Exploring the Experiences of Rural Gay and Lesbian Catholics Around Their Sexual and Religious Identities

Lawrence J. Goetz, Jr.

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/etd/1796

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Repository @ IUP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations (All) by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Repository @ IUP. For more information, please contact sara.parme@iup.edu.
EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF RURAL GAY AND LESBIAN CATHOLICS AROUND THEIR SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Lawrence J. Goetz, Jr.
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
December 2019
Indiana University of Pennsylvania  
School of Graduate Studies and Research  
Department of Sociology

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Lawrence J. Goetz, Jr.

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

_____________________
J. Beth Mabry, Ph.D.
Professor of Sociology, Advisor

_____________________
Michelle Sandhoff, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Sociology

_____________________
John A. Mueller, Ed.D.
Professor of Student Affairs in Higher Education

ACCEPTED

_____________________
Randy L. Martin, Ph.D.
Dean  
School of Graduate Studies and Research
People who identity as gay or lesbian and Catholic may experience conflict or incongruence between those two identities given the Catholic Church’s stance on homosexuality. Other scholarly studies examine this issue of sexual and religious identity conflict, but most approach it with samples of Christians, in general, or focus on gay-affirming religious organizations, and typically have urban dwelling samples. Few studies focus on Catholic-only or predominantly rural samples of gays and lesbians, as this study does. This study applies a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches, including: identity, social identity, self-authenticity, and self-concept theories, as well as cognitive dissonance theory, to the issue of the seemingly conflicting gay or lesbian and Catholic identities.

This study takes a phenomenological approach to understanding how persons with potentially conflicting sexual and religious identities experience and make sense of incongruences. Using qualitative, individual interviews, this study explores the experiences of 18 people from a rural region who identify as both gay or lesbian and Catholic.

The findings reflect that the participants in this study are able to maintain both their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity because of the meanings they give to those identities and the support they receive for these identities, both separately and together. Key themes in how participants make sense of their sexual and religious identities include their belief
in the perfection of God’s creation, family support, support from others, critiquing the Catholic Church’s message and the messengers, and perceived support from Pope Francis.

Implications of this study suggest that gay and lesbian people sit in the pews, sing in the choir, and administer the Eucharist in their local Catholic parishes, and that the Catholic Church should take measures to make them feel welcome. Participants in this study conveyed the power of judgement, whether from family members or by the church, in their struggle to come to terms with their sexuality. Their stories indicate, for instance, that the church should avoid the use of out-of-context Bible passages to condemn homosexuality during services and to stop referring to gays and lesbians, some of whom are among them at Mass, as disordered. It is also important that the Catholic Church understand that there are gay and lesbian youth in their pews who struggle with their sexual identity and they should not be condemned for being who they believe God created them to be. Further, the participants in this study thought the church should continue to encourage families not to reject LGBT relatives.

This study examined the potential identity conflict participants may experience in being both gay or lesbian and Catholic, as well as how they made sense of that conflict, by applying identity and social identity theories, rather than focus solely on various dissonance theories as in previous studies, such as Steele and Liu (1983) and Aronson (1992). In this study, participants retained both their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity, often in spite of negative experiences, because of the cognitive identity work they did and with the social support they received. Lastly, the participants here want to feel welcomed and validated by their church in the same way that heterosexual persons feel welcomed and validated. These findings have implications for ways that gay or lesbian Catholics might navigate these identities and integrate
them, how allies can provide support, and ways the Catholic Church, at the institutional and parish levels, can be more inclusive of LGBT members.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The dissertation process taught me more about myself than anything else I’ve done. There were times where I was gung-ho and moving forward only to have other times where I wasn’t sure I was worthy enough to even be conducting a study. A special thank you to Dr. J. Beth Mabry is necessary for her encouragement and support through this process, for her willingness to chair my dissertation committee, and for her guidance and suggestions. Her help made the insurmountable possible. I would also like to thank Dr. John A. Mueller and Dr. Michelle Sandhoff for not only being part of my dissertation committee, but also for their guidance. Next, I would like to thank my wife, Jennifer, for her loving support and for the sacrifices she made, both known to me and unknown, so that I could pursue a Ph.D. Lastly, I would like to thank the participants in this study for allowing me a window into your lives. I hope that what I present herein does justice to your joys and struggles.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>INTRODUCTION</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Comments on Catholic and Homosexual Identity</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Identity</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homosexual Identity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problem Statement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literature Weakness</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Significance of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Researcher Positionality Statement</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>LITERATURE REVIEW</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Identity Formation</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Identity</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Homosexual Identity</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sexual Identity</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contemporary Catholic Teachings on Homosexuality</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pertinent Theories</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity Theory</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social Identity Theory</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Authenticity</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Concept</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive Dissonance</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Consistency Theory</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Affirmation Theory</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Religious Identity and Homosexual Identity Conflict Framework</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Reject Religious Identity</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problems related to rejection of religious identity</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rejection of Homosexual Identity</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Compartmentalization</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity Integration</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cognitive work</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Biblical reinterpretation/questioning</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monogamy and role assignment</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Motives</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prospective Contributions to Literature</td>
<td>45</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3 METHODS</strong></td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and Objective of the Study</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study Setting</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling Strategy</td>
<td>49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>53</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Outline</td>
<td>54</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4 FINDINGS</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question One</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Spaces</td>
<td>57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Upbringing</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schooling</td>
<td>59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>61</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocations</td>
<td>64</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming Out</td>
<td>65</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Meaning of Being Catholic</td>
<td>69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Two</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Experiences</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling accused</td>
<td>72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hide</td>
<td>73</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinful</td>
<td>75</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost expectations</td>
<td>76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family (lack of support)</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from significant others</td>
<td>78</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with God</td>
<td>80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope for a welcoming and accepting church</td>
<td>81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question Three</td>
<td>88</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Rather Than Rejecting Religious Identity</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracing Rather Than Rejecting Homosexual Identity</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compartmentalization of Identities</td>
<td>91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Integration Process</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical reinterpretation</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monogamous relationships</td>
<td>93</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning the messenger</td>
<td>94</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 DISCUSSION</td>
<td>97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysis of Research Questions</td>
<td>97</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conceptual Model</td>
<td>101</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unanticipated Findings</td>
<td>102</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal Culture vs. Real Culture</td>
<td>103</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity – A Two Way Street</td>
<td>104</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>105</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Theory</td>
<td>106</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Future Research</td>
<td>107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Policy</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice: Parishes and Religious Leaders</td>
<td>108</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice: Lay Leaders</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications for Practice: Gay and Lesbian Catholics</td>
<td>109</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>110</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>111</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A – Church Bulletin/Newsletter/Newspaper Announcement</td>
<td>121</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B – Qualtrics Website</td>
<td>122</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C – Facebook Website</td>
<td>125</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D – Interview Guide</td>
<td>127</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E – IRB Approval of Study</td>
<td>129</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F – Participant Summaries</td>
<td>131</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Catholic Life Course Timeline</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Age and Religious Practice of Participants</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Negative Experiences</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Positive Experiences</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Conceptual model</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Conceptual model revisited</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Revised conceptual model</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What is it like for people who identify as both homosexual and religious when they come from a religious tradition that condemns homosexuality? Specifically, what are the experiences of gay and lesbian Catholics and how do they make sense of their lives? Today, in the United States, 3.8% of Americans identify as gay or lesbian (Newport, 2015). Of this, approximately 20% are Catholic, at least in name (Newport, 2014). The Catholic Church in America is in crisis as parish populations shrink, scandals taint the public view and doctrine is increasingly at odds with the beliefs and practices of its membership (Pew Research Center, 2013; Vires, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2015). In the last decade, American society rapidly became more accepting of the mainstreaming of gays and lesbians into social institutions, such as the military and the family (Lee, 2010; Matthews, 2014; deVogue & Diamond, 2015), and the more open presence of gays and lesbians in the workplace and the public sphere (Coontz, 2014), along with the legal and policy reforms, including the military with the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (Lee, 2010; Matthews, 2014; deVogue & Diamond, 2015), all contribute to normalizing a once highly stigmatized status (Herek, 2009). In addition, society made great strides in the recognition of same-sex marriage with the recent Supreme Court ruling in Obergefell v. Hodges legalizing same-sex marriage and changing laws regarding same-sex adoption (Beitsch, 2015). For the Catholic Church to continue to condemn homosexuality (though, recently, not homosexuals, provided they remain celibate) seems likely to alienate members and potential members (both gays and lesbians and their friends and families) in a time when membership declines in the church are a severe problem (Pew Research Center, 2013; Pew Research Center, 2015). More
pertinent to this study, though, is how this stance impacts individuals who identify as Catholic and homosexual.

This study explores the experiences of people who identify as gay or lesbian and Catholic, with a particular interest in whether these two identities result in a sense of inner conflict, dissonance, contradiction, or inauthenticity. If so, how do gay and lesbian Catholics make sense of and live within a space (the Catholic Church) considered a devalued space for gays and lesbians (D’Augelli & Hart, 1987; Herring, 2010)? People derive a sense of identity from the social groups and categories to which they belong. Learning more about the experiences of individuals with these identities may offer insights not just into the lives of gay and lesbian Catholics, but also into the more general psychosocial processes that people use to contend with seemingly incongruent aspects of themselves (Erickson, 1995).

Comments on Catholic and Homosexual Identity

A person’s identities, in reference to the focus of this study, a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity, operate on two distinct levels. The first is on the individual level where the behaviors (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014; citing Stryker, 1965, 1980, 2003) and subjective value (Burke & Stets, 2009; Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014) of the person’s identity are created. If an identity is improperly performed or the subjective value of that identity is put into question, dissonance, which is an inconsistency with in a person that cannot be rationalized away (Festinger, 1957), may be created within that individual. The other level on which identities operate is on the social or group level where the association with a particular group creates an identity for some (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Brown, 2000). These groups form distinctions between members of the group and those who are outside of the group (Hogg & Smith, 2007). The distinctions affiliated with different group identities will at times come into conflict with
each other and create feelings of dissonance, inauthenticity, or hypocrisy between these two identities (2007). In this case, the homosexual identity may be in conflict with the Catholic identity group, and vice versa, which could result in the creation of uncomfortable feelings within a person. For both the individual identity and the group identity, feelings of dissonance, inauthenticity, or hypocrisy may occur as a result of the Catholic teachings on homosexuality, which may conflict with a person’s behavior, their subjective value about their homosexual identity, and the group norms relative to homosexuality.

**Religious Identity**

A person usually acquires a religious identity in one of two ways. One way is by being born into a family or culture that practices a particular religious faith (Johnstone, 1992), such as Catholicism in this instance. In this scenario, the child will acquire a Catholic identity as an infant through baptism into this faith tradition without any decision-making on their part and may internalize it through religious practice while growing up. The other way to acquire a religious identity is by purposefully joining a particular faith tradition later in life (1992). Johnstone (1992) holds that regardless of how or when a person joins a particular religion, that person receives instruction on the norms and values of the religious group with which they are affiliated.

What Catholics believe largely explains their religious identity. The Nicene Creed states the basic beliefs of a Catholic. According to the Nicene Creed, Catholics believe, in part, that there is only one God, that Jesus was born of a virgin woman, died, and rose from the dead. In addition, the Creed expresses how Catholics believe in “one, holy, Catholic and apostolic church” (http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/). Following from this,
Catholics would ideally follow the teachings of the Catholic Church in the form of doctrine and dogma set forth by the Magisterium of the Church (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2000).

The beliefs of many Catholics, however, are not as straightforward as to only adhere to the teachings of the Catholic Church. In a recent study on Catholic identity, Grossman (2011) found that 86% of survey respondents held that position that a person can still remain Catholic even though they may disagree with certain components of Catholic teachings. In addition, he found that the Catholic Church’s teachings on social issues, such as same-sex marriage, influenced the majority of his respondents (Grossman, 2011). This position on social views may be due in part to another finding in Grossman’s study; people’s moral views are more important than those held by Catholic Church leaders. If a Catholic identity receives explanation from what a Catholic believes, then a Catholic identity is subjective and negotiated by the individual. It is a person’s subjective sense of the Catholic identity that is important for this study.

**Homosexual Identity**

People come to identify themselves as gay or lesbian in a number of ways. Researchers have put forth several homosexual identity formation models to explain how individuals acquire a homosexual identity. Each model typically includes several stages people may experience before adopting this identity. The homosexual identity models put forth by Cass (1979) and by Troiden (1979, 1988) are useful in illustrating possible ways that people may come to identify as gay or lesbian.

The homosexual identity model developed by Cass (1979) explains the acquisition of a homosexual identity through a six-stage process. According to Cass’s model, a person first becomes aware of behaviors and thoughts that are potentially homosexual, next feels alienation, then comes to tolerance of contact with homosexuals, and eventually shifts to acceptance of
homosexuals. The devaluation of heterosexuality and heterosexual institutions follows this, before finally integrating a homosexual identity into one’s self along with other identities. During the last stage of this model the homosexual identity is no longer considered the person’s main identity, but only one among others that construct the person’s self (1979).

In 1979, Troiden first developed a homosexual identity acquisition model. He described a four-stage, ideal type model that begins with a person reinterpreting past behaviors and feelings as homosexual. In the next stage, a person tries to rationalize homosexual feelings and behaviors (1979). In the third stage, a person assumes the homosexual label and becomes involved in the homosexual culture (1979). In stage four of Troiden’s (1979) model, the person acquires a homosexual identity by entering into a committed relationship.

In 1988, Troiden presented a revised model of homosexual identity, maintaining it as a four-stage ideal type model. However, this model deviates significantly from his earlier model in stages two and three and remains unchanged in stages one and four. In stage two of Troiden’s revised model, a person must confront the confusion they face between their heterosexual identity and their burgeoning homosexual identity. In order to deal with this confusion, Troiden holds that a person may engage in behaviors that range from denial of their burgeoning homosexual identity to an acceptance of this new sexual identity. In stage three of the revised model, Troiden (1988) notes that persons begin not only to assume the identity of a homosexual but also present themselves as homosexual to others. Troiden (1988) makes these changes in order to integrate parts of Cass’s model, as well as elements of other homosexual identity models, including those of Plummer (1975) and Ponse (1978), to form a more complete model (Troiden, 1988).
Problem Statement

A gay or lesbian Catholic may experience inner conflict or a sense of contradiction as result of the Catholic Church’s stance on homosexuality. What are the feelings, experiences, and means of coping with these contradictions? How do they vary and why? The extent to which people identify as Catholic could influence their experience, as could the degree to which being “out” as gay or lesbian. Variations aside, there is potential jeopardy for these individuals’ wellbeing and sense of self. The nature of that threat and conflict may well have changed over time as being gay or lesbian has changed from a highly stigmatized to a more accepted status, as well. This study seeks to understand how gay and lesbian Catholics make sense of their experiences and maintain identities as both Catholic and homosexual. In order to accomplish this, I use theories on identity, social identity, dissonance, authenticity, and self-concept.

Dissonance occurs when inconsistencies develop within a person that rationalization cannot correct (Festinger, 1957). While there may be many causes for dissonance, and while it is unlikely that dissonance is never present within a person in some fashion (1957), individuals who identify as religious and homosexual can experience significant dissonance (Mahaffy, 1996). Individuals who identify as homosexual and Catholic may experience dissonance as a result of Catholic teachings on homosexuality.

According to Erickson (1995), we can develop values that are instrumental to our self, which she calls self-values, and which provide a person a sense of authenticity. Erickson (1995) points out that persons in marginalized groups, such as gays and lesbians, may encounter difficulty in acting authentically and in accordance with their self-values. Individuals who identify as homosexual and Catholic may face difficulty in acting in such a way that exhibits
their self-values associated with their homosexual self in the face of “the expectations of powerful others” (p. 138).

The relationship of hypocrisy to a person’s self-concept may be of importance to this study for a person that identifies as homosexual and Catholic. According to Turner (1976), a person is hypocritical in regards to their self-concept in two possible ways. A person acts in a hypocritical fashion when they either do not measure up to the standard they set for themselves or if they behave in a manner contrary to how they would prefer to behave (1976). A person who identifies as both homosexual and Catholic may be engaging in a behavior that is hypocritical in some fashion to their true self.

The contemporary teachings of the Catholic Church on homosexuality are inspired by over 2,500 years of doctrine. The Persona Humana, the 1986 letter by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church each draw on many sources that prohibit homosexuality and hold it as sinful. Gay and lesbian Catholics know some sources while others may be lesser known to them. The prohibitive sources that are perhaps best known are those found in the Bible. The Old Testament books of Genesis and Leviticus and the New Testament books of Paul’s letters of Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy and the books of 2 Peter and Jude each contain passages that traditionally interpreted as hostile to homosexuality.

In addition to the scriptural inspiration found in contemporary Catholic teachings on homosexuality, the writings of Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also inform these teachings. Well known in Christianity and Catholicism, gay and lesbian Catholics may be less aware of the influence of these men on the church’s position on homosexuality. Augustine’s works On Nature & Grace, On the Good of Marriage, City of God, and Confessions take the position that same-sex activity is sinful. Likewise, passages found in
Thomas Aquinas’ works of *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles* speak of the sinfulness of homosexuality while using natural law to do so. Both of these theologians informed Catholic teachings for centuries and up to the present day.

As a result of contemporary Catholic teachings on homosexual behavior, along with the prohibitions against homosexual activity found in the Bible and other authoritative theology in the Catholic tradition, this study grounds itself in the assumption that gay and lesbian Catholics are likely to experience some degree of conflict or incongruence between their homosexual identity and Catholic identity. This study seeks to understand and describe patterns of those experiences, as well as to investigate how gay and lesbian Catholics relieve the discomfort created by the potential contradictions between their Catholic identity and their homosexual identity.

**Literature Weakness**

There are two main weaknesses in the existing literature on homosexual and religious identity conflict. First, there are few studies of Catholicism on potential homosexual and religious identity conflict or incongruence. The majority of studies that examine the intersection of religious identity and homosexual identity focus on Christians in general (i.e. Halkitis, et al, 2009; Barton, 2010; Pitt, 2010a; Pitt, 2010b) or are centered on a gay-affirming religious organization, such as the Metropolitan Community Church (i.e., Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000; Wilcox, 2009; McQueeney, 2010).

The other weakness in the literature is that many studies focus solely on Festinger’s Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. For instance, (Anderton, et al., 2011), Mahaffy (1996), Pitt (2010a), and Yip (1997) each use or discuss cognitive dissonance theory in their work on religious and homosexual identity conflict. Rather than only focusing on cognitive dissonance,
this study uses a broader theoretical approach and includes theories on identity, social identity, self-concept, authenticity, along with dissonance theory to capture how persons who identify as homosexual and Catholic deal with the potential conflict or incongruence they may experience.

Research Questions

This study centers on the following research questions, developed through an examination of the literatures on religious identity, homosexual identity, cognitive dissonance, identity and social identity literature, self-concept, and authenticity, as well as Catholic teachings on homosexuality.

Research Question One: How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?

Research Question Two: What are sources of both positive and negative experiences for gay and lesbian Catholics?

Research Question Three: How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflict contend with such conflicts between sexual and religious identities?

Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions to the literature on religious and homosexual identity conflict or incongruence. First, this study applies theories on identity, social identity, dissonance, self-authenticity, and self-concept. Other studies that focus on this issue tend to utilize only dissonance theory. Using these other theories may provide insight into how people negotiate their Catholic and homosexual identities. This study may illuminate how persons who experience a sense of conflict or incongruence deal with issues of inauthenticity, hypocrisy, and identity conflict relative to their homosexual and Catholic identities. Providing insight into these issues may inform policy and programs to increase the wellbeing of gay and lesbian Catholics.
For instance, results of this study may help Catholic priests and religious leaders who are sympathetic to the plight of gay and lesbian Catholics in the United States to more effectively minister to them as it may offer insight into the reality of persons who may be sitting in their pews.

**Researcher Positionality Statement**

Maxwell (2005) holds that research bias occurs in a qualitative study when the researcher chooses only the information that fits into the “existing theory or preconceptions” and the selection of data that is of interest to the researcher. Constructing this positionality statement will put forth my own biases and preconceptions, which will help deal with potential issues surrounding the researcher’s bias.

My interest in this topic started to form approximately 12 years ago while I was instructing 11th grade religious education. During one session a student asked me about homosexuality and Catholic teachings. While my position necessitated that I convey the teachings of the church, I found myself explaining it in a way that was less harsh than normally conveyed by those teachings. It would be wrong to say that this one moment sent me on path that would one day lead me to conduct this study; however, the question of how Catholics who identify as gay or lesbian make sense of these seemingly conflicting identities is a question I have long thought about, especially since I do not experience this potential conflict as a straight male Catholic.

My stance on homosexuality departs from the orthodox Catholic teachings on homosexuality. I do not view homosexuality or homosexual acts to be sinful in nature, which is contrary to the teachings found in the *Persona Humana* or the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. One reason for this is that coming into contact with different types of people helped inform me
that everyone is basically the same. We all want to love and receive love and to feel safe and be happy. If I am to love my neighbor and do unto others as I would have them do unto me, it is important to support those that do not have the same rights or feel as safe as I do. Another reason is that I feel that the Catholic Church lacks the authority on issues of morality as a result of its own inaction and turning a blind eye to the recent, and seemingly ongoing, sexual abuse scandals within the church. Lastly, I am of the opinion that just because some people may identify as a gay or lesbian does not mean they do not or cannot have religion in their life.

Summary

Over the past decade, American society has become more welcoming of persons who identify as gay or lesbian. This change is visible through milestones, such as, the 2011 repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and the 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision, which legalized same-sex marriage in the United States. However, as mentioned by some of the participants in this study, events such as the election of Donald J. Trump as President of the United States and the Pulse nightclub shooting created a sense of unease and fear in the gay and lesbian community. As monumental as the progress has been, not every aspect or institution of American society is welcoming to those that identify as gay or lesbian. The Catholic Church with its millennia of teachings is one such institution. As such, people who identify as Catholic and homosexual may come to experience conflict or incongruence between these two identities. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to attempt to understand how people who identify as Catholic and gay or lesbian in a predominantly rural region deal with this potential conflict or incongruence. The approach to the study is phenomenological and framed by theories on identity, social identity, self-authenticity, self-concept, and cognitive dissonance.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study explores the relationship between a person’s identity as gay or lesbian and as a Catholic. This chapter reviews the scholarly literature on identity formation and on how a religious, in this case, a Catholic identity forms. I also address the literature on the development of sexual identity and, in particular, how homosexual identity forms. Second, I present the Catholic Church’s contemporary teachings on homosexuality as context for why having a gay or lesbian identity may conflict or be incongruent with a Catholic identity. Third, I review theories pertaining to identity, social identity, self-concept authenticity, and dissonance that help explain the mechanics of how a Catholic identity may come into conflict or with homosexual identity. Fourth, I summarize the limited literature that specifically examines how religious and homosexual identities conflict and how such conflicts may be resolved by the individuals experiencing them. Finally, I offer a conceptual framework that informs my approach to addressing the research questions of this study.

Identity Formation

This section will explain the literature on the ways in which a person’s identity forms. I explore Erickson’s (1968) writings on identity formation and also literature on how roles, social groups, and cultural characteristics form the basis of our identities.

Erickson (1968), in his book *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*, put forth a three-stage process by which a person’s identity forms. The first phase of this process, introjection, is a process that occurs at a young age in childhood whereby a child crudely incorporates the behaviors of those close to them (1968). In the second phase of his identity formation model, identification, Erickson argued that the children become exposed to various roles from parents, siblings,
grandparents, or other significant others who will give them a set of expectations. These expectations will allow the children to have some understanding about who and what they will be when they mature (1968). The third phase of Erickson’s (1968) identity formation model is entitled identity formation. The rejection and assimilation of the roles the children made from which they received exposure to during the identification phase marks this phase. It is also during this time where a person has exposure to greater independence and has increased interaction with other people, be it in school or elsewhere, which leads to contact with other ideas (Sokol, 2009). According to Erickson, a person’s identity is largely set at the end of adolescence.

Another approach to examine how identity formation occurs looks to the roles a person takes on, their group affiliations, and the internalized cultural characteristics as the basis for their identities. According to Burke and Stets (2009), one way an identity forms is through a person’s role identity and the internalization of the meanings associated with a role through its enactment. As a result, one role may have many different meanings to a person and may also vary in meaning from one individual to the next (2009). For instance, the role identity of father may mean being compassionate to one person, but to another person, it may mean being strict. Another aspect of the role identity is the need for verification of that role performance. If verification is positive, the person performing the role identity may experience feelings of validation and competency for that performance (2009).

Another identity a person assumes is a social identity. This identity forms when a person has interactions with a group. This particular identity allows the person to behave in a manner similar to others in the group and to also perceive instances from the view point of the group (Burke & Stets, 2009). According to Burke and Stets, a person’s social identity activates through
the accessibility and fit process. The accessibility component of a social identity pertains to social categories that are readily accessible to a person and allow that person interpret a situation within the group (2009). These categories may include race, gender, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or political affiliation, to name a few. The fit component pertains to whether or not the social category used allows that person to make sense of what is occurring. If the fit of the social category is poor, until found, another social category provides meaning until a proper fit (2009). Similar to a role identity, a person seeks verification of their social identity. A positive verification provides a person with a sense of self-worth and feelings of belonging to the group (2009).

The third basis for identity formation is a person identity. This identity is composed of the meanings that define a person as being unique rather than only a member or a group or a holder of a particular role or set of roles. Person identities, Burke and Stets (2009) argue, originate from characteristics and traits that are culturally recognized and internalized to provide a person with the sense of uniqueness. These characteristics and traits may include how moral, dominating, or loving that person feels themselves to be. Because a person identity informs a person as to who they are, this identity may influence the roles they take on and the social groups they join (2009). For instance, if a person views themselves as a “go-getter,” responsible, and charismatic, that person may seek roles that pertain to leadership in some capacity. And similar to a role identity and a social identity, a person identity also seeks verification from others. A positive verification can lead to feelings of authenticity (2009).

A person’s identity forms in many ways. Erickson (1968) argued that as a result of a person’s interactions with significant others during childhood and society at large during adolescence, that person’s identity forms and subsequently becomes largely fixed at the end of
adolescence. Burke and Stets (2009) hold that a person’s identities form from the roles a person takes on, the groups they join, and the unique culturally recognized characteristics and traits a person internalizes. Each of these models of sources of identity may provide insight into how people cope with potential conflict or incongruence between identities, including a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity.

**Religious Identity**

A person’s religious identity forms in one of two ways. The first is by being born into a family or culture that practices a particular religious faith (Johnstone, 1992), such as Catholicism in this instance. The other way a religious identity forms is by purposefully joining a particular faith tradition later in life (1992). Johnstone (1992) holds that regardless of how or when a person joins a particular religion, they receive instruction on the norms and values of the religious group with which they are affiliated.

According to D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Meyer (2001), there are two different types of Catholic identity: the official identity and the subjective identity. The official identity is one claimed by the Catholic Church on its parishioners. That is, those who were born into Catholicism, baptized, and confirmed. Although a person may be officially identified as Catholic, that person may not feel Catholic (2001) or act out a Catholic identity.

The second type of Catholic identity put forth by D’Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, and Meyer (2001) is a subjective one. They argue that the subjective identity consists of the level of centrality of the identity to an individual and boundaries and core/periphery beliefs that can fluctuate over time (2001). In other words, a Catholic identity is not one where a person needs to believe this or believe that. This may be important for the official identity, as defined by the Catholic Church itself, but that is not so for the subjective identity. Rather, the nuance of the
subjective Catholic identity occurs when a person holds some beliefs as important while others are not. This may be of a particular importance for this study as it may explain whether or not a person feels conflict or incongruence between identities.

**Homosexual Identity**

Over the years researchers put forth several homosexual identity formation models to explain how an individual acquires a homosexual identity. Each model typically has several stages persons must traverse before they acquire this identity. The models explored below are those put forth by Cass (1979), Troiden (1979), and Troiden (1988).

The homosexual identity model developed by Cass (1979) detailed the acquisition of a homosexual identity through a six stage process: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity, tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. Identity confusion occurs when a person becomes aware that their actions and thoughts may be homosexual (Cass, 1979). As a result, the image this person has of themselves as a heterosexual, as well as the image others have of this person as a heterosexual, is now in conflict with their new awareness and creates incongruence (1979). This incongruence leads to confusion when the person must now ask themselves if they are indeed a homosexual (1979).

Identity comparison occurs in the second stage of Cass’s (1979) model. The purpose of this stage is to deal with the social alienation that a person may begin to experience as a result of their burgeoning homosexual identity (1979). Cass (1979) explains that there are four options available to a person that is experiencing alienation. These stages vary in their acceptance of self and behavior, as well as whether or not a person finds their self and behavior as desirable or undesirable. A person that holds an undesirable opinion of their self and their behavior
experience alienation and will act to prevent any homosexual behaviors, view homosexuality in a negative light, and have positive opinion of heterosexuality (1979).

Identity tolerance begins in the third stage of Cass’ (1979) model. During this stage, a person will view contact with other homosexuals as both tolerable and essential to deal with any experienced alienation. Cass (1979) points out that the quality of the contact a person begins to make in this stage can result in either a high or low view of homosexuals.

Identity acceptance occurs in the fourth stage. During this stage, a person transitions from simply tolerating homosexuality to acceptance of a homosexual self-image (Cass, 1979). Also, during this stage, a person begins to prefer the company of homosexuals and develops friendships with them as their contact with homosexuals becomes more commonplace (1979).

Identity pride occurs in the fifth stage of Cass’ (1979) model. When a person enters this stage, Cass (1979) notes that they are aware of the variance between their own acceptable view of self as a homosexual and society’s rejection of homosexuality. In order to deal this variance, a person organizes society in an “us vs. them,” homosexuals vs. heterosexuals; a structure which also involves the devaluation of heterosexuals and heterosexual institutions (1979). Since a person has shunned heterosexuals and institutions with a heterosexual normative approach, this person is much less concerned with how heterosexuals view them (1979).

Identity synthesis is the last stage in Cass’ (1979) homosexual identity model. In this stage, the person becomes aware that the homosexual and heterosexual dichotomy they created is no longer correct (1979). A person in this stage accepts the fact that they are very similar to heterosexuals in some respects, and dissimilar to other homosexuals in other respects. Finally, in this stage, a person has integrated their homosexual identity with their other identities. The
homosexual identity is no longer their main identity, but simply one identity among others that constructs their self (1979).

In his work, *Becoming Homosexual: A Model of Gay Identity Acquisition*, Troiden (1979) puts forth an ideal type, four stage model by which a person comes to acquire a homosexual identity. His model, unlike Cass’ (1979) six stage model, has four stages of development: sensitization, dissociation and signification, coming out, and commitment. The following is a brief explanation of each stage in the model.

In the first stage, sensitization, a person experiences feelings or engages in behaviors which they reinterpret later as homosexual feelings or behaviors. Troiden (1979) argues that it is necessary for a homosexual reinterpretation of former behaviors to occur for assumption of a gay identity by an individual (1979).

In the second stage, dissociation and signification, rationalization occurs within the individual whereby they conclude that their actions are not homosexual (1979). They accomplish this by separating their homosexual behaviors from their sexual identity (1979).

The third state of Troiden’s (1979) model is called coming out. This stage begins when a person decides to assume the homosexual label. Once a person assumes a homosexual label, they begin to become involved in homosexual culture and begin to view homosexuality as something positive and reasonable (1979).

Finally, the last stage of Troiden’s (1979) model is the commitment stage. This stage begins when a person assumes a homosexual lifestyle. Troiden (1979) argues that a homosexual identity is confirmed when a person takes same-sex partner.

Almost a decade after Troiden created his gay identity acquisition model, he revised it in his work, *Gay and Lesbian Identity: A Sociological Analysis* (1988). Much like his first model,
his new model is a four-stage ideal type model. The main differences between this model and his 1979 model occur in stages two and three. In the later model, stage one remains a sensitization stage where reinterpretation occurs, and stage four remains as a commitment stage where a homosexual lifestyle is adopted (1988).

In the revised stage two, identity confusion, Troiden (1988) notes that turmoil and uncertainty over sexual identity is salient in this stage. Troiden (1988) explains that this occurs because a person can no longer make a heterosexual assumption about themselves, but they do not yet consider themselves to be a homosexual (1988). As Troiden (1988) further explains, a person in this stage exists in a type of sexual identity limbo. A person experiencing identity confusion will try to mitigate the uncertainty they feel by engaging in behaviors, such as, denial, redefinition, and acceptance (1988).

The revised stage three, identity assumption, begins when a person not only takes on a homosexual identity, but, also, self-identifies as homosexual and makes their homosexual identity known to others (Troiden, 1988). In this stage, a person makes this identity known to other homosexuals in particular (1988).

**Sexual Identity**

In 1996 McCarn and Fassinger developed a sexual identity model based on several homosexual identity formation models including those put forth by Cass (1979) and Troiden (1979, 1988) following a review of the existing literature on gay and lesbian identity formation. The purpose of McCarn and Fassinger’s model is to allow for more inclusiveness for a range of differing experiences (1996). Their model of homosexual identity development consists of four stages. In the first stage, a person becomes aware that they feel uncertain of their heterosexuality. In the second stage they may begin to explore any sexual feelings that they have, but they may
also choose to not explore behaviors. In the third stage, a person begins to feel a deepening attraction for persons of the same sex. Lastly, in the fourth stage they begin to accept their same-sex feelings as part of their identity (1996).

**Contemporary Catholic Teachings on Homosexuality**

The purpose of this section is to explain how the potential conflict between a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity may come into being. This research argues that a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity can come into conflict and incongruence within a person with both of these identities. One important factor that may contribute to this potential conflict is the Catholic Church’s teachings on homosexuality. Current Catholic teaching on homosexuality represents the culmination of 2000 years of theology and scriptural interpretation. This teaching relies on Old Testament stories and New Testament statements made by Paul, the interpretation of Augustine, and the natural law of Aquinas. The following is a review of the most important contemporary documents related to Catholic teachings on homosexuality. However, historically, the concept of a heterosexual or a homosexual did not begin to see usage until they appeared in medical journals in the 1890s (Katz, 2007). Heterosexuality is not “ahistorical” according to Katz (1996) and it did not always mean what it currently does. In addition, I discuss contemporary writings that illustrate how the United States Catholic Church is trying to handle the issue of homosexuals in the pews of its Churches follows below.

In 1975, the Catholic Church, through the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, put forth its teachings on sexuality and sexual ethics in the form of the *Persona Humana: Declaration on Certain Questions Concerning Sexual Ethics* (hereinafter referred to as *Persona Humana*). This document outlines what the Catholic Church deems permissible and what it
deems as sinful in the realm of sexuality based upon the natural law philosophy (Williams, 1987). In particular, the document outlines the Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality.

According to Section VIII of the *Persona Humana*, there are two types of homosexuals. There are those who are born that way and those who chose to be homosexuals. While the *Persona Humana* instructs priests and other religious acting in a pastoral role to treat all homosexuals with understanding due to the difficulties they may face in society as a result of their sexual orientation, it cautions those providing pastoral care that there is no “moral justification” for homosexual acts (pp. 5-6). Accordingly, the *Persona Humana*, through the natural law presented by Aquinas, holds that homosexuality is opposed to the “objective moral order” because homosexual acts do not result in the creation of life.

The *Persona Humana* contains several additional comments on homosexuality. While the argument that homosexual activity receives disapproval because it does not end in the creation of human life may seem innocuous, the other comments are less so. First, the *Persona Humana* holds that not only does scripture condemn homosexual acts, but it also states that homosexuality may serve as a punishment for rejecting God. The argument of homosexual acts not only being a sin but also punishment for sin is not new. In fact, St. Augustine, detailed above, made a similar argument in Chapter 24 of his work *On Nature and Grace*. The *Persona Humana* does hold, however, that the scripture grants no authority to the church to hold all homosexuals as responsible for their homosexuality through their rejection of God. Finally, the *Persona Humana* concludes that whether homosexuals are responsible for their homosexuality is irrelevant because the Catholic Church views all homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered.

Following the issuance of the *Persona Humana* and prior to the issuance of the 1986 *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*,
United States Catholic Church leaders wrote a number of on how to treat homosexuals within the church. The documents written by these Catholic Church leaders touch on a number of topics including, but not limited to, integration, chastity, and identity. Some of these topics and the way the United States Catholic leadership handles these issues ends up being at odds with later Catholic Church teaching on homosexuality. For instance, Archbishop Rembert Weakland (1980) and the Roman Catholic Church of Baltimore (1981) each hold that the homosexual condition is not itself sinful. Also, while some U.S. church leaders at this time urge that homosexuals should not be encouraged to join other gay groups, which may be an allusion to newly emerging homosexual organizations of the 20th century such as Dignity and New Ways Ministry organizations (Medeiros, 1979), others willingly open their church facilities for use by Dignity (Hunthausen, 1983). Within a few years, however, Archbishop Hunthausen received rebuke by the Catholic Church over his liberal interpretation of church policy, including his views on homosexuality (The Washington Post, 1986).

There are few other themes that arise in the writings of United States church leaders during this period as well. For instance, Catholic Church leaders call homosexuals to act in a chaste manner toward their sexual desires (RCC of Baltimore, 1981; Sullivan, 1983). The call to chastity for homosexuals is something reiterated in official Catholic teaching moving forward. Another theme carried forward in Catholic teaching on homosexuality is the call for respect. The writings of these church leaders suggest the church’s understanding of the difficulties homosexuals encounter in their everyday lives. As such, the church calls on Catholics to respect homosexuals (National conference of Catholic Bishops, 1976; Quinn, 1980; Roman Catholic Church of Baltimore, 1981) because they have a right to “human respect, stable friendships, economic security and social equality” (Roach, 1978, p.10). It is open for a debate and
interpretation as to whether or not Catholic teaching on homosexuality is actually in congruence with its position of respect for homosexuals.

A little more than a decade after the issuance of the *Persona Humana*, a document published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith entitled *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (hereinafter referred to as the *Letter*). Written by Cardinal Ratzinger of Germany, this letter reiterates the Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality. In the *Letter*, Ratzinger addressed the development of a “benign interpretation” (pp. 1-2) toward homosexual orientation. Ratzinger holds that while the homosexual orientation is not a sin, the inclination itself is a “strong tendency toward an intrinsic moral evil” (p. 2). As a result, Ratzinger concludes that the homosexual orientation, or the homosexual identity, is an “objective disorder” (p.2). Following this new interpretation of homosexuality, the Catholic Church holds that the inclination toward homosexuality is objectively disordered and that homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.

Ratzinger’s *Letter* addressed the ‘alright to be gay’ position some clergy were taking as a position following the issuance of the *Persona Humana*. Williams (1987) argues that if it was alright to be a homosexual, then there would be no proper reason as to why homosexual behavior should not also be permissible. As noted earlier, the *Persona Humana* (1975) refrains from holding homosexuals responsible for their homosexuality. By taking the position that homosexuality itself is an objective disorder rather than just homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered, the church removes the argument against its seemingly incomprehensible prohibition on homosexual acts (Williams, 1987).

Ratzinger based his arguments against homosexuality upon the Sodom story, the Levitical prohibitions against homosexuality, and the statements against homosexuality found in
Paul’s writings. Ratzinger argues that natural law is implicit in the *Letter* (Williams, 1987). However, Ratzinger also added another scriptural component to his argument. That is, the complementariness of the sexes argument based upon the creation story found in Genesis. In the *Letter* (1986) Ratzinger recounts that God created male and female based upon his own image and likeness (Gen 1: 26) and as such, humans are called to reflect the inner unity of God through the complementariness of the sexes. Ratzinger argues that one way this complementariness is demonstrated is through the creation of life “by a mutual donation of the self to the other” (1986, p. 2).

In 2006 the United States Conference of Bishops in their document *Ministry to Persons with a Homosexual Inclination: Guidelines for Pastoral Care* took the opportunity to address the criticism the *Letter* had received as a result of its position on homosexuality. The United States Conference of Bishops held that the church’s teachings in the *Letter* have either been misinterpreted or misrepresented as teaching that homosexuals rather than “the inclination” is what is considered to be objectively disordered by the church (2006). This, however, may be a distinction without a difference as the homosexual “inclination” is what makes a homosexual a homosexual much the same way a heterosexual inclination makes a heterosexual a heterosexual.

In addition to addressing homosexual inclination, Ratzinger’s *Letter* also addressed the appearance of Catholic gay groups, such as Dignity and New Ways Ministry even though he did not mention them by name. The *Letter* (1986) holds that all pastoral care given to homosexuals should be in line with church teachings on homosexuality. As a result those providing pastoral care are forbidden to associate with groups for pastoral care of homosexuals and they should receive no support from Bishops if they do not hold the church position that homosexual behavior is morally wrong (1986).
The last major documents produced by the Catholic Church pertaining to its teaching on homosexuality is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and it contains the entirety of the Catholic teachings on faith and morals. The *Catechism* (2000) itself does not provide any new teaching on homosexuality or homosexual acts. Rather, it reiterates the Catholic Church’s view on homosexual acts and the homosexual inclination found in the *Humana Persona* and the *Letter*. The *Catechism* (2000) holds that homosexual acts are “acts of grave depravity” and are intrinsically disordered (2357). It also holds that the homosexual inclination is objectively disordered, and all forms of unjust discrimination require avoidance (2358). Finally, the *Catechism* (2000) calls all homosexuals to pursue lives of chastity (2359). Like previous contemporary church teachings on homosexuality, the *Catechism* (2000) relies on the Aquinas’ natural law argument, the Old Testament stories, New Testament writings of Paul, and the complementariness of the sexes argument to inform its position on homosexuality and homosexual acts.

In the years following the issuance of the *Persona Humana*, the *Letter*, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the United States Conference of Bishops issued other documents pertaining to homosexuality. Although they offer nothing new in terms of teaching, one of them is worth mentioning if, for no other reason, than to show that the Catholic Church is trying to deal with the reality that there are people with a homosexual orientation in its pews. In 1997 the United States Conference of Bishops produced a document entitled *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers*. This document details how parents should not reject their children because they are homosexual as that may lead to other problems such as becoming runaways, engaging in substance abuse, and suicide. In addition, it holds that homosexual youth should be encouraged to lead a chaste
lifestyle and those with a homosexual orientation be allowed to accept or reject conversion therapy of their own volition (1997).

The Catholic Church’s teachings on homosexuality rely on a combination of scriptural interpretation and conceptions of natural law. While it can interpret the Bible as it sees fit, the church cannot do the same with natural law. Natural law requires the use of new data and information when it is discovered (Bonsor, 1998). However, the church treats these data and information as inconsequential not only to its judgment but also as a gateway to moral insight (Bonsor, 1998; Pope, 2005).

Whether or not the Catholic Church uses natural law to consider homosexuality an objective disorder and homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered may not matter to those experiencing feelings of inner conflict and incongruence between their homosexual identity and their Catholic identity. It may not even matter what the Bible says about homosexuality since some may see those prohibitions as stories and relics of an age long since passed. All that matters is that the church considers people who are homosexual, regardless of whether they act on their sexual orientation, objectively and intrinsically disordered.

**Pertinent Theories**

As a result of the Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality, a person who identifies as homosexual and Catholic may experience incongruence or conflict between these identities. This section will explore the various theoretical frameworks that explain the mechanics of how identities may come into conflict or incongruence and how that conflict or incongruence may be resolved.
Identity Theory

Identity theory is both rooted in the symbolic interactionist tradition and based on the works of George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, William Jones, and Sheldon Stryker, among many others (Burke & Stets, 2009). Under this perspective, for each and every relationship in which we engage, we have a corresponding identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1982) that helps to explain our social behavior (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). Identity theory offers two explanations of how our identities are organized that are of particular interest to this study because it is at these levels that conflict and incongruence may be experienced.

According to identity theory, the organizing of a person’s identity occurs, in part, according to its salience. The salience of an identity is the probability that a particular identity behavior occurs during an interaction with another person (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014; citing Stryker 1965, 1980, 2003). As such, identity theory allows for the prediction that a salient identity that is highly ranked is more likely to not only occur but define a situation in such a way as to allow for the highly salient identity to be enacted (2014). The converse, however, is also true for an identity ranked lower in an individual’s identity salience hierarchy. For example, a person with a highly salient parent identity and a less salient employee identity will more likely than not engage in the parent identity behavior when they come home from work as opposed to continuing to work once they get home due to the salience of those identities. It should be noted that the more committed a person is to an identity, the more salient that identity becomes for that person (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Burke & Stets, 2009, citing Stryker, 1980).

In addition to ranking along a salience hierarchy, identities rank along a prominence hierarchy. Unlike the salience hierarchy, which is based on the situation and behavior, the prominence of an identity is based on the person’s ideal self (Burke & Stets, 2009). As such, the
prominent identity of a person is that person’s subjective self, which value to the individual is relative to their other identities (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). The placement of an identity in the prominence hierarchy is determined by the level of support they receive for that identity from others (Burke & Stets, 2009). The more support an identity receives, the higher up the hierarchy it is and, as a result, the more value that identity gives the individual.

Several nuances are worthy of note concerning salience and prominence of identities. First, as stated above, the salient identity refers to behavior (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014; citing Stryker 1965, 1980, 2003) while the prominent identity refers to the subjective and ideal self (Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2009). Next, a salient identity and a prominent identity do not necessarily need to align with each other in their respective hierarchies (Ervin & Stryker, 2001; cited by Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). In fact, there may be times where a preferred identity does not activate in a given situation (Burke & Stets, 2009). Lastly, Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker (2014) hold that the salient identity and the prominent identity are not necessarily the same identity.

According to Hogg, Terry, and White (1995, citing Thoits, 1991), if a person is enacting a role in a way that is perceived satisfactorily by another, that person should receive an increase in their self-esteem; however, if the role is performed unsatisfactorily, that person will receive feedback that may cause psychological stress. In order to reduce this conflict and incongruence, a person will change their behavior to match their beliefs about that identity (1995). For example, a person’s Catholic identity will tell them, through Catholic teachings, that homosexuality is sinful and intrinsically and objectively disordered (Persona Humana, 1975; Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 1986). As a result, that person must engage in a behavior to reduce this inconsistency where the behavior engaged in
may depend on how prominent a Catholic or homosexual identity is for an individual. However, since there are two components to a person’s identity, the salient and prominent, it is unclear if this would reduce conflict and incongruence for both identity components. It is possible that in order to reduce conflict and incongruence in a prominent homosexual identity, conflict and incongruence reduction strategies that address the self may also be necessary in addition to a behavioral change.

Identity theory is useful to this study because it addressed the behavioral aspects of an identity, as well as, the subjective worth of an identity to an individual. As a result, it allows for the creation of interview questions in Chapter Three that will, hopefully, illuminate how a person experiences and resolves conflict based upon the behavior associated with an identity along with questions based upon the value of an identity to that person. Varying levels of salience and prominence between homosexual and Catholic identities may led to insights on different reduction strategies that could explain strategy variance from person to person.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is a social psychological theory that explains a person’s social identities as deriving from their membership in groups (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Brown, 2000). While a part of a social group, people act as representatives of that group as a category prototype for that group (Hogg & Smith, 2007). A category prototype is a set of attributes that illustrate the similarities between in-group members as well as the differences between the out-groups (2007). Hogg and Smith (2007) state that a prototype operates as an ideal type for the in-group and informs them of what attitudes they should hold and how they should behave against the backdrop of the out-group. For example, expectations for a gay or lesbian person may include engagement in same-sex actions as part of the broader gay or lesbian social group. At the
same time, members may experience pressure to cut ties with their religious faith if it is hostile to homosexuality. Likewise, Catholic social group members may expect their members not to engage in, among other behaviors, homosexuality due to church teachings on the subject.

Social identities will, at times, come into conflict with each other. Since people desire an integrated self-concept (Hogg & Smith, 2007, citing Baumeister, 1988), when conflict between identities arises, there is pressure to reduce it (Hogg & Smith, 2007). Social identity theory internally deals with this conflict through compartmentalizing identities. Hogg and Smith (2007) argue that a person’s identity and the attitudes associated with this identity experience compartmentalization by the individual with only one identity being in use at a time. Compartmentalization of identities may help to alleviate conflict and incongruence between homosexual and Catholic identities (see Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000).

**Self-Authenticity**

According to Rebecca Erickson (1995), we can develop values that are instrumental to our self, which she calls self-values, and which provide a person with a sense of authenticity. We commit, Erickson (1995) argues, to those identities that allow us to enact the self-values that we find most important. Erickson (1995) points out that persons in marginalized groups, such as gays and lesbians, may encounter difficulty in acting authentically and in accordance with their self-values. Individuals who identify as homosexual and Catholic may face difficulty in acting in ways that exhibits their self-values associated with their homosexual self in the face of “the expectations of powerful others” (p. 138). In other words, a person’s Catholic upbringing may impact their ability to act out a homosexual identity.
Self-Concept

According to Ralph Turner (1968) an individual’s self-concept is their sense of who they believe they are. Turner referred to this sensation as “the real me” (1968, p.94). Sociologically, Turner argued, the notion of the self-concept describes the roles a person assumes that are important to that individual (1976). A person’s self-concept may consist of being someone’s mother, spouse, or sister. In the case of this study a person’s self-concept may include being homosexual and Catholic. The relationship of hypocrisy to a person’s self-concept may be of importance to this study for a person that identifies as homosexual and Catholic. According to Turner (1976), a person is hypocritical to their self-concept in two possible ways. A person acts in a hypocritical fashion when they either do not measure up to the standard they set for themselves or if they behave in a manner contrary to how they would prefer to behave (1976). A person who identifies as both homosexual and Catholic may be engaging in a behavior that is hypocritical in some fashion to their true self or “real me.”

Cognitive Dissonance

As a result of the Catholic Church’s contemporary teachings on homosexuality, a person who possesses both a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity may experience cognitive dissonance as result of the conflict between these two identities. Leon Festinger put forth his theory of cognitive dissonance in his 1957 work, The Theory of Cognitive Dissonance. For more than 55 years, it has become one of the most written about social psychology theories. In fact, 25 years after the publication of Festinger’s book, there were over 1000 published research articles and books pertaining to the theory (Cooper and Fazio, 1983). Today, there are thousands of research articles and books that pertain in some way to cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger’s theory, psychological discomfort occurs when inconsistencies arise within an
individual (1957). When a person faces inconsistencies, Festinger holds that they will try to rationalize these inconsistencies (1957). If a person cannot rationalize the inconsistencies, that person will begin to experience psychological discomfort (1957). Cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort which results from these inconsistencies.

The theory of cognitive dissonance makes two predictions. The first prediction is that if a person experienced dissonance, that person will want to reduce the dissonance and achieve a level of consonance (1957). The second prediction is if a person experienced dissonance, that person will avoid situations and information that would increase the dissonance (1957). A person experiencing dissonance can reduce their dissonance through a change in their behavior, a change in their environment, or by adding to or changing their knowledge about the effects of their behavior (1957).

Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance has not remained static over the past 55 years. The theory’s evolution includes the revision and refutation by other theorists and theories claiming to offer a more complete explanation for what an individual is feeling when inconsistencies between beliefs and actions occur. The early dissonance theories may be of little use to this study, but later revisions of the theory, such as, self-consistence theory and self-affirmation theory, may prove to be useful.

**Self-Consistency Theory**

Elliott Aronson (1968; 1992) introduced self-consistency theory as something that was missing from the main dissonance paradigms. That is, the introduction of the self. In his work, he postulated that most people want three things when it comes to their conceptualization of self. He held that people want to 1) preserve a consistent, stable, and predictable sense of self; 2) to preserve a competent sense of self; and 3) to preserve a morally good sense of self (1968). As a
result, E. Aronson (1968) argued that a person experiences dissonance when they engage in a behavior that is in conflict with their self-concept (1968). E. Aronson offers three ways in which people may differ in the dissonance they experience. First, he holds that people tolerate dissonance to varying degrees. Second, he holds that people reduce the dissonance they feel in different ways. Lastly, he holds, as a necessary precondition for points one and two, that what may be dissonance for one person may not be so for another person. The way to determine whether or not an event is dissonant for a person, he argued, is to examine the self-concept of that person (1968).

**Self-Affirmation Theory**

The second cognitive dissonance revision worth mentioning also maintains a focus on the self. The difference between self-affirmation theory and other dissonance theories and paradigms is this theory’s perspective that the motivation for the cognitive change resulting from dissonance arousing psychological inconsistency is the threat to a person’s self-adequacy and is not an inconsistency (Steele & Liu, 1983; Steele, 1988). In fact, research conducted by Steele, Spence, and Lynch (1993) found that not only is psychological consistency not a part of people’s motivation to reduce dissonance, but inconsistency experienced by an individual was not enough to arouse dissonance, and adverse consequences are not necessary to arouse dissonance.

If, as proposed by self-affirmation theory, inconsistency and adverse consequences do not arouse dissonance, what does? The answer to this is similar to that found in self-concept theory. Self-affirmation theory views the person as wanting to maintain a self that one, maintains stability, is free to make choices and is able to control outcomes (Steele, 1988, p. 262). Dissonance occurs in this theory when a person receives information considered a threat to the self. This threat will continue until this person restores the perception of self that they are good,
competent, etc. (Steele & Liu, 1983). A key difference in self-affirmation theory from the other dissonance theories and paradigms is that the actual inconsistency that causes a threat to a person’s self-image does not necessarily need remedied. Instead, a person experiencing dissonance under the self-affirmation framework only needs to engage in an activity that affirms their self-image that they are good and competent. However, even though inconsistency causing dissonance does not need remedied, the affirmed self-image must be as important as the self-image that was threatened (Steele, 1983).

**Religious Identity and Homosexual Identity Conflict Framework**

This section focuses on the homosexual and religious identity literature. There is a body of literature that details the conflict and struggles persons with religious and homosexual identities must endure as a result of their conflicting identities. Most of the literature presented here focuses on Christian religions in general as the number of Catholic only studies on this issue are few in number. A framework developed by Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) partitions the literature into four specific parts. The framework operates as a way to navigate the choices a person with conflicting religious and homosexual identities could make. This method allowed for the rejection of the person’s religious identity, the rejection of the person’s homosexual identity, the compartmentalization of both identities, and the integration of both identities.

Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) developed their model of four potential outcomes for conflicting religious and sexual identities through a study of a New York Metropolitan Community Church (2000). I use their framework not only to organize the homosexual and religious identity literature, but, also, use it as a way to categorize how people in this study with conflicting religious and homosexual identities may reduce the conflict and incongruence they experience.
Reject Religious Identity

One-way individuals who experience conflict and incongruence created by the conflict between their religious identity and homosexual identity is to reject their religious identity in favor of their homosexual identity. For example, Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) found that gay men with a religious upbringing believed that rejection of religion is necessary in order to accept their homosexuality. Similarly, Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Bonacci, and Cowie (2009) found that while the majority of the participants in their study grew up in a religious household, approximately 25% currently belonged to a religious organization. Likewise, in a study which focused on gay Latino Catholic men in Chicago and San Francisco, Garcia, Gray-Stanley, and Ramirez-Valles (2008) found that over 66 percent of their participants abandoned the Catholic Church. The men in this study, however, chose to retain some religious or spiritual identity even apart from the Catholic Church. The rejection of a religious identity has the potential to lead to two possible outcomes.

Spirituality. The first possible outcome is to adopt a spiritual identity in the wake of rejection of a religious identity. For instance, Garcia, et al. (2008) found that even though many of their participants rejected their religious identity, they wanted to maintain a relationship with God, so they adopted a spiritual identity. Likewise, Dahl’s (2011) study of adolescent sexual and religious identity development, he found that a majority of the participants did not identify as religious. Instead, they opted for a spiritual identity over a religious identity (2011). Similarly, Halkitis, Mattis, Sahadath, Massie, Ladyzhenskaya, Bonacci, and Cowie (2009) found that many of their participants chose a spiritual identity over a religious identity.

Problems related to rejection of religious identity. While the rejection of a religious identity and the possible adoption of a spiritual identity is one way to deal with the conflict and
incongruence created between conflicting religious and homosexual identities, this does not mean that there are not potential drawbacks to the rejection of a religious identity. Other possible outcomes of rejection and abandonment of a religious identity may lead to a loss of “meaning and purpose,” bouts of depression, and low self-esteem as a result of religious views toward their homosexuality (Barton, 2010). For example, Rean and Savin-Williams (2005) found that adolescents who feel they must terminate their religious identity due to conflict with their homosexual identity suffered from poorer mental health.

**Rejection of Homosexual Identity**

Another option available to a person experiencing conflict and incongruence as a result of the conflict between their religious and homosexual identities can utilize to resolve this conflict is to reject their homosexual identity. One possible explanation for the rejection of a homosexual identity in favor of their religious identity is internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia involves applying to oneself a negative set of beliefs toward homosexuality that developed before the person identified as homosexual (Harris, 2001). Internalized anti-gay feelings may manifest themselves through low self-esteem, decreased acceptance of self, and through negative social beliefs about homosexuality (Harris, 2001). In some instances, the negative attitude individuals have toward their own sexuality may develop through their religious background (Sullivan-Blum, 2004). For example, internalized homophobia is apparent in Barton’s (2010) study on gays in the Bible-belt (Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, & West Virginia). His study revealed that approximately 50% of the participants in the study expressed long-term psychological distress developed in connection with the belief that being gay was not acceptable to society or God (2010).
The psychological distress discussed by Barton (2010) manifests in several ways. In addition to feelings of low self-acceptance as a result of internalizing homophobia, early experience adolescents engaged in denying their same-sex attractions, which translated into feelings of being alone and isolated from others (Dahl, 2011). Another study found that individuals who identified as both homosexual and religious did to not know how to cope with their homosexual identity (Ganzevort, van der Laan, & Olsman, 2011). As a result, participants chose to abstain from sexual activity and suffer from a loss of self, alienation from themselves and others, alienation from God, and feelings of guilt and shame (2011).

Coping though the denial of and abstinence from same-sex sexual activity was not limited to the above two studies. An earlier study conducted by Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, and Brooks (2009) found that half of their participants were deterred from engaging in a sexual relationship because of their faith. Much like the participants in the Ganzevort, et al. (2011) study, these individuals also experienced guilt and shame as a result of their attraction to someone of the same sex (2009).

**Compartmentalization**

The third option available to an individual who experiences conflict or incongruence between their religious and homosexual identities is for that person to compartmentalize these identities (Hogg and Smith, 2007). This means that an individual would keep their religious and homosexual identities separate. In their study of gay Catholic Latino men in Chicago and San Francisco, Garcia, et al. (2008) found that participants engaged in compartmentalization by hiding their gay identities while at church. These individuals go to religious services on a regular basis but are not out as gay at church (2008).
Compartmentalizing religious and homosexual identities may be a viable strategy for some individual, but this option is not without its potential drawbacks. One possible drawback includes the possibility of being outed at church by someone who knows the individual as gay from outside the church environment. The second drawback is that the converse could also be true. It could be the case where a person who identifies as homosexual is outed as religious to their friends. A person identified as religious could expose that person to labeling as a gay (rather than Black) “Uncle Tom” resulting in internalizing negative information (Shallenberger, 1996). Both of these drawbacks could possibly maintain the conflict and incongruence experienced by individuals with religious and homosexual identities rather than reducing it because neither identity is being resolved.

There is another aspect of compartmentalization for consideration. A person may hide their homosexual identity from others, but they cannot hide it from God. Lalich and McLaren (2010) addressed this in their study of gay and lesbian Jehovah’s Witnesses. The participants in their study revealed that regardless of how well they were able to manage and compartmentalize their religious and homosexual identities, they could not hide their “sinful” inner self (2010). In other words, these individuals could hide their homosexual identities from others but not from God. This reaction on the part of the participants could relate to internalized homophobia although the authors do not address any connection to internalized homophobia. Participants in this study did, however, face a loss of family and friends as a result of their homosexuality and some also suffered from suicidal ideation (2010).

Compartmentalization allows participants a way to deal with the conflict and resulting conflict and incongruence from their religious and homosexual identities. However, this way of
coping, much like the rejection of a religious identity or a homosexual identity may lead to an increase in conflict and incongruence rather than to its reduction.

**Identity Integration**

The fourth option available to individuals who experience conflict and incongruence as a result of the conflict between their religious identity and homosexual identity is to find a way to integrate these identities. The question is how do these individuals integrate these identities? What steps do they take? What is the process? How long does it take? These are the questions answered in the following sections.

**Cognitive work.** The literature on religious identity and homosexual identity conflict can not only be deconstructed to reflect how individuals cope with the conflict and incongruence from conflicting identities through either rejecting their religious identity, rejecting their homosexual identity, compartmentalization, or integrating religious and homosexual identities, but it can also be deconstructed to derive the methods individuals use to integrate those identities. Individuals who integrate their religious and homosexual identities do so through reframing work (Mahaffy, 1996; Yip, 1997; Pitt, 2010). A review of the literature on religious and homosexual identity conflict reveals four techniques used to reduce conflict and incongruence. This cognitive work includes techniques, such as Bible reinterpretation and questioning, monogamy and role assignment, questioning the morality of the messenger, and questioning the motives of the messenger.

**Biblical reinterpretation/questioning.** Bible reframing is the most utilized type of reframing tactic used to help integrate conflicting religious and homosexual identities found in the literature. Bible reframing includes ignoring Biblical passages that speak negatively of homosexuality and reinterpreting Biblical passages to reflect a gay-friendly message.
In her study of lesbian Christians, Mahaffey (1996) found that over half of her participants engaged in behaviors that resulted in a change in their beliefs rather than live with conflict and incongruence between their religious and homosexual identities. These behaviors included condemning sections of scripture that had a negative view of homosexuals (1996).

Pitt (2010), in his study on how religious black men neutralize anti-gay religious messaging, found participants engaging in Bible reframing. These individuals were able to deal with the negative message by arguing that those delivering the message with “flawed” knowledge of the Bible and of morality (2010). They placed additional criticism on those delivering the message for not focusing on Jesus’ teachings on unconditional love, but on the “legalistic” approach found in the Old Testament (2010).

Bible reframing was also apparent in Rotosky, Riggle, Brodnicki, and Olson’s (2008) study. In their study of religion and same-sex couples, they found that over 50 percent of the couple participants rejected religious teachings that condemned their relationships.

Next, Shallenberger’s (1996) study found that participants engaged in reframing by “translating” what was preached in church into something that was more agreeable and more in keeping with their views on homosexuality.

Walton (2008) found that participants in his study found the usage of “selective Bible literalism” to be an unsuitable method to interpret the Bible. Some of the participants engaged in reframing by looking at the story of David and Jonathan through a gay-positive lens (2008).

Finally, Yip’s (1999) study of 60 gay men found that they engaged in Bible reframing in several ways. First, the participants invalidated the Biblical passages that spoke negatively about homosexuality based on the Catholic Church misrepresenting the passages (1999). Second, his participants questioned the church’s failure to recognize their sexuality as created by God (1999).
Finally, the participants questioned the church’s ability to even speak on the matter given its own misdoings (1999).

In addition to Christian Biblical critique, gay North American Muslims and gay Traditional Jews also critiqued their respective scriptures for their negative homosexual messaging. For example, Minwalla, Simon Rosser, Feldman, and Varga (2005), in their study of identity and North American gay Muslims, found that their participants engaged in activity where they would question the concept that the Qur’an condemns homosexuality. The ability to question included drawing a distinction between what Allah actually told Mohammed and the human component of transcription of Allah’s words by Mohammed (2005). Also, Schnoor’s (2006) study of gay and Jewish identities found that traditional Jews engaged in reframing by reinterpreting scriptural passages.

Bible reframing shows that the participants in these studies took an active role in trying to make sense of their religious identities and homosexual identities. It also shows that they wanted to create an understanding of the Bible that helped them further their homosexual identity rather than diminishing it (Walton, 2008). Through reframing, they were able to create this understanding.

**Monogamy and role assignment.** Another reframing technique participants in the literature used to help them integrate or lessen the incongruence between their conflicting religious and homosexual identities was to engage in monogamous behaviors and assign traditional Biblical roles to their relationships. McQueeny’s study is an example participants engaging in both. In her study, McQueeney (2009) found that one way participants engaged in reframing was to normalize their homosexual identities through the invocation of Biblical concepts of manhood, motherhood, and monogamy. Participants engaged in monogamy by
adopting a butch/fem relationship based on models of incorporating the male in the leader/provider and the female in the mother/helper role (2009). According to McQueeney (2009), the adoption of these roles allowed them to define themselves as both monogamous and grounded within the male/female relationship norm. Gay men, on the other hand, adopt Biblical paradigms of the man as the head of the household (2009). Doing so allows black gay and bisexual men to normalize and assume headship roles in the home and as leaders in their churches (2009).

The adoption of motherhood as a Biblical identity varied between white and black lesbians. McQueeney (2009) notes that white lesbians would invoke Biblical family values as a good mother identity. Conversely, black lesbians, including those with children, did not use motherhood as a means to normalize themselves within Christianity (2009).

Other studies also detail the importance of monogamy and its relationship with God. For example, Sullivan-Blum’s (2004) study found that two participants in the study held that monogamous relationships are necessary for their sexual lives to be in line with God. Also, Yip (1997) found that 80.2% of participants held that they believed that fully expressing their same-sex love while in a relationship with another is compatible with the traditions of the Catholic Church.

Participants in these studies found engaging in monogamous relationships an integral aspect of living Christian lives as they try to integrate conflicting identities. Their belief in monogamy is so important that some created the necessary roles within their relationships to help them make sense of their relationships in relation to their religious views.

Morality. Questioning the morality of the messenger does not occur often with in the literature on religious and homosexual identity conflict. However, Yip’s (1997) study on gay
Catholics illustrates that it is present. Questioning the morality of the messenger is in essence questioning their authority to deliver the message. Yip (1997) found that participants in his study questioned the Catholic Church’s moral authority to portray homosexuality as it does. For example, they hold that the church lost this moral authority in its sanctioning and approval of slavery and other social institutions considered objectionable (1997). The lack of moral authority is compounded by what participants believe is a “credibility gap” between the church’s teachings on homosexuality and its actions toward homosexuals (1997). They hold that while the church’s stance on homosexuality is negative, the treatment received on the “grassroots level” is more supportive (1997).

**Motives.** Much like questioning the morality of the message deliverer, questioning the motives of the messenger does not receive much attention in the literature. However, participants in Pitt’s (2010) study did just that. Pitt (2010) found that participants believed that the motives behind the pastor delivering an anti-homosexual message was related to either the messages being used to placate certain members within the congregation, gain more pastoral popularity within the congregation, or create an increase in tithing (2010). Questioning the motives of the messenger allows one to argue that the pastors do not really mean what they say, but only use anti-homosexual messaging to further their own aspirations for either themselves or their church.

**Other.** The use of Bible reframing, monogamy and roles, questioning the morality of the messenger, and questioning the motives of the messenger encompass the vast majority of the actions the participants in the literature engage in to help themselves make sense of the conflict between their religious and homosexual identities. However, people may employ other techniques. For instance, Mahaffy (1996) noted that participants in her study would read literature about other gay Christians and seek out other gay Christians in order to inspire them. In
addition, Yip (1997) found that some participants in his study made the argument that God
created their sexuality and, in essence, made them who they are, and that others cannot dispute
their sexuality as a result.

Reframing allows for a vast array of possibilities for the integration of conflicting
religious and homosexual identities. Bible reframing allows for the ignoring and questioning of
Bible passages that speak negatively of homosexuality. Monogamy and role assignment allows
for gays and lesbians to live according to biblical teachings. Questioning the morality of the
messenger essentially asks the question of what gives others the right to judge when that
institution is no better. Finally, questioning the motives of the messenger calls into question as to
whether a church leader actually means what they say.

The framework provided by Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) offers different coping
strategies to explain how individuals experiencing conflict between their religious identity and
their homosexual identity a way to deal with the conflict or incongruence. The literature on
religious identity and homosexual identity conflict also presented numerous ways in which
individuals deal with the experienced conflict. However, since this research is focused on how
people who maintain both a Catholic identity and homosexual identity deal with this conflict, the
rejection of a homosexual or Catholic identity will most likely not be an available option to
reduce the conflict and incongruence for participants in this study. As such, I anticipate that
participants in this study will engage in behavior that allows them to compartmentalize their
identities or engage in behavior that allows them to integrate their homosexual and Catholic
identities. The following model I created illustrates how a person with a Catholic identity and
homosexual identity may reduce a sense of conflict and incongruence they experience as a result
of their sexual and religious identities.
Figure 1. Conceptual Model. I created this conceptual model following a review of the literature on persons with a gay or lesbian identity and a religious identity. The model depicts how I anticipated participants in this study to act in response to conflicting gay or lesbian and Catholic identities.

Prospective Contributions to the Literature

There are three main weaknesses in the reviewed literature. First, there are few Catholic only conflict and incongruence studies. The majority of religious identity and homosexual identity studies focus on urban areas, Christians in general, or center on a gay-affirming religious organization such as members of the Metropolitan Community Church. Additionally, the studies that do focus on Catholics seemingly do not focus on a particular diocese (Yip, 1997; Garcia, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez, 2008) or focus on their involvement with Dignity (Perkins, 2007) and are more urban focused in their design. Third, most studies of this phenomenon access urban dwelling individuals for their samples (Yip, 1997; Garcia, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez, 2008); people living in rural areas where populations may be more homogeneous may experience
feelings of conflict and incongruity more acutely. In addition, many studies focus solely on dissonance theory in relation to religious and sexual identity conflict and incongruence, whereas this study takes a broader approach that incorporates theories on self-concept, authenticity, identity theory, social identity theory, as well as dissonance theory.

**Research Questions**

Research Question One: How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?

I anticipate that persons will describe some negative feelings associated with being gay or lesbian and Catholic. They may feel angry or sad or some other negative feeling. I also anticipate that persons will note positives describing their experiences (Pitt, 2010).

Research Question Two: What are sources of both positive and negative experiences for gay and lesbian Catholics?

I anticipate that persons will discuss the Bible passages and Catholic Church statements made as negative experiences. In terms of positive experiences, I anticipate participants discussing their family and friends as instruments of support.

Research Question Three: How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflict contend with such conflicts between sexual and religious identities?

These questions are the main research questions for this study. I anticipate that the participants will engage in activities such as those mentioned earlier in this chapter. I do not anticipate them rejecting their gay/lesbian or Catholic identity since I designed the study for persons who maintain both a gay or lesbian identity and a Catholic identity simultaneously.
Summary

The literature in this chapter puts forth how a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity are developed and how they may come into conflict through the Catholic Church’s contemporary teachings on homosexuality. Theories on identity, social identity, self-concept, authenticity, and dissonance help explain the mechanics of how identities may come into conflict. Literature on how a conflict or incongruence between a religious identity and homosexual identity may be resolved illustrate the various ways persons may cope with a sense of conflict or incongruence. Lastly, I offered a conceptual model and research questions developed by utilizing the literature put forth in this chapter.

The next chapter details the methodology of this study for collecting and analyzing data that will allow me to explore the proposed research questions about experiences of persons with both a Catholic identity and a homosexual identity in a largely rural region, and whether and how they may experience and resolve any conflict or incongruence they may encounter as a result of these potentially conflicting identities.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Purpose and Objective of the Study

The literature on identity, social identity, cognitive dissonance, self-concept, and self-authenticity reviewed in Chapter Two suggests that individuals who hold both Catholic and homosexual identities may experience feelings of inner conflict, dissonance, contradiction, or inauthenticity. However, the vast majority of the studies that address homosexual and religious identity conflict use either a general sample of Christians or focusing on gay-affirming churches. Very few studies focus on only Catholic gays and lesbians. Further, few studies examine a largely rural sample. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore whether and how gay and lesbian Catholics in a predominantly rural region experienced conflict or incongruity from conflicting homosexual and Catholic identities, and how they may cope with or resolve those conflicts.

Research Design

This study is interested in capturing the lived experiences of rural, gay and lesbian Catholics and will approach the research from a constructivist perspective. This perspective is appropriate where the researcher seeks an understanding of the world of the participants (Cresswell, 2009). As such, the questions asked are open-ended so that the participants can discuss their experiences (2009). This approach also allow the researcher understand the context of the participants’ experiences through the data gathering process (2009). In addition, this study uses a phenomenological approach to examine how rural, gay and lesbian Catholics cope with the potential dissonance resulting from conflicting religious and homosexual identities. A phenomenological study focuses on individual experiences and how individuals make sense out
of those experiences (Patton, 2002). This type of approach led me to conduct in-depth interviews in order to see how gay and lesbian Catholics in a rural region make sense of their religious and homosexual identities and how they deal with the conflict created by those identities.

**Study Setting**

Participants from this study came from a largely rural geographical area (D’Augelli & Hart, 1987), roughly bounded by a single Catholic diocese is situated between two cities, one in the west and one in the east, which includes a number of colleges and universities, as well as some towns of various sizes, and mostly rural space. As a largely rural area, it is a devalued social space for gays and lesbians (Herring, 2010). I chose this area as a place of study because I could locate no studies on homosexual and religious identities that focus on rural areas as a study setting, and this region includes both a concentration of Catholics and a rural area.

I sought persons as participants who identify as gay or lesbian and Catholic for in-depth interviews from the eight counties that comprise this region. I did reach beyond this geographical area through the use of social media to seek interviews with gay or lesbian Catholics in rural areas, but maintained the rural focus. I interviewed 18 individuals to explore their experiences and whether and how they deal with any conflict or incongruence created between seemingly conflicting gay or lesbian and Catholic identities.

**Sampling Strategy**

The target population for this study was persons who identify as gay or lesbian Catholics in the rural area under study. In order to obtain this sample, I used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is appropriate for qualitative studies. The strength of purposeful sampling is the ability to select participants that are rich information cases (Patton, 2002). Information rich cases for this study are those that provide the best information relating to the experience of
holding both Catholic and homosexual identities. The only age qualification was for participants to be over 18 years of age.

There were several approaches that I used to develop the sample for this study. Below is an outline of where and how I sought persons for this study. First, I attempted to place announcements in the Catholic Church bulletins in the study area; however, only two churches ran an announcement and no individuals responded to requests to participate via this method.

Second, in addition to soliciting participants through announcements in the bulletins of the churches, I placed announcements inviting participants for this study with LGBT student organizations at colleges and universities in the region.

The third, and main, approach I used to recruit participants for this study was snowball sampling. This sampling technique focuses on asking people who may know individuals in the population of interest for referrals to them in order to find participants for the study. Questions I asked of individuals to locate information rich cases included: “Who should I talk to?” and “Who knows a lot about this?” (Patton, 2002, p.237). I asked these questions of both study participants and non-participants. I found the majority of my participants for this study this way. After interviews, I asked participants if they knew of anyone who may fit the criteria for this study, and if they did, to forward my contact information to them.

Fourth, I attempted to find participants for this study by placing an advertisement in the local newspaper. A copy of the announcement placed in church bulletins, newspapers, and newsletters are in Appendix A.

I also posted invitations to participate in this study on social media via networking. I created a Facebook profile for the study and linked it with a Qualtrics website to allow potential
participants to view the purpose of the study and to provide their contact information. A copy of the Qualtrics website and Facebook page are included as Appendices B and C respectively.

Altogether, I received permission to recruit research participants at several locations. These included the bulletins of two Catholic Churches, an announcement at one student organization, a large local gay and lesbian online site, and other college institutions. In addition, I received permission to advertise for participants at a local community college.

I contacted persons who expressed an interest in participating in this study and who signed the informed consent form. I scheduled the interviews as participants became available so that I could network and snowball sample other participants through them. I conducted the interviews in two ways. First, if an interviewee wanted to meet in person, we agreed to meet in a safe and quiet public place, such as a restaurant or college cafeteria. If the person wanted interviewed by telephone, we did the interview by telephone. All interviews were audio recorded and each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. At the end of each interview I asked the participants to please contact me if there was anything that later came to mind concerning the questions I asked. A few participants did follow up, and I included the information they shared in their correspondence with me as part of the interview data.

The semi-structured interview guide contained questions that I constructed to address the following research questions:

Research Question One: How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?

Research Question Two: What are sources of both positive and negative experiences for gay and lesbian Catholics?
Research Question Three: How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflict contend with such conflicts between sexual and religious identities?

I developed the questions to ascertain what it means to be homosexual and Catholic. These questions included, but were not limited to:

1) Tell me about your experiences as a gay/lesbian Catholic? What has that been like for you?
2) What are some things you’ve experienced that have made being a gay/lesbian Catholic easier or that you’ve felt supported by?
3) What are some things that you’ve experienced that have made being a gay/lesbian Catholic challenging or difficult?
4) When you think about where the Catholic Church stands on homosexuality, how do you make sense of being a gay/lesbian Catholic? How do you cope with that?

Probes and follow ups when warranted by the conversation augmented questions. A complete list of the interview questions are in Appendix D.

Data Collection

The interviews for this study took place following the acceptance of a proposal by both my committee and approval of my human subjects protocol by the university’s IRB. The IRB approval letter is in Appendix E. I recorded the interview via a digital recorder and I took handwritten notes during the interviews. I transcribed the interviews utilizing transcription software. I removed names and any identifying information from my notes and transcripts to preserve the confidentiality of the participants.
Data Analysis

I analyzed the transcribed interview data using the following process.

Step One: Bracket prior knowledge. According to Richards and Morse (2007) bracketing prior knowledge on the subject being studied allows the researcher to explain what is being studied as it was experienced by the researcher. They state that the researcher should set aside any prior information pertaining to the subject, including any theories, knowledge, and encounters with the subject (2007). What I bracketed were the resolution strategies found in the literature for persons with conflicting homosexual and Christian identities and my own personal experiences of being Catholic, which mirrored the participants’ experiences in many ways, such as attending Catholic elementary school and high school, being an altar server when I was younger, and being a lector and Eucharistic Minister. Bracketing this information allowed me to view my research participants’ experiences in a relatively unfiltered perspective.

Step Two: Read through the data. I read and re-read the transcripts, and checked them against the audio recordings for correctness once transcribed. I also contacted the participants to review a summary of their interview. Analysis began once all interviews were completed, transcribed, and reviewed.

Step Three: Code and develop themes. I developed codes through a two-cycle process. In the first cycle, I developed codes using an initial coding process. Initial coding allows the researcher to be “open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by your reading of the data” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 46). This is particularly important since this study makes use of several different theoretical approaches. Initial coding allowed for the separation of data into individual components for examination and comparison by the researcher (Saldana, 2013).
Once I coded the transcripts using an initial coding approach, I re-coded the data during the second cycle phase of the coding process using a focused coding approach. This particular coding approach uses codes that are more “directed, selective, and conceptual” (Charmaz, 2006, p.57). In addition, this approach distills initial codes down to those that are frequent, important, and which make the most “sense” for the data (Charmaz, 2006). Charmaz also notes that the shift to focused coding is not always a linear process. Rather it is one that requires going back to earlier data and initial codes, and being active in the process of reading over those data (Charmaz, 2006). During the coding process, I followed the two cycle approach but went back to the data numerous times to reanalyze and recode when necessary. I coded the interviews and stored them in NVivo software.

Step Four: Data interpretation. I interpreted the data using the codes developed in the initial and focused coding processes. I did not conduct a member check for two reasons. First, the majority of participants declined the option for additional review and informed me they were comfortable with what they told me during their interviews. Because of this response, I spent additional time in the post-interview phone conversations going over their responses and the meaning of those answers, and capturing their responses in my notes. Second, over 12 months passed from their interviews to when I interpreted the data to allow for an accurate recollection of the interviews by the participants.

Process Outline

This outline sets forth the order in which I conducted this study after its approval.

1) Contact potential participants, provide information, and obtain informed consent.
2) Schedule interviews.
3) Conduct interviews.
4) Transcribe the interviews. (Note: steps 4, 5, and 6 overlapped as I interviewed new participants.)

5) Write up bullet point summary of transcripts and review with interviewees.

6) Bracket pre-existing knowledge and personal experiences.

7) Review transcripts and notes:
   a. initial and focused coding of data,
   b. theming data,
   c. re-coding data, and
   d. re-theming data.

8) Write-up the findings section.

9) Write-up the analysis section.

   **Ethical Considerations**

   There were ethical considerations to be mindful of in conducting this study. The primary concern was maintaining the confidentiality of participants. This was done out of respect for their privacy, whether or not they were out or not out as gay or lesbian or Catholic. In order to protect their identities, the names provided in this summary and used throughout the rest of this document are not the real names of the participants. I based the names on World War I leaders, family members, and other figures. There is no connection of any kind between a participant’s real name and the name given them in this study. I also excluded names of churches. The final step I took to protect the identities of the participants, people, and places they mentioned, and their churches, was to transcribe the interviews myself.
Summary

This study used a qualitative research design, individual, open-ended interviews, and a phenomenological approach to study how gay and lesbian Catholics in a rural region area might cope with conflicting religious and sexual identities. Recruitment of participants for this study included the use of announcements in church bulletins, at colleges and universities, newspapers, and primarily through snowball sampling. The in-depth interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, reviewed, and the data analyzed and coded.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Over the course of 15 months, between June 2016 and September 2017, I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with individuals who identified as Catholic and gay or lesbian. I asked the participants questions about these identities with a particular focus on how they make sense of these identities in light of potential conflicts between them. I present the findings relative to these questions in the following pages according to research question. Please see Appendix F for a summary of each participant.

Research Question One

*How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?*

The following themes of rural spaces, Catholic upbringing, vocations, coming out, and meaning reflect patterns of experiences of the participants as they negotiated their lives as gay and lesbian Catholics. In order to keep this question separate from that of the second research question that seeks positive and negative experiences, the answer to how participants describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic will follow a timeline narrative that includes these themes and what it means to them to be Catholic in rural and small town spaces.

Rural Spaces

The vast majority of the participants in this study reside in either small rural communities or outside of urban centers. Within these spaces, the participants, as gay and lesbian individuals, are more likely to be visible to those around them (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). Several of the participants spoke of the negative treatment or concern they encountered where they live because of this visibility. For example, Vicki, a 50-something who resides in the same small town she grew up in, recalls the bullying she experienced in school.
Vicki: I had a girlfriend in school. And we were teased and tormented terribly to the point where I quit school. And then I went back and it happened again, so I quit again. I quit school twice.

George, a 79 year old former bar and club owner, on the other hand recalls a different type of experience in his working class Irish Catholic neighborhood.

George: I grew up in a rough neighborhood. I have three brothers and a sister. I was part of the neighborhood even though I hung out with a lot of the girls at the time. I was a sissy growing up. I played a little bit of softball with them, and I was never good, but the guys, the kids in the neighborhood accepted me for who I was. I wasn’t ridiculed or anything. And I think a lot of that had to do with my brothers. A part of a family. A part of the neighborhood. So I had an easy time growing up that way. I was very fortunate.

William, a 41 year old gay rights activist in his local community, provides a less personal account to reflect his experiences than Vicki and George. Rather than focusing on the individual, William notes how the gay community experienced hatred and violence in his town.

William: They made human walls with people linking their arms to stop us from walking in the doors of certain events. Just last year they protested our prom. We were on the evening news and the front page of our paper because they claim we were all strippers giving booze to children and were all a bunch of sodomites.

We have local hate groups. We had a gay bar in 1997 that was shut down. Reverend (name redacted) and his followers, you had all of his church people. They shot bullet holes through the door of the bar and they shut it down after a six month siege.

Another issue gay and lesbian persons can have in rural spaces due to the interconnectedness of these spaces is how this interconnectedness can affect other areas of the
lives of gay and lesbian persons (Movement Advancement Project, 2019). While the participants in this study do not discuss how this affected them directly, Anne, a 20 year old pursuing a career in the restaurant business, expressed concern about coming out and how it may impact her family because of the conservative community she resides in.

Anne: I don’t want to shame my family. Especially in the community we’re in. It’s a pretty conservative community.

Outside of these very troubling instances, however, the participants did not relate much difficulty based on where they lived. They are able to live, work, and practice their faith without incident because they either have support or they keep their sexual orientation hidden, which is consistent with the findings of Wienke and Hill (2013) and that “rural living is incompatible with the needs and wants of gay men and lesbians” (2013, p. 1274)

**Catholic Upbringing**

To elicit responses about their Catholic experiences, during the interviews, I asked the participants about their experiences growing up Catholic. In their responses the participants discussed how they were altar servers, lectors, choir singers, volunteers, Eucharistic ministers, and a sacristan. They attended mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation with their families. A few of them either wanted or believed they had a calling to religious life in service to God and the Catholic Church. As they grew older, many of them also attended either Catholic grade school, Catholic high school, and/or Catholic college or university. Overall, the participants in this study had a fairly typical Catholic upbringing.

**Schooling.** As part of their Catholic upbringing, many participants attended some form of Catholic school during their lives. Two participants attended Catholic elementary school. Four (4) of the participants attended Catholic elementary school and Catholic high school. One (1)
participant attended Catholic elementary school, Catholic high school, and a Catholic college. Finally, two participants attended only a Catholic college. The participants did not discuss their gay or lesbian experiences while in Catholic elementary school or high school except to the extent that many discovered their same-sex attractions at this point or came out during this time in their lives. The few who attended Catholic college discussed their experiences to some degree. For example, Mary did not out herself out to others as a lesbian during her time in college. She explained how when someone was identified as gay, they faced judgment from administrators.

Mary: I went to a Catholic university, and it was very clear with the older adults, administration, priests, president, whoever of that university that whenever we got into a situation where someone was identified as homosexual, that there was judgment placed on their choice or their life. They called it a choice. I’m not sure I would use that word because I don’t believe that people choose. I don’t believe that.

In addition to fear of judgment, she was also not sure being gay wasn’t wrong at this point in her life, which also informed her decision not to come out in that space.

Mary: I played sports. When you’re a female and you play sports you are going to encounter other females that identify as gay. And for me it wasn’t-shouldn’t say that. At the time it was a big deal. I was accepting but I still felt very conflicted that it was wrong. And so, I mean I certainly got along with everyone who identified as gay, but I didn’t put myself out there to befriend them to the point of hanging out and doing things socially.

In contrast to the experiences of Mary at a Catholic college, Josie, who is almost 30 years younger than Mary, had a much different experience. Instead of facing judgment, she received support from the religious director at the school.
Josie: I would say once again my campus minister at (college removed), a Sister of Charity. She did at one point shortly after this most recent election—she and I sat down and talked and she expressed how she is supportive of me and disagrees with the church in her own way. Obviously there’s not much she can do bound by religious order, but she offered herself up as a means of support and told me about how there are a lot of people in religious orders who are supportive of their LGBT friends, family, brothers, sisters.

Ironically, Josie attended the same Catholic college as Mary and found a much different experience 30 years later.

**Participation.** As part of their Catholic upbringing, some of the participants volunteered their time at their church by being an altar server, lector, Eucharistic minister, peer ministry, an instructor of religious education. Nine of the participants were altar servers in their youth. One participant volunteered for the peer ministry program in her church. Four participants are or were lectors in their local church. Two of the participants are Eucharistic ministers. Lastly, one participant volunteers as a religious education instructor. The majority of the participants who volunteered their time at their church did not report any issues between their Catholic identity and their gay or lesbian identity except for two (2) participants. Gavin recounted a time in the early 2000s where, as a religious education instructor, he and other instructors of religious education at the church were receiving training on suicide and the trainer assumed that all the participants were heterosexual and that there were no gay or lesbian persons in their church or schools.

Gavin: The presenter was discussing suicide, and consider the fact that I knew no one else would bring it up, I brought up the topic of homosexuality and how that effects a
student when they’re debating on suicide based upon this. And she brushed off the entire conversation and just moved on to a different topic.

This angered Gavin greatly and he lashed out at the trainer.

Gavin: And basically the presenter was like I don’t understand, we would never have that issue here in “Blue Town.” We would never have this issue in our schools because that’s not something that we deal with. And I looked at her and said, “are you flipping kidding me?”

He then informed the trainer that he was a gay man and that he was not the only one in the church who identifies as gay. He then proceeded to leave the training before returning after he composed himself.

In order to help illustrate the upbringing of the average Catholic and the participants in this study, Table One below outlines the typical Sacramental life course a person would follow as a member of the Catholic Church. The table includes the age a person must attain in order to receive a particular Sacrament. The Sacraments serve as formational milestones in the lives of Catholics and are required if a person wants to participate as an altar server, lector, and/or Eucharistic minister. Each participant in this study received the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation at some point in their Catholic upbringing.
Table 1

*Catholic Life Course Timeline*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sacrament</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baptism</td>
<td>Removes Original Sin.</td>
<td>Received after birth around three months of age. All participants received this Sacrament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eucharist</td>
<td>Final initiation step into the Catholic Church.</td>
<td>Received around the age of 7 or 8. Children can become an altar server after receiving this Sacrament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>Commonly known as Confession. Sins are confessed to a priest for forgiveness from God.</td>
<td>Received around the age of 7 or 8.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmation</td>
<td>Connects the individual more closely to God and the church.</td>
<td>Received between age 13 and 17. This Sacrament is needed to be a Eucharistic Minister and to become a lector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matrimony</td>
<td>Unites a man and a woman in Marriage through the church. Procreation is only to occur here.</td>
<td>Cannot be received by same-sex couples in the Catholic Church.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Orders</td>
<td>Allows for the continuation of Christ’s mission given to his apostles.</td>
<td>Received by those who want to enter into religious live within the Catholic Church. Several Participants considered entering religious life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anointing of the Sick</td>
<td>Requests the grace of God to forgive sin for entrance into his Kingdom.</td>
<td>Received when ill or in old age and death approaches.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* I created this table utilizing the Catechism of the Catholic Church, and it depicts the Sacraments of the Catholic Church and when a Catholic receives them.

Each participant except for Doug, a 25 year old convert to Catholicism, received the Sacraments of Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Confirmation at the times suggested. Doug converted to Catholicism in his early 20s, and followed the Sacramental path set forth through the Rite of
Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA). After the completion of the program, Doug explained that he received the first four Sacraments at an Easter Vigil Mass.

The participants in this study did not receive the following Sacraments: Matrimony, Holy Orders, or the Anointing of the Sick. The reason for not receiving the Sacrament of Matrimony is that the Catholic Church will not marry same-sex couples. This, however, does not prevent them from being married civilly outside of the Catholic Church. The participants also did not receive the Anointing of the Sick because they had never been seriously ill or in a situation to receive it. Several participants did, however, considered a religious life through Holy Orders.

**Vocations**

As mentioned above, several of the participants in this study considered entering into a religious life either as a priest or as a nun through the Sacrament of Holy Orders. George and Vicki entertained the idea of entering the religious life because they believed they had a calling because of their same-sex attractions which, at the time of their discovery, would not permit them to get married.

George: When I was young, I thought I wanted to be a priest. When I got older I realized I was gay. I just gave up on that.

Vicki also thought she had a calling to be a nun because she did not understand what gay was at the time.

Vicki: They didn’t realize back then that we were born this way. Well, when I was younger, I knew I was gay, but I just didn’t understand what it was. So, I was going into the convent, after a while, after I was accepted and everything, I realized that I was gay. I was something, and it wasn’t that I had a calling.
Once they realized they were gay, neither George nor Vicki pursued a religious life. Nick, however, continued to pursue a religious life even after he discovered his same-sex attractions, believing that if he gave himself to God, his same-sex attractions would stop. When they did not, he left the seminary.

Nick: Out of high school I went to the seminary. I went to “Blue monastery” in “Blue Town.” My excuse to other people for quitting was, “I think I’m too immature and I’ll probably go back when I grow up a little bit more,” but my reasoning to myself was my attraction never ceased.

Doug is currently contemplating a possible religious calling to the priesthood.

**Coming Out**

At some point during their Catholic upbringing, the majority of the participants, 17 of 18, either discovered their same-sex feelings or came out during this time. The coming out process was a significant milestone for the majority of the participants in this study and at times conflicted with their Catholic identity. In order to get an understanding of how the participants experienced this process, I asked them open ended questions to detail this process. The responses to those questions varied, but also reflected similar feelings and experiences, which the participants had in common during their coming out process. While the stories of the participants varied, in general, they had concerns about how their families would react.

Vicki: My family was Roman Catholic. They were rather strict, you know, and being gay just wasn’t—it was not something you do.

In my teens. Just my friends were gay, I wasn’t. That’s how my family looked at it. I just ran around with a bunch of gay people.
As a result of her parents’ concern over her sexuality, in 1976, her parents took her to see a psychiatrist because she had a girlfriend.

Vicki: They sent me to a psychiatrist actually because I had a girlfriend. Actually it was like 9th grade I had a girlfriend. They didn’t understand, so they thought there was something wrong with me. And the psychiatrist said that no, I was perfectly normal.

When Doug came out to his family, his mother was also in denial and refused to accept it.

Doug: It’s a subject we don’t really talk about, but my mother tends to make a big issue out of it a lot. So, it’s caused quite a rocky relationship since I came out.

Similarly, when William came out to his family the response he received was very negative. His devout Catholic Italian family reacted with denial, and his father did not talk to him for several years.

William: My family was, “oh, my god, how could you be gay?” My father was in complete denial over it and did not talk to me for seven years. My grandmother, who recently died, was proud of my accomplishments, but could not vocalize the words. She has sisters who she never told.

Due to the fear of this type of a response from their loved ones, some participants are not out to their parents while some waited decades to tell them.

Even though some of the participants struggled with coming out to their parents for fear of their response, they also struggled with the fact that they were hiding part of themselves from others and misrepresenting themselves because they were not being truthful to their families or themselves.

Josie: It was a lot of emotional buildup so to speak because I wasn’t out and was only out to myself, it was very much a lie of omission that I felt. Even though it’s not essential that
everyone know my sexuality, it’s not something all people need to know, but at least for those that I’m close with, it was a sense of this is a very key part of who I am that I’m not telling you, so it feels like I’m lying to you on a daily basis.

Mary also struggled with not telling people she was gay. Much like Josie, Mary felt that she needed to live a life truthful to herself and others.

Mary: I was deep in the closet. As I’ve gotten older and more established in my relationship and things, I just had to have conversations with myself with living an authentic life and trying to make sure I wasn’t being deceitful with people. And I decided at certain points that lying by omission is still lying. And so, I had certain conversations with my immediate family.

Anne’s experience is quite different in that she is not out to her parents due to the community in which they live. While Josie and Mary can live authentic lives, Anne feels greatly stressed because she is not out to her parents. When she would go to church, she would fight with her parents and then go sit in the bathroom during mass. Since she is not out, she feels constrained to defend herself from anti-gay comments, such as homosexuality’s inclusion as a sin, because she is concerned that she may out herself.

Anne: Everyone’s so nice but then they talk so much about it being a sin and its wrong, and all this stuff, and it makes me so uncomfortable. And I feel like I’m an imposter.

Al is in a similar situation to Anne. He is not out to his parents, and he also feels that he is not being truthful about his sexuality. However, rather than feeling untruthful to those around him, Al felt untruthful to God.
AI: I felt like I was lying to God when I was an altar server because I was like, how can I be serving God, how can I be doing him a service when I can’t even resolve the issue that was going inside of me?

AI grew up in a traditional Mexican Catholic home and spent time volunteering as an altar server and doing other tasks in his church. When he discovered his same-sex feelings, AI struggled with them because he understood them to be a sin, and wondered how he could serve God if he could not resolve his same-sex feelings. At first, he interpreted these feelings as a test from God to see how good of a Catholic he was. After a while, however, he became frustrated with God to the point of anger and walking away from the church because God did not help him.

The choice of the participants to come out to their parents is one fraught with concerns ranging from acceptance to removal from their homes. However, the desire to be authentic to themselves and others is just as important to the participants. Part of being authentic for the participants also includes whether or not to continue practicing their Catholic faith. Erickson (1995) argues that marginalized groups may experience difficulty in their attempt to act in an authentic fashion. In the current study, several participants experienced difficulty in being authentic to themselves while they were hiding their sexual identity from their parents. Mary, Josie, Al, and Anne are among those who struggle or struggled with the feeling that they are hiding or lying about a part of themselves. Some of them reconciled their inauthenticity by coming out to their parents. Others still struggle with it. The feelings the participants experienced about being inauthentic also points to a need by the participants to have a positive self-concept. Because the participants feel that they are good persons, and by engaging in an action whereby they hid their sexual orientation from those close to them, they were acting in a way that was
both inauthentic to who they believed themselves to be and contrary to their subjective self as good persons.

Although each person in this study maintains a Catholic identity, not all maintained their church practice. Table Two below depicts the name, age, and current Catholic practice of each participants. Currently, seven of the 18 participants attend church on a regular basis. Seven additional participants attend church occasionally and on holy days. The remaining four participants no longer attend church. The participants between the ages of 18 and 40 maintained a more constant church attendance practice than their older counterparts.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Current Catholic Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Christmas and Easter Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rey</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenny</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Occasionally, off and on</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Christmas and Easter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josie</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicki</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Occasionally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gavin</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>50s</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table depicts the name, age, and Catholic practice of the participants. I created it utilizing interview data.

The Meaning of Being Catholic

Throughout the interviews the participants alluded to and commented on what it means to be Catholic. The answers they provided go beyond just going to mass and adherence to Catholic
dogma and doctrine. Instead, the participants focused on trying to do what is right in their day-to-day interactions. Some of the participants no longer practice their faith by going to mass and now consider themselves as more spiritual than religious, but that does not mean they gave up on what their religious upbringing taught them. As mentioned before, George tries to live as good of a life as he can while Nick holds that he is a better Catholic now than he ever was when he was practicing. Fred views his faith as something that brings him comfort. Doug tries to apply Catholic teachings to how he lives his life and the relationships he enters. Rey is not sure she has everything figured out concerning her sexuality and religious identity being in her early 20s, but her faith remains unchanged. Anne experiences stress. William does not feel welcomed. Vicki is nostalgic because her faith reminds her of good family times, even though there were some bad times, now that everyone is gone. For Mary, it is part of who she is, much like her ethnicity. Several participants are actively out and participate in the church as Eucharistic ministers and lectors. Some bring their significant others to mass. Even those who do not practice their faith engage in some of the rituals around Lent and Easter. Perhaps Victor best captures the spirit of the participants in how he views what it means to be Catholic.

Victor: Is being Catholic just going to church on Sunday? I don’t think that’s what it’s about. So to me, it’s a way of life. So when you’re out and about, aren’t we always looking at what’s going on around us and making a decision about what we do and what informs us to what’s important and what’s not important? How do we decide what we should and shouldn’t do? Some things are simple and others are more complicated. So to me, part of being Catholic is applying what we’ve learned, or what I’ve learned, to growing up in a Catholic family and going to Catholic school to how I live my life. And to me, that’s what being a Catholic.
The Catholic upbringing of the participants in this study follows a traditional approach experienced by almost all Catholics. They attended Catholic elementary schools, high schools, and colleges. They were altar servers, Eucharistic ministers, lectors, and even taught religious education in spite of living in rural or small town spaces and experiencing difficulties in those places because of their sexual orientation. Still, not all of them maintained their Catholic practice even though they maintained their Catholic identity. While the deep rooted socialization of the participants plays a role, other reasons why they maintain their Catholic identity, sometimes despite not maintaining their practice, appears in the themes and experiences that reflect the cognitive work done by the participants in response to research questions two and three respectively.

Research Question Two

What are sources of both positive and negative experiences for gay and lesbian Catholics?

The participants in this study had a wide variety of positive and negative experiences in relation to the intersection of their Catholic and gay or lesbian identities. The themes in the data reflect this range. Broadly, the themes conceptually represent the discomfort the participants felt, such as feeling accused, sinful, needing to hide their sexual identity, lost expectations, and the lack of family support. However, some participants reported a strong sense of support from those around them, which helps them understand that their religious and sexual identities are not incompatible.

Negative Experiences

The following themes illustrate the negative experiences of the participants as they relate to their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. These themes include feeling accused, sinful, the need to hide their sexual identity, lost expectations, and the lack of family support.
**Feeling accused.** Several participants mentioned accusations of pedophilia against gay men by Catholic authorities and society in general as something they need to deal with as a result of their Catholic identity. While they do not face accusation of, or engaged in any type of criminal behavior relative to pedophilia, they are aware that the conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia. William, Victor, and Gavin each brought up the conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia as weaponized by the church to scapegoat the horrific sexual abuse crimes the leaders of the Catholic Church allowed to flourish for decades, including against one of the participants.

William: You can be straight and no one is going to accuse you of being a pedophile or a molester or anything else. You’re allowed just to be straight.

Gavin: If you look back in the priest sex scandal, most of them are straight men. It had nothing to do with the topic, but society’s now edged it into that must be the reason, so now you get kind of stuck in the dogma of getting that little classification sometimes.

Victor is the most adamant in his response to these accusations and sees it as nothing more than trying to shift the blame.

Victor: Their confusion or their attempt at regaining morality or moral authority by connecting homosexuality with pedophilia is intellectually dishonest again and just another way to make it seem what you’re doing is a sin cause they lump the two together.

Some of the participants also commented on how former Pope Benedict would engage in this type of scapegoating to shift the blame of sexual abuse within the Catholic Church and the harm it did to them. Pope Benedict was the head of the Catholic Church from 2005 until his resignation in 2013. He was Pope during the height of the church sex scandal in the 2000s. The statements he made concerning his belief of the cause of the scandal caused much hurt for some of the participants.
Eric: The watershed point in my life, and a lot other people’s lives was when Joseph Ratzinger was elected Pope. And really what happened more than anything else was that moment where he came out-around that time was the child sex scandal, and his response, the Pope’s response more than anything else was to say it’s the gay’s problem. It’s because you allow these people to be in your midst. And I think everyone had an awful reaction to that. That was very hurtful. That really changed my practice.

The participants also recalled other statements of Pope Benedict that considered harmful to the LGBT community.

Ellen: I remember back when Pope Benedict was pope. I think I read a speech that he had given where he either claimed that the LGBT community was the number one threat to Catholicism or clumped in with a group of other things threatening Catholicism. That made me feel very alienated.

The scapegoating done by former Pope Benedict did change Eric’s practice in that he does not attend church as much as he used to. The alienation that Ellen felt, however, caused her to seek out others like her which resulted in her finding a local Dignity organization.

Hide. Several participants discussed how their sexual identity interacted with Catholic identity in such a way as to cause them to hide their sexual identity. Many of them understood their same-sex attractions to be sinful in the eyes of the Catholic Church, as well as socially unacceptable by their communities. Nick was a devout Catholic in his youth. He attended Catholic school and was an altar server at his local church. When he realized his same-sex attractions, he felt as though he needed to hide this part of himself from others.

Nick: So then I became a chameleon when I realized that what I was doing was socially unacceptable, aside from the fact that I considered it sinful. So, once I realized that it
wasn’t every boy’s dream, or whatever you want to call it, I just tried to meld into the woodwork, you know.

Anne’s experience is not much different. Her family is a devout Catholic family that regularly attends Catholic masses on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation. She is out to her friends and siblings, but she is not out to her parents. The fact that she is not out to them, coupled with the fact that they made her attend mass, created a very stressful situation for Anne. She wants to tell them, but she also does not want to create shame for her family in their community. As a result, Anne hides who she is out of fear and concern for her family.

Anne: People won’t know that I am gay, but they’ll be like, “you know the Bible said it’s wrong,” and I argue with them but I can’t really be out and be like-try to explain to them. They’re like, “why are you so interested in this? Why are you defending this so much?” I want to explain things to people and I want to be like, “this is my view. You know me and you know I’m not like this.” But that would kind of out myself so I just keep my mouth shut.

Eric’s situation varies from that of Nick and Anne concerning the way he experienced the conflict between his gay identity and his Catholic identity. He initially found support from his local priest, but when the local Diocese reassigned that priest to another parish and a new priest arrived, Eric found the new priest to be “less reasonable.” When the issue of homosexuality would come up, Eric struggled with being able to be himself and be just like everyone else.

Eric: You don’t want to cause a ruckus. You don’t want to be the focal point. You just want to exist. You want to chill out. And then when this comes up you suddenly feel like you can’t be that regular person.
Not all the participants in this study hid their gay or lesbian identity as a result of their Catholic faith; however, those who did hide their gay or lesbian identity were not able to fully be themselves and receive support for their gay or lesbian identity.

**Sinful.** The theme of feeling sinful shares a link with the need to hide a gay or lesbian identity from others. Not all participants feel that their same-sex orientation is sinful. In fact, the majority do not consider it sinful at all. These individuals are much younger than those who feel that it is a sin. In the previous section on Catholic Upbringing, Nick and Mary mention believing that their same-sex attractions were sinful and necessitated them to hide as a result. George is very close in age to Nick and maintained a similar outlook on his same-sex attractions.

George: That was only teaching I knew. And at the same time I thought I was going to hell. And, you know, if I didn’t turn straight I’d go to hell, and I knew I wasn’t going to turn straight. For all those years, I figured I was going to hell.

Likewise, Vicki grew up believing that her same-sex attractions to other women was sinful and something she needed to confess to a priest. Even as a 56 year old adult in a happy and committed relationship with another woman, Vicki continues to feel that she needs to confess that she is a lesbian.

Vicki: I was just taught in the Bible that it was wrong. We were going to go to hell. Plain and simple. We were going to hell for being gay. And I still struggle with that actually.

Not all participants share the view that their same-sex attractions are sinful. Rey is an out 20 year old college student who is not sure that being a lesbian is a sin. She acknowledges the teaching, but she never heard it discussed as such in the church by a person of authority, such as a priest.

Rey: I still haven’t decided for myself if engaging in homosexuality is a sin or not. I mean we’re taught that, but experiencing it is a little different.
I’ve never heard it discussed as it being sinful by a priest. I’ve never heard any of those arguments brought up in front of me where I have heard things against greed and other sins such as that. So, I think that’s why I have such a problem with it because I’ve never been directly told or at least saw a human influence, a priest or something, telling me it was wrong. It was just this underlying idea, word of mouth by everyone else.

**Lost expectations.** The inability to meet the expectations of family by maintaining a heterosexual identity is a source of disappointment for some of the participants. For example, William is not married with kids as his family expected of him through his upbringing.

William: I’m not in my 30s and married with 5 kids. I’m not that Italian Catholic. Always a big push growing up that you get married in the church. Have a family. Have lots of kids. It was that drive on procreation. Following the church rules. That’s not who I am. I can’t be. I’m gay.

Al is in a similar situation by not being able to meet family expectations. For him, there is significant pressure to be masculine, and by being the first born male in his family, to carry on the family name and legacy. However, he feels that he cannot do this because he is gay.

Al: It is with being of Mexican descent, you know, it is considered the machismo, being the man, being masculine, being this. And me being the first born, they put a lot of pressure that I had to continue with that thought of what my subculture wanted from me and what my parents wanted for me being the first born.

Eric also feels the pressure to meet expectations, but unlike William and Al, the pressure comes from the Catholic and gay community rather than from his family. The pressure he experiences is from the push to choose one identity or the other, rather than both.
Eric: I didn’t want my identity taken away from me. It’s an uncomfortable thing that you have this identity and here you have these people saying we’re going to take your identity away from you, and then you have other people saying you must be self-hating to maintain the identity. This is part of who I am. I can try to do other things, but it’s still going to always be a part of me.

**Family (lack of support).** Overall, however, the majority of participants had a supportive family when they came out and experienced understanding and compassion; however, some participants were not as fortunate in the responses they received when they came out. The quotes by William and Vicki in the coming out section demonstrate this. William expressly commented on how his father did not talk to him for years after coming out. Vicki’s parents took her to a psychiatrist when she began showing interest in girls. Maria’s family and mother ostracized her when she came out in the 1990s, and she did not receive acceptance from her mother until after she died and a letter read on her mother’s behalf at her funeral.

Maria: My mother actually broke from tradition and stated in her letter at her funeral that she wanted people to accept gay people. She had 9 children. She pleaded with us to support each other no matter what. She said even if it’s mental illness, divorce, homosexuality. She said please support each other. Now that was totally radical for my mother, and it demonstrated how much she had grown from when I first came out and she rejected me.

Other participants held off telling their parents that they were gay out of concern for the response. As mentioned before, Anne is not out to her parents. Her reasoning for this is that she lives in a socially and politically conservative area and does not want to embarrass them, even though not telling them causes her great distress. Similarly, Al did not tell his parents because he
does not want to disappoint them based on their expectations of him. When dealing with their families, the participants had to balance not only what could happen to them, but also what it would mean to their parents if they were gay.

**Positive Experiences**

In spite of the difficulties the participants faced as a result of their gay or lesbian and Catholic identities, there are positive experiences. The themes that illustrate these positive experiences include the support of significant others, including family, God, and Pope Francis. While George was damned for his same-sex attractions by a priest during confession, Nick had a much more positive experience in confession that allowed him to move forward with his life as a gay man. The message that some participants received from their family and loved ones was that God loves them and that He does not make mistakes, brought comfort to some of them. The statements of Pope Francis bring hope to some of the participants that things can change. Finally, while the participants know the church’s position on homosexuality, many of them never heard it spoken from the leadership, which brings into question for them just how influential that position actually is.

**Support from significant others.** Although some negative themes concerning needing to hide, feeling accusations, and feeling sinful emerged in the previous section, some participants reported a strong sense of support from those around them which helps them understand that their religious and sexual identities are not incompatible. The family of the participant, for instance, plays an important role in the coming out process of the participants. The more well received the information by the family, the better the outcome for the participant. Conversely, if the information was ill-received, the process was difficult for the participant. Some of the concerns of the participants during this process include ostracization by their family and their
parents throwing them out of their home. The experience of Josie during this process best sums up the fears of most participants.

Josie: I came out to my parents. Broke down crying. I think my parents were the most difficult because I honestly didn’t know whether they were going to kick me out or not. They didn’t. They were much more accepting than I expected them to be.

Several of the participants, such as Ellen, found support from their parents and families when they came out, which allowed them to act freely and be themselves.

Ellen: It’s also accepted to the point where I can comment on something in passing and since everyone in my immediate family knows that I am saying it within the context of being a queer person, like with some of the things that are going on with legislation right now, I feel like I can talk about that more freely, and that is also a help because it makes me feel less restricted at home.

While Josie also finds support from her family, she received support in an unexpected place in the form of her campus minister when she attended college. She was active in the church prior to attending college, but the support of the campus minister allowed Josie to continue her role as a lector and Eucharistic Minister while she attended college.

Josie: I would say once again my campus minister at (college removed), a Sister of Charity. She did at one point shortly after this most recent election-she and I sat down and talked and she expressed how she is supportive of me and disagrees with the church in her own way. Obviously there’s not much she can do bound by religious order, but she offered herself up as a means of support and told me about how there are a lot of people in religious orders who are supportive of their LGBT friends, family, brothers, sisters.
Mary held off until well into adulthood before she came out because she had a view that her family saw homosexuality as sinful. She expressed surprise by the amount of support she received when she did though.

Mary: I’ve always acknowledged giving my family, any family members, the out of loving the person but not the action. None of them cared. I think my mom would have been the toughest of all, I’ve been really, really surprised at the level of genuine, “I’m happy for you.”

Doug converted to Catholicism while in his 20s, which is well after he came out to his family. According to Doug, the support he receives from his fellow Catholics greatly outweighs any support he ever received from his non-Catholic family and other members of his town.

Doug: Actually, my Catholic friends and my Catholic colleagues have actually been far, far, far more accepting and embracing of my sexuality then a lot of other members of the public and family and whatnot. As well as my family members who are Catholic, they’ve been far more accepting than the non-Catholics.

**Relationship with God.** The view the participants have of God is of an understanding God rather than a judgmental God. He is a God that provides comfort rather than damnation for their same-sex attractions. George, who believed when he was younger that he was going to hell because he was gay, finds comfort in the belief that if he lives a good life, treats others well, and follows God’s general rules, he’ll be alright.

George: I just know that as long as I live a good life and don’t hurt anybody, and follow God’s general rules, that I’ll be ok. Tradition is important in a lot of ways but it’s not the end all.

Others view their very existence as proof that God is accepting of them.
Rey: I know God made me this way for a reason, and my parents chose to baptize me Catholic for a reason. I’m a full hearted believer in everything happens for a reason and that it’s all part of God’s plan, so there is a reason I was made this way. I don’t even know if I’m destined to figure it out, but this wasn’t accidental, so I just keep that in mind. I’m not a mistake. I may make mistakes along the way, who I am is not a mistake, so there’s a reason I was brought up Catholic and there’s a reason I am gay.

Lenny: Understanding that being gay or being straight, no matter what you identify as, or who you feel that you are, God made you that way.

The belief that God does not make mistakes is a powerful belief for the participants and helps them legitimize who they are and why they are gay. Fred uses the belief that God doesn’t make mistakes to discredit passages in the Bible that prohibit homosexuality. He argues that what is in the Bible regarding homosexuality is incorrect because if it was a sin, why would God create him the way he is.

Fred: I still feel like God, even though it was written in the Bible, He didn’t mean it that way because if he meant it that way then why would I be the way that I am?

Hope for a welcoming and accepting church. During the course of the interviews the participants discussed other issues directly related to their hope for change within the Catholic Church and change toward the treatment of LGBT individuals. In particular, they hold out hope that Pope Francis can move the church forward on the issue of LGBT inclusion as he has spoken more positively about LGBT persons than previous popes, and in particular Pope Benedict. Unlike the former pope, the participants view Pope Francis as a force for progress on LGBT inclusion. George and Maria see the Pope as easing up on some of the criticism of LGBT persons.
George: I feel more comfortable. The pope is easing up on a lot of things now.

Maria: I do have a little more hope with the newest pope because he does seem a little more progressive.

Fred finds Pope Francis to be more accepting.

Fred: I know that the pope, Pope Francis, has touched on this a few times. And each time he has touched on it, he still stands strong with this is-like it’s still a sin. It’s in the Bible. It says it right here. But then he also goes on to say that he won’t tell anybody that they’re not welcome in the church. He’s very accepting. And he says to anybody who wants to come in, I’m not going to try to convert you. I’m not going to try to tell you that you’re wrong.

Lastly, Eric, who is very critical of former Pope Benedict, feels that Pope Francis gives the Catholic “brand” more credibility.

Eric: I feel much more comfortable with Pope Francis’s call for pastoral care for more of a focus on the parts of faith where we can be productive with each other rather than the very accusatory tone that Ratzinger had. Pope Francis has definitely given the Catholic brand more credibility though, so it’s easier to say the word.

When I asked the participants about what they want the Catholic Church to be, overwhelmingly the participants agreed that the church needs to be more welcoming.

Al: Just be more open arms. Be more understanding. They keep saying we’re all children of God, then, you know, open up to the community. We struggle to identify ourselves in this world and where we belong.

Other participants, such as Rey and Mary, want more than just to be welcomed. They want who they are and their same-sex relationships considered valid.
Rey: In a perfect world I would honestly like for my relationships and who I am to be considered valid.

Mary: It would be a relief to have the powers that be say, yes, we as a body recognize that you are no less or no more in the eyes of the Lord. And what you’re doing is not sinful if it’s going to the same principles of marriage or principles of relationship that we uphold with same-sex.

Ellen questions why same-sex relationships are invalid when they create the same types of valued feelings that heterosexual relationships produce.

Ellen: They invoked all the same feelings and emotions and actions, so it made me question why same-sex pairing would not be okay by the church standards and by Catholicism.

Some of the participants also believe that the Catholic Church will eventually become a more inclusive place once the older generation (as they put it) begins to pass away and others replace them. Despite the current state of gay and lesbian individuals in the Catholic Church, Philip believes that change will inevitable and will occur within the Catholic Church in time.

Philip: What I think’s going to happen is a lot of the younger generation Catholics, straight, gay, and non-Catholic. It’s going to be more accepted, and the older generation, you see it now, they’re all dying out. So, once they all die out, everybody else will be just go with the flow. It’ll be no big thing.

The construction of a person’s identity includes a series of interconnected components working in cyclical fashion that constantly analyzes and reinforces itself (Burke & Stets, 2009), and the negative and positive experiences of the participants play a part in the construction of the participants’ gay and lesbian identities. As part of the identity process, an individual tries to
verify their identity in the hopes that the meaning in a situation concerning themselves matches what their identity means to them (2009). If the match is successful, the person may experience positive feelings. However, if the match is unsuccessful, a person may experience negative feelings (2009). The participants experienced a mix of both negative and positive experiences in connection with their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic. One way to analyze the impact of these experiences is to look at whether or a particular experience validates the gay or lesbian identity of the participants. Whether or not a participant has their gay or lesbian identity validated in connection with their Catholic identity may explain, in part, why they maintain both identities.

Burke and Stets (2009) note that when improper verification of an identity occurs for an individual, negative feelings may develop. In order to deal with feelings associated with accusations or viewed as sinful, a participant may engage in selective affiliation and decide that they no longer wish to affiliate with those who prevent a positive identity verification. The negative experiences not only originate from the church through accusation and viewing them as sinful, but also the family. The reason for this is the lack of support provided or the necessity to hide a gay or lesbian identity from parents because of a possible negative response, such as causing shame or fear of removal from their house. Table Three depicts the negative experiences of the participants because of their gay or lesbian identity. In this instance some participants were accused, felt the need to hide, believed they were sinners, and did not receive support from significant others, such as their family. These negative experiences did not allow the participants to validate their gay or lesbian identity in a positive way. Although some of the participants could not make a positive validation of those identities, their decision to distance themselves
from the church demonstrates a resilience in the nature of their identities in the face of negative experiences and lack of positive identity validation.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Validation of Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accused</td>
<td>Refers to participant understanding and feeling toward the connection of pedophilia levied against them for being gay</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hide</td>
<td>Refers to participants having to hide their gay identity from others when they were coming out or currently</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sinful</td>
<td>Refers to participant views on Homosexuality and how they or others view it as sinful</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost Expectations</td>
<td>Refers to the feeling that they disappointed others because of gay or lesbian identity</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Support</td>
<td>Refers to where and from whom participants received no support for their gay identity</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Table three depicts the negative themes and their meanings and whether or not validation of the participants’ gay or lesbian identity would occur. The table was created using data from the participant interviews.

The positive experiences of the participants in this study stand in stark contrast to those found in other studies. The participants in Barton (2010) related feelings of depression, isolation, loss of purpose and meaning in the way their gay identity interacted with their religious identity. The vast majority of participants in this study, 17 of 18, do not relate these types of feelings regarding their gay/lesbian and Catholic identities even though they have their own issues and concerns. In addition, the participants in this study found their relationship with God to be a
positive source of support rather than a shame from which they cannot hide their sinfulness, as found among the participants in the Lalich and McLaren (2010) study. Perhaps the most important theme relative to how participants deal with conflict is the support the participants received from family, friends, and even persons within their local parishes. Table Four depicts the themes relative to positive experiences, their meanings, and whether validation may have occurred.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Validation of Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>Refers to how participants view God and their homosexuality</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Refers to support or the lack thereof the participants received from their parents and other family members in connection to their gay identity</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Refers to where and from whom participants received support for their gay identity, i.e. work, college, church, friends</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope Francis</td>
<td>Refers to statements made by Pope Francis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Table four depicts the positive themes and their meanings and whether or not validation of the participants’ gay or lesbian identity would occur. The table was created using data from the participant interviews.

The participants in this study obtain positive validation of their gay or lesbian identity in connection with their Catholic identity through support from their family, local Catholic leaders and members, and maintain hope that Pope Francis affirms their gay or lesbian identity. Lastly, they believe that God affirms them because the participants hold that He would not have created them as they are if being gay or lesbian was wrong. As a result of these experiences where the
participants affirm their gay or lesbian identity, they experience more positive feelings in connection with their Catholic identity. As such, they are able to maintain a more frequent Catholic practice. The participants who are no longer active tend to not have the same level of support as those that do receive support for their gay or lesbian identity. They experience more negative experiences in connection with their gay or lesbian and Catholic identity and have fewer positive experiences in connection with those identities.

Two other components of identity theory, in addition to identity validation, are useful for this study and how the participants relate to their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity is the salience and prominence of an identity (Burke & Stets, 2009). The salience of an identity responds to the situation a person is in rather than the desires of the person. The factors that influence the salience of an identity include how prominent it is, the support it receives, any rewards the person may receive, and how applicable it is to the situation a person finds themselves in (Burke & Stets, 2009). Commitment to an identity and any support that identity receives determines the prominence of that identity in a person’s identity hierarchy (2009). Saliences refers to the probability of a certain identity being relevant and/or enacted during a given social interaction (Stryker 1965, 1980, 2003 cited in Brenner, Serpe, & Stryker, 2014). Of the two identities examined in this study, gay or lesbian identity and Catholic identity, the gay or lesbian identity is the more salient of the two identities among this study’s participants likely due to immutability in the experiences of the participants.

Among the participants, once they came to identify as gay or lesbian they changed or augmented their Catholic identity to accommodate the homosexual identity. For example, some participants stopped attending mass, reinterpreted what the church taught, or reaffirmed their beliefs about the perfection of God’s creations rather than becoming celibate or rejecting their
gay or lesbian identity. I analyzed the actions, behaviors, and cognitive work of the participants using the conflict framework of Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) and noted the salience of the gay or lesbian identity in the decisions they make and the actions they engage in. Although some participants did attempt to alter their sexuality, upon discovering that it did not work, they focused on altering their religious identity instead. Now, they engage in work that alters their Catholic beliefs, such as maintaining that God made them the way they are and He does not make mistakes, which allows them to continue to identify as Catholic.

**Research Question Three**

*How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflict contend with such conflicts between their sexual and religious identities?*

Throughout the interviews, the participants revealed different ways in which they deal with conflicts between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. Previous research found that persons deal with the conflict between a religious identity and a homosexual identity by rejecting a religious identity, rejecting a homosexual identity, compartmentalizing identities, or integrating (Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000). The experiences of the participants in this study are not fully consistent with previous research. The participants in this study maintain gay or lesbian and Catholic identities rather than reject or entirely compartmentalize either of those identities. The themes surrounding how the participants in this study deal with conflict between a Catholic identity and religious identity include identity (Catholic), meaning (to be Catholic), compartmentalization, teachings, Pope Benedict, Pope Francis, change, and support. The participants are able to embrace rather than reject identities and integrate identities because the support they receive provides validation for their gay or lesbian and Catholic identities. In addition, they wish to maintain a sense of authenticity and a positive self-concept, which helps
integrate identities. Lastly, the salience and prominence of these identities helps them maintain both identities in the face of adversity.

**Embracing Rather Than Rejecting Religious Identity**

The participants in this study all maintain a gay or lesbian identity and a Catholic identity even if they are not active participants in the Catholic Church. I constructed my study to use only those participants that maintained a Catholic identity unlike the participants in other studies, such as Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, and Williams (1994) who found that a rejection of religion is necessary for acceptance of a homosexual identity. However, some participants consider themselves more spiritual than religious as also noted by Halkitis, et al. (2009). One participant in particular, Maria, was quite adamant in her ability to find God in herself and does not allow man-made religious doctrine to bind her.

Maria: I don’t see them as God-given or even valid, so basically, I can find “church” or God within myself, so I don’t have to go to a church to search for a higher power because God is within me all the time.

Several participants note that there is no conflict between their identities, and when there is, they find a way to navigate that conflict. A study conducted by Rean and Savin-Williams (2005) found that adolescents felt that they must end their connection to their religious identity due to conflict with their homosexual identity. In this study, it is the younger participants between the ages of 18 and 40 who maintain the strongest bonds to their religious identity while fostering a healthy gay or lesbian identity.

**Embracing Rather Than Rejecting Homosexual Identity**

Next, as a result of the design of this study that sought participants who maintained a gay or lesbian identity along with their Catholic identity, no participants succeeded in rejecting their
sexual orientation as an option to reduce any conflict they may experience as a result of their gay or lesbian and Catholic identity. The few who did attempt to change their orientation did so by petitioning God to remove their same-sex feelings through “praying the gay away,” joining the seminary, or devoting more time to God during their coming out process.

Fred: I know some people say that why don’t you just change or pray the gay away, quote, un-quote. And that’s not really an option. It doesn’t work. I can tell you that.

The participants who engaged in these activities did so because they had an understanding that the church considers their same-sex attractions both sinful and socially undesirable. Vicki, for instance, still confesses to a priest that she is a lesbian because she believes that being gay is sinful, but this does not interfere with her relationships with other women.

Studies conducted by Dahl (2011), Ganzevort, et al. (2011), and Yarhouse, et al. (2009) found that participants had difficulties engaging with their homosexual identities because of their faith. The majority of participants in this study did not report any such difficulties at this point in their lives, having found ways to overcome them. While they understand the Catholic Church’s position on same-sex relations, it does not prevent them from dating or engaging in sexual relations with a partner. In fact, a few participants note how they apply Catholic teachings on sexuality to their dating practice. For instance, Doug remarks on how he tries to apply “Catholic morals” towards dating.

Doug: I would say in relationships I apply Catholic morals, I guess you could say. I don’t really believe in the traditional secular hook-up culture that’s going on now. I believe more in dating with a purpose towards a long term result. Marriage, what have you.
Compartmentalization of Identities

One way individuals can deal with the conflict between their religious identity and homosexual identity is to compartmentalize those identities (Rodriguez & Oulette, 2000). Most participants in this study did not seem to engage in compartmentalizing their gay or lesbian and Catholic identities. The compartmentalizing that occurred among these participants is sometimes in keeping their gay or lesbian identity separate from their social identity. In other words, while they are out to immediate family in most instances, they do not feel it is necessary for others to always know they are gay or lesbian, including extended family. Still, some of the participants are out and open in their public life, including in their faith community, in contrast to the findings of Garcia, et al. (2008). When the compartmentalization occurs, it is more in line with the findings of Hogg and Smith (2007) where there is a pressure by others placed on the person to choose one or the other identity. Ellen, and the vast majority of the participants, by contrast does not compartmentalize her identities. When she was younger, she had concerns about what one group would say about the other if they knew she was a lesbian and Catholic. As she grew older she realized that being lesbian and Catholic can work for her.

Ellen: I’d just like to say that I think it’s easier to be an LGBT Catholic than most people would assume. They don’t conflict with each other. They don’t really go against each other. When I was younger I thought that I was kind of like a dual agent or something but now I understand that that doesn’t really make sense. They don’t really go against each other in any respect and they can in fact enhance each other. And I think that was maybe one of the things that made me more reluctant to get involved with either community because I was afraid of what the one community would think of the other if they
discovered that I was a part of it. But, I think that fear shouldn’t prevent someone from expressing both their LGBT identity and their Catholicism.

The fear that Ellen pondered over concerning what one group may feel toward another group is usually resolved through compartmentalization in social identity theory (Hogg & Smith, 2007). In this way a person compartmentalizes their identity as a gay or lesbian person and a Catholic person depending on the group they are engaging with. I anticipated more participants engaging in compartmentalization in group settings to resolve any conflict between identities. However, in this study, only Ellen and Eric mentioned concern over group membership and what the group may expect of them, and neither seemed to engage in compartmentalizing their identities at the point when I interviewed them. I recognize as a possibility that persons who do compartmentalize their gay and lesbian and religious identities were not willing to participate in this study for fear of being “outed,” which may explain the lack of identity compartmentalization in this study.

Identity Integration Process

The last option available under the framework put forth by Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) to deal with any conflict between a religious identity and a homosexual identity is to find a way to integrate those identities into their whole person. One way a person does this is through reframing (2000), which can include reinterpreting biblical passages, engaging in monogamy, and questioning the morals and motives of the messenger.

Biblical reinterpretation. Mahaffey (1996) found that rather than living with a conflict between a religious and a homosexual identity, the participants in her study would condemn the passages in the Bible that were critical of homosexuals. Conversely and somewhat surprisingly, some of the participants in the current study have an understanding that there are passages
against homosexuality in the Bible, but they have not read them or heard them mentioned in church.

Rey: I have never witnessed or heard any of the readings that people use as arguments against homosexuality. I’ve never heard that in the church that I’ve been to. I’ve never heard it discussed as it being sinful by a priest. I’ve never heard any of those arguments brought up in front of me where I have heard things against greed and other sins such as that.

Fred also understands that those passages exist in the Bible, but as mentioned earlier, he holds that God did not want them to condemn gays. Also, many participants have the understanding, as put forth by Yip (1997), that their gay or lesbian identity cannot be wrong if God made them, because they believe that God does not make mistakes, as illustrated in the discussion of research question two. Here, the participants engage the material and reinterpret what the Catholic Church holds to better fit it with their gay or lesbian identity.

**Monogamous relationships.** According to McQueeney (2009), one way persons integrate or lessen the conflict between their religious and homosexual identities is to engage in monogamous behavior and role assignment. The participants in the current study did not report engaging in the types of roles put forth by McQueeney (2009), but they did describe how Catholic teachings on sexuality impacted their relationships. They took the church’s teachings on sex very seriously. One participant noted how he may have escaped the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s because of teachings concerning sex and marriage.

Victor: I will say that inadvertently I might have survived the whole AIDS. I did take some of the Catholic teachings about sex very seriously, and that you don’t go having sex with somebody outside of marriage, which I had to put into a different context for myself
since that wasn’t going to happen. So, I wasn’t sexually active at a time when friends my age were. And nobody knew at that time, or understood, what was going on with respect to HIV, and since I wasn’t sexually active and I didn’t start being sexually active until things were identified, then I was able to be cautious when I was sexually active. So, I have to give credit there; although their teaching about sex is a maybe not the healthiest.

Other participants, such as Doug, deride the current hook-up culture and date with purpose toward a relationship rather than just engaging in sexual activity. When it comes to their relationships, though, the participants, such as Mary and Rey, want validation by the church because those relationships produce the same types of feeling that heterosexual relationships produce.

**Questioning the messenger.** Another activity participants engage in that helps them alleviate the conflict they experience is questioning the messenger (Yip, 1997; Pitt, 2010). In the current study, this activity takes the form of questioning the motives and morality of the message itself. The theme of accusations manifests here as participants note that gay men are scapegoated as an explanation as to why child abuse occurs in the Catholic Church. They note a purposeful, but incorrect, connection made between gay men and pedophiles. The participants see the accusations and the scapegoating manifest themselves in the saying of the Pope Benedict, whom the participants hold responsible for causing harm to gays and lesbians in order to shift blame from the irresponsibility of the Catholic Church on the matter of child sexual abuse by Catholic priests.

The cognitive work done by the participants, in regard to research question three, in order to resolve any conflict they experience between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity is in line with what is found in the work of Rodriguez and Oulette (2000). However,
what is it that allows the participants in this study to question the messenger, reinterpret scripture, and look at their relationships in a very similar way to those in heterosexual relationships? Eric alludes to the process the participants engage in to make their Catholic faith fit them.

Eric: Everyone gets to pick and choose a little bit, and you know that everyone is picking and choosing.

What Eric is referring to in his statement is the relationship between the ideal culture of the Catholic Church and the real culture of the Catholic Church. According to Ritzer (2013) ideal culture consists of the values and norms of a society that direct what persons in that society should do. However, this does not always happen. Instead, people follow the real culture which is the way people actually behave and think in their everyday lives (2013). In the case of the Catholic Church, it ideally wants its followers to act and believe in a way according to its teachings and defines it as sin if a person fails to abide by its rules. In reality, however, the members of the Catholic Church tend to believe and behave in a way that is contrary to these teachings in a number of ways. The term “cafeteria Catholic” commonly describes those members who pick and choose the teachings they wish to uphold while ignoring other teachings. Much like going through a cafeteria line, these Catholics take a little of this and leave a little of that. In a world-wide study conducted by Univision in 2014, Catholics in the United States depart from church teachings on a series of issues including support for gay marriage, contraception use, married priests, divorce, and abortion. Being a “cafeteria Catholic,” or engaging in the real culture of the Catholic Church, is not out of the ordinary. In fact, it is normal for Catholics to behave in this manner (Jenkins, 2016).
In order to resolve any conflicts the participants in this study experience as a result of conflict between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity, the participants pick and choose what they want to believe, reinterpret, or question, all of which is consistent with what other Catholics do on other issues. Some of the participants do not believe the Bible literally as it pertains to the passages typically referenced in regard to homosexuality, and this allows them to resolve any issues resulting from those passages. Similarly, they do not take the church’s word on what God holds sinful or not. Rather, they use the church’s teachings on the perfection of God’s creation to justify their existence in a positive way. They do not adhere to church teachings on same-sex relations. Instead, they take the teachings on sexuality, use them and apply them in their lives as it pertains to their same-sex relations. Lastly, they question the authority of those in the church who make decisions that negatively impact them. The actions and cognitive work of the participants in this study are not different than those done by other Catholics on other issues (Univision, 2014; Jenkins, 2016)

Summary

This chapter focused on the participants and their experiences in being both gay or lesbian and Catholic. In many ways their stories are similar but vary in how they view their faith and how they choose to approach it. The chapter examined each of the research questions and offered an explanation of the themes associated with those questions. In the final chapter I further discuss these questions while offering other avenues of study on this topic and the potential relevance of this study in the lives of gay and lesbian Catholics and parish and church leaders.
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer three questions: 1) How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?; 2) What are sources of both positive and negative experiences or gay and lesbian Catholics?; and 3) How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflicts contend with such conflicts between their sexual and religious identities? Below I discuss how the findings pertaining to each research question and how each offers something different to explain the process by which the participants are able to maintain congruence between seemingly incompatible identities. I will also discuss the unanticipated findings of the study and offer implications this study may present for the Catholic Church and members of the LGBTQ community.

Analysis of Research Questions

In Chapter Four, I presented the findings of this study organized by research question. The findings indicated that the participants were socialized in the church and its teachings, received validation for their gay or lesbian identity from others and God and engaged in a process that challenged and reinterpreted information that was incongruent with their gay or lesbian identity. Each of these findings is a step along the way to understanding how the participants in this study made sense of seemingly incompatible identities.

Research Question One concerned itself with understanding the experiences of the participants as it relates to their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. The participants reside in rural or small town spaces that provide very little anonymity. They received socialization in the Catholic Church from a very young age. They grew up in the church, attended Catholic elementary schools, Catholic high schools, and Catholic colleges and
universities. They volunteered as altar servers, lectors, choir singers, Eucharistic ministers, and instructors of religious education. As a result of this deep socialization, the participants maintained their Catholic identity even if they stopped practicing.

The second research question concerned itself with the negative and positive experiences of the participants. Through the course of analyzing the data, I identified several themes pertaining to these negative and positive experiences. The themes that developed around the negative experiences include feeling accused and scapegoated by the Catholic Church as the cause of sexual abuse crisis within the church. A second theme developed is the feeling of sinfulness some of the participants felt as a result of church teachings on homosexuality and their understanding of it. Some of the participants hid their sexual identity while others resigned themselves to going to hell. Another theme developed due to the negative experiences of the participants is the feeling of lost expectations of others. Coupled with lost expectations is the lack of support some participants received from family or others when coming out. These negative experiences did not permit the participants to validate their gay or lesbian identity in a positive way. As a result, some of the participants changed their church practice or stopped going altogether.

While some participants did have negative experiences between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity, most of the participants shared positive experiences as it relates to these identities. The theme developed around God illustrated how the participants viewed the perfection of God’s creation and their role as part of it. Since they see themselves as part of that creation, they hold that their same-sex attractions cannot be wrong or sinful because God created them. This understanding provides great comfort for some of the participants. The support they receive from their family members and from significant others in their lives helps
the participants enjoy a healthy gay or lesbian identity in connection with their Catholic identity. Lastly, a theme developed around Pope Francis where they see him as a potential change agent and someone who may make strides in the direction of acceptance of gay and lesbian persons in the church. The positive experiences of the participants allow them to validate their gay or lesbian identity in their relationship with others and the Catholic Church. As a result, these participants tend to have a more stable church practice in their attendance and participation.

Research Question Three examined how participants resolve any conflict between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. In answering this question I used a framework provided by Rodriguez and Oulette (2000) who set forth four possible options to reduce conflict between these identities. The first option is to reject a religious identity. None of the participants in this study reject their Catholic identity, even if they do not practice as they once did. I did not anticipate any participants rejecting their religious identity because the study asked for participants who maintained a Catholic identity. The second option available is to reject their homosexual identity. I also did not anticipate any participants rejecting this identity because the study asked for participants who also maintained a gay or lesbian identity in addition to a Catholic identity. The third option available to reduce conflict between identities is to compartmentalize the identities. I anticipated that some of the participants would engage in this type of behavior in connection with their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity, but they did not. There was compartmentalization in other areas of their lives for some of the participants, such as in the workplace. Finally, the last option is to somehow integrate these conflicting identities. Previous studies conducted by Mahaffey (1996), Yip (1997), McQueeny (2009), and Pitt (2010) illustrate ways in which persons with conflicting religious and sexual identities resolve the conflict between the identities. The participants in this study questioned the
message-givers of the Catholic Church, reinterpreted the Bible concerning God, and applied the church’s teachings on sexuality to their own lives all in an attempt to resolve any conflict that may exist between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity.

The way the participants reduced any conflict was not different than the approach most Catholics have to the teachings of the Catholic Church (Univision, 2014; Jenkins, 2016). They chose the teachings they wanted to adhere to and left those that they disagreed with. This type of action is not out of the ordinary. Many Catholics, in the United States and worldwide, disagree with key components in the teachings of the Catholic Church (Univision, 2014). While the ideal culture of the Catholic Church is one where all its members listen and adhere to its messages and teachings, the reality is, as demonstrated by previous research and in this study, the reality is that most of its members behave and act differently, including the church’s religious leaders at times.

The three research questions presented in this study: 1) How do people describe the experience of being gay or lesbian and Catholic?; 2) What are sources of both positive and negative experiences or gay and lesbian Catholics?; and 3) How do gay and lesbian Catholics who experience conflicts contend with such conflicts between their sexual and religious identities? Each provide an explanation as to why the participants may maintain a Catholic identity even when there is potential conflict between their gay or lesbian identity, and how they deal with and resolve the conflict. The deep rooted socialization of the participants in their Catholic identity makes it hard to give up as some of the participants reported. In addition, the majority of the participants receive support from their family, significant others, God, and Pope Francis in such ways as to provide validation for who they are through their Catholic faith. Finally, when there is conflict, the participants do what the majority of Catholics do, which is
adhere to the teachings they feel are important while ignoring or engaging in cognitive work to make the teachings work in conjunction with lives.

**Conceptual Model**

The original conception model for this study anticipated that some participants compartmentalize to relieve any type of conflict they experience because this is what previous studies demonstrated. While I did not expect I would encounter participants that rejected their gay or lesbian identity or their Catholic identity because I intentionally sought a sample of people who held both identities, I did expect some participants might compartmentalize their identities to reduce conflict.

![Figure 2. Conceptual Model Revisited.](image)

I created this conceptual model following a review of the literature on persons with a gay or lesbian identity and a religious identity. The model depicts how I anticipated participants in this study to act in response to conflicting gay or lesbian and Catholic identities.
However, after analyzing the participants’ interviews, I noticed that there was no specific compartmentalization done between their gay or lesbian and Catholic identities. Instead, the participants found ways to integrate their Catholic identity and their gay or lesbian identities. The adjustments the participants in this study make to their Catholic identities and understandings of what it means to be Catholic are necessary since any efforts to change their sexual identities, sometimes considerable efforts, are unsuccessful. These cognitive shifts enabled the participants to maintain both of their Catholic and sexual identities. The revised conceptual model for this study is below.

![Figure 3. Revised Conceptual Model.](image)

This conceptual model is an updated version following the responses of the participants in this study. It depicts that compartmentalization did not occur as a way to reduce any conflict between identities.

**Unanticipated Findings**

During the course of this study, I found two unanticipated themes. The first concerns how the participants are not the only people making choices when it comes to which teachings to
uphold. The second unanticipated finding is the impact of a Catholic identity on the gay or lesbian identity of the participants in the some participants interpreted their same-sex feelings as a call to religious life and how some participants applied Catholic teachings to their relationships. When I conceived this study, I focused on how the sexual identity of the participants might impact their Catholic identity rather than the other way around.

**Ideal Culture vs. Real Culture**

I presented the topic of the ideal Catholic culture and the real or actual Catholic culture engaged in by the participants at the end of Chapter Four and above as a way of explaining the cognitive work the participants engaged in to reduce any incongruences between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. The focus then was on the actions taken by the participants rather than the actions taken by those who represent the church. However, several participants noted that the treatment they received from leaders of the church was welcoming and comforting to them. When Nick was in the Navy in the late 1960s, he had a very positive encounter with a priest during confession.

Nick: So, to prepare myself for coming out, I went to confession at St. Matthew’s just symbolically, you know, the Kennedy connection and all that. So, and I don’t remember exactly how I phrased this but I went into the confessional and I said Father I’m not here to really make a confession but to, and I don’t remember exactly how I phrased it, but to just discuss something with you. And so he did. And so that was very nice, and I felt better afterwards.

Doug experienced similar treatment when he would go to confession.

Doug: Even in confession, priests have been actually very compassionate whenever I broach that subject with them.
Unfortunately, not all participants had positive experiences when discussing their same-sex orientation with a priest. George had a very negative experience where the priest suggested incarceration for being gay.

The participants experienced the support from religious leaders in other ways, as well. Eric, for example, received support from the priest at a former church.

Eric: The parish I was at the time in (redacted) was extremely welcoming, extremely open. It made it much easier. I didn’t have, at that time, the same conflicts I hear from a lot of other people. There were a number of gay identified or non-heterosexual identified people at that time that I could talk to.

This eventually changed though when a new priest came to the parish. Eric would eventually stop practicing there.

The experiences of the participants in their interactions with priests and religious leaders of the Catholic Church demonstrates that the participants are not the only ones picking and choosing which teachings to uphold and which to let loose. Their decisions to support rather than condemn, as in George’s case where he told by a priest that he should be locked away for being gay, helped the participants make sense of their gay or lesbian identity and Catholic identity.

**Identity – A Two Way Street**

This study focused on how the gay or lesbian identity of the participants impacted their Catholic identity. During the course of the study it became apparent that the converse was also true in that some of the participants, whether they practice or not, were abiding by church teachings and traditions and incorporating them into their lives or giving their lives meaning. These teachings and traditions include their sexual practices and what being Catholic means to them.
Several of the participants noted how the sexual teachings of the church on pre-marital sex played a role in their lives. Victor recounted how church teachings on sexuality may have kept him safe from during the AIDS epidemic in the United States in the early 1980s. Doug also recounted how he tries to apply Catholic teachings on sexuality to his dating practices and how his Catholic identity impacts him generally.

Doug: I just try to live the sacraments out. I try to live out the teachings of the church, what we’re called to do as all Catholic brothers and sisters and people in general. It’s just like another aspect of my life. Everyone has personality in their own individuality. So, that’s how I make sense of it. It’s just another part of who I am, and I don’t really let it impact my faith. Rather the opposite. I try to let my faith influence how I live out my sexuality, romantically, personal life.

The participants in this study do not experience their relationship between their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity as a one-way street where only the gay or lesbian identity influences the participants. Instead, the gay and lesbian and Catholic identities of the participants each influence the participants in different ways. For some, the influence is on how they approach their sexuality. For others, it is a point of importance and as much a part of them as their sexual identity.

Limitations

There are two main limitations in this study. First, this study only sought participants that maintained a gay or lesbian and Catholic identity. As such, these individuals already reconciled any potential conflict between their gay or lesbian and Catholic identity. The second limitation is the research design. The design of this study possibly encouraged people with positive experiences to be more likely to participate which potentially led to a greater representation of
positive experiences than negative experiences. A different research design may show that the experiences of gay and lesbian Catholics are more balanced than they appear in this study. Future studies should seek to redress these issues.

**Implications**

This section details the implications this study may have on current theoretical approaches to the topic of sexual and religious identities, future research suggestions, and what the Catholic Church can do at different levels to make it a more welcoming place for persons of the LGBTQ community.

**Implications for Theory**

Several theories on dissonance where put forth in Chapter Two that could explain how participants in this study deal with any conflict they may experience between their gay or lesbian identity and Catholic identity. In Aronson’s (1968; 1992) work on self-consistency, he argued that persons want to maintain a stable, consistent, and moral sense of self (1968). Again, in this study some of the participants wanted to maintain these concepts and in order to do so they needed to come out to their parents.

I anticipated using dissonance theories to understand experiences of participants in this study because other studies looking at sexual orientation and religion make use of them (Mahaffy, 1996; Yip, 1997; Pitt, 2010). I also anticipated social identity theory would play a larger role in explaining the compartmentalization done by the participants. However, since only two participants mention concern over groups and neither one of them discussed how they navigate these groups, I was unable to make full use of social identity theory. Still, I believe that identity theory and components of identity theory are useful in explaining how the participants in this study make sense of their gay or lesbian identity and their Catholic identity. The attempt to
verify an identity that results in a lack of validation provides enough explanatory power to suggest that a person stopped an activity because of the negative perception. In other words, participants identify as gay or lesbian and they either do or do not receive sanctioning for it by others. Additional research needs conducted on the impact of a Catholic identity on a gay or lesbian identity for those who maintain both identities. It seems there is a tendency, and this study is no different, to focus on the sexual identity and its impact rather than the other way around. Also, additional research needs conducted on the impact of groups within a church parish, such as the Knights of Columbus and lay ministry organizations, concerning a person’s gay or lesbian identity and a Catholic identity.

**Implications for Future Research**

In addition to examining the impact of a gay or lesbian sexual identity on a Catholic identity where a person maintains both identities, future researchers should examine if statements and materials of the Catholic Church and its representatives, when made known to the participants, have an impact on their practice. In this study, some participants had an awareness of some of the statements of Pope Benedict and related discomfort with those statements while other participants did not note such knowledge. A study using a pre-test and post-test design may provide insight into this issue.

Another avenue of potential research is on the discrepancy between the church practices of the older persons in this study versus the younger persons whereby the younger persons maintain a more consistent church practice. I anticipated the reverse for this study but did not find it. All participants appeared to receive the same socialization in the church despite their ages. It is possible that other issues besides their sexual orientation caused them to practice more
infrequently such as the generational and historical shifts in which those socialization practices occurred.

This study was not able to judge how the participant’s gay and lesbian and Catholic identities operate along a prominence hierarchy. Future studies may seek to address this issue to determine where on a hierarchy gay and lesbian Catholic place the identities they hold.

**Implications for Policy**

The Catholic Church moves very slowly when it comes to changing its position on an issue (Jang, 2015). There are, however, several steps the Catholic Church can make that may benefit the LGBTQ community. First, the church needs to take ownership of the global sexual abuse crisis by holding itself accountable rather than scapegoating gay men as being the problem when the problem actually lies with their unwillingness to deal with the issue in a substantive way. Second, the church can take substantive steps to stop using cold and insulting language, such as disordered, when referring to same-sex individuals. Lastly, the church can take steps to publically acknowledge the difficulty members of the LGBTQ community face and transform into a welcoming institution for them as the majority of the participants in this study want the church to become.

**Implications for Practice: Parishes and Religious Leaders**

While change at the top of the Catholic Church is difficult to achieve and slow moving when it does occur, the local parishes attended by LGBTQ persons have an opportunity to provide the religious guidance its members seek. Some of the participants in this study have a good relationship with their parish and its priest and religious leaders. Many, however, do not. The messages the participants want to hear are religious messages rather than political. Inclusive rather than divisive. Many of the participants remarked on how their belief in God and that he
does not make mistakes provides a powerful reminder that they have value. Priests and religious leaders can make strides to remember this when dealing with same-sex individuals. Listening, rather than judging as some participants have encountered, is something that is doable at this level of the Catholic Church. There are gay and lesbian youth in the pews who struggle with their sexual identity and do not want parish and church leaders condemning them for being who they believe God created them to be.

**Implications for Practice: Lay Leaders**

Many of the statements made above concerning the parishes and religious leaders are applicable here as well. However, since it is possible that volunteer instructors of religious education may encounter LGBTQ individuals with questions, they should receive training from professionals in the field to properly answer those questions in a positive way rather than referring to the Catholic Church teachings on sinfulness and disordered persons.

**Implications for Practice: Gay and Lesbian Catholics**

Gay and lesbian Catholics should not feel forced to leave behind their faith tradition because of their sexual orientation. The majority of the participants in this study attend mass on a semi-regular or regular basis. Unfortunately, not all gay and lesbian Catholics are as fortunate when it comes to the support they receive both from their family and their religious leaders. One option available is to talk with the parish priest and ask them how they approach the LGBTQ community from the pulpit. Another option available, and one that some of the participants made use of during their college years, is to attend church service at a college or university where the population and the needs of the population are more diverse and inclusive. Finally, if it is available nearby, the Dignity organization provides Catholic services but does not have approval from the church itself.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how persons who maintain a gay or lesbian identity and a Catholic identity make sense of those seemingly conflicting identities. The results demonstrated that the participants retained both a gay or lesbian identity and a Catholic identity despite some negative, deep rooted socialization into the Catholic identity that makes it difficult to give up. Support from family and others played a key role in helping the participants continue to participate in their church. Lastly, this study demonstrated that the importance of cognitive work in examining Biblical passages, questioning the messenger, and using the concept of the perfection of God’s creation to help them understand that they are not wrong for being gay. If this study is read by decision makers within the Catholic Church, whether it be a priest, bishop, or a religious education instructor, or just a parishioner in a pew, it should be apparent that there are persons, like those in this study, actively participating in the church who want to feel welcomed. In order to make the Catholic Church a more welcoming place, greater awareness is necessary concerning what is said during mass and in official statements and documents concerning persons with same-sex attractions to ensure that the Catholic Church does not malign persons with same-sex attractions for the way they believe God created them.
References


Lee, J. (2010, December 22). The president signs repeal of “don’t ask don’t tell”: “Out of many, we are one.” Retrieved from https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/12/22/president-signs-repeal-dont-ask-dont-tell-out-many-we-are-one


doi:10.1080/13691050412331321294


Appendix A

Church Bulletin/Newsletter/Newspaper Announcement

Seeking Study Participants
I am conducting my doctoral dissertation research on the experiences of people who identify both as Catholic and as gay or lesbian. If this describes you and you might be willing to participate in a confidential interview for this study, please contact me: Larry Goetz, EMAIL, PHONE, or visit my study website at: URL. Thank you for your help!
Appendix B

Qualtrics Website

Default Question Block

Hi and welcome!

If you’re an adult who is gay or lesbian and Catholic, please consider helping with my doctoral research study—it would involve participating in an interview of about an hour. Your identity and information would be completely confidential.

My name is Lawrence Goetz and I am a Ph.D. student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I’m doing my dissertation research on experiences of people who are gay or lesbian and Catholic.

As a Catholic myself with gay and lesbian friends who are Catholic, I’ve found that people may have many different types of experiences. Please know that I have no agenda other than developing a scholarly understanding of the ways that people experience these identities—no judgment, no politics, just a sincere interest in your story and the story of other gay or lesbian Catholics.

If you are willing to help, please provide your contact information below. I’ll get in touch and we can set up a time and place to meet for an interview at your convenience. Also, please pass the word to other lesbian and gay Catholics you may know—I hope to interview about 30 people for my study, and I’d appreciate your assistance!

If you are willing to participate in the study, an informed consent form will be presented to you, and your consent will be obtained prior to beginning the interview.

If you have any questions, please contact me or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Beth Mabry at ___

Thanks!
Lawrence

If you would prefer to contact me, please do! Send me an email, or call or text the number above, and leave a message. Thank you!
I'm asking for your contact information so that I can set up an interview with you and provide you with more details about the study. The information you provide will remain confidential.

What is your name (you need not provide your real name, just let me know how you'd like me to refer to you):

Email Address:

Phone Number:

What is the best way to contact you?

In what area do you live? (This is to help me with scheduling interviews. Your information will remain confidential.)

- County in PA:

- At school in what town, county and state?

- Live elsewhere (please provide postal zip code):

Are you Catholic?

- Yes

- No

Are you:

- Gay

- Lesbian

- Identify differently (please describe):

Are you over 18 years of age?

- Yes

- No

If you provided your contact information, I will be in touch with you within the next several days.

If you would prefer to contact me, or if you have any questions, you can reach me by email at

Please click on the arrow below to send your information to me.

Thanks again!
This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Appendix C

Facebook Website

This page has not been published. Learn about unpublished pages and Publish this page when you are ready.

About Catholic Gay and Lesbian Research Study

**Page Info**

**Category**
Other: Community

**Name**
Catholic Gay and Lesbian Research Study

**Start Date**
Enter your start date

**Short Description**
If you’re an adult who is gay or lesbian and Catholic, please consider helping with my doctoral research study.

**Impressum**
Input Impressum for your Page

**Long Description**
If you’re an adult who is gay or lesbian and Catholic, please consider helping with my doctoral research study—it would involve participating in an interview of about an hour. Your identity and information would be completely confidential.

My name is Lawrence Goetz and I am a Ph.D. student at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. I’m doing my dissertation research on experiences of people who are gay or lesbian and Catholic.

As a Catholic myself with gay and lesbian friends who are Catholic, I’ve found that people may have many different types of experiences. Please know that I have no agenda other than developing a scholarly understanding of the ways that people experience these identities—no judgment, no politics, just a sincere interest in your story and the story of other gay or lesbian Catholics.

If you are willing to help, please provide your contact information below. I’ll get in touch and we can set up a time and place to meet for an interview at your convenience. Also, please pass the word to other lesbian and gay Catholics you may know—I hope to interview
Catholic Gay and Lesbian Research Study

about 30 people for my study, and I'd appreciate your assistance!

If you are willing to participate in the study, an informed consent form will be presented to you, and your consent will be obtained prior to beginning the interview.

If you have any questions, please contact me or the faculty sponsor, Dr. Beth Matry or [ ]

This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects [ ]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Website</th>
<th>Enter your website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Official Page</td>
<td>Enter the official brand, celebrity or organization your Page is about</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D

Interview Guide

1. Tell me a bit about what was it like for you growing up Catholic?
   a. Probe. “What do you remember about that or what stands out to you?”
   b. Follow-ups.

2. What have your experiences as a gay/lesbian Catholic been like?
   a. Probe. “Different people have different experiences. What has that been like for you?”
   b. Follow-up.

3. What does it mean to you today to be Catholic?
   a. Probe. “In what ways would you say are you Catholic, and in what ways are you less Catholic?”
   b. Follow-up.

4. How did being gay/lesbian and Catholic come together for you?
   a. Probe. “Sometimes when people realize their sexual orientation it takes some work to make sense of that in light of other aspects of who they are. How was that for you as a Catholic?”
   b. Follow-up.

5. Tell me a about a time when your gay/lesbian identity and your Catholic identity intersected each other.
   a. Probe. “I’m thinking about a time you might have experienced an awareness of being both Catholic and gay/lesbian and it stood out to you.”
   b. Follow-up.

6. If you feel as though you are “out” as gay/lesbian, what was you coming out process like as a Catholic?
   a. Probe. “It seems like everyone’s coming out experience is a little different. Was there anything in that process for you that stands out in terms of also being Catholic?”
   b. Follow-up.

7. What are some things you’ve experienced that have made being a gay/lesbian Catholic easier or that you’ve felt supported by?
   a. Probe. “Were there things people did or said; people in your parish, fellow Catholics, or things you heard—just things that were positive for you as a gay/lesbian Catholic?”
   b. Follow-up.
8. What are some things that you’ve experienced that have made being a gay/lesbian Catholic challenging or difficult?
   a. Probe. “Not everyone is supportive, I’d guess. What has made it harder for you? Tell me about some negative experiences you’ve had as a gay/lesbian Catholic.”
   b. Follow-up.

9. When you think about where the Catholic Church stands on homosexuality, how do you make sense of being a gay/lesbian Catholic?
   a. Probe. “Times change, but the Church has had a fairly consistent stand, how do you feel about that? How do you deal with that as a gay/lesbian Catholic?”
   b. Follow-up.

10. In your view, what could the Catholic Church do to be more supportive and welcoming of gays and lesbians?
    a. Probe. “If you could sit down and talk to the local priest or the Bishop—even the Pope, what might you tell them would be supportive to you?”
    b. Follow-up.

11. Is there anything I haven’t asked about that you could share to help me better understand your experiences as a gay/lesbian Catholic?
Appendix E
IRB Approval of Study

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Institutional Review Board for the
Protection of Human Subjects
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Slight Hall, Room 113
210 South Tenth Street
Indiana, Pennsylvania 15705-1048

May 10, 2016

Lawrence J. Goetz, Jr.

Dear Mr. Goetz:

Your proposed research project, “Exploring the Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Catholics Around Their Sexual and Religious Identities,” (Log No. 16-156) has been reviewed by the IRB and is approved as an expedited review for the period of May 9, 2016 to May 9, 2017. This approval is for St. Andrew’s Catholic Church (Johnstown, PA), St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church (Ashtabula, PA), and the Keystone Alliance/Gaylife Newsletter. Researchers may initiate data collection.

Please note that this approval is for the stated research purposes only and does not supersede or obviate compliance with any other University requirements, including, but not limited to, enrollment, degree completion deadlines, topic approval, and conduct of university-affiliated activities.

You should read all of this letter, as it contains important information about conducting your study.

Now that your project has been approved by the IRB, there are elements of the Federal Regulations to which you must attend. IUP adheres to these regulations strictly:

1. You must conduct your study exactly as it was approved by the IRB.
2. Any additions or changes in procedures must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented.
3. You must notify the IRB promptly of any events that affect the safety or well-being of subjects.
4. You must notify the IRB promptly of any modifications of your study or other responses that are necessitated by any events reported in Items 2 or 3.
IRB to Lawrence J. Goetz, Jr., May 10, 2016

Should you need to continue your research beyond May 9, 2017 you will need to file additional information for continuing review. Please contact the IRB office at [Contact Information] for further information.

The IRB may review or audit your project at random or for cause. In accordance with IUP Policy and Federal Regulation (45CFR46.113), the Board may suspend or terminate your project if your project has not been conducted as approved or if other difficulties are detected.

Although your human subjects review process is complete, the School of Graduate Studies and Research requires submission and approval of a Research Topic Approval Form (RTAF) before you can begin your research. If you have not yet submitted your RTAF, the form can be found at [Form Location].

While not under the purview of the IRB, researchers are responsible for adhering to US copyright law when using existing scales, survey items, or other works in the conduct of research. Information regarding copyright law and compliance at IUP, including links to sample permission request letters, can be found at [Resource Link].

I wish you success as you pursue this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Roberts, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Professor of Criminology

[Signature]

Cc: Dr. Beth Mabry, Dissertation Committee Chairperson
Dr. John Anderson, Graduate Coordinator
Ms. Brenda Boal, Secretary
Appendix F
Participant Summaries

Nick: In 1963 President Kennedy’s funeral mass was held in St. Matthew’s Cathedral in Washington, D.C. Several years later Nick symbolically chose this Church when he sought “counseling” from one of the priests before beginning his new life. Nick was born in a once thriving steel town populated by descendants of European migrants. As a youth, Nick participated in Church life as an altar server, and maintained a dream of becoming a priest when he was older. It was about this time that Nick also began to feel same-sex attractions toward other boys; however, at the time, he did not understand what being gay was. He did understand it enough though to realize that not only was it sinful because he was a devout Catholic, but also socially unacceptable to be gay when he was growing up. During this time, Nick tried to hide his gayness while believing that if he pledged himself to God, He would take his gayness away. Nick took the name Jude, the patron saint of lost causes as his Confirmation name.

After high school, Nick entered the seminary to fulfill his dream of becoming a priest and also in the hope that God would take his same-sex attractions away. He attended seminary for a while before leaving. He would tell others that he left because of immaturity, but for him, he left because his attraction to men did not cease. Eventually, Nick decided that he needed to be true to himself and stop hiding who he is. It was at this point, while in D.C., that he went to confession at St. Matthew’s, not to confess, but to talk to someone. He found this “counseling” emotionally helpful. Nick did not experience a hard break with the Catholic Church, but gradually fell away until he was not practicing by the age of 21. Now at the age of 69, Nick believes that he practices more of what the Church teaches today rather than when he was an active member.
George: George shares a similar background to Nick. He was born in a booming steel town in the late 1930s. He grew up in an Irish Catholic home, went to a Catholic school, was an altar server, and had a family member in the religious life. One of his aunts was a nun. In his youth George wanted to become a priest, but gave up on that dream when he realized he was experiencing same-sex attractions. As a result of his devout Catholicism, he thought he was going to go to hell because of his same-sex attractions. Like Nick, George went to confession to confess his same-sex attractions; however, unlike Nick, George’s experience was dramatically different. After he moved to another state in his early 20s, George went to confession. During the event, rather than offering guidance, the priest told George that he needed arrested and imprisoned. George responded by telling the priest to “fuck himself,” and proceeded to walk out believing that he was going to hell.

After many years, George moved back to the area he grew up in. George no longer attends Church, but when he goes to the hospital he tells them he’s Catholic should something happen to him while he is there. Today considers himself more spiritual than religious. George no longer believes he is going to hell for being gay. He has come to an understanding that if he lives a good life, doesn’t hurt anyone, and follow God’s general rules, he’ll be alright.

William: William grew up in an area that during its heyday had a booming steel economy and a population to support the dozens of Catholic Churches in the area. Within the past 30 years and up to the present, the area was subject to anti-gay attacks and protests. During his youth, attended Church weekly with his Italian family. He was an altar server. He sang in his Church choir. He worked as a volunteer with his Church, and was a member of the Knights of Columbus. According to William, his entire life was through the Church before he came out.
The coming out process for William was very difficult. Due to the religious climate of the area, he felt like he had to hide because he did not want physically attacked. When he told his family, his father was in a state of denial and did not talk to him for several years. Some of his other family members still cannot accept it. William does believe that his family still loves him even if they ignore his sexuality.

After coming out, William no longer feels welcomed in the Church, and feels a sense of sadness as a result because the Church was a significant part of his life. He no longer attends mass except on Christmas and Easter; however, he still believes in the teachings of the Church. He looks at the Catholic Church as something he can no longer have because they don’t accept him.

Eric: Eric shares a similar background with the other participants discussed to this point in that he was also born in an area with a once burgeoning steel economy. Now he sees his hometown as being isolated and always looking to the past and where life seemed to stop after the mills closed. Eric also viewed himself as being isolated when growing up without having a good grasp on the word. This felt normal to him, however, because he was ignorant of what was outside his Catholic faith. In his youth, Eric volunteered in the Church as a sacristan. As he explained it, he was responsible for stage-hand type activities. He was in the choir until his voice changed. He also filled in as an altar server and a lector when needed.

Eric came out when he was around 18 years old. He decided to tell his parents because he was very ill at the time. Like Nick, he talked to a priest about it and found that to be very helpful to him. He related that the priest told him that you know who you are and the expectations for you. Eric finds his family more supportive now than he would have expected years ago. He attributes this to there being more social awareness of homosexuality and that people have had
time to get on board. Still, Eric feels like he cannot be a regular person when the issue of homosexuality comes up and finds it uncomfortable when the LGBT or Catholic community questions why he maintains a gay and Catholic identity rather than choosing one or the other.

Now in his mid-late thirties, Eric does not attend mass as often as he did. He found the statements of Pope Benedict blaming gays for pedophile priests to be very hurtful to the point of changing his practice. In addition, the fundraising and recruitment aspects of the mass turned him off. Even though he does not attend as he once did, Eric laments the Church closings due to diminishing population and priests moving from one parish to the next, both of which he feels prevent the Church from being the social and communal glue that it once was.

Al: Al is the oldest child of Mexican-American parents. His ethnic background played a significant part of his life. Since he was the oldest, he believed his parents were stricter with his Catholic upbringing relative to his brother and sister. He was an altar server at his Church. He helped change out the missalettes for the Catholic Spanish service. He also enrolled in a religious program while he was in high school for those interested in entering into the priesthood. When he realized that he was gay, his religious upbringing and relationship with God caused great difficulty for Al.

When Al realized he was gay, he thought this was a test from God. In order to address what he believed was a sin, he believed that he needed to spend more time with God. Doing this though caused him great stress. He felt as though he was lying to God because he felt how could he serve God when he couldn’t resolve his gayness. In addition to the stress he felt from his relationship from God, he also felt great pressure from his family due to his ethnic background and being the first born male in his family. He felt that he needed to be straight. When God did not take his gayness away, Al became angry with God and stopped going to Church. He finally
accepted himself and his gayness around the age of twenty. He’s forgiven God, but he is not out to his parents for fear of how they would react.

_Anne:_ Al is not the only participant in this study who is not out to their parents. Anne is 19 and struggles greatly with her Catholic and sexual identity. She grew up in a Catholic and conservative community. She would go every Sunday and on Holy Days to mass, but she no longer regularly attends except on Christmas and Easter. She reached this concession with her parents because she would sit in the bathroom during the mass because it was too stressful for her. Anne is out to her siblings and close friends, but is not out to her parents. Not being out to her family also causes her stress because she feels like an imposter in addition to the fact that she does want to shame her family for being a lesbian. She is unable to counter any negative statements made about homosexuality because she does not want to out herself. Anne is a prisoner of sorts between not wanting to cause harm to her family and the need to be true to herself.

_Mary:_ Mary considers herself someone that is rooted in tradition and where every experience you have makes you “you.” While growing up, her mother was strict with Church observances, but she did not recall her father attending Church with the same fervor. When she realized that she was experiencing same-sex attractions she did not act on them. She did not tell her family because she believed that they saw it as a sin. While she was in college at a Catholic University, she hid her sexual identity for fear of reprisal. Mary also never entertained the thought of marriage because it was illegal and she was Catholic.

One evening, while Mary was walking through her neighborhood, she stopped in front of a Catholic Church and asked God why it is so difficult to be religious and gay. After being absent from the Catholic Church for a while, she decided to go back, but was met with political
messages rather than spiritual messages. She considered joining the Episcopal Church, but she could not go through with the final steps because being Catholic is a part of who she is. In trying to live an authentic life where she is not hiding a part of herself from other because she believes that lying by omission is still lying, Mary, in her early 50s, came out to her family when she invited them to a wedding for her and her longtime girlfriend. She was surprised at the support she received from her family, especially from her mother, after fearing their response for almost the entirety of her adult life.

Today, Mary tries to live as authentically as she can. She is happily married to a woman she cares very deeply towards. She is a believer in the New Testament teachings of Jesus, but she does not agree with the ritualistic nature of the Church even though she does not eat meat on Fridays during lent. When confronted for her life and her choices, Mary will only accept judgment from God.

Maria: Maria is 50 years old and experienced the ostracization feared by Anne and Mary. When she was younger, Maria attended mass every Sunday and on holy days. She attended the only black Church in her community. Being a black Catholic means a great deal to Maria as part of her heritage and connection to her past. Maria came out in the early 1990s. When she did, her family, and in particular her mother ostracized and marginalized her. At the same time though, her coming out gave courage to other family members to come out as well. After Maria’s mother died, someone at the funeral read a letter her mother wrote. The letter addressed her family and asked them to find acceptance for gays. For Maria, this was a very powerful moment after years of rejection. Maria is no longer an active participant in the Catholic faith, but she attends other services that she finds more open minded. Still, though, she does not consider herself religious as she finds herself to be more spiritual with the ability to find God within herself.
Fred, Rey, Lenny, Ellen, Josie, and Doug share a commonality in both age and experience. They are each between the age of 18 and 25 and are either in college or recent graduates.

_Fred:_ Fred is out and accepted in his local Church. He was accidentally outed to his high school classmates when he was 14 or 15 and officially came out to his parents around 15 or 16 years of age. His parents are supportive and he is a lector and a Eucharistic Minister at his parish, but like William and Al, at one time Fred hoped that God would take his gayness away. Fred’s Catholic identity means a great deal to him but he is concerned that others will try to separate his Catholic and gay identities by saying that he is sinning, and this he finds very hurtful.

_Rey:_ Rey is a 20 year old college student. She, like her parents, is not a regular Church attendee, but she received all the sacraments she is able to receive. When she was a few years younger she would volunteer at vacation Bible school. She recently came out to her parents, who she found to be very accepting. Rey hid her sexual identity from the time of puberty until she came out because of social stigmas rather than the Catholic stance on homosexuality. When she did come out Rey found her parents very accepting. They told her that God will always love her and that God does not make mistakes. Rey enjoys going to Church when she can, but acknowledges that she is still young and doesn’t have everything figured out yet. Still, she acknowledges that things happen for a reason and that there is a reason she is the way she is.

_Lenny:_ Lenny is an 18 year old college student. He is an attendee at the college Church and participates as a Eucharistic minister. Growing up he was an altar server, a lector, and a Eucharistic minister at his home parish. Lenny came out to his parents when he was 17, and found them to be very supportive. He found the process difficult, but not because of his faith.
Lenny’s concern was how his parents would react. Lenny does not take every teaching literally, but maintains that he is Catholic and will remain Catholic regardless of his sexual orientation.

Ellen: Ellen is a 22 year old student working on a doctorate in the medical field. She regularly attended mass and recently joined a local Dignity community. Ellen is out to her immediate family, who have been very supportive of her, but she is not out to her extended family because they may not be as supportive. When she was younger, Ellen viewed herself as a dual agent and was concerned what the LGBT community would say about her Catholicism and vice-versa. She believes that what one community says or does should not prevent the expression of both of her identities.

Ellen joined the Dignity community after the election of Donald J. Trump in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. Following his election she felt depressed for herself and people like her, and found Dignity while looking online for support in the aftermath of the election. She tries to incorporate God into what she does and give thanks to Him when necessary. She finds that the sacraments provide her with a sense of stability and tradition. She questions why the Catholic Church is against same-sex relationships since those relationships create the same feelings as those experienced by those in heterosexual relationships. In the end, Ellen follows her conscious and does what feels right in the eyes of God.

Josie: Josie looks back at her Catholic upbringing as being isolationist with regards to other religions and practices. Her family is a strict Catholic family that is very involved with their local parish. She was an altar server and is currently a lector at her parish and she was on the peer ministry team while at college and acted as a lector and Eucharistic minister at the campus Church. Josie came out when she was 17 or 18 years old. She found the process terrifying and emotional because she was uncertain if her parents would throw her out of the house for being a
lesbian. Still, before she came out she felt like she was lying and committing sins of omission by not telling her family about her sexual orientation. Josie feels that however imperfect the fit between her Catholic identity and her lesbian identity may be, there is still a fit between the two. She can’t ignore her sexual identity and she wants her Catholic faith to be something that she can commit to long term and not just something she grew up in.

Doug: Doug converted to Catholicism when he was in his early 20s. When he would attend Church with his friends while in college, they would go to a Catholic Church because they were Catholic. This exposure along with supportive religious figures while in college made him feel comfortable converting to Catholicism. Doug is considering the priesthood as a vocation because he feels a sense of duty to the Church. He tries to live out the sacraments and apply Catholic teachings to his relationships and let his faith influence how he lives out his life personally and sexually. Doug came out to his parents as a gay man prior to his conversion to Catholicism. His father turns a blind eye to his sexuality, but his mother refuses to acknowledge his relationships. Doug has found that his Catholic friends and Catholic work colleagues are more supportive of him than members of the public and his own family.

Philip: Philip was an active participant and attendee of mass in his youth. He would attend on Sundays and on Holy Days and was an altar server. However, he stopped actively practicing after he left high school. His family is religious, and even though he does not practice, it still comes to him in different forms. When he came out to his parents at age 19, Philip’s parents did not talk to him for about a month but they did eventually become accepting of him. He believes they are as accepting as they could have been at the time. His parents did not disown him and they always included his boyfriends in events if he was dating someone at the time. Philip says he is who he is. He does not identify as a gay man in general. It’s just him.
Victor: Victor, like the others included here, was an active participant and attendee at mass, but he stopped attending because of political rather than spiritual messages at mass. Victor grew up in a steel town that recently began to experience an economic rejuvenation. When he came out to his parents he worried that they would reject him. His parents were upset, but it was because they did not tell them sooner. Victor recalls them being very supportive of him. He went to Catholic school when he was younger and looks back with fondness on the nuns who taught him.

Victor believes that being Catholic is more than just going to Church on Sundays. To him it is a way of life that he tries to incorporate into how he lives his life. He wonders if perhaps he survived the AIDS epidemic in the early 80s in part because of how seriously he took Catholic teachings on sex. He was able to bring comfort to a friend of his who was dying from AIDS in the hospital by being able to say the rosary with him. It is the lack of discussion of the actions of saints and social justice messages about helping the poor and sick and more emphasis on the politics of divorce, marriage, and contraception that frustrates Victor and changed his practice. Still, Victor believes that it’s not the Church that gets to decide if he is Catholic or not. That’s for him to decide.

Vicki: Vicki is 50 years old and grew up in a small town in a Catholic family where being gay wasn’t something that was done. When she was younger Vicki believed that she had a calling to the religious life because she did not like boys. She had an understanding that she was gay though. She recalls kids teasing, taunting, and tormenting her for being gay. It was so bad that she quit school twice. Vicki’s parents took her to see a psychiatrist in the mid-70s because she had a girlfriend. She did not undergo any form of conversion therapy and the psychiatrist told her that she was normal. When she formally came out in her 20s, Vicki found her mother more accepting of her despite taking her to a psychiatrist years earlier.
Vicki struggles greatly with her sexuality and Catholic identity. She likes the structure of the mass, and finds that structure comforting, but she does not believe that she goes as often to mass as she should. She feels that order to go, she would need to go to confession first. When she goes to confession she confesses that she is a lesbian because she believes Church teachings that being gay is a sin, and she believes that it is a sin. For many years she thought she was going to hell for being gay. Currently, she does not view it as something worse than anything else that is sinful, but it is still something she feels she needs to confess.

Gavin: Gavin attended mass weekly and on holy days, was an altar server, and participated in the Church youth group while growing up. Now as an adult, Gavin continues to attend mass regularly and volunteers as an instructor of religious education. He recalls that he did not have a coming out situation like many others did and feels that things are better now for persons who identify as gay because of the diminished stigma. Gavin does not piece himself down to different identities. He is who he is. Although he instructs religious education, he does not agree with 100 percent of the teachings of the Church, but he holds that no one else does either.