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The Experiences of LGBTQ+ Christians in a Support Group and Implications for Practitioners

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Abstract

LGBTQ+ students attending Christian colleges and universities represent a unique intersection of sexual and spiritual identity. There is a dearth of literature regarding

LGBTQ+ students at Christian institutions. Research is difficult to undertake because of the challenge of recruiting participants who may not feel comfortable or even safe identifying as LGBTQ+, even in an anonymous study. This qualitative study specifically studies LGBTQ+ students who are members of a school-sanctioned LGBTQ+ support groups at a Council for Christian College and Universities (CCCU) institution. Participants involved in such a group responded to an interview discussing their faith development, their sexual identity development, and possible conflicts between the two. Two of the common themes, Community and External Conflict, are examined in this article.

Introduction

The development and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ+) students at Christian colleges in the United States is a topic without an abundance of research and literature. Through the process of developing their sexual identities, LGBTQ+ students at Christian colleges may face a conflict between identities or rejection from previous sources of comfort (Love et al., 2005). LGBTQ+ students are dealing with issues of faith development, sexual identity development, and the interplay between these two processes. The intersection that occurs between faith and sexual identity development is worthy of study and could be of interest to professionals seeking to holistically serve their students at Christian college campuses.

Definition of Terms

Much of this work relies on the understanding of key terms that are relevant to study of the LGBTQ+ community as well as the study of faith and faith-based institutions. This study relies primarily on information from the National LGBT Health Education Center (2015), James Fowler (1981), and Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) for these definitions:

Ally- A person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBTQ+ people.

Belief- The holding of certain ideas.

Bisexual- A sexual orientation that describes a person who is emotionally or sexually attracted to people of their own gender and people of other genders.

Coming Out- The process by which one accepts and/or comes to identify one's own sexual orientation or gender identity (to come out to oneself). Also, the process by which one shares one's sexual orientation or gender identity with others (to come out to friends, etc.).

Faith- The activity of seeking and discovering meaning in the most comprehensive dimensions of our experience.

Gay- A sexual orientation that describes a person who is emotionally and sexually attracted to people of their own gender. It can be used regardless of gender identity but is more commonly used to describe men.

Lesbian- A sexual orientation that describes a woman who is emotionally and sexually attracted to other women. Gay can also be used to describe a lesbian.

Queer- An umbrella term used by some to describe people who think of their sexual orientation or gender identity as outside of societal norms.

Some people view the term queer as more fluid and inclusive than traditional categories for sexual orientation and gender identity. Due to its history as a derogatory term, the term queer is not embraced or used by all members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Literature Review

When researching LGBTQ+ students at Christian colleges in the United States, one faces a lot of unique challenges due to the changing views on the subject over time. In their article in *Christian Higher Education*, Wolff and Himes (2010) lay out a short historical overview of LGBTQ+ students at Christian institutions. The picture they paint is, unfortunately, a rather bleak one. The duo points to the church's systemic oppression of the LGBTQ+ community. Wolff and Himes start by describing the church's role in perpetuating myths about AIDS and the gay community in the early 1980s and Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority's campaign against homosexuality. Christian organizations have set up reorientation camps for sexual minority youth and many Christian universities still have admission policies that prohibit homosexual or bisexual students.

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In the same 2010 report, Wolff and Himes used university websites to compile information on twenty Christian colleges and their policies toward LGB students. It is important to note that the Wolff and Himes report did not include policies regarding transgender students. The use of LGB instead of LGBT was an intentional omission "as many schools do not even acknowledge that transgendered students are on their campuses" (p. 441). The authors note that because the schools do not acknowledge transgender students, many policies do not explicitly prohibit transgender student admission, though the campus may not be any more welcoming than that toward LGB students.

While there is a wide array of Christian colleges with varying policies across the United States, Wolff and Himes (2010) noted some trends among admission and conduct. In 2010, they reported that 200 American institutions of higher education barred admission to openly LGBTQ+ students. In their review of policies at twenty Christian colleges, Wolff and Himes found that 75% of these colleges had policies in place for expulsion of students engaging in homosexual behavior.

When entering college, students are entering a challenging and often confusing time in their sexual identity development. LGBTQ+ students are fighting conflicting identities and a large number suffer rejection by

family, friends, or their faith community where they previously sought comfort (Love, et al., 2005). In a 2006 study of closeted and out homosexual students, Gortmaker and Brown (2006) found that students experienced the most oppression from other students, not from the institutional bodies, staff, or faculty.

The Council for Christian Colleges and Universities universities are, by their very nature, going to attract Christian students holding Christian worldviews, and a strong correlation exists between religious fundamentalism and intolerance toward the LGBTQ+ community (Lafave, et al., 2014; Wolff et al., 2012). A 2012 study of Christian colleges in California found that the strongest correlation with a negative attitude toward gay rights was religious fundamentalism. The study found that those students with strong fundamental religious beliefs were far more likely to hold a negative view of homosexuality (Wolff et al., 2012). It is probably no surprise, given this correlation, that LGBTQ+ students at some Christian colleges report a largely negative climate on campus (Vespone, 2016).

LGBTQ+ youth suffer from a higher-than-average risk for mental health issues, and these issues are only further aggravated by the harassment they face at Christian institutions (Vesponse, 2016). Many of these issues could arise from the insulated nature of a Christian college. A 2012 study of student attitudes at Californian Christian colleges found those who had family or acquaintances that were LGBTQ+ held more positive attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. However, the study also found that 60% of those they surveyed had no close family or acquaintances that openly identified as LGBTQ+ (Wolff et al., 2012). It is important to keep the perceived lack of contact with LGBTQ+ classmates in mind when noting that research by Gortmaker and Brown (2006) found most negativity and oppression LGBTQ+ students face is from other students and not from faculty or staff.

In a qualitative study by Wentz and Wessell (2011) of gay and lesbian students at colleges affiliated with the CCCU, none of the students interviewed had ever thought they would identify as LGBTQ+ when they enrolled in college. While it is true that many young people have experienced some discovery of their sexual identity before they matriculate into college, Wentz and Wessell offer some suggestion of why they found a trend toward a later period of discovery among those they interviewed. They point out that students who rejected the outright possibility of

being anything other than heterosexual may experience stagnation in sexuality development.

The experience of LGBTQ+ students at Christian institutions of higher education is still a topic in need of significant research. Multiple researchers note a gap in the literature (Wentz & Wessell, 2011; Lambeth, 2012; Vespone, 2016). Another issue with the existing literature that Lambeth (2012) highlights is that much of the literature dealing with higher education is written through a purely dogmatic lens by writers who have little knowledge of the research outside of their faith.

Theoretical Framework

In an effort to determine how students might experience an LGBTQ+ support group at a CCCU college, the study examined both the identity development of the students as well as their faith development. Fowler's stages of faith development and Cass's model of homosexual identity development served as the foundation for the study.

Fowler's *Stages of Faith* (1981) presents a development model that helps to explain the journey a person goes on as they develop their faith. After infancy, there are six stages of faith development that Fowler identifies stretching from about age three through adulthood as one's faith matures. In the *Handbook of Affirmative Psychotherapy with Lesbians and Gay Men*, Cass's model is presented in six stages of development (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). These six stages represent a gay man or lesbian's journey from first questioning their identity through an acceptance of their identity.

Methodology

Data Collection & Analysis

Utilizing a gatekeeper, participants in this study were gathered from an LGBTQ+ support group at a CCCU college. For the purpose of this study, a support group was a school-sanctioned group that the institution actively advertises to its students. The purpose of the group must have been to offer a space for students to openly explore issues related to LGBTQ+ identity. The group also needed to be identity-affirming in order to qualify for the study. To be a participant, the student must have self-identified as an LGBTQ+ student.

Each interview question was designed to relate to the student's faith development, sexual identity development, or the interplay between the two. On the instrument, the researcher identified which theoretical framework served for the basis of each question. In order to better elicit

narrative response, questions were designed to ask the interviewee to describe a specific story or situation rather than broadly speaking about their entire life (Elliot, 2005).

After the researcher transcribed the interviews, each was put through a program called “Wordle” that created a word cloud to help identify the frequency of recurring themes in the interviews. High frequency words were grouped together into thematic categories. The transcripts were reread, and the passages that fit themes appearing in both interviews were highlighted. Two of the themes identified were *Community & Support* and *External Conflict*. The participants were given a chance to review the transcripts to confirm they accurately reflected their intent. Allowing participants to check the transcripts is a method utilized to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research (Shenton, 2014).

Case Study

The purpose of a case study is to study “what is common and what is particular” about the case (Stake, 1994, pp. 238), so in that way such an approach could provide valuable insight into this population. By examining commonalities and exceptionalities, the authors hoped to better understand the experiences of these students. In this way, this project’s aim was to take on some elements of both intrinsic and instrumental case studies. An intrinsic case study does not seek to study a case because it may represent other cases but “because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, [the] case itself is of interest” (Stake, 1994, pp. 237). In an instrumental case study, the case is used as a way to understand some other issue or problem. Instead of the case being at the center of the work, “it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else” (Stake, 1994, pp. 237). The research presented here is intrinsic in that the authors hope to better understand this individual case due to the particularity of the participants’ situation. This case study is also instrumental in that the analysis will utilize two established developmental theories and critique the ways in which they do and do not describe the participants’ experiences.

Participants

To participate in the study, participants must have identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, attended a CCCU college, and been a member of an LGBTQ+ support group on their campus. To protect the anonymity of the participants and the group, the institution will be referred to as “the College” and the support group will be referred to as “the Group.” The qualitative study consisted of interviews with two

female members. Each participant was asked to select a pseudonym for themselves that they would exclusively be referred to in all recordings and writings. The two selected the names Janice and Anne.

Janice is an upperclassman who described herself as a bisexual. She was raised in a fundamentalist Baptist household. Janice is a member of the Honors College and decided to come to the College because they offered the biggest scholarship. While the Christian identity of the school was a factor in her decision, it was not the reason she ultimately chose to come to the College. Janice did not participate in the Group until her senior year after discovering her bisexual identity abroad. She states that before joining the Group, she had “queer friends” but was not a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Anne is an upperclassman who transferred to the College after previously attending a different CCCU university. While she was at this previous institution, a guest speaker was invited on campus and gave a series of lectures and sermons that included homophobic statements. Anne cites this incident as being one of the things that sparked her to leave. Anne had a friend who knew people who had gone to the College and the two of them decided to transfer together. During her second semester at the College, Anne realized she was developing feelings for a female friend. Anne states that she has not settled on a label for what she identifies as, be it bisexual, lesbian, or something else. She is out to most of her friends and to her parents, and is openly dating another female student.

Results

Community & Support

The word clouds revealed ‘community’ and ‘friends’ to be among the most common words that appeared throughout the interviews with the LGBTQ+ students. The idea of the Group as a community and a place of belonging was a common theme across both interviews. Describing her first time attending a meeting of the Group, Janice states:

That was my first time going to [the Group] and I felt at home there and accepted even though at first I felt like a little bit of an outsider. But it’s the LGBTQ+ community, nobody is more accepting, so I quickly felt like safe and comfortable there.

In Janice’s interview she stated that her activity in the Group made her “feel like this is where I belong...these people are like me.” It was through membership in the group that Janice began to embrace the LGBTQ+ community and find a greater understanding of herself. Janice

stated that through being in the Group she “saw [herself] as a member of the LGBTQ+ community far more than [she] ever had before.”

The theme of comradery and friendship is continued through Anne’s interviews. In describing her initial involvement with the Group, Anne stated the Group was “one of the clubs I joined right away just cause I wanted to get involved on campus and a lot of my friends were already in it.” Anne went on to describe the sense of solidarity and community she felt being in a group composed of people going through the same types of life events she was going through. Describing the importance of the Group, Anne said the following:

[The Group] being visible is really important so that students know that there are resources and there are supportive spaces on campus available to them. And so, I think [The Group] is helpful because it also provides the support and the community so that people have the courage to be themselves without being super worried they won’t have any friends or being super worried that there are going to be all these negative professional academic repercussions.

Community and friendship with LGBTQ+ individuals were prevalent factors in the identity and faith developments of both of the participants. This common theme of community and support ran throughout the other sections of this study’s findings as well. The immersive community provided by the Group allowed for exploration and growth in the identity of the participants.

Connecting their experiences to faith development, both women also spoke to LGBTQ+-related experiences that had an impact on how they viewed their beliefs. Janice mentioned how she thought it was a sin to be gay, but discussions with LGBTQ+ people affected her thinking. Similarly, Anne cited having gay friends in high school as prompting her to question church teaching on gay marriage. Both of these experiences with the LGBTQ+ community led to an examination of their faith. Fowler (1981) states that encountering and responding to situations that lead to “critical reflection” of value systems is an important part of transitioning into more mature levels of faith (p. 162). These experiences aided in the women’s faith development, which later would play a part in reconciling their faith with their own sexual identities.

External Conflict

One of the questions posed to the participants in the interviews was about identifying any times where their faith and sexual identities may

have been in conflict. Interestingly enough, both participants reported similar answers to the question. Both Janice and Anne identified the source of any such conflict to be external. Neither woman spoke in this section about a personal conflict between their ideas of their faith and how they viewed their sexuality.

For Janice, she suggested that because her faith changed with her sexual identity, she never felt they were incongruent. Speaking of her faith and sexual identity being in conflict, Janice had the following to say:

I think the only time they've been in conflict is when someone external to me is perceiving them to be in conflict and telling me that. I've personally never felt that they're in conflict ever, because the process of coming out and the process of moving leftwards in Christianity coincided for me. But it's really through the solidarity week and events that we put on, the conversations I had as a result of that afterwards, those are the times when I'm meeting opposition. When people are telling me they don't agree with the way that I read the Bible, that they don't agree with my, you know, identity style. That sort of thing.

Anne reported that she also felt she had already resolved that conflict internally before coming out as bisexual. While she acknowledged that she suspects it is not the case for many LGBTQ+ Christians, she did not feel she experienced conflict between her faith and sexuality. Speaking on the subject of her faith and sexual identity being in conflict, Anne said, "I kind of already sorted out that I didn't think that gay marriage was wrong or that LGBTQ+ relations were against Christianity before I had to deal with applying that to myself and coming to terms with my sexuality." Anne mentioned that she does not feel this is always the case, going on to say, "I know a lot of my friends...even if they are sure in their minds that being in a relationship is fine that they still feel really guilty about it or something. I haven't had to deal with that."

Anne's sense of conflict was also external. The conflict she perceived is based in the views of LGBTQ+ individuals and Christians with whom she conversed. Describing conflict between Christianity and the LGBTQ+ community, Anne had the following to say:

I think a lot of where I feel conflict is when I feel like when I'm talking to other LGBTQ+ people or people who are allies in the LGBTQ+ community, they kind of have a disdain for the Church, which I understand because there is a lot of badness historically with that. And kind of the same thing when I'm talking to

other Christians who don't know anything about me, don't know that I'm involved in the LGBTQ+ community or that I'm part of it, then talk to me and say things assuming not only that I'm straight, but that I'm against gay marriage... It's so awkward in those moments because I feel like I kind of have to always play devil's advocate in a way, but use myself as an example...I feel like I have to defend one community to the other and it is always not received well.

With both Anne and Janice, the women felt like their own sexual and faith identities were only in conflict because other people perceive them to be in conflict. Both participants felt that they had already reconciled LGBTQ+ issues with their faith before coming to the realization of their own sexual identities. They did, however, still perceive there to be external conflict with both LGBTQ+ and Christian individuals who had not made similar reconciliations.

It is interesting to note that both individuals felt they had adapted their faith simultaneously or before recognizing their sexual identity, so both reported less internal struggle and conflict. It would seem that as they moved along Cass's model, they were also moving along Fowler's. Their sexual identities could have potentially been very hard to reconcile with faiths at a stage of development that favors conformity (Fowler, 1981), and both reported being raised in faiths that condemned homosexuality. However, because these two had begun the process of what Fowler calls "demythologizing" (Fowler, 1981) and took a more individual responsibility of their faiths, they found this transition in sexual identity development to be easier.

Limitations

This qualitative study was conducted with a small sample of students. Due to policies in place at many CCCU institutions, a search of the websites of hundreds of institutions yielded very few schools with university-sanctioned LGBTQ+ support groups. Because of the limited number of schools with such services, the pool of students nationwide that could participate in this study was limited. The uniqueness of these groups makes them especially worthy of study, but in return presents a problem of limited sample size. Additionally, the stigma of being an LGBTQ+ student at a CCCU university makes it difficult to find many students who are actively engaged in these groups and willing to participate, even anonymously, in a study for fear of being outed.

Implications for Practice

The conversations with these women gave rise to a lot of information that could be used to help inform how colleges and universities can better serve LGBTQ+ populations (specifically those affiliated with the Christian faith). This research continues to echo the calls by other researchers for the creation of safe spaces and accepting campus climates where students can explore their sexual identity (Wentz & Wessell, 2011; Lambeth, 2012; Vespone, 2016). These groups are especially helpful as part of the coming out process many LGBTQ+ students will engage in (Vespone, 2016).

There are many avenues an institution could take in setting up groups for LGBTQ+ students to find comradery and develop their identities. These could be done as student organizations, groups in the counseling center, or even organized through campus ministry or faith offices. Each approach may bring certain advantages and disadvantages (for instance, the confidentiality offered by a counseling-based group may require sacrificing the autonomy and student control that a student organization might enjoy). The best choice may be one that fits best in each campus' particular climate and is responsive to the needs of the campus population.

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In this research, the participants interviewed had already had a chance to critically examine and develop their faiths before tackling the issues of their own sexual identity. Likewise, while these women still felt external conflict between their faith and sexual identities, both felt they had personally reconciled these differences before having to apply it to their own identity.

If institutions can guide students through the process of their faith development, they may be able to assist in resolving the incongruence that some LGBTQ+ students could feel. Whether in the classroom or outside, institutions should consider ways that students can “encounter and respond to situations or contexts that lead to critical reflection on their tacit value systems” in order to encourage further development (Fowler, 1981, p. 162).

Lastly, the interviews pointed to the importance of visibility and support on campus. Serving LGBTQ+ populations means creating opportunities at the college for LGBTQ+ students to be presented with role models (Lambeth, 2012). Practitioners at institutions without LGBTQ+ faculty or staff members could work to bring in community leaders

or speakers on to campus to fill this role. Additionally, by working to make their office known as a safe space, practitioners are taking steps to create a more positive atmosphere that will be highly beneficial to their LGBTQ+ students as they move through college (Wentz & Wessell, 2011; Lambeth, 2012; Vespone, 2016). When an ally is known as an ally, they can begin to be a resource. By making their ally position known, practitioners can better help students.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ students at faith-based institutions face a unique set of challenges navigating their identity developments. Universities taking a holistic approach to education need to ensure that both the faith and sexual identity developments of these students are being properly supported. While development is an individual process, there is much schools can do in terms of creating environments that are supportive of these students and offering resources to this population.

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