Gay Christians on College Campuses: The Impact of Residence Halls in Synthesizing Multiple Identities

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Abstract

For some, the term “gay Christian” may seem oxymoronic, and as a result little research has been conducted to assess the needs of this underserved population. Through the lenses of identity development and social integration, the formation of these intersecting identities is explored and the negative consequences that these students often experience as a result of these supposedly conflicting identities are evaluated. Sexual orientation and Christianity are investigated within the context of student affairs, with specific attention paid to residence life programs.
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Many believe that there is an inherent opposition between homosexuality and Christianity, and that a person cannot be completely both at the same time. For college students that identify as both gay and Christian, the reconciliation of these two identities can be a difficult task to undertake. There is little research available on this topic, but it is clear that this student population is a demographic in need of support in student affairs. Studies have found that the attempted suicide rates for religious gay and lesbian teens are higher than for their nonreligious counterparts (Hendershot, 2000). This indicates that being religious and gay has marked effects above and beyond the negative consequences associated with being homosexual and nonreligious. Therefore, it is in the best interests of these students to give increasing attention to issues pertaining to gay Christians.

The late adolescent years, when people are roughly 18 to 22 years old, are regarded as a crucial time for identity formation (Lounsbury, et.al, 2005; Yarhouse, 2009; Tinto, 1997), and is an especially salient time for gay Christian youth. Not only are they forming a holistic personal identity, but they may also be dealing with the conflict between two supposedly oppositional identities, leaving them feeling confused and alone. Loneliness can be a pervasive problem for lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) youth, and college peers could fill an important role in reducing alienation (Longerbeam, et. al, 2007). Residence halls have the unique opportunity to provide a social network to these students. However, certain programmatic elements must be taken into consideration for the residence halls to be helpful in these students’ development. In this paper, homosexual and Christian religious identity development will be explored within the framework of college student affairs. Particular focus will be placed on the roles of residence halls and
Resident Advisors in creating a supportive environment conducive to the growth and development of this unique demographic.

**Homosexual Identity Formation**

In order to better understand how having both gay and Christian identities may impact a student’s experience in institutions of higher education, it is important to first comprehend how these two intersecting identities form and develop. Cass (1979) identifies six stages of homosexual identity formation, including: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and eventually identity synthesis. In the first stage, the individual becomes aware of his homosexual feelings or attractions. In the second stage of identity comparison, he may examine the implications of being gay, which may lead to social isolation, and in the third stage, he may eventually acknowledge that he is homosexual and may seek out like individuals (Cass, 1979). The first three stages are when individuals may have the most internal conflict. When a person reaches the stage of identity acceptance, he begins to associate more positivity with his sexual orientation, and later on during the identity pride stage he will become more vocal about his sexual orientation (Cass, 1979). The stage that is the healthiest is the final stage, identity synthesis. In this stage, the person’s sexual orientation is seen as only a part of the larger whole, and the person is capable of seeing their sexual orientation as a part of their identity, but not as his only identifier (Cass, 1979). This final stage can be broadly applied to a students’ identity, and in this paper the term identity synthesis is also used when speaking about bringing multiple identities together.

Gay Christians who reported that they had fully integrated their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs were found to be “significantly more open about their sexual orientation in general and were also more open about their sexual orientation at work” (Rodriguez & Ouellette,
2000, p.340). Because gay Christians often hide their homosexual identity due to shame (Yarhouse, 2009), this openness indicates that identity synthesis can potentially make people more confident in themselves and have a more positive outlook on their overall identity. This is important because Lounsbury, et.al, (2005) showed that both confidence and a strong sense of identity, including sexual identity, correlated positively and significantly with the self-rated educational progress of 255 undergraduate students. This was also supported by a positive correlation between students’ overall sense of identity and GPA (Lounsbury, et.al, 2005). Students appear to be able to concentrate more on the academic aspects of college when they are comfortable with who they are as individuals.

**Gay and Christian Identity Integration**

Identity formation can be a long and difficult process and can be further complicated when the homosexual identity is formed alongside a Christian religious identity. This complication can be exacerbated if one is religiously conservative. This is because there is generally a conflict between believing a Christian religious doctrine and practicing homosexuality. Levy and Reeves (2004) stated that “most Christians and Christian churches contend that homosexuality is a sin” (p.54). Some more fundamentalist denominations even assert that homosexual Christians are “abominations before the Lord” (Hendershot, 2000, p.152).

There are a number of ways in which homosexuals with religious backgrounds attempt to adjust to the two supposedly competing identities. This process may include: dismissing one of their two conflicting identities by rejecting either the religious identity or the homosexual identity, by compartmentalizing the two identities by not letting one aspect of the identity come into contact with the other, by integrating the identity into a new, synthesized sense of self, or by simply living with the conflict (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Levy & Reeves, 2011). Choosing
to reject Christianity seems to be a popular way to deal with the conflict, with approximately 62 percent of homosexuals stating that religion is not an important factor in their lives (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). However, if a person has grown up with religion, it can be damaging to completely dismiss that part of their identity. Many homosexual adolescents experience a spiritual loss, which is akin to losing a part of their identity as an individual (Love, et. al, 2005). The healthiest option is to synthesize the two identities into one holistic character, though this option is often the most difficult and complicated in nature (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Gay Christians often need to reevaluate their faith in order to have their religion reinforce and not interfere with their sexual orientation. A common strategy that has been adopted for the purposes of identity integration is one that emphasizes exegesis, which is a critical interpretation of Biblical text, in contrast with a literalist interpretation. “Exegetical readers consider the social, historical, or political contexts in which the text was written, whereas Biblical literalists do not” (Walton, 2006, p. 5). By changing the way one reads the Christian Bible, it is easier to participate in behaviors that do not coincide perfectly with religious doctrine. Another way to reconcile gay and Christian identities is to attempt to create a distinction between God and the church (Walton, 2006). This is a similar process to interpreting the Bible as non-literal because it takes social influences into consideration. Homosexuals can still have a relationship with God even if they are shunned by their church if they see church as a congregation of imperfect people and see God as a separate, loving and accepting entity. In order to create a newfound relationship with religion that facilitates homosexuality rather than condemns it, the student needs to come into contact with new knowledge that opens the possibility that the Bible may not be the literal word of God.
This new knowledge may be internal, and can occur if a student sees a disconnect between their religious doctrine and their personal experiences of the world (Levy & Reeves, 2001). This new knowledge acts as a catalyst to encourage students to question their faith and begin working through the conflict they had seen between their religious upbringing and their sexual orientation (Levy and Reeves, 2011). This can be a positive step towards an integrated identity. It motivates students to closely examine their personal beliefs as well as beliefs instilled by the church in order to develop personalized value systems while finding reconciliation between their two identities (Love, et.al, 2005).

If a student is struggling with spirituality and identity formation, this can have a number of negative effects on their academic and personal lives. Bryant and Astin (2008) found that spiritual struggle is positively associated with psychological distress (i.e., feeling overwhelmed, depressed, stressed, or anxious), and that students who experience spiritual struggles also “exhibit less confidence in their personal, social, and intellectual capacities” (p. 17). As was previously shown, a lack of confidence and sense of self is correlated to lower grade point averages and a poorer sense of academic performance (Lounsbury, et.al, 2005). It is important to support students going through struggles with identity synthesis whenever possible because it can help improve their college experience on both a personal and academic level.

**Social Integration**

In addition to identity development, it is also important to take social factors experienced by gay Christian students into consideration. It has been shown that difficulty, adjustment, and isolation are three of the experiences that influence student departure from college, with social isolation being a primary cause (Sanlo, 2004). Social isolation is particularly prevalent for gay and lesbian adolescents, especially if they are not completely comfortable with their holistic
identity (Longerbeam, et.al, 2007). This could be due to a lack in confidence exhibited because they are not yet comfortable being “themselves”, but may also be due to perceived hostility from their peers on campus.

When gay Christians are in the process of exploring their faith and sexual orientation, they may feel confused and fearful about the conflict between their two identities (Levy & Reeves, 2011). Often these adolescents will try to keep their sexuality a secret from others in order to avoid judgment or antagonism from fellow Christians. 75 percent of a sample of sexual minority college students attending Christian universities had not disclosed their sexual orientation to their mothers, and 82 percent had not disclosed to their fathers (Yarhouse, 2009). This indicates that there is a widespread fear of rejection amongst this student demographic that needs to be addressed. This is further supported by Levy and Reeves (2011) who stated that the majority of the homosexual individuals from Christian households that they interviewed had admitted to keeping their sexual attractions a secret from others for a significant amount of time.

While this secretive nature could be interpreted as the result of irrational fear, there is data supporting the idea that homosexual students are at-risk for maltreatment during their college experiences. In a study by Yarhouse (2009), approximately 36 percent of sexual minorities reported harassment while on campus. It was also posited that nearly 74 percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual undergraduates and graduate students rated their campus as homophobic (Longerbeam, et.al, 2007). While these statistics may be presenting a perception of homophobia, this viewpoint has real physical consequences for LGB students. Approximately 31 percent of sexual minority college students have left college for a semester or longer, some never to return, due to harassment on campus (Sanlo, 2004). This break from college life may be necessary for some students because “students who worry about an unsupportive environment
and harassment are unable to focus on either academic or co-curricular learning” (Sanlo, 2004, p. 97). Inhospitality on campuses needs to stop in order for these students to be successful academically and socially.

**The Role of Residence Halls**

The residence hall environment provides a unique opportunity to develop the supportive and accepting community essential for gay Christian students to reach their full academic potential. Gay Christian students may feel socially isolated from their peer groups, and may also experience more stigmatization and harassment than their heterosexual counterparts. Because of this, they may experience a variety of problems that have the potential to impact their physical and mental health, including: low self-esteem, feelings of alienation or invisibility, depression, anxiety, violence, substance abuse, and self-destructive behaviors including high-risk sexual behaviors, excessive drinking and suicide (Sanlo, 2004). These findings are consistent with studies that gay men seek to fit in by limiting their visibility, and that less visibility is predictive of a more positive self-perception for them (Longerbeam, et. al, 2007), and with findings that gay male students were more likely than students in any other sexual orientation to report excessive drinking in order to fit in and feel more comfortable in social situations (Longerbeam, et. al, 2007). By creating an accepting place for lesbian and gay students to live, it may be possible to combat some of the self-destructive behaviors that homosexual individuals trend towards.

According to social impact theory, “people tend to interact more with and therefore exert greater influence on those who are closer to them in physical or social space” (Cullum & Harton, 2007, p.1328). In one survey by Yarhouse (2009), 96 percent of homosexual students reported hearing derogatory statements in front of their peers, and 87 percent stated that their peers either
agreed with the hostile sentiment, or failed to challenge it. In order to create an open and accepting environment conducive to creating a “safe” space for gay Christian students, there needs to be peers with influence who are willing to question homophobic beliefs and statements, and who exhibit acceptance towards this student population. If influential members of the residence hall environment openly accept these students, then others will follow suit. This is why open and accepting Resident Advisors are beneficial for sexual minority students.

Reason et.al (2001) stated that in order for Resident Advisors to provide appropriate role modeling against homophobia for their students, the RAs need to be knowledgeable about the subject of homosexuality and be supportive of issues related to sexual orientation. The problem is, not all RAs are equipped prior to hall placement to deal with issues pertaining to homosexuality. Some may even demonstrate homophobic behaviors themselves (Reason, 2001). According to Reason, et.al (2001), “Students who experienced homophobic incidents involving RAs reported more negative feelings toward residence hall living than students with supportive RAs. These students were less likely to recommend residence halls to other LGB students, or to recommend being ‘out’ in the halls” (p.85). Resident Advisors may be the first impression that a gay Christian student gets of college and residence life, so it is important that these RAs are equipped to deal with diversity, including sexual orientation, to ensure that they are providing support for all of their students.

It has been shown that “students who live in residence halls and floors where they feel a sense of belonging, have people interested in their intellectual development, and have well-developed relationships with peers on the floor, achieve higher grades” (McCluskey-Titus & Oliver, 2001, p.17). Forming substantial relationships with peers on the floor may be pivotal in helping the students form and develop identities and aide them in avoiding the issues associated
with social isolation. While any significant relationship can prove beneficial to these students, “peer relations and institutional agents who serve as mentors for the students [have] the most significant impact on how they [continue] to grow and develop during college than any other factor” (Holmes, Roedder & Flowers, 2004, p. 142). It is thus incredibly beneficial for gay Christian students to have supportive Resident Advisors, and would benefit from having gay Christian RAs to utilize as role models.

Rhoads (1995) gave a few suggestions for positively integrating gay and lesbian students into the college environment. It was proposed that homosexual students would benefit if faculty and staff members were provided with training addressing homophobia and sensitivity training to differences in sexual preference, and that it was made clear on campuses that harassment directed at the LGB community would not be tolerated (Rhoads, et.al, 1995). In order for changes to be made, RAs need to be aware of the implications of homophobia for gay individuals on their floors, so that they may take the proper measures to combat any derogatory sentiments that may occur in the residence halls.

**Implications for Further Research**

While it is important to begin the process of support and acceptance for gay Christian students, it is not enough to tackle this issue only in the residence halls. In order for these students to feel truly accepted on college campuses, there needs to be collaboration between staff and students throughout all of the student affairs offices. Every person of influence, whether it be faculty, staff, or resident advisors, needs to become educated on homosexual issues and the implications of these issues on students’ academic and psychological well-being. While one could posit that implicating programming for homosexual issues and beginning the development of an accepting environment in residence halls would be a beneficial place to begin, there needs
to be further research on the gay Christian population in order to come to any concrete
conclusions on what would be the most beneficial in assisting this demographic succeed in
higher education.

It may be helpful to conduct additional research on the benefits of LGB programs for gay
Christian students because this student population may feel as though they are caught between
two opposing forces. It may be necessary to assess the level at which these students feel
accepted by both LGB organizations and Christian student organizations. In order to determine
how student affairs professionals can improve the situation for gay and lesbian Christian
students, we must first determine how these students are affected by their college environment,
and where the most improvement can be made.
References


