and comfort level in sharing. As in individual therapy, as the alliance developed over the course of the interviews, participants appeared increasingly

comfortable.

Data Analysis Procedures

The analysis was designed to capture the themes that emerged from the interviews that reflect the ways in which the participants negotiate—understand and cope with—the religious and sexual aspects of their identities. I flexibly followed the guidance of Smith and Osborn (2008) in conducting the analysis; I read through transcripts and made annotations sequentially as they suggested and departed from their suggestions in my strategy for organizing the results into tables, creating my own design. Each interview was transcribed from the audio recordings. Between five and eight hours were allocated for transcribing every one hour of audio.

I began the analysis process by reading the transcription from one interview, scanning for interesting or significant components that relate to the research question, and making annotations in the left margin. Next, I read through the same transcript again and used the right margin to note emerging themes, thereby converting my initial notes into concise phrases. I then listed the emergent themes and identified connections between themes, clustering some together to create *superordinate concepts*. The compiled list of superordinate concepts was checked against the participant's own words in the transcript and the participant's words were gathered in a word processor document for use in supporting superordinate concepts (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

I repeated the process delineated above with each of the other transcripts. I used the themes and superordinate concepts identified in the first transcript as a foundation for my subsequent analyses, while attending to differences and new material that emerged. After analyzing all of the transcripts, I created three documents to organize and make sense of my findings. First, I assembled a list of the identified superordinate concepts (Appendix C). In creating this list, I eliminated themes that "neither fit well in the emerging structure nor are very

rich in evidence within the transcript" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 72). Then, I created an organized and comprehensive list of superordinate concepts with summaries of all of the contributing data from transcripts. I listed themes beneath each superordinate concept title. Key words and phrases, called *indicators*, along with their corresponding page numbers were used to represent the themes; this way, individual themes can be easily located in the transcript. Additionally, quotations were sometimes included as examples. Finally, I created a table organizing the superordinate concepts into three categories based on how they would be used (Appendix D). The table contains three categories: (a) *general experiences*, (b) *how participants hold both religious and sexual aspects of identity*, and (c) *eliminated concepts*. I deviated from the table template initially chosen to represent the data and created the three documents described above in formats that seemed more intuitive based on my findings and preference for organizing them. I re-read each transcript once more, checking to ensure that these final superordinate concepts fit the full dataset (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

As a part of IPA, data analysis continued as results were reported and as I formulated the discussion section. I expanded upon elucidated superordinate concepts and themes by texturing them with narrative accounts. My own commentary and interpretations were added and clearly delineated from the participants' individual accounts (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

Ethical and Institutional Review Board Considerations

I submitted my proposal to the Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board (IRB) before beginning the study and received full IRB approval in July 2014. I renewed approval in December 2014. I became familiar with the policies and guidelines set forth by both APA and the IRB and adhered to them throughout the study. My dissertation chair and committee members were consulted throughout the study. As part of informed consent,

participants were given the opportunity to consent to, or decline, the inclusion of their verbatim quotations in the manuscript (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Once analyses were performed, all quotations that I wished to use in the manuscript were sent to the corresponding participant for review and to afford them a final opportunity to rescind their consent for inclusion within the dissertation manuscript.

Quality Control and Credibility

Measures were taken to protect the credibility of the study, which is the perceived correspondence between participants' experiences and the way in which the researcher describes these experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). In member checks, the researcher presents the information that he or she gleaned from each participant to the respective participants. Participants are asked to provide feedback regarding the researcher's interpretation, or understanding, of the information they provided. Member checks were completed once the data were transcribed to ensure that the participants felt that they have been accurately understood and represented (Mertens, 2010). Typed transcriptions of individual interviews, along with requests for feedback, were sent via email to the respective participants.

A confirmability audit was conducted, in which I iteratively traced emergent themes to the original sources within transcripts, thereby rooting my interpretations in the data source (Mertens, 2010). I further ensured credibility by recruiting an external auditor to check my coding of the interviews. The auditor scrutinized my coding annotations and the resultant themes and superordinate concepts and compared these with the transcripts. When the auditor experienced confusion or disagreement with my coding, he made clear notes on the transcripts and provided the feedback to me. We followed up with a discussion and I critically incorporated the auditor's feedback. In this way, a second set of eyes ensured the quality of the research as it

progressed. Finally, I ensured dependability by thoroughly documenting any changes that were made throughout the study, as well as a rationale for making the changes (Mertens, 2010). Such changes include any revisions made to the procedure as outlined in the dissertation proposal. My own feelings shifted, at times, over the course of the study and these were documented. Change is expected in the constructivist paradigm in which this study is rooted and it is imperative to the integrity of the study that changes are transparently noted and explained (Mertens, 2010).

Procedure

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants lasting approximately one hour. All interviews were recorded. I utilized an interview schedule to present open-ended questions, according to the evolution of the interviews. As is acceptable when conducting semi-structured interviews, I moved with the participants and allowed them to spend more time on certain questions than others if they wished to do so (Smith & Osborn, 2008). During the interviews, I noted the process of the interviews, including my observations of participants' reactions and presentations, as well as any strong feelings of my own that were elicited during the process. After each individual interview, participants were given the opportunity to debrief with me and ask any questions related to the study. I then transcribed all of the interviews. My external auditor checked my coding and provided me with feedback and adjustments were made as necessary.

I anticipated that the interviews would yield rich, complex, and deeply personal accounts. I came to better understand the ways in which the participants hold both the religious and sexual aspects of their identities as a result of the procedure described. In contrast to much of the existent literature on the subject, the results of this study seem to indicate that Catholic lesbians can reconcile these identity dimensions and find ways of coping with the dissonance between the

two. However, it is important to note both that this reconciliation seemed to be, at times, a painful and complex process for participants and that *reconciling* is distinct from *resolving* dissonance.

Chapter 3: Results

In this chapter, I review the data collected through semi-structured interviews with four women who identify as undergraduate Catholic lesbians. These participants were asked questions about their religious and sexual identities, both separately and in terms of the intersection of the two. For the complete interview schedule, refer to Appendix B. Data were reviewed for themes and categorized in terms of concepts. Superordinate concepts elucidating the ways in which participants hold both religious and sexual aspects of their identities are the focal point of this study.

Recruitment

I recruited participants using the purposeful sampling procedure of criterion sampling. I determined inclusion criteria; a potential participant needed to identify as an undergraduate Catholic lesbian who considers both religious and sexual aspects of her identity to be important to her. Potential participants were notified of my study and of the inclusion criteria via contacts I made with LGBT groups and via university employees affiliated with campus LGBT populations at two universities in New England. I then confirmed inclusion criteria and introduced myself in brief phone conversations with potential participants. All individuals screened through these conversations were appropriate candidates for participation and, thus, selected as participants. Participants apparently were interested in the topic and enthused about taking part in the study.

Interviews took place in pre-determined, quiet, private locations on the participants' respective campuses. During the interviews participants spoke openly about their experiences. The interviews were conversational, guided by the interview schedule but taking unique form according to the length and depth of participant responses. They ranged from one to one and a half hours in duration. All participants expressed interest in and appreciation for the research

being conducted. I was impressed by the degree to which all four participants had considered the intersection of their religious and sexual aspects of identity and their ability to articulate the tension between the two, as well as the ways that they hold both. I got the impression that they left the interviews feeling heard and understood.

Participants

The participants for this study were four undergraduate Catholic women, ages 18 to 22, from colleges/universities in New England. All participants considered both their religious and sexual identity dimensions to be important aspects of who they are. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for reporting the results of the interviews.

Catie. Catie was a 19-year-old, White, sophomore. She was baptized Catholic in infancy. Catie identified as lesbian and single at the time of our interview. She had the following to say about her coming out process:

> I've known since I was probably like 13 but I was very…I think…the Catholic stuff…really made me feel repressed and…I just…was in denial….I had come out to people in high school, but I don't think I was really…I hadn't really come out to myself until I was, um…I had just turned 18…my first semester in college.

Eva. Eva was a 22-year-old sophomore who identified as White and Hispanic. She was baptized in the Catholic Church as an infant. Eva self-identified as "gay or lesbian…whatever people want to say." She said: "It took me awhile to…accept those labels for myself…I used to just say 'Oh, I fall in love with a person, not a gender.'" Later, Eva added:

> I wasn't one of those people who knew when I was four-years-old that I was gay. It really took me until…the end of high school, early college, to really identify the feelings that I had been having and sort of internally be like "Oh shit, I think I might be gay."

She was single at the time of our interview.

Elle. Elle was a 20-year-old, White, senior. She was baptized Catholic as an infant. When asked about her sexual orientation, Elle said "I don't really have labels…is actually the fun part." She went on to say:

> Some people really like labels because they're feeling something and then they finally find a word for it and they're like "Yes, that is me." But, I haven't really found that yet, and…at this point I know it's okay I haven't.

Elle identified herself in the past by saying "I'm in a relationship with a woman." When I referred to her as "someone who's dating a woman" later in our interview, she said: "Gay is fine." Elle was in a relationship with a fellow female student when I interviewed her.

Mackenzie. Mackenzie was an 18-year-old, Asian, freshman. She was baptized in the Catholic Church in infancy. In terms of her sexual identity and coming out, Mackenzie said:

> I still don't really say that I'm a lesbian, although…most people just think that I am and it's like I kind of am…but there's…a lot of…connotations to that word that I don't really like….there's…social, political issues with it…what is gender? And then…biological sex…it's hard to define that, so…anyone who doesn't fit into the typical binaries of male or female….Right now, I pretty much like girls or female-bodied people, but I don't know what I'll like when I'm an adult so it's…weird to identify as that…it makes more sense to just…like specific people.

She did refer to herself as "gay" during other portions of the interview. Mackenzie was single at the time of our interview.

Categorization of Concepts Derived from the Data

Concepts were divided into three categories: (a) *general experiences*, (b) *how*

participants hold both religious and sexual aspects of identity, and (c) *eliminated concepts* (Appendix D). The general experiences category includes the variety of experiences that the four participants reported based on their identification as both Catholic and lesbian. These included: experience of religion as repressing sexuality or opposing sexuality; experience of familial disapproval and/or lack of acceptance and support regarding sexuality; experience of relationship with Catholicism as difficult; experience of negative emotional effects for identifying as both; experience of two identities as connecting; experience of familial support; experience of (progressive) parish support; and experience of external conflict.

This study focused on the negotiation of holding both religious and sexual aspects of identity. Though general experiences do provide interesting information about how participants experience these aspects of identity, this information is peripheral to the active process of contending with identification as Catholic and lesbian that this study seeks to elucidate. I will not expand upon general experiences in this study because they do not directly address the research question.

Eliminated concepts include concepts that emerged, though not as robustly as others found in the data. These included: experience of sexual identity as empowering; concerns about the future; management of Catholic identity in relationships; positive experience of sexual identity; and not limiting participation in Catholicism. These concepts provided a glimpse into the participants' individualized experiences related to their religious and sexual identifications. While they shed light on specific participants' experiences, the concepts did not appear as relevant for the majority of participants. In IPA, one attends to both "convergences and divergences" across transcripts (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 73). Because I conducted semi-structured interviews, concepts sometimes emerged exclusively in one interview and, thus,

cannot be considered for convergences or divergences in light of the other three interviews. All of this supports my choice not to further elaborate upon eliminated concepts in the present study.

Superordinate Concepts: Holding Religious and Sexual Identity

Across all four interviews, seven superordinate concepts emerged in the category of *how participants hold both religious and sexual aspects of identity*, the focus of this study based on the research question: How do undergraduate Catholic lesbians negotiate the potentially dissonant religious and sexual aspects of their identities? The seven concepts are: (a) experience of internal conflict, (b) compartmentalizing aspects of identity, (c) personal meaning-making around Catholicism, (d) limiting the scope of Catholic beliefs and religious participation, (e) shifting identification and openness about identity in response to the context, (f) use of specific actions and thoughts to cope, (g) personal construction of identity dimensions.

Experience of internal conflict. All participants framed their religious and sexual aspects of identity as being at odds with each other. Catie spoke about feeling pressure to "bifurcate" her personality because these aspects of her identity feel like they sometimes oppose each other. She said: "it's so hard to negotiate between those two things because they're both so important and it seems like they're in direct, um, opposition to each other at times." Eva described feeling "hypocritical" about openly identifying as both Catholic and lesbian because the Catholic Church teaches that a part of her is "inherently wrong." She spoke of not yet finding a way to "neatly integrate" these aspects of her identity, "I'd like to somehow be able to sort of have these two identities intertwine in sort of…in harmony, but right now I'm not in a place where that's happening." Elle talked about not feeling strongly connected to either part of her identity because she identifies as both. Finally, Mackenzie said that her religious and sexual identity dimensions "don't mesh very well" since neither group, with which she identifies,

supports the other. She said: “It never really works.”

Compartmentalizing aspects of identity. All four participants articulated their experiences compartmentalizing the religious and sexual aspects of their identity. There was overlap when it came to either emphasizing or downplaying aspects of identity based on their relationships with individuals and communities. In her relationship with her parents, Catie downplays her sexuality by avoiding talking about attraction and romantic relationships. She is also not open about her sexuality with people from her church. Eva said: “I kinda view the identities separately in order to make it easier.” She does not think about her Catholic identity when she is with gay peers and she “forgets” her gay identity when in Church. She said: “it’s sad and it probably shouldn’t have to be that way, that I sort of…shut one identity off…when I’m in each situation…I haven’t found a way to sort of neatly integrate them together.” Elle does not bring her girlfriend to Mass. Additionally, Elle said that her sexual identity has not felt salient in her family-of-origin; though, she wonders what it will be like to bring a partner home someday. Mackenzie does not tend to discuss her religious beliefs with the people she dates or with people outside of her religious community. She is not open about her sexuality when in her Catholic community at home. As is evident, the four participants flexibly compartmentalize. They allow the religious and sexual aspects of identity to become more or less prominent, both internally and in terms of being transparent about these with others, based on their comfort levels in different situations. Both the contexts within which this occurs and participants’ preferences for keeping parts of themselves out of specific contexts were individualized.

Exceptions to compartmentalizing identities were present in all interviews. Each of the participants referenced a relationship in which they feel comfortable being seen as both Catholic and lesbian simultaneously. Trust and acceptance were common themes in the participants’

descriptions of these relationships. Catie found a group on campus in which she feels free to talk about both aspects of her identity:

> I'm…very involved in theatre on campus. I do a lot of theatre. And so those are really my communities and I feel very comfortable talking to those people, not because I think they'll agree with me…I trust them, ya know? So that's really important.

Catie also found the Catholic community on campus to be "loving and accepting," saying: "I think that the…Catholic community in general on campus…is nothing but warm and…inviting and it's all about love and taking care of each other." Eva spoke about her parents' support of her identification as both Catholic and gay; she described them as "really accepting and progressive." Through her programming initiatives on campus, Eva met and talked about her identity openly with LGBT-affirming clergy members, though none of them were from the Catholic Church. Elle described a relationship with a mentor who is a consecrated nun at her school and who developed campus initiatives to highlight the intersection of Christian and LGBT identity dimensions. She described her mentor as promoting a "pro-gay Catholic community" on campus and said: "there's so much sense of affirmation here that you can do whatever you want and it's like you bring whoever you are to the table but that doesn't necessarily change you or what you can do." Mackenzie described herself as "comfortably both [LGBT and Catholic]" with her family: "with my family, what I identify as doesn't matter because they just see who I am."

Participants' connections with accepting others were meaningful to them. I felt shifts in tone and mood during the interviews as participants spoke about people in their lives with whom they can be open about both parts of their identities; they smiled, brightened, and seemed at ease. I surmised that the importance of such experiences rested in the same domain as the interviews themselves; they enabled the women to feel less isolated and alone in their experiences holding

both aspects of identity.

Personal meaning-making around Catholicism. Participants hold their Catholic identities in unique and personalized ways. Each participant articulated a fairly comprehensive picture of what her Catholic identity means to her. There was some overlap between participants' descriptions, but they were also nuanced based on each participant's respective relationship with Catholicism. To varying degrees, the four participants articulated values that they associate with the Catholic Church such as unconditional love, compassion, and care for humanity. Participants also highlighted belief in a higher power, the importance of faith during challenging times, and a sense of belonging.

Catie. Catie described what Catholicism means to her:

> Well, when I was younger I think it meant to go to church every week. I think it meant, um, you know, saying grace before meals, you know, being…my mom, ya know, is very, um, into not saying the Lord's name in vain…all this stuff…um….I think for me now it just means that I'm part of this grander tradition of belief.…I think for me it just has to do with…being a part of…I don't know…Christ's church and I think it's really….I like it a lot because it's inspired…all this great art and architecture and I just feel like I'm connected to something bigger and even though that bigger thing is kind of like an institution that has some…questionable beliefs, obviously, um, I just like it because it makes me feel closer to my family. It makes me feel like I'm part of something and stuff like that.

Catie went on to say:

> For me, Catholicism is just about believing that there's some greater power, there's some greater order…just believing that the institution, the Vatican, will never be perfect.

> They'll never be…get it completely right because, ya know, we're human and we're flawed and fallible and all those things. And…it's all about, you know, humanity and people making mistakes but just…continuing to love and care about those people anyway.

Eva. Eva talked about what her faith used to mean to her and how that shifted over time:

> My dad, um, grew up super Irish Catholic and my mom's heritage is also Puerto Rican, so I have Catholicism on both sides…church growing up was something that I had to do…no matter how tired I was, my dad would drag my butt out of bed and we would go to Mass every morning and I taught CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) and I was the cantor at my church so it became very much a community for me….it became something that I went to, to…de-stress. It was…a place where…I felt at peace…

Eva stated: "I was really proud to be Catholic growing up." She indicated that her relationship with Catholicism "definitely shifted" as she got older. Eva said: "it's still important to me to be a Catholic and to be a spiritual person, um, but I'm having a harder time…having that be as salient as it used to be, since being out." She continued:

> A lot of the teachings of the church about, ya know, being compassionate individuals and…putting others before ourselves and…being gracious and thankful…um,
>
> those things play, ya know, an important part of who I am and how I identify as a person.

However, Eva does not attend Mass as often as she used to and, instead, does her "own spiritual prayer thing." Eva summarized her present relationship with Catholicism: "I use my…faith for overcoming hardships or helping through adversity and praying for other people…but it…it's not a place of community anymore, unfortunately."

Elle. Elle's description of her relationship with religion differed from other participants'

in that she elaborated more upon accepting, rather than selectively sifting through, Church doctrine. For example, Elle talked about being confirmed in the Catholic Church, which constitutes the final sacrament of initiation in the Roman Catholic faith. For Elle, being Catholic means "having read through what all of the…faith entails and…knowing that and accepting that and then…going through the ceremony of being part of this…body of Christ." She summarized this by saying: "So, that's what I think being Catholic means, is…loving God, loving others, as well as the…body of everyone else out there having similar beliefs…" and

> It's so much…a part of who I am and what I would do. Um, I think that it…affects how I treat people and…how much I want to…love one another….it also…affects how I treat myself and that I…want to treat myself the best I can…because love one another as you love yourself.

In college, Elle changed her opinions about issues such as abortion: "that one sort of changed based on people that I've met here and their…strong opinions…in terms of…being pro-choice and feminists for reproductive justice." She also said: "I definitely see where it's flaws are…there are problems in the institution, but, spiritually, I still want to be part of it, because it's so much a part of me."

Mackenzie. Like the three other participants, Mackenzie identified a sense of tradition, as well as tenets such as compassionate treatment of others, as components of her Catholic identity. She added that she uses Mass attendance in an individualized, personal way. Mackenzie spoke about what her Catholic faith means to her in these ways:

> It's partly family tradition….my mom's Irish and her family's Irish Catholic and there's…my uncle married an Italian Catholic…so it's a very Catholic family and, so, having the rites, like "oh, it's time for his first communion" or "she's gonna be

> confirmed," it's…comforting in some ways that you're doing things that all your family's done.

She elaborated on her own identity as Catholic:

> I am not exactly super Catholic but I'm very religious…I love the structural traditions…some of them at least, in the Catholic church…I…know what I'm supposed to be doing at Mass but when I'm at Mass, I don't always listen to the priest. I take it as…an hour to…think about things, to not be doing homework or hanging with friends but to just think about, um, God in my life and…how I'm affecting people and how I'm being affected.

Mackenzie listed "general concepts" from Catholicism that affect the way she lives her life: "you should always…do service for other people…you should be grateful for what you have cuz you're very lucky and you're blessed and, therefore…you should…give more than you take…." She indicated that Catholicism makes her consider "things that aren't just right here and right now" and promotes in her a "sense of humility," "you're not the most important thing in the world."

All participants mentioned transformation in terms of what Catholicism meant to them over time. Their experiences of their Catholic faith in young adulthood seemed to depart from their earlier experiences of it as children and adolescents. Participants made decisions about how to understand their beliefs and their participation in religion and much of this process of transformation coincided with participants' coming out processes, college entrances, or both.

A consistently strong theme emerged across all four participants' responses: an emphasis on Catholicism being connected to familial relationships. Catie said: "it makes me feel closer to my family. It makes me feel like I'm part of something…." Eva spoke about both of her parents

coming from Catholic families and how the Church became an important community for her being raised in her family. For Elle, her Catholic identity is very connected to her relationship with her mother, "A lot of my…faith is bound up with…my mom…and so…things that she tells me to do, things that my faith tells me to do, are very similar." Relatedly, Mackenzie connects Catholicism to her relationship with her mother and the rest of her family. She was adopted into a "very Catholic family." Mackenzie feels close to her family because they all participate and share in religious rites and rituals. She said:

> For me, Catholicism is…largely rooted in family. Like…between…Thanksgiving and Christmas break, because of three weeks of hell because of the amount of homework we had, I didn't go to Mass. But, until Thanksgiving, I'd gone every week…but…it hurt my pride a little each time I was in church because I missed my church and I missed my mom…it reminded me of going with my mom, um, and it made me very homesick. Ah, but…I'd call my mom after church, um, cuz…I call every Sunday….so, for me, Catholicism is…thinking of my family, thinking of other people, um, and their feelings and how you'd want to be treated, and the ideal way to treat other people.

Participants identified familial ties as foundational and essential to their relationships with Catholicism. Sharing overarching values, beliefs, rituals, and traditions with family members seemingly creates a sense of connection and belonging for these women. While religion is strongly related to their relationships with their families, all participants spoke of ways in which they question the Catholic Church as an institution, which will be presented next.

Limiting the scope of Catholic beliefs and religious participation. All four participants articulated varying amounts of skepticism about certain Church teachings. For several participants, this skepticism and, at times, disagreement with Church teachings prompted them to

change their participation in their faith. Catie said that she became "more lax" about following what the Vatican prescribes. She added:

> I was so reverent towards this place and…everything that was taught to me here. And now I kind of am able to see it as being…not a flawed structure…but one with…holes in it that you can kind of poke through and see, ya know, and it's not as strong.

Eva pointed out that the majority of Catholic Americans are LGBT friendly, though the Vatican is not. She talked about the "problems" she believes that the Catholic Church has with gay people and women. Though hopeful about limiting the scope of her beliefs and participation in her faith, Eva also expressed concern about the discrepancies between her personal values and those of the Church:

> Eventually, hopefully, I will get to a place where I can take parts of the faith that are important to me and really use those to continue to guide my life…I don't know if I can necessarily ignore the others.

Elle was perhaps the least verbal about her perception of the Church as flawed. She stated: "there are problems in the institution, but spiritually I still want to be part of it, because it's so much a part of me." According to Mackenzie, "the basis of Christianity and Catholicism is to be kind to others and love others and to…not just to allow people to be, but to truly celebrate who they are." She described the process of getting to the point where she self-defined her faith: "I guess it took awhile to get there, to…understand what parts of each group that I…agreed with…the philosophies that I wanted to keep inside and then the ones that I rejected." Mackenzie said that this is an ongoing process for her. She continues to think about her religion and how it intersects with her sexual orientation:

> I think it's always kind of there…in the back of my mind and it gets brought to the

> forefront more when something happens….I'm not constantly thinking about God, or my religion, or my sexuality…sometimes I just…really hate homework or just wanna watch a movie with my friends…I'm not always thinking about it. But when something happens…certain things might bring it up more. So obviously…going to Mass, I might think about Christianity and going home and going to…more conservative Masses, I think about how the two of them are…how much sexual orientation relates to my religion.

In the interviews, all of the participants they presented critical, respectful views of the institution that demonstrated how they have thought about the parts of the Church with which they agree and disagree. There was variation in how participants articulated their criticisms, misgivings, or disappointments with their religious tradition. Elle's interview stands out, in that she shared the least in this respect, thus giving me the impression that she was either less willing to speak out against the Church or genuinely experiencing less discontentment with the institution.

Shifting identification and openness about identity in response to context. All participants spoke extensively about shifting their identifications as Catholic and lesbian based on the contexts in which they find themselves.

Catie. Catie feels that her gay identity is quite prominent at school, where she reported it is "weirder" to be Catholic than gay. She described her social group at school, as well as the larger campus community, as loving, accepting, and inviting in regards to her identity as both Catholic and gay and feels that she is able to comfortably talk about both parts of her identity at college. However, Catie doubts she could do the same back home. She is secretive about her gay identity when she is home and said: "I have to lie." Catie contrasted the comfort she feels around

openly identifying as both Catholic and gay at school with her discomfort in her hometown:

> It's so much different from when I'm at home because I just feel like very tense and uncomfortable…in church, and I feel very tense and uncomfortable…around my family, but here [college] it's just…they interact very fluidly and it's fine. I'm…very happy with the way they interact with each other.

Eva. Eva grew up in a progressive parish. Her "open-minded" priest preached acceptance and non-judgment. She provided an example of the priest's influence in her life:

> I…use this all the time; it's my motto for life. He said something like: "Be childlike…accept everyone or love everyone and judge no one," or something like that. So I knew in that parish, at least, with the priest who ran that church…he was open-minded. I've never had…an actual conversation with him…I did email him after I came out…to ask if I could meet up and talk to him when I came home for break, but I never followed through.

Now that she is in college, Eva finds her campus to be accepting and affirming. However, she described the campus Catholic community (Newman Center) as "very conservative" and "not affirming." Eva came out while in college and said that she wonders how being part of a church community that is not accepting affected this process. She was very careful about to whom she came out and continues to be. Eva has been active in her campus Catholic community, but expressed guilt about being a public figure in the Church while not being out as gay in this community.

During her college years, Eva said that her sexual orientation became more important for her when it comes to thinking about her identity:

> I think my sexual orientation is more salient in terms of who I am…it wasn't before. It's

> so interesting because, last year…I live with six girls and, so, my roommates shouldn't do this but…sometimes they'd be like…when someone new was meeting us…"This is Eva, she's the religious roommate…" is what they'd call me…And now, "Oh, this is Eva, she's the gay roommate," which is problematic…stigmatizing people, putting them into boxes about one part of their identity. Um…but…when I think about the top 5 things about my identity, I don't think I would list my religion there anymore…. it's still important to me to be a Catholic and to be a spiritual person…but I'm having a harder time…having that be as salient as it used to be, since being out.

I asked Eva if the coming out process "bumped" her identity as Catholic "down as being less important" in the way thinks about herself. She said:

> I don't know if it was coming out that bumped it down, I think it was my experience at Newman and how I watched how intolerant they were of this…freshman kid who had been on campus for…three months and was…trying to find a home and a place and…they were just not even…faking it to…try to…welcome him in. It was such overt discrimination…and I was not out at that point to people…and I think that was…really horrifying to me to see that they were so quickly abandoning this kid who was…struggling transitioning to the school; he's looking for a safe space and…that space wasn't being created for him. Um, and I became very fearful….I wonder if I hadn't been in Newman, if I'd been back at home or in a church that was more affirming and had come out, if it would have been…if it would have felt differently to me…if my identity as a Catholic wouldn't have been sort of bumped down, or if they could have been integrated better.

Elle. Elle feels supported in both her gay and Catholic identities on her college campus,

"There's so much sense of affirmation here that you can do whatever you want and it's like you bring whoever you are to the table but that doesn't necessarily change you or what you can do." She pointed to the example of a nun on campus leading a Christian feminist circle. Contrastingly, Elle usually is not open about her sexual identity when she participates in Catholic activities. For example, she does not feel that she can bring her girlfriend to Mass off campus and she finds it more difficult to come out to Catholic friends who "might have a preconceived notion that the whole [Catholic] community's straight." Elle does not like that being open about her sexual identity would cause her to stand out in the Catholic community. However, she said that she subtly brings her gay identity into her faith:

> And usually what I'll do is wear a T-shirt that has…rainbows on it and not necessarily be like "Oh yeah, so me and my girlfriend…" but it will be like a subtle signal or something….But it's not necessarily a…megaphone…it's the…whisper…that other people can hear if they're listening for it.

I was struck by Elle's description and commented that it was a "beautiful" way of articulating her desire to bring her sexuality into her religious community. However, I did not query further about this. She said that others have to be really close to her to "get both" parts of her identity. Elle made clear that she does not like to be reduced to either aspect of her identity: "I bring who I am to what I do, but what I do isn't who I am." For example, she spoke about going to a conference where there was an "LGBT meet-up" for attendees. Elle said "it was…harder for me…just, within myself to…wear the nametag that said that I was gay. But that…wasn't…as much a part of me that it needed to be on my nametag…" However, she then made a case for openly identifying as gay in that scenario: "I kinda realized it was more important for other people who also had that, that I could be like, 'Oh, hey, you're gay.'" Elle said that she would

not come out to potential employers, "No! That's not…part of my achievements at all!"

Mackenzie. Finally, Mackenzie spoke of her sexual orientation as feeling most relevant when she likes or wants to flirt with someone. Like Catie, she feels it is weirder to be Catholic than gay at her college. She said "at home, I'm a bad Catholic because I'm gay and here it's I'm a bad gay because I'm Catholic." Mackenzie elaborated:

> It's like I'm constantly both inside of myself because I have my own personal view of Catholicism and queerness that isn't what is…officially espoused really by either group….other people who use the identity "queer" or use the identity "Catholic" have different understandings of each and so…socially, politically it's like it never works…

When Mackenzie is in her home church, she feels more aware of being queer; when she is in an environment that is "anti-church," she is more aware of being Catholic. She is out at school and at home, but not at her home church. Mackenzie does not tend to talk about sexuality in religious settings and tends to keep religion to herself when she is not in a religious setting.

Participants attune to their surroundings and are sensitive to where they can derive support and acceptance for each of their identities. All four women felt a sense of comfort identifying as LGBT in their college/university communities. They all also provided examples of contexts in which they downplay, hide, or ignore their sexual identities; these were families of origin (Catie) and Catholic communities (Eva, Elle, Mackenzie). While some examples of keeping Catholicism out of relationships were provided, there seemed to be less experience of stigma regarding their religious identity than their sexual orientation. With shifting contexts, the women themselves shift their identification with religious and sexual aspects of identity and how much they allow themselves to be in touch with these, both internally and in relationship with others.

Use of specific actions and thoughts to cope. In addition to the thematic ways of coping with identifying as both Catholic and lesbian presented, all four participants cited personalized ways in which they have managed to hold both their religious and sexual aspects of identity.

Catie. Catie said that holding both takes a lot of "self-assurance," being "tough," and not allowing her sense of self to be "infiltrated." This is well articulated in the following quote:

> I am here because of both things and they both inspire me to move forward and they both, just, in their different ways, are helping me become who I'm gonna be. Because they're both about awareness, they're both about, you know…figuring out…who you are and what you want and…relating to yourself….I think you can…look at this search for defining yourself and this…awareness of your family's history and your cultural background as being in direct opposition, but they're really connected…and just…being able to say to yourself…they are both inspiring and working for each other.

Though she did not feel like she belonged to a particular parish church once she came out, Catie decided she did not want to anymore.

Eva. Eva has been active on her campus, creating programming to promote awareness surrounding LGBT religious and spiritual students on campus:

> The sort of…silver lining in all of this was despite how not pleasant the experience at Newman was, I was able to start talking with a different administration at [university name] and ended up…getting a position in the Office of Religious and Spiritual Life and that's sort of how I started initiating all this programming and resources to be visible for religious and spiritual LGBT individuals.

Eva described her efforts as being "a really empowering experience." She added: "It's been really cool. I've been recognized in a lot of really nice ways by the university for it…it really

counteracted the experience at Newman, which has been nice." Eva also relied on faith and prayer when she was coming out: "a lot of it was finally accepting all of myself." When I asked her how she feels about her sexual identity at this point, Eva responded:

> I mean, I think for everyone, it takes time to get there. I…think for the first time, I can say…I like being gay….There's been particular people in my life…who have really helped me…embrace being gay and…learn to be proud of it and not to be shameful…and, so, I guess, I am deeply appreciative of those people.

Elle. Elle found supportive friends in both Catholic and LGBT circles over the past several years at school and feels that she has more friends as a result of identifying with both groups. She also described a process of self-reflection that included Mass attendance:

> You…leave home and you…discover more things about yourself because you're living on your own and then you figure this one thing out [sexual identity] and then you…still bring that back with you to Mass…. Any changes that you make…Mass is still there, week in, week out…

Elle said: "I try to lead a balanced life…that…involves a lot of…self-reflection and…figuring out what you're doing and why you're doing the things that you're doing." Part of finding balance included giving herself space to continue her religious practice and also to think about her identity:

> So…when it was first…happening to me [coming out], I didn't know if I should…stop going to Mass because…you're not supposed to be both…but I figured that I would still…go because it was so much a part of me before that it should still be a part of me after…and I think…continuing going to Mass was…the best decision ever and that it gives you this time, once a week to sit down and think.

Finally, Elle requested to be matched with a first-year student who also identifies as a Catholic lesbian as part of a campus mentorship program.

Mackenzie. Mackenzie described coping with both her religious and sexual identity dimensions by only sharing her opinions when invited to do so, which I got the sense gave her a sense of comfort and safety:

> I never really liked…putting my face on something that felt political…or making a big deal out of it. And I understand some people do because you need…awareness is very important, but I am more private, I guess, than that. Like, it's weird, I'm very open but that's when people want to know and ask me questions. I don't just go around telling everyone everything.

Mackenzie also talked about her experience as a minority in terms of sexuality and race and said:

> I'm automatically given a space to voice my opinions…because of how prominent male, straight, White…most of America is, a lot…of the spaces I'm in at [university name] work very hard to try to be like "no, it should all be about people of color, queer people…." They're given a lot more voice in some ways here.

She sees her religious and sexual identities as allowing her to get to know more people and as increasing her sensitivity towards marginalized groups: "It sucks to be discriminated against…to not be the norm…to always stick out…but it also makes you more sympathetic to other people." Additionally, Mackenzie holds on to the belief that there are "quiet" LGBT people who do not believe that religion is evil and that there are "dissenters" in the Catholic church who are LGBT affirming. She uses Mass as an opportunity for self-reflection and said: "I think that being gay has made me more spiritual because I've had to think about things more and face more hardships and pray more."

Catie, Eva, Elle, and Mackenzie all shared their investment in being both LGBT and Catholic over the course of our interviews. They spoke about the positive experiences they attribute to holding both identity aspects, which, to me, signaled resilience and successful coping.

Personal construction of identity dimensions. All participants referenced the importance of their agency in constructing their identities. There was much divergence across participants' reports of their progress in this process of construction. Based on her report, Catie seemed to be farthest along in terms of constructing her identity. She thus articulated her process:

> It's just about creating your own identity…. so I've been given these pieces of things…so, I was born this way, I was raised this way, um, I think for me…it's all about taking these pieces of…cultural inheritance, these pieces of…what I believe and just crafting it into…me…. Every institution, every community, every…kind of identity is malleable, ya know, and you can't assume that there's only one way to do it. There are many ways to do it. And that's been…a really big lesson for me, um, in both parts of…those identities. So, you just have to…create something that works for you and I think I have.

Catie also feels that she is unique because of the identity that she constructed including both religious and sexual dimensions:

> I think that in both places [home and school] they kind of make me feel…not like an outsider…but just like it's having something special and having something, ya know, that's my own…. it's like my own personal, private identity and I think for awhile I just felt…very lonely in both those things…But, I guess now…they just both make me feel

> special in different ways. Like, I feel like I have something different to offer and…I just…I like surprising people I guess.

Eva seemed to be in a different place in terms of constructing her identity, and the distinct religious and sexual dimensions therein, when we met for the interview. While Catie spoke at length about her process of coming to terms with pieces of her identity and feeling that she has created an overall sense of identity that works for her, Eva expressed doubt about her ability to do so. In the wake of being hurt by the Newman Center, she distanced herself from her religious communities at school and at home, decreasing her involvement in religious activities. Instead, she said: "I still…do sort of…my own spiritual prayer things." Despite her worries about constructing an overall identity that both encapsulates her Catholic faith and her sexual identity, Eva said: "being Catholic is important to me; I…eventually, hopefully, will get to a place where I can take parts of the faith that are important to me and really use those to continue to…guide my life." As she attempts to figure out how she will live out her Catholic identity, Eva said that the intersection of her religion and sexuality is "so salient in [her] life right now."

Elle said that neither her religious nor her sexual identity dimensions define her. Rather, she said, "I define me." Elle did not elaborate on how she defines herself and was less forthcoming about her process of identity construction. She did reference the process when referring to self-reflecting in Mass.

Lastly, Mackenzie said:

> I have my own personal view of Catholicism and queerness that isn't what is…officially espoused really by either group….I think religion in general is different individually….to me, it's very internal and so I know what I mean by being Catholic. I didn't always. That was a bigger problem when I was in high school…figuring it out. But right now it's…I

> have a pretty good idea of what I believe in. And it doesn't conflict with being queer. But other people who use the identity "queer" or use the identity "Catholic" have different understandings of each and so…socially, politically…it never works, but internally it does.

Because she defines her Catholic identity and her gay identity, Mackenzie draws upon what these both mean to her personally and can hold both in a way that feels comfortable to her. However, she acknowledged that others might not understand her personal relationships with her identity dimensions and, thus, fail to understand how she has constructed a sense of self that works for her.

Chapter 4: Discussion

In this chapter, I reflect on the data presented in light of the relevant research and present my own interpretations and responses in regards to the emergent themes. I also elucidate my process and biases as the researcher. Finally, I examine the limitations of the study and present implications for clinical work and future research.

Superordinate Concepts

Experience of internal conflict. All four participants referenced the conflict they experience as a result of their dissonant religious and sexual identity dimensions. They shared their feelings that neither their Catholic nor their LGBT communities fully support their identity dimension associated with the other. In reporting results, I presented participants' specific comments about internal conflict. However, internal conflict was a theme that wove throughout all four interviews. This finding was in keeping with the literature (Abes & Jones, 2004; Davidson, 2000; Love et al., 2005; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2004; Rosario et al., 2006) and logically flows from the current socio-political climate and the official stance of the Catholic Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009). That Catholicism and LGBT identification are at odds is inescapable and participants did not hesitate to return to this fact as we discussed both aspects of identity and their intersection.

Participants' recognition of the internal and external conflict between their Catholic and lesbian identity dimensions was not surprising given the existent literature and the socio-political and religious climates. I was, however, somewhat surprised by the participants' perceptions of this conflict as something to be accepted and worked around rather than to be overcome or resolved. Rosario et al. (2006) propose that internal conflict *must* eventually be "resolved," otherwise "religion would have negative, even toxic, consequences for the health and protective

behaviors of LGB individuals" (p. 133). Additionally, Love et al. (2005) found that five of their sample of twelve individuals who identify as both lesbian or gay and religious or spiritual "reconciled" the two parts of their identities and eliminated internal conflict:

> They were aware of the beliefs and practices in their religion that oppress gay and lesbian people and it may have caused them pain; however, they experienced no conflict or dissonance between who they were as sexual beings and who they were as spiritual beings. (p. 199)

It is important to recognize that the participants from my study are in the early stages of negotiating their religious and sexual aspects of identity, taking into consideration both their ages and the recency of their coming out processes. Perhaps, over time, participants will be less comfortable accepting and working around their internal conflict and move towards attempts to resolve it.

Compartmentalizing aspects of identity and shifting identification and openness about identity in response to the context. Rosario et al. (2006) assert that compartmentalizing, as a way of resolving internal conflict, is not sustainable because it does not resolve cognitive dissonance. All four participants compartmentalize and this appears to have not led to resolution. I question the idea that completely eliminating cognitive dissonance is a possibility, as Rosario et al. suggest it is, for participants in terms of their religious and sexual identity dimensions. Even when managed internally, conflict may not ever be truly resolved since participants live in a relational world and feel the effects of the dissonance between Catholic and LGBT identities as manifested in the world around them.

When looking at the ways in which participants compartmentalize the religious and sexual aspects of their identities, it became evident that their negotiation of these aspects is a

highly relational process. Participants make choices about how to outwardly identify based on their relationships with family members, friends, and communities. Participants also described their tendencies to "ignore" either their sexual or religious identity dimensions based on the relational context. Contrastingly, all of the participants have relationships in which they feel free to forego compartmentalization and openly allow both aspects of their identities to co-exist. In the interview process, participants and I co-created relationships in which participants shared both parts of themselves with me. I asked participants about their experiences of the interview process and Catie commented: "it's also kind of nice…talking…seems like therapy." Additionally, Eva said: "it's kinda nice to talk it out with someone who is obviously well-versed in both types of identities and what that means…I think it's been helpful too." Though our interactions were limited to this study, I wonder if participants will carry the interviews with them in the future as positive experiences of being able to be openly both Catholic and LGBT identified.

The importance of relying on relationships in which participants can internally and externally accept both identity dimensions stood out to me as a poignant result of the study. One of the key components of religious affiliation is that it "provides individuals with a sense of belonging and social support. It fulfills a basic need for affiliation" (Rosario et al., 2006, p. 132). Because elements of this are ostensibly absent or substantially diminished via the Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality, participants described experiences of rejection. In relationships with others who accept both the religious and sexual aspects of their identities participants experience acceptance and belonging without sacrificing authenticity. Still, compartmentalizing is important in that it sometimes enables participants to maintain connections with significant others and groups in their lives without losing support. Sometimes it

appeared to be the only option if participants desired to maintain specific relationships.

As previously discussed, the participants felt connected to their families-of-origin because of their shared religious ties. This becomes particularly relevant in light of how these women experience a sense of isolation due to the conflict between religious and sexual identity dimensions. Catie's story offers a poignant example of this. For her, feeling connected to family via religion stands in stark contrast to feeling disconnected from her parents due to their lack of acceptance of her sexuality. I note the irony of this, as it is her parents' religious beliefs that drive their lack of acceptance, according to Catie.

Personal meaning-making around Catholicism and limiting the scope of Catholic beliefs and religious participation. Barret and Barzan (1996) posited:

> A fundamental struggle is for…lesbians to find ways to overcome the clash between homoprejudiced religious institutions that assert their authority and personal spiritual experiences that connect them with a Supreme Being who offers love and acceptance. (p. 7)

As someone who was raised in the Catholic Church and, therefore, exposed to Church doctrine and culture, it was interesting for me to hear what components of the faith participants have chosen to hold on to at this point in their identity development. All four participants spoke at length about the things that are important or influential about the Catholic faith and the parts of it that they have chosen to reject or ignore. I wonder about the implications of this.

The colloquial term "buffet Catholic" is sometimes used to describe Catholics who pick and choose those elements of Church doctrine to which they adhere or in which they believe. If participants are comfortable with their personalized relationships with their faith and able to withstand criticism from others regarding this personalization, perhaps they will be able to

sustain their points of view. This seems especially hopeful in a time when research shows that 71% of Catholics believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society (Pew Research Center, 2013) and 70% of Catholics favor gay marriage (Pew Research Center, 2014). Findings were even stronger when U.S. Catholics, ages 18 to 29, were surveyed; 85% believe homosexuality should be accepted and 75% favor gay marriage (Pew Research Center, 2014). These statistics lie in contrast to the Church's official stance on these issues and indicate that a majority of Catholics are doing what the participants described; they are being selective about what parts of Church doctrine they accept or reject.

There is a part of the doctrine of the Catholic Church that seems to be in keeping with the participants' selectivity pertaining to their beliefs. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

> Man has the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions. "He must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters." (Catholic Church, 2000, 1782).

This passage locates responsibility for making decisions about moral issues in individuals and, thus, seems to offer support for the participants' individualized meaning making around their religious beliefs as they relate to LGBT issues.

The question remains: Are the Catholics referenced above public about their support and acceptance? Mackenzie seemed hopeful when she spoke about the lack of acceptance at her home church: "If…I disagree and my mom disagrees, then there have to be other dissenters in the group….Even if there's no one saying anything, it doesn't mean they all agree with it." Even if participants like Mackenzie are hopeful about silence around affirmation of LGBT issues in

the Church, I surmise that the extent to which other Catholics are open about their acceptance of LGBT individuals and support of issues, like same-sex marriage, will impact participants. For example, if participants experienced visible support within their Catholic communities, they might feel a greater sense of belonging and less shame when they attend Mass or church related events. I do not think that it is coincidental that participants chose to highlight belonging, acceptance, and compassion for others as important elements of Catholicism and I conjecture that they desire to be on the receiving end of these within their Catholic communities.

Use of specific actions and thoughts to cope. Participants appeared invested in reconciling the religious and sexual aspects of their identities. I felt honored to hear them talk about the ways in which they have advocated for, and taken care of, themselves via actions they have taken (i.e., mentorship, programming, self-reflection, intentionality about sharing beliefs) and attitudes they have held (i.e., self-assurance, pride, gratitude, sensitivity to marginalized others). Participants' agency and autonomy in developing methods of coping is necessary, according to the literature, because LGBT individuals are often not "carefully taught ways to integrate their emerging sexuality into their religious lives" and they are "deprived of assistance from families, schools, and churches in learning how to affirm both themselves and their sexual orientation" (Barret & Barzan, 1996, p. 7). Additionally, all of the participants talked about developing both self-awareness and self-acceptance. Love et al. (2005) found "Self-efficacy, self-awareness, and self-acceptance" to be central to reconciliation of religious and sexual aspects of identity in their study (p. 200).

Personal construction of identity dimensions. Abes and Jones (2004) commented on the importance of a college-aged lesbian's "capacity to make meaning of her environment through internally generated values rather than only in relationship to others" (p. 624). While this

study highlighted the importance of relationships as mediating the process of meaning-making around participants' religious and sexual identity dimensions, participants' identity exploration and construction thematically emerged in tandem with influence from their relationships. The paths of participants' identity exploration took new forms when they left home and integrated into their college/university communities. They delved into a developmental "struggle for meaning and a quest for wholeness" (Garrod et al., 2005, p. 7). The struggle is likely ongoing, though there was wide variation in terms of how confident or settled participants' reported feeling in their religious and sexual identity dimensions. While all of the young women acknowledged experiences of conflict between the dimensions, some spoke about embracing the struggle and feeling strong in their intersecting identities. Others felt uncertain about the ways in which their identities intersected or resisted allowing either aspect of identity to define her.

Researcher's Process

I completed much of my clinical training in college and university counseling centers, providing psychotherapy to undergraduate and graduate students. My passion for working with this population fueled my desire to focus my research on undergraduates. The participants in this study inspired me. When I am doing therapy with college students, I often see students who are in distress and in crisis. It was both refreshing and encouraging to speak with the participants, as they were not in distress. I perceived these women to be resilient, well spoken, and high functioning. I was touched by their willingness to share their stories with me and speak openly about something as important and encompassing as identity.

When I decided on this topic of study, I anticipated and hoped that I would hear stories that indicated it is possible to hold both Catholic and lesbian identity dimensions. When I reflect on my expectations, I also hoped that the potential to hold such dissonant aspects of identity

would, to some extent, preclude the consistent experience of conflict. Despite participants' ability to embrace both parts of their identities, they continuously feel the tension between the two. They spoke of recognizing and accepting the tension rather than attempting to eliminate or resolve it. This makes sense, given the dissonance that exists in the socio-political and religious climates. Even though participants found and continue to expand upon ways of holding both aspects of their identities, there will continue to be external tension between the two.

Researcher's Biases

An external auditor scrutinized my analyses through review of transcripts and the final dissertation manuscript. He did not experience confusion or disagreement with my coding, but noted several instances of possible bias in the way I phrased questions or remarks during the interviews. In the interview with Elle, she said: "I'm really glad that I came to a liberal arts college where there's more diversity of opinions than a Catholic college," to which I responded "Good point," thereby revealing a bias. Elle also talked about not feeling comfortable with bringing her girlfriend to Mass and I made a comment about them holding hands in Mass, something that was based purely in my own experience and that Elle did not, herself, mention. In my interview with Eva, I assumed that growing up in a progressive parish influenced the ways in which she sees her religious and sexual identity aspects. She confirmed this assumption, but my belief that this would be the cause preceded her discussion of such influence. Finally, in the interview with Catie, I set up a particular reflection to suggest that she experiences her family as disempowering, though she did not explicitly state that this was the case.

Additionally, the auditor located a couple instances in my original report of the results, in which I infused my own interpretation of experiences without the explicit intention of doing so. For instance, I originally described the relationship between Elle and her mentor as

"meaningful," though she did not label it as such and this was my own inference. Additionally, though some of the participants described the Catholic Church as "imperfect," it appeared that my own conceptualization of the Church as flawed caused me to overemphasize this.

Limitations

Sample size and recruitment difficulties. Sample size is one of the primary limitations of the described study. Despite efforts to recruit between five and eight participants, I was only able to recruit four participants after attempts to find more participants, which lasted for over a year. My method of recruitment may have played a role in the difficulty in recruitment. By going through faculty or staff members at various colleges and universities, I may have inadvertently added an evaluative layer to the process. Because potential participants received information about the study from people in roles of power and evaluation within the college or university structure, they may have been deterred from coming forward to partake in the study. This seemed particularly salient in the Catholic institutions within which I initially attempted to recruit.

I would change my recruitment method if I did not have time or resource constraints. As someone who has provided outreach services on college campuses, I would likely connect with campus LGBT groups and request the opportunity to attend a meeting in order to describe my study and need for participants. I find that face-to-face contact and the establishment of some kind of brief relational connection can put students at ease. In this way, I would make direct contact with potential participants and remove the evaluative layer described above.

A final observation about recruitment difficulties pertains to the population I chose to study. As the data indicated, participants are still in the early stages of navigating their religious and sexual identity dimensions in relation to more global identity development. It is possible that

this influenced the extent to which members of this population were willing to participate in the study. Perhaps if I had recruited from an older population, further removed from the stage of identity formation and more advanced in their navigation of dissonant identity dimensions, recruitment would have been easier.

Conjectures about the zeitgeist. With the installment of Pope Francis in March 2013, conjectures were made about the Pope's potentially more liberal views of LGBT issues within the Church. It was in the fall and spring of 2013 that I began my recruitment and, thus, conversations with contact people at Catholic colleges and universities. One such university cancelled a campus talk about the Church and same-sex marriage around the same time that the new Pope was installed and around the time that I was negotiating potential recruitment. The zeitgeist, including a new Pope who was rumored to be more accepting of homosexuality, may have created a backlash that made openly identifying as both Catholic and LGBT even less acceptable. This, in turn, may have caused potential recruits to be less comfortable coming forward to participate in my study, especially given the involvement of staff or faculty who passed along the recruitment information I provided.

Limited sample. While the participant's experiences and unique ways of holding the religious and sexual aspects of their identities provide a glimpse of this process that has not been represented in previous research, results cannot and should not be generalized given both the small sample size and the highly individualized process of meaning-making around identity. Additionally, my participants were recruited from only two colleges/universities in New England, neither of which was a Catholic institution as originally intended. I surmise that Catholic lesbians attending Catholic colleges/universities may experience the negotiation of these identity dimensions in ways that qualitatively differ from those who belong to secular

institutions. For instance, I would guess that Catholic lesbians at Catholic institutions might feel less comfortable about identifying as LGBT but possibly more comfortable identifying as Catholic. In contrast, the participants in the present study described feeling more discomfort about being Catholic at liberal secular schools than about identifying as lesbian.

In order to expand upon sample diversity, I might implement Skype interviews in lieu of in-person interviews. This would enable me to access participants from a wider variety of colleges and universities, both secular and Catholic, across the United States. It would also provide for the face-to-face contact that I believe contributed to the relational connections that were established in the interviews conducted for this study.

Future Implications

This study attempted to shed light on the highly individualized and private process of negotiating two dissonant aspects of identity. The results are relevant when conducting psychotherapy work with individuals who have potentially dissonant identity dimensions. Based on this study, therapists can expect the process of holding dissonant identity dimensions to be complex, individualized, relational, and ongoing. Additionally, therapist or client expectations of resolving conflict may be unrealistic, particularly for emerging adults going through identity exploration. Just as I attended to my biases in the research process, therapists should examine their own biases about the importance of one aspect of identity over another or about the connotations of identifying in a certain way, for example. Therapists can also explore how important the identity dimensions are to their clients and how invested they are in reconciling these.

Participants indicated that there was something inherently helpful about the interview process and this should be considered in terms of clinical practice. Based on my relational

approach to psychotherapy, I conjecture that both the opportunity to sit down and spend dedicated time discussing this deeply personal topic and doing so with someone whom they experienced as nonjudgmental, empathic, and supportive contributed to participants' perceptions that the interviews were beneficial. Participants were aware that I chose the topic of study and that I was committed to understanding their experiences. We developed rapport, as was evident by the flow of conversation captured in the transcripts, and expressed mutual gratitude; I was grateful to them for participating in my study and they were grateful to have the opportunity to share about their identities. Thus, I assert that therapists' openness to, and empathic curiosity about, clients' experiences within a therapeutic holding environment will be influential when conducting psychotherapy with individuals who hold dissonant or intersecting aspects of identity.

A final implication in terms of conducting psychotherapy with emerging adults navigating multiple identity dimensions pertains to identity development. It seems essential to honor the fact that individuals who are within the stage of identity formation, and concordantly working toward navigation of these dimensions, are not foreclosing on either dimension. As long as they continue to explore these aspects of their identities, they also do not fit into the categories of identity diffusion or moratorium. This is a courageous thing to do and it may be useful to acknowledge this within the therapeutic relationship.

Undergraduate Catholic lesbians were chosen as the target population and four participants shared their experiences related to their religious and sexual identity dimensions and the intersection between the two. I reported on the results pertaining to the intersection and the ways in which participants hold both aspects of their identities. Participants' descriptions of more general experiences went beyond the focus of the present study, but it would be interesting to

look more closely at these in order to provide a clearer picture of that which participants experience and endure on a regular basis, as they inhabit the intersection being studied.

It would be helpful to continue to examine how undergraduate Catholic lesbians, in particular, hold the dissonant religious and sexual aspects of their identities, with a larger sample recruited from various geographical regions and racial and ethnic backgrounds (though there was some diversity in my sample) and from both secular and religious colleges and universities. It would be of interest to attend to potential differences between students' experiences based on geography, race and ethnicity, and type of college or university. Introducing these elements of diversity would add further intersections to the topic being studied and more closely approximate the complexity of "cross-contextualization" (Stanley, 2004, p. 163). Examples of variations that might arise as a function of the dimensions of geography, race and ethnicity, and institution type include: (a) familial response to intersecting religious and sexual aspects of identity, expression of Catholicism and parish culture, and participant transparency about identity in light of the political climate in her state of residence.

Conclusion

The four undergraduate Catholic lesbians who were interviewed feel that both their religious and sexual identity dimensions are important. They are invested in maintaining both parts of their identification and have done this by acknowledging and attending to internal conflict, compartmentalizing, taking part in meaning-making around Catholicism, limiting the scope of religious belief and participation, shifting identification and openness about identity based on context, using specific coping mechanisms, and taking agency in constructing their sense of self. The processes by which these women hold both aspects of their identity, in the midst of internal and external dissonance, are complex. Though similar thematically, they are

highly individualized works in progress.

It was an honor to engage with the participants and their unique stories. In accordance with my research paradigm and methodology, I certainly brought myself into the research process. I feel a sense of satisfaction as I conclude and look back on this study due to my investment in the possibility of reconciling religious and sexual aspects of identity. The participants in this study are doing just that.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Volunteers Needed for Study about Undergraduate Catholic Lesbians' Experiences!!!

My name is Christina Chestna and I am a fourth year doctoral student in clinical psychology at Antioch University New England. For my dissertation, I am conducting a study about the experiences of undergraduate Catholic lesbians and what it is like to be both Catholic and lesbian. I am looking for 5 to 8 young women to interview.

Participation in this study entails sitting down with me for an hour and a half at a predetermined location on your campus. During that time, I will further inform you about the study, interview you about your experience as both Catholic and lesbian, and answer any questions you may have about the research. As a participant in this research, you will remain anonymous.

In order to participate in this study you must: 1) be an undergraduate student at a Catholic college or university, 2) identify as both Catholic and lesbian, and 3) feel that both of these aspects of your identity are important to you.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me as soon as possible. You may reach me via cell phone at: **(XXX)-XXX-XXXX** or email me at: **XXX@antioch.edu**. I am happy to answer any questions you may have about participating. The first 8 individuals who contact me, meet the criteria, and are willing to participate will be selected. Thank you!

Appendix B: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

A. Identification as Catholic

1. What does being Catholic mean to you?
   [*Prompts:* 1a. What are some of your beliefs as a Catholic woman?
   1b. How does being Catholic affect your behavior?]

2. How would you describe your relationship with Catholicism?
   [*Prompt:* 2a. What are some of your feelings about being Catholic?]

B. Identification as lesbian

3. What does your sexual orientation mean to you?
   [*Prompts:* 3a. What kinds of beliefs do you hold because you identify as lesbian?
   3b. In what ways does identifying as lesbian affect your behavior?]

4. How do you feel about your sexual orientation?
   [*Prompt:* 4a. What are some of your feelings about identifying in this way?]

C. Negotiating being Catholic and lesbian

5. What's it like to be both Catholic and lesbian?
   [*Prompts:* 5a. How do these parts of your identity fit together?
   5b. How don't these parts of your identity fit together?]

6. How do you hold both aspects of your identity?
   [*Prompts:* 6a. What are some things that you do to make being both easier?
   6b. What are some helpful ways of thinking about being both that you have developed?]

7. How do your sexual orientation and religion relate to your overall sense of self and to each other?

8. How does the situation around you, or the environment you're in, influence how you experience these two aspects of your identity?
   [*Prompts:* 8a. We might experience ourselves differently in different contexts…
   8b. How might it be different when you are in Church versus LGBT community? 8c. Describe your experience of being Catholic in the lesbian and/or LGBT communities. 8d. Describe your experience of being lesbian in Catholic communities.]

9. How does holding these two identities influence you in your daily life?

10. What is your experience of holding these two aspects of identity in your romantic or sexual domain of life?

[*Prompts:* 10a. How does being Catholic influence your romantic relationships?]

11. What is your experience of holding these two identities in terms of your religious life?

[*Prompts:* 11a. How does being lesbian influence the ways in which you practice your faith?]

D. Follow-up

12. What has this process been like for you today?

Appendix C: List of Superordinate Concepts

A. Experience of religion as repressing sexuality/in opposition to sexuality

B. Experience of familial disapproval/lack of acceptance and support re: sexuality

C. Experience of internal conflict

D. Compartmentalizing aspects of identity

E. Personal meaning-making around Catholicism

F. Limiting scope of Catholic beliefs/participation

G. Experience of relationship with Catholicism as difficult

H. Experience of sexual identity as empowering

I. Shifting identification/openness about identity in response to context

J. Experience of negative emotional effects for identifying as both

K. Actions and thoughts used to cope

L. Concerns about future

M. Personal construction of identities

N. Experience of two identities as connecting

O. Management of Catholic identity in romantic relationships

P. Experience of familial support

Q. Experience of parish support (progressive)

R. Positive experience of sexual identity

S. Not limiting participation in Catholicism

T. Experience of external conflict

Appendix D: Organization of Superordinate Concepts

GENERAL EXPERIENCES	HOW PARTICIPANTS HOLD BOTH RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL ASPECTS OF IDENTITY	ELIMINATED CONCEPTS
A. Experience of religion as repressing sexuality/in opposition to sexuality	C. Experience of internal conflict	H. Experience of sexual identity as empowering
B. Experience of familial disapproval/lack of acceptance and support re: sexuality	D. Compartmentalizing aspects of identity	L. Concerns about the future
G. Experience of relationship with Catholicism as difficult	E. Personal meaning-making around Catholicism	O. Management of Catholic identity in relationships
J. Experience of negative emotional effects for identifying as both	F. Limiting scope of Catholic beliefs/participation	R. Positive experience of sexual identity
N. Experience of two identities as connecting	I. Shifting identification/openness about identity in response to context	S. Not limiting participation in Catholicism
P. Experience of familial support	K. Actions and thoughts used to cope	
Q. Experience of parish support (progressive)	M. Personal construction of identities	
T. Experience of external conflict		

Appendix E: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form

The Study

You are invited to participate in research conducted by Christina Chestna, a fourth year doctoral student in clinical psychology at Antioch University New England. I am interested in learning about the experiences of undergraduate women who identify as both Catholic and lesbian. The results of this study will be used to better understand the intersection of these parts of identity.

Your Participation

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your status as an undergraduate student, who identifies as both Catholic and lesbian, and who considers both of these parts of your identity to be important to you. If you decide to participate, I will interview you once, for approximately an hour and a half. You will be asked to answer questions and to talk about your experiences as someone who identifies as both Catholic and lesbian. You will also have the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

Potential Risk and Benefit

There is minimal risk to you in taking part in the interview. You may be at risk for some emotional or psychological discomfort if you choose to discuss sensitive information about your experience. Potential benefits to participation in this study include the opportunity to speak about your experiences and be heard, as well as the opportunity to contribute to needed research in this area. I cannot guarantee any benefits.

Protecting You as a Participant

You do not have to answer any interview questions that you do not want to answer. Your anonymity will be preserved and identifying information will only be disclosed with your permission or as it is required by law. By signing this informed consent, you give me permission to use the information obtained from you in a published work. Immediately following our interview, I will summarize my understanding of your comments during the interview. You will be asked to help me to better understand if it seems that I am not clear about what you were trying to say. In the months that follow, I will type our conversation and send the transcript to you. I will invite you to review the transcript for accuracy. You may withdraw any comments you do not wish to appear in the published study. Finally, before including any of your direct quotations in the published work, I will email them to you for your final approval.

Audio Recording

The interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of analysis by the researcher. Only my research team and I will have access to the recording, which will be deleted upon completion of the study.

Freedom to Withdraw

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation during, and up until one month after, the interview.

Resources and Contacts

Please let me know if you have any questions at all. If you have additional questions later, I will be happy to answer them at cchestna@antioch.edu. If you would like to contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Victor Pantesco, you may reach him at vpantesco@antioch.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact Dr. Katherine Clarke, Chair of the Antioch University New England Institutional Review Board, (603) 283-2162, or Dr. Stephen Neun, ANE Vice President for Academic Affairs, (603)-283-2150.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

YOUR SIGNATURE BELOW INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE AND *YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE* IN THIS STUDY.

Participant's signature Date

Participant's printed name

Please check one of the boxes below regarding use of your direct quotes.

☐ By checking this box, I **am** giving my permission for my direct quotes to be used in the published study. I am aware that I will be given the opportunity to review the quotes that the researcher selects and to change my mind at that time.

☐ By checking this box, I **am not** giving my permission for my direct quotes to be used in the published study.

To be completed by the researcher:

To my knowledge, this person is choosing to give informed consent to participate.

Investigator's signature Date

Investigator's printed name