

DUAL IDENTITY:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF GAY CHRISTIAN MALES

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explores the context and process of identity formation in gay Christian males. Participants were recruited via the Internet to conduct online interviews and a total of four participants were interviewed twice. The findings include four prominent themes which provide greater understanding as to how gay Christians achieve and experience healthy identity integration. Discussion of research findings includes applications to social work knowledge and direct practice.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to shed some light on the context and process of identifying as both a gay and Christian man. It has been my experience that those who identify as gay are often presumed by others to be non-Christian. This is understandable in light of the fact that many opponents of homosexuality source Christian doctrine, religious institutions and Biblical text as reference for anti-gay sentiments. The participants in this study all are men who were willing to share their experiences of being both gay and Christian. The contexts of their lives were as varied as their environments and geographic locations. This lent itself richly to their contributions and to this end, the data informing the research findings reflects a remarkable scope of processes, experiences and contextual landscapes.

The discussion of Christianity and same-sex issues currently keeps surfacing to the forefront of social debates with increasing regularity. For Canadians, this may hold especially true in light of the relatively recent Supreme Court decision that ruled in favour of same-sex marriages in Canada. However, the notion of marriage is only one of any number of overlaps between Christianity and same-sex concerns. The media at large pays very little attention to topics that address gay and lesbian individuals who identify as Christians. Therefore many people in society are surprised that there even are those who self-identify as both same-sex oriented and Christian. This perceived dichotomy between the two camps potentially renders those who adhere to both as nearly invisible or non-existent. However, in relatively recent history, scientific and academic knowledge has begun to explore this dynamic and some literature on the topic does exist. This phenomenological study aims to give voice to a small

group of gay Christians and to illuminate the context and process of their experience of identifying as both gay and Christian.

It might be best to qualify the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality' before proceeding further. Tan (2005) sums up the difference between the two by stating "Spirituality pertains to the sense of meaning, purpose and morality that individuals espouse regarding their lives" (p. 136) where as religion "pertains to a system of standardized beliefs, practices, and experiences related to spirituality". By virtue of these definitions, it would appear that spirituality pertains to an individual process and religion provides the context for the experience and I will employ these terms accordingly.

I also have a particular resonance with the given topic of research in that I am a male who identifies as both gay and Christian and in my experience, very little exists in scientific bodies of knowledge that reflects the lived reality of myself and my gay Christian peers. It is my aspiration that by gaining better understanding of this dynamic and complimenting existing social work literature with the research findings, social work practitioners from all aspects of service provision including micro (therapeutic individual counselling), mezzo (community development) and macro (promotion of social equality) levels will be better equipped to recognize and address unique dynamics of working with this subgroup of the gay community.

## Literature Review

The existing literature on the topic of gays and Christianity is scarce and relatively little has been published to this end. However, there are some research findings that offer significant

glimpses into the context surrounding religious influence on sexual orientation and the process of sexual identity development.

Discussions of spirituality and sexual orientation seem to be somewhat more fluid and expansive than those that involve specific religions. Perhaps this is because there are many forms of spirituality that are not based so much on sacred texts and congregational rituals as they are on basic values and practices in everyday life. For example, a person may find appreciation of one's role in nature to be a spiritual process and yet there may be no immediate thought given to dogmatic belief systems or contexts. It is the sense of meaning and purpose that may make the experience spiritual. There are numerous ways in which this notion of spirituality can be of particular benefit for gay persons.

### *Gay and Christian Identities*

A significant body of this literature focuses on the perceived incompatibility (implied or otherwise) between traditional Christian ideologies and personal same-sex orientation (i.e. Brooke, 1993; Wood, 2000; Miller & Romanelli 1991; Brant 2001; Yip, 1997). Common questions include: How can one be gay and Christian? How can these two identities ultimately be compatible?

### *Traditional Christian Contexts*

Christian communities and churches traditionally have taken a generally negative stand on homosexuality in any form. According to Newman (2001), "Members of Conservative

Christian religions have consistently been found to express negative attitudes towards homosexuality.” (p. 89). One way that this takes place in the form of negativity is through denial of existence. For example, Thumma (1991) asserts “According to a majority of the conservative Christians, there is no such thing as a gay Christian” (p. 333). While this may speak also to the ongoing invisibility of gay Christians, it does imply an avoidance of reality because there are indeed many people who identify as both.

The refusal to acknowledge gays who identify as Christian can be argued as not only a manifestation of the aforementioned oppression, but oppression at its most extreme. The reason why this approach by many Christian groups can be so oppressive is perhaps best summed up by Klein (1993), who so succinctly states, “existence, of however despised a kind, is preferable to, better than, a higher state than, nonexistence” (10). If, as Thumma (1991) claims, the *majority* of conservative Christians deny the existence of gay Christians, then this oppressive dynamic could be seen as epidemic in proportion. Christian fundamentalists in particular have been found to be primary players in perpetuating oppression. According to Laythe, Finkle, Bringle & Kirkpatrick (2002), “fundamentalism [is] a significant positive predictor of prejudice against gays and lesbians”. (p. 623). Buchanan, et al. (2001) provide further context by stating “Fundamentalism can form an extreme challenge to forming sexual identity, if that identity does not adhere to the requisite religious beliefs.” (p. 437).

It is interesting to note that the oppression of gays as experienced at the hands of religious communities is unique from other forms of oppressive dynamics. For example, Booth (1995) states “gays are the only groups who have been religiously condemned not for what they do, or for what they believe, but for who they are.” (p. 57). This is a key context to remember when exploring the topic of oppression of gays because unlike behaviours condemned by

traditional interpretations of Biblical text, sexual orientation is not necessarily a behaviour; it is a characteristic which may or may not be acted upon. Many Christians seem to interchange the notions of sexual behaviour and sexual orientation. However, according to Alderson (2003), “Sexual behaviour is *not* [author’s italics] included in the definition of sexual orientation because many individuals have sexual relations with others for reasons unrelated to their natural proclivities.” (p. 79). An example of this might be a gay man who is closeted and monogamously married to a female to fulfil societal expectations of his given gender role.

### *Theory*

#### *Theological Contexts*

The existing literature on Christianity and sexual orientation employs a diverse selection of theoretical slants that inform the purpose of the given research and presumably influences the interpretation of the subsequent data. For example, some researchers choose to address this subject through a theological framework whereby findings are explored in the context of Biblical interpretation. Accounting for Biblical interpretation provides a context for the process experienced by gay Christians; a traditional interpretation may result in greater oppression of gay Christians while a more accommodating interpretation may be of greater personal affirmation. Some examples of this would be Locke (2004), Frontain (1997) and Swigonski (2003) who explore reinterpretation of Biblical texts by those who strive to adapt it to current constructs of same-sex orientation. Others such as Yip (2002) explore the roles of gay and lesbian Christians in religion’s “constant state of transformation” (p. 199), thereby affording the individual greater

spiritual autonomy and subsequently diminishing the role of traditional church contexts in informing the process of identity formation.

### *Psychotherapeutic Contexts*

Beyond theology, there is also a definitive psychotherapeutic slant throughout much of the existing literature. This is not surprising in that psychology was one of the fore-running disciplines to research sexual orientations (Martin & Meezan, 2003). Indeed, it was only as recent as 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder (Alderson, 2003). While other disciplines have recently entered this arena of research, the residual influence of the psychological foundations of same-sex research is demonstrated by the specificity of the published research studies in regards to mental health concerns (Bozett & Sussman, 1990), the role of spirituality on mental health and functional health status (Coleman, 2003), and narrative therapy (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris & Hecker, 2001). By and large, most of the current research regarding same-sex-oriented Christians explores common linear themes of initial identity dissonance followed by an eventual (or ongoing) process of resolving previously conflicting identities (i.e. Buchanan et al., 2001; Kerr, 1997; O'Brien, 2004; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994). Most of these linear themes are based on stage theories where development advances one stage at a time until resolution of identity conflict is ultimately achieved.

However, according to Rodriguez & Ouellette (2002), there are several strategies that have been identified as ways "in which gays and lesbians might engage to alleviate conflict between their homosexual and religious identities." (p. 334). Incidentally, one of the strategies is

“rejecting the religious identity” which is “a matter of divorcing oneself from the Christian religion” (p. 334). There are numerous ways in which this could be achieved formally (i.e. switching to a non-Judeo-Christian belief system or definitively renouncing all religions) and informally (i.e. gradual decline in church involvement and / or identification with Christian beliefs).

An alternate strategy is to reject their same-sex orientation and this is commonly attempted through some form of ‘reparative therapy’. Reparative therapy is a controversial process whereby gays attempt to renounce their same-sex orientation through methods such as sexual abstinence and other religious-themed techniques (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2002). Yet another option for gay Christians when dealing with identity conflict is to compartmentalize and keep the two identities in completely separate contexts. However, according to Rodriguez & Ouellette, “only by completely isolating one’s homosexual identity from one’s religious identity can this strategy for reducing identity conflict be successful.” (p. 334). This would presumably be a potentially stressful process of identity management due to the vigilance required to isolate such fundamental parts of one’s being.

The final option is identity integration and this is the dynamic generally strived for in most of the existing literature (i.e. Buchanan et al.). In this particular dynamic, “identity conflict can be alleviated when gay men and lesbians integrate their religious beliefs and their homosexuality into a single, new, workable understanding of self.” (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2002, p. 334). But just how might such a process of integration transpire?

### *Identity Formation Process*

Meezan & Martin (2003) speak to the importance of accounting for social dynamics in same-sex research by addressing "...the importance of looking beyond individual factors, to the ways in which individuals interact with others and with their environments, in order to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomena under study." (p. 6). The authors also assert that research on same-sex populations must "...move beyond simple description to the use of complex models, containing mediating and moderating variables, in order to understand the presence of problems experienced by members of these populations." (p. 7). Alderson (2003) provides the following example of how context might apply to the process: "If [the gay man's] environment is tolerant or accepting at every level (societal, parental / familial, cultural / spiritual, peer influence), he will have a much easier time self-identifying as gay than someone raised within an intolerant environment at any or all levels." (p. 78).

Alderson (2003) expands at length on the process of identity formation and criticises linear development theories in that they do not account for the complex dynamics of internal and external influencers on identity formation by focussing nearly exclusively on sexuality. The linear models also have identity conflict resolution as its ultimate stage of completion but Alderson argues that such a limited scope of development theory does not account for results that fall outside of such a utopian ideal. Indeed, Alderson proposes three fundamental factors in the process of identity formation: "1) the individuals themselves; 2) their environment; and 3) the interaction between the two." (p. 76).

Alderson's (2003) attention to an individual's identity formation in relation to their environmental context is a take on some of the similar theories rooted in feminist theory. For example, Eliason (1996), in discussing feminist-based models of lesbian identity formation, states "A theory that accounted for political and social conditions for women would be better

able to explain identities such as the 'political lesbian' and would be more likely to acknowledge and explore intersecting identities." (p. 13). This accounting for contextual influence on process can easily be transferred from its original feminist applications to the discussion of gay Christians.

Alderson does, however, contextualize the process of gay men's identity formation in three fluid stages: Before Coming Out, During Coming out, and Beyond Coming Out (2003). The term 'coming out' refers to the process of self-disclosing as non-heterosexual to those in one's environment. The introduction of these stages is not to mark the progress of identity integration towards some predefined destination, but rather to chronicle the process, regardless of ultimate results. Others such as Eliason (1996) reject such coming-out models stating that they "do not consider other aspects of identity and the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, religion, and other human characteristics may intersect with sexuality." (p. 11). Eliason also states concerns regarding the way in which coming-out models rarely take bisexuality into account, thereby excluding an entire group while addressing sexual orientation and identity.

Like Alderson (2003), Rodriguez & Ouellette (2000) also address the need for process-oriented research by stating "it might not be the construct of [identity] integration that should be of theoretical interest in studying gay and lesbian Christians, but the process of integration instead." (p. 345). Since the potentially influential external influencers on this process are so vast, Alderson recommends numerous topics for further research, including "To what extent do peers, parents, family, culture, and church affect gay identity development?" (p. 80). In this regard, he seems to echo Eliason's (1996) aforementioned concerns regarding lack of accounting for various other characteristics and contexts.

There are a few instances of research that have directly focussed on the interrelation between the gay individual male and his environment. Yip (1997; 1998; 1999; 2003) has done extensive research into how gay Christian males perceive themselves in relation to their respective religious institutions and what, if any, actions they may take in response. As an example, Yip addresses how gay Christian males “shape and reshape their social biographies to reinforce their personal identity and social roles”, thereby moving from “*becoming*” to “*being*” gay Christians (p. 49. 1999). In one specific study, he explores the process whereby gay males in a British church reject the doctrine of the given denomination that denounces their homosexuality and they reclaim the Christian principles denied to them by the church as a “counter-rejection”. (p. 47). Yip explains this concept as follows:

“Having felt rejected by the Church because of their sexuality, [gay Christians] engage in what I call the politics of counter-rejection through which they develop arguments against the stigmatizers, namely the Church. This form of politics of counter-rejection might lead to the actual participation in political activism. ... Also, this politics of counter-rejection does not necessarily lead to [gay Christians’] physical distancing themselves from the Church. Only ten of the 60 gay male Christians studied have stopped participating in any form of church activities as a result of their disappointment with the Church. The remainder participate in the local church with varying degrees of activeness.” (pp. 49 - 50).

Rodriguez & Ouellette (2000) offer the following that might explain why gay Christians engage in this type of 'counter-rejection' instead of denouncing their sexual orientation or alternately walking away from the church itself:

“Despite the traditional animosity that many Christian denominations show towards homosexual men and women, and despite the conflict that many gay and lesbian Christians have experienced between these two conflicting identities, many gay and lesbian Christians feel very strongly about their religious beliefs and about their homosexual identity. The feelings for each of these identities are so strong that they refuse to give up (or reject) either one.” (p. 345).

Lindsey (2002) also explores the unique perspectives of gay Christians as a knowledge-base to instigate change of power dynamics in organized religion, stating “Gay Christians are in a position to translate [their experiential] knowledge into a call for radical transformation that is vital for the survival of the church.” (p. 110). In keeping with the theme of 'counter-rejection', Yip (2002) discusses the role of gays and lesbians in the church as necessary agents of change in bringing traditional Christian doctrine into an immediate and contemporary context. In this regard, gay Christians bear a political cross by default of their identities and the knowledge that their unique roles afford them. This brings to mind the feminist-based adage 'The personal is political'.

Indeed, Mullaly (1997) states that feminist analysis “stresses the link between the personal and political better than any other theory” and “it, like structural social work, emphasizes transformational politics”. (p. 131). What then can be learned from feminism in regards to gay Christians and what theory can best inform research on gay Christians, accounting

for political and social conditions that would be likely to influence intersecting identities such as sexual orientation and spirituality?

### *Structural Social Work*

Alderson (2003) and Martin & Meezan's (2003) appreciation for environmental factors in identity formation not only opens the door to explore the influence of spirituality on sexual orientation, but it ties in directly to social work structural theories that actively account for the role of oppression in identity formation. In a world where homophobia and heterosexism still run rampant, non-heterosexuals continuously face oppressive measures enforced by the heterosexual majority. It would be remiss, at best, to overlook this dynamic when conducting any form of research within this marginalized community. Structural social work theory best contextualizes the social umbrella of oppression.

What is the relationship between oppression and structural theory? Mullaly (1997) states "[Oppression] occurs through the systemic constraints on subordinate groups that form the unquestioned norms, behaviours, and symbols and in the underlying assumptions of institutional rules...modern-day oppression is structural." (p. 145). This statement reflects a broader conceptual scheme than the common and obvious impressions that the word 'oppression' evokes. For example, when terms such as 'unquestioned norms' are discussed, one must accommodate the myriad of subtleties that could entail. Oppression does not occur (or is not limited to) "some coercive law or because of the evil intentions of some dominant group." (p. 145).

For example, Mullaly (1997) states "structural social work includes in its analysis the roles and functions of...heterosexism." (p. 132). This social work-based approach is relatively

new and underexplored when specifically discussing same-sex research, let alone when accounting for the additional dynamic of a Christian spiritual identity. But what exactly might structural social work have to say about oppressed groups and how might this apply to gays?

Mullaly (1997) expands on several forms of oppression that apply to most of, if not all, non-heterosexual persons in our current Western culture. One of these forms is known as 'marginalization'. Mullaly suggests this to be "perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression because it excludes whole groups of people from meaningful participation in society" (p. 147). It is interesting to note that even some prominent evangelical Christians are beginning to voice their concern over the deliberate exclusion of allowing gays to participate meaningfully in churches and their respective Christian communities. For example, Campolo (2002) states "It is a shame and a sin that persons with homosexual orientations usually are forced to discover and use their gifts outside the church... We [Christians] must find ways for them to have loving and fulfilling experiences so that we affirm their humanity and ensure their participation in the body of Christ [the Christian church]." (p. 76).

One other form of oppression that Mullaly (1997) addresses is the concept of 'powerlessness'. He demonstrates this concept by stating "Powerlessness consists of inhibitions in the development of one's capacities, a lack of decision-making power in one's working life, and exposure to a disrespectful treatment because of the status one occupies." (p. 148). Indeed, in a world where many geographic jurisdictions offer no protection for gays regarding housing, employment, and other institutional matters open to discrimination, it is not difficult to see how the notion of powerlessness can potentially affect gays in profound ways that threaten the very basics of human needs.

Mullaly (1997) also lists 'cultural imperialism' as a common form of oppression that occurs when "the dominant group [in this case, heterosexuals] universalizes its experience and culture, and uses them as the norm." (p. 149). Mullaly argues that oppressed group "experience a double and paradoxical oppression" in that "stereotypes are used to mark them at the same time their own experiences and perspectives are rendered invisible." (p. 150). This seems to corroborate some of the findings by Thumma (1991) previously discussed in regards to gay Christians being rendered invisible by mainstream Christian churches.

Perhaps the most common form of oppression reported against gays is violence. So common is this phenomenon, it carries with it its own term: gay-bashing. Violence, as Mullaly points out, is not only evident in "direct victimization, but in the constant fear that violence may occur, solely on the basis of one's group identity." (p. 150). However, what defines violence as being a part of structural oppression as opposed to simply being random acts of isolated aggression? Mullaly states "Violence is structural in when it is tolerated, accepted, or found unsurprising by the dominant group, or when perpetrators receive light or no punishment." (p. 150).

The common response to violence by marginalized individuals, according to Mullaly, is a sense of inferiorization which leads to an impoverished identity. He states:

"This lack of a strong self-identity will, in many cases, lead to an internalization of the dominant group's stereotyped and inferior images of [themselves]... This internalized oppression, in turn, will cause some oppressed people to act in ways that affirm the dominant group's view of them as inferior and, consequently will lead to a process of inferiorized persons reproducing their own oppression....[It is] as if the oppressor gets in

the head of the oppressed. People understand their own interests in a way that reflects the interests of the dominant group. (p. 151).

This concept would seem *especially* applicable to those who identify as both gay and Christian in that, as established earlier, most Christian communities, churches, and structures do not traditionally accommodate non-heterosexual persons (Newman, 2001; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). If structures within Christianity do not accommodate gays and yet, some gays choose to adhere to these structures, then in some ways, they might be perceived as ‘sleeping with the enemy’. How does a gay Christian mitigate the factors of oppression? Is adhering to a traditionally religious structure an example of the internalized inferiorization as presented by Mullaly (1997)? Does this context potentially contribute to a member of the oppressed group developing an impoverished identity? It is these and other similar questions that form the impetus for this research.

### *Social Work Research*

Meezan & Martin (2003) point out that “Social science research on [same-sex] populations is in its infancy, with the first important studies appearing less than fifty years ago.” (p. 5). Indeed, the Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services has only been in existence since 1993 and much of the previous research was conducted, as stated earlier, from a psychological / psychotherapeutic perspective. Meezan & Martin also assert, “Social work has lagged behind the social sciences in the development of a unique knowledge base about [same-sex] populations,

and the research issues faced by other social scientists in past decades are only now being identified and addressed by human service professionals.” (2003, p. 6).

It would appear as if structural social work theory provides the optimal framework within which to further examine the intersections of same-sex orientation and Christian identities in a way that benefits social work practitioners in direct application of service delivery to this subgroup within an oppressed minority. Mullaly (1997) addresses the evolution of structural social work theory and he asserts “It will continue to grow and develop as more information on the experience of all oppressed groups is received from the oppressed themselves.” (p. 133). Presumably this could include the unique experiences of gay Christian males.

### *Social Work Application*

While giving voice to gay Christians may further the evolution of structural social work knowledge, there are also numerous ways in which it could inform direct application of service. Some examples include possibly identifying gaps in service, informing models of best practice, and equipping social work practitioners with a knowledge base to better inform the service delivery process. For example, Grant & Epp (1998) state “By understanding the negative impacts of particular manifestations that unwittingly increases maladaptive thoughts while recognizing and respecting underlying beneficent aspects of spirituality and religion, the counsellor is in a position to help clients critique religiously destructive life events without losing the deeper resource of authentic spirituality and religion.” (p. 28). Kelly (1995) hypothesizes that positive images of God “are positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to loneliness, whereas wrathful-rejecting-impersonal God-images are negatively related to self-

esteem and positively related to loneliness” (p. 216). On this premise, Grant & Epp (1998) assert “Helping clients to recognize and reflect on their image of God can be a vehicle to understand their image of themselves as projected onto God.” (p. 30).

Alderson (2003) suggests that not many social service professionals may be comfortable addressing these kinds of concerns with their same-sex clients. He states “Students in both counselling and clinical psychology report that they are unprepared to work with lesbian, gay and bisexual clients...despite the finding that two to four times as many gay people compared to non-gay people seek out counselling.” (p. 81). Booth (1995) claims “Ignorance of issues facing gays does a great disservice to all clients, gay and straight.” (p. 58). An increase in social work research in same-sex studies could lend itself to a reversal of this trend of practitioner discomfort and perception of being ill-equipped to delivery optimal services to the same-sex community. Indeed, Martin & Knox (2000) state “Research has an important role in educating social workers about lesbians and gay men and their human service needs.” (p. 51).

Alderson (2003) reports “Helping clients to understand and accept themselves is nothing new for counsellors, although doing this with a male who is questioning his sexuality may well be.” (p. 81). Buchanan, et al. (2001) claim “spiritual challenges are at the heart of the gay or lesbian experience.” (p. 436). How much more prepared might a practitioner be when given information and research findings that assist in better understanding same-sex identity and potential barriers in identity integration such as religious or spiritual influencers (both external and internal)? Martin & Knox (2000) support the need for research with the following statement: “Social work programs require research-based knowledge about lesbians and gay men to educate students about their characteristics and needs, their institutions, and their communities.” (p. 57).

## *Voices of the Oppressed*

Buchanan, et al. (2001) suggest the “dominant internalized discourse” for gays and lesbians is the dissonance between their religious and sexual identities. (p. 443). To this end, the authors suggest employing a narrative perspective that affords the gay Christian individual a means to deconstruct presumed realities in a safe and guided conversation, thereby allowing internal dramas to be externalized and processed with a greater degree of objectivity and presumably a restored internal locus of control. This narrative may not only benefit the social work client, but also lend the practitioner a better understanding of the contextual dynamics of being gay and Christian.

Clearly research participants are not necessarily social work clients nor can we assume that all gay Christians require therapeutic intervention in their process of identity formation. However, when gay Christians are afforded the opportunity to relay their process of ongoing identity formation, a greater understanding of their internal and environmental influencers on identity can be achieved. This may well be the insider knowledge, indeed, the voices of the oppressed, that Mullaly (1997) claims the evolution of structural social work verily depends upon to grow.

Dudziak (2002) asserts “Educating for social justice is integral to social work’s mandate”. (p. 6). Educating for social justice is one form of consciousness-raising; a term frequently employed by both feminists and structural theorists. What does this term mean? Montenegro (2002) defines it as “a process by which individuals and people become aware of their conditions of life and, consequently, transform them.” (p. 512). However, this process is

not only limited to a new awareness as experienced by an oppressed individual. Indeed, the new awareness may be experienced on a level beyond merely individual. Montero (1998) expands:

“Consciousness-raising in relation to certain problems not only leads to transformation of what is accepted into the unacceptable, it also produces self-recognition among individuals as actors and constructors of their reality. This leads them to play new roles, to generate and deploy new forces, and to recognize that they have power and resources that enable them to make changes in their life circumstances. Construction of an integral consciousness through which recognition of causes and effects puts an end to the division and distortion produced by dominant social interests has a deideologizing effect. The fundamental goal is to reveal what is hidden to make changes.” (p. 285).

Mullaly (1997) contextualizes consciousness-raising under what he calls the meta-theme of structural social work practice; empowerment. He defines empowerment as “a process through which people reduce their powerlessness and alienation and gain greater control over all aspects of their lives and their social environment.” (p. 167). One of the primary tenets of empowerment theory is that of consciousness-raising and Mullaly breaks this process down into four distinct components.

The first component is ‘normalization’. According to Mullaly (1997), normalization is a method to demonstrate to others that “their problems and / or situations are not unique.” (p. 173). The second component of consciousness-raising is collectivization. This process entails a banding together of sorts by a marginalized group to oppose the oppressive social and often isolating structures as experienced by groups such as same-sex minorities in general. The

desired collectivism would serve as much a therapeutic role as any other because in this process, “positive changes in the conception of self occur” (p. 176). However, collectivization can also mobilize a community to take great action towards social change by taking a ‘strength in numbers’ approach to send a message of solidarity to the dominant group (i.e. Pride parades, etc.).

The third component of consciousness-raising is the process of redefining. Mullaly (1997) explains this dynamic by stating “Redefining is a consciousness-raising activity in which personal troubles are redefined in political terms, exposing the relationship between objective material conditions and subjective personal experience.” (p. 177). The ‘objective material conditions’ are the context within which the dynamic is experienced and the ‘subjective personal experience’ is the process experienced within the dynamic. If exposing the relationship between the two is part of the process of redefinition resulting in identity integration, then this would seem to be of particular importance to gain a better understanding of regarding the group at hand. The fourth component of consciousness-raising is engagement in “dialogical relationships”. His definition states “A dialogical relationship is one wherein all participants in the dialogue are equals, each one learning from the other and each teaching the other.” (p. 180).

I have formulated a research question that I believe can potentially give further voice to the oppressed, thereby also gaining a greater understanding of the sexual/spiritual dual identity dynamic so as to not only facilitate awareness in the individuals belonging to the given group, but also to determine best practice for social service providers.

*Research Question*

What is the process and context of identity formation in gay Christian men?

CHAPTER II  
METHODOLOGY

*Phenomonology*

In attempting to explore the experiences of gay Christian males, I decided to conduct a phenomenological research endeavour. Phenomenology examines the varied individuals' perceptions of a phenomenon as reported by those who have directly experienced it (Creswell, 1998). These perceptions inform the process by which people make meaning of the circumstances around them and in their lives. According to Tan's (2005) definition of spirituality as a form of making meaning, phenomenology would be especially pertinent to this study. Both spirituality and phenomenology relate to people making meaning of their lived experiences; spirituality provides a process for making meaning and phenomenology examines how that meaning is made.

According to Appleby (2001), "One form of phenomenology is *heuristic inquiry* [author's italics], in which the researcher sheds an effort to be detached and actually experiences first hand the phenomenon they are studying" (p. 135). This would certainly apply to this particular study in that, as stated earlier, I am a male who identifies as both gay and Christian. It would be impossible for me to detach from the topic at hand since I would be quite unable to identify otherwise for the duration of this study. While this does somewhat contradict phenomenology's insistence on the need for bracketing, the practice of separating one's personal experiences from the analytical process (Creswell, 1998), I believe that my identity as a member of the researched group afforded me some insights into the data that non-gay and non-Christian

persons may have completely overlooked. I also believe that by bringing my gay Christian identity to the table during the interview process afforded me a greater sense of trust from some of the participants.

### *Procedure*

After deciding my research question and having chosen my theoretical framework within which to proceed, I formulated a qualitative research endeavour. I compiled a list of theme-centered interview questions and sought to find participants who might want to partake in this study. With my interview questions (see Appendix 1) I attempted to be consistent with the theories informing my work. I left questions open-ended and solicited broad information regarding both the participant's internal and external influencers on how they view themselves and others. The broad scope of most of the questions also afforded them the opportunity to set their own rate of depth based on their comfort levels and subsequent disclosures. If a person wanted to comment in depth and detail, the opportunity was presented. However, if someone preferred to remain focussed in general topical themes, then he could do so without any greater expectations. This is in keeping with Schorn (2000) who writes: "The theme-centered interview offers interview partners the opportunity to develop their special point of view in detail...the focus is on the individual person and his or her experiences and opinions concerning a topic." (n.p.). The interview questions also were worded in terms that reflected the context- and process-centred perspective employed. For example, discussions around concepts of 'community' were common as were methods of relating to others within their environment. This was done in consideration of ecological factors informing perceptual contexts of identity.

Questions included specific focus on topics such as self-disclosure as gay and Christian to various communities and social environments.

### *Role of the Internet*

The gay Christian population is not easily identified and at the time of the commencement of this study, I was situated in a relatively small rural city with no visible gay Christian community to speak of (or at least I, as a member of the local gay community, was not aware of such). This presented some immediate concerns regarding access to potential participants. However, through my own experiences as a semi-rural gay man, I was aware of the significance of the Internet in the gay community. I decided to do some research in that regard and as it turned out, I did not have to look far to find scientific knowledge to support this notion. According to Appleby (2001), "The Internet [is] a valuable resource for contacting a population which is invisible in the broader society." (p. 134). This would seemingly apply well to gay Christians. Haag & Chang (1997) state "The Internet can be a major link for social service providers working with socially isolated gay and lesbian communities." (p. 87). Furthermore, the authors offer the following observation:

"One of the greatest advantages that electronic networking has brought to the gay and lesbian community is the ability to interact with anonymity. For years, because of oppression and other social problems, there have been difficulties for young gays and lesbians to establish themselves in the community. For this reason, social isolationism develops in individuals, making it difficult for gays and lesbians to interact with one

another. Through the use of computer technology, interaction can be as simple as dialing the phone, but with one great advantage: no longer is social isolationism involved in the interaction. A person online retains anonymity and control of interactions.” (p. 85).

Sherhoff (2000) adds “A particularly useful and relevant resource that the Internet assumes is that of a lifeline for those isolated queer individuals who live in remote areas or who feel too stigmatized to seek out support” (p. 106). The vast expansiveness and near ubiquity of the Internet also means that potential participants are not limited to any particular geographic region. Since social climate influences dynamics of oppression, the ability to have such a wide access to gay Christians provided for a fairly well-rounded sample.

Anonymity can also play a role in the quality of data obtained on the Internet. Rezabek (2000) states that online research “provides for anonymity which can lead to greater openness.” (n.p.). Grohol (2000) corroborates: “Research shows that on-line social interactions can have a greater incidence of dis-inhibition in on-line communications.” (p. 8). This potential for greater openness was something that intrigued me as it could benefit the data collection procedure with an additional element of insight. To this end, I decided to pursue my research through this avenue of communication.

Online interviewing techniques can also afford the researcher greater benefits than just those regarding access. The ability to interview another from the comfort and privacy of our respective homes not only provides a natural setting, but also eliminates cost and time demands of meeting in person. Holge-Hazelton (2002) states that one of the benefits of electronic research as “the potential of increased confidentiality and privacy, which can mean that people who under different circumstances would not participate in a research study are more likely to do so in this case.” (n.p.). The ability with modern instant-messaging chat programs also afford for

immediate opportunity to save the conversation as a text file on the computer, thereby eliminating the need for tedious traditional methods such as audio-to-text transcription from recorded cassette tape. This efficient means of saving the conversation as a text file also offers the “elimination of transcription bias and easier handling of data.” (Morag, 2001, n.p.).

However, there are some drawbacks to online interviewing and communication and one example of this is that the sample is limited to Internet users. There is no telling how many gay Christians are out there who either do not have Internet access or who are not well enough versed in computer technology to engage in this form of online dialogue. This presumably limits the opportunity for some participants to take part in the research process.

I also found that the online technique of interviewing participants influenced the capacity and usage of the allotted timeframes for the interviews. Some participants had faster keyboard typing skills than others (or perhaps the slower typists were in fact more pensive and less impulsive in their answers than their peers). The faster typists naturally contributed to the study with a greater volume of transcripts and statements, thereby creating inconsistent amounts of data across the sample base.

Another potential concern for online interviewing regards the authenticity of participant identity. For example, one could inquire as to how a researcher can be sure that the individual with whom they are chatting is indeed who they claim to be. To this end, verification of identity was not only addressed via the consent forms, but also by virtue of email correspondence. Interviews took place at designated times and the email addresses by which we corresponded were utilized to access the chat programs. Since the chat programs required a valid password-protected email address to enter the chat system, I could identify the person in the chat window because they had access to the same email address to which I had corresponded with them to set

up the chat time in the first place. Throughout the entire data collection process, I was never in a chat window with anymore than one person, namely the participant. However, the possibility remains that a research participant could have constructed a fictional identity and / or fictionalised their responses, thereby jeopardizing the authenticity of the data. While there is an obvious limit to the extent that I was able to verify the authenticity of a participant's identity and statements, I am confident that all available measures were exercised to counteract this somewhat remote possibility.

### *Recruitment*

Due to the invisibility of the gay Christian community and since I am a member of the group in a general sense, I decided to recruit the participants via the Internet and my first course of action was to join an online gay Christian community. I located one online group (now defunct) called "Gay Christian Online" through the MSN Community Network and I posted a few brief words regarding myself and my interests not only as a fellow gay Christian, but also an academic involved in research on the given community. Within a day or two, I received an email from an individual who was most supportive of my research aspirations. He volunteered to be a participant and he, in turn, told a few of his online friends about my research. I had composed a letter of invitation inviting interested participants to contact me (see Appendix 2) and my first participant electronically forwarded the letter to some of his gay Christian friends. Two of them ended up contacting me and subsequently became participants as well.

The fourth participant was a gay Christian friend of mine whom I had known for a few years prior to this endeavour. I ended up with four participants in total and I interviewed each of

them twice via an online chat program of their choice. The instant-relay chat programs we ended up employing were MSN Messenger © and Yahoo Messenger ©. The first interviews were conducted as the initial source of data and were approximately one-and-a-half hours long. The follow-up interviews were a bit shorter and provided me the opportunity to seek clarification if needed regarding my interpretation of their statements from the first interview. Similarly the participant a chance to expand on their initial responses to topics discussed. The initial interviews were loosely structured around an interview guide (see Appendix 1) but the conversations frequently wandered off into other territories that the participants felt lead to address. A transcript of the first interview was sent to the participant shortly after the session and this afforded for ample time for review prior to the second interview. In most cases, the second interview employed the transcript of the first interview as a launching point for continued discussion.

### *Participants*

There were four participants who took part in this research endeavour and I've included the following brief overviews of each participant. Please note that pseudonyms have been assigned to each individual to ensure their confidentiality.

Bob is a gay Christian male in his early 40s and he lives in a rural Southern part of the United States; an area that is traditionally known for its exceptionally conservative values. He is single and lives alone. He has identified as a gay man since his early twenties and while he does not discuss his sexual orientation beyond his close friends, he assumes that most people in his immediate environment know he is gay.

Ken is a middle-aged gay Christian male who lives in an Eastern part of the United States. He belongs to a conservative Protestant denomination and is in a long-term relationship with his partner. Like Bob, he does not discuss his sexual orientation beyond his close social circles but he believes that most people in his community, particularly his church community, are aware that he and his partner are in a committed relationship. Ken has identified as gay since his late thirties.

James, is a middle-aged gay Christian male and he lives in a large Eastern Canadian city. He is single and has spent most of his adult life as clergy in a very traditional Christian church. James has identified as gay since he was a teenager but is discerning regarding his disclosure of his sexual orientation even though he believes that many in his environment know he is gay.

Eric is a single gay Christian male in his early 40s and he lives on the Canadian prairies. During the time of the interview, he was in the process of leaving his position in a fundamentalist evangelical church ministry and in transition regarding career and residence. Eric has discussed his sexual orientation with a few people around him but for the most part, he remains closeted due, in part, to his religious environment.

All of the men self-identify as gay, report being raised in conservative Christian households and all claim to have professed their Christian faith from their early 20s to the present.

### *Ethics*

Numerous measures were in place to ensure that ethical concerns were addressed to the best of my ability. There was no coercion involved in the recruitment stage as each participant

responded to the initial letter of invitation. The letter of invitation clearly stated that this was part of my academic pursuits and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without incident. Each participant was e-mailed a consent form (see Appendix 3) which they signed (verified by a witness who also provided signature) and these forms were then faxed or mailed to me. The time involved in this process afforded the participants to process their decision to be involved, thereby ensuring their ultimate contribution was deliberate and not impulsive.

I was also aware of the need for a plan should the interviews prove to be traumatic for the participants in any way. To this end, I also had a list of suitable clergy and counselling services in each of the participant's respective locations on hand during the interviews should the need for an appropriate referral arise. I proceeded sensitively throughout the interviews so as to create a climate of trust and respect. Each participant was offered a gift certificate totalling \$15.00 in their respective currencies as a small token of appreciation for their input. I have not received any monetary sum or any gift in kind through my involvement of this research.

All information relevant to the participants of this study including the data itself is available only to my advisor from the UBC School of Social Work (Dr. Mary Russell) and me. All electronic files have been protected through the use of an electronic password limiting access to the password holder (in this case, myself). All materials such as computer diskette with the e-interview text-files will be secured in a locked compartment at UBC as per standard procedure for the required amount of time prior to secure disposal. This will be done upon completion of this study. To maintain confidentiality in the research findings, all identifying information, including given names and names of specific geographic locations have been changed to ensure privacy.

## *Data Analysis*

Once the data was collected, the information was examined in a method called 'vertical hermeneutics' whereby each participant's given data from the two interviews was compiled and examined as a single case study. Themes were then elicited from the individual sets of data and assigned keywords for reference. Special topics were then selected and chosen for special emphasis and put under greater scrutiny, a method also referred to as "tagging" (Schorn, 2000). Once general themes were explored and given particular scrutiny, the four sets of data from the respective participants were examined in relation to each other, a process known as horizontal analysis (Baptiste, 2001). From this process emerged clusters of meanings that were then categorized and dissected both for textual and structural descriptions. Common threads emerged and several comprehensive descriptors of the experience can be deduced from the exploration. Certain themes were addressed in the follow-up interviews with the participants for verification regarding the accuracy of my interpretation of their stated sentiments (a process known as member-checking) (Silverman, 2000).

The computer chat programs employed offered emoticons (such as smiley faces, etc) whereby the user could demonstrate an emotion experienced during the interview. These emoticons provided some potential challenges in data interpretation in that it was sometimes unclear to me exactly what they represented. For example, a smiley face can represent a hearty laugh, and genuine sense of well-being, or sarcasm – it all depends on the context of the sentiment preceding the icon. To this end, it was beneficial to have the second interviews to afford the member-checking process.

### *Genuineness and Consistency*

The data of this study is deemed genuine if for no other reason than by virtue of the fact that self-admitted gay and Christian men relayed their experiences. This is in keeping with the teachings of Freire (1998) and who asserts that people are the experts of their reality. If we want to endeavour to find out what is the reality and experience of a person, then we have to take their self-report at face value. This is also in keeping with the structural social work theory that provides the framework for this research (Mullaly, 1997). Inherent in this approach is the assumption that the participants spoke the truth of their realities to the best of their ability.

Several measures were in place throughout this study to provide maximum consistency to the findings. As stated earlier, participants were provided with transcripts of their respective interviews and they were provided opportunity to expand on a previous thought or correct the context. Likewise, I was able to ask for feedback of my interpretations of their data. To this end, the second follow-up interviews proved valuable indeed and all four participants indicated that they were satisfied that the data accurately reflected their stated sentiments.

The efficient technique for saving data exactly as the participants had typed it also lent support to the data in that there was no room for transcription bias or inaudible response. I also chose to intra-rate the data, a process whereby I revisited the data after periods of distance from it, thereby affording me the chance to review it again from perhaps a shift in perspective due to the elapsed time.

## *Reflexivity*

Throughout the process of analyzing the data, I found myself both identifying with the participants and yet, on occasion, feeling completely separate; like an outsider looking in. I attribute this to the variance of experiences as reported by the participants. Even though I identify as both gay and Christian, I quickly gained a new insight into the diversity of experience that Christians can have based on spiritual and religious location. Someone from a traditional denomination may view themselves and their Christianity in a completely different light than someone who does not identify from a traditional approach. These fluid subtleties allowed me to alternately bracket (separate from the analysis process) my own experience and spiritual location and yet, on other occasions, continue in the aforementioned heuristic inquiry. I believe that this alternating sense of immersion and detachment from the data afforded me the opportunity to view the data from more than one angle, thereby increasing reliability of the findings.

My ongoing reflection and introspection also gave me an added sense of self-awareness throughout the process of data analysis. I found myself inspired by the data and it proved to be a catalyst for continuing in my own personal spiritual journey. This manifested itself in a number of ways and I found myself becoming more involved in the gay Christian community as a direct inspirational response from this endeavour. I believe that this increased self-awareness also afforded me to be more aware of any subtle personal projections that I might have ordinarily made but for the benefit of this additional introspection and insight.

## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

The results of this research shed significant light on the process of identity formation and contexts in which this occurs. Four prominent themes emerged from the data that speak to the unique experiences of the participating men. While most of the data collected overall is useful to understanding the experiences of gay Christian males, I have decided to stick with the main clusters of meaning that best address the topic.

#### *Awareness of Separate Identities*

Each participant relayed evidence of an *Awareness of Separate Identities* and each person contextualized their identities in a unique and personal manner. The notion of one aspect of identity being of greater importance than the other was a running theme throughout most of the data and it really provides great insight into the way in which they make meaning of their dual identity experiences. For example Bob views his sexual orientation as being a 'gift from God' and he states this numerous times throughout the interview. The fact that he capitalizes the letters when he speaks of his sexual orientation in such terms adds greater emphasis to the way in which he contextualizes it. For example, he states:

"I'm not sure I'd say [being gay is] incidental. I do feel strongly it's a GIFT FROM GOD. I really don't mind the term 'gay Christian' at all. But I prefer 'Christian who happens to

be gay.’ ... a man of integrity first--and then being gay on down the list.”

It is interesting to note that by rearranging the term ‘gay Christian’ to “Christian who happens to be gay”, Bob indicates that one identity supersedes the other in importance, with gay being, as Bob states “...on down the list.” The fact that Bob equates integrity with his Christian identity instead of his same-sex identity also seems to suggest that he places greater importance and value on the former.

He further expands on the ‘gift from God’ theme in the following excerpts from his interviews.

“BEING GAY is not wrong. It TOO, is a gift. My hope would be that all Christians would unite in helping folks understand this truth. I do believe that God has a plan for each and every life. And I believe that being gay has (and continues to be) an integral part of God’s plan for mine. I have often thought that being gay has given me such a unique perspective as a Christian. So, in that sense, I would say that my being gay is NOT incidental – but instead a well-thought-out gift that God wanted ME to have... My being gay is nothing short of a spiritual gift from our Father.”

It is interesting to note that Bob repeatedly talks about ‘being’ gay as opposed to same-sex behaviour. This seems to suggest that his same-sex identity is based on something he perceives himself to be as opposed to an identity based on behaviours. Perhaps Bob’s most telling remarks regarding the way he sees his identities in relation to each other can be demonstrated by the following excerpt from his interview.

“I feel it truly is [imperative] that gay men (and women) really think through the unique beauty of their sexuality gift from God. And to always STRIVE to CULTIVATE the fruit of the Spirit so that all people will see the Spirit of Christ in these individuals – making sexual orientation considerably more of a ‘non-issue’. Sure, homosexuality is ‘interesting’. Nothing wrong with that. But, to me, it should NEVER be the focal point of a Christian’s identity. THAT distinction belongs to MIRRORING THE LOVE OF CHRIST EVERY DAY.”

In this statement, Bob emphatically downplays his same-sex identity in favour of elevating his Christian identity. Indeed, he contextualizes his sexual-orientation as a “non-issue”. James offers a less emphatic take on this theme but an equally poignant sentiment can be deduced when comparing his statements regarding various disclosures. For example, he states “I don't [disclose sexual orientation to others] unless they are obviously [gay] friendly or sometimes if I have had a couple of drinks and feel ready for a fight!” He then indicates that he would prefer his sexual orientation be a non-issue. When asked how he would prefer that others respond upon discovering his sexual orientation, he replies “I don't want to say that my sexuality is irrelevant - it isn't - but the best reaction would be ‘So what?’ ”. However, his tone changes when asked how he would ideally prefer that others respond to his profession of his Christian faith: “The best answer if/when I reveal myself as a Christian to another gay person would be, ‘How wonderful! Please tell me all about it.’” His tone addresses his sexual orientation as a topic of potential conflict (“ready for a fight!”) or a non-issue (“So what?”) but his Christianity as something much more likely to result in an engaging conversation (“How wonderful! Please tell

me all about it.”).

At one other point in the interview, James offers a less enigmatic insight into his perception of his sexual orientation in relation to his spirituality by simply echoing Bob’s sentiments; “I now regard my sexuality as God-given.” However, the fact that he uses the word “now” implies a process has taken place whereby he has not always viewed his same-sex orientation in such a favourable light.

Ken also demonstrates an awareness of separate identities in that like Bob, he regards one as a choice and the other as innate. This is evident when he says:

“Being gay is simply who I am. I did not choose to be gay, I just am. Being Christian, of course, is my choice, so it is different.”

While, Ken does not specifically state if the perceived difference makes one take precedence over the other, the fact that he states a freedom of choice regarding religious beliefs indicates that his Christian identity is important enough for him to choose it whereas being gay is “*simply*” who he is. He adds: “I am gay whether I like it or not, but on the other hand I could be Muslim, Mormon, or atheist.” Once again, his tone indicates a resignation to his sexual orientation but an enthusiastic freedom of choice regarding his spirituality, so much so as to list other options available to him. This would seem to suggest that in his subtle way, he honours and appreciates his chosen spirituality to a greater degree than his innate sexual orientation.

The interesting exception to this common theme is Eric. He concedes that at one time his spirituality *did* supersede his sexual orientation but that at the present time, due to a shift in the

focus of his personal life, the balance has shifted to the opposite side whereby his sexual orientation now takes precedence. This is evident when he states:

“...both [gay and Christian identities] are part of my being. That was the difficulty in admitting my sexuality to myself. How does one be gay and be a Christian at the same time? Most of my life, my Christian identity has been at the forefront because of the nature of my education and employment. Since my admission of being gay, my homosexual identity has become more important since I want to be true to myself or authentic. Hence, the identities relate and conflict.”

It is important to remember that Eric is a Bible school graduate and was concluding his employment at an evangelical church at the time of the interview. He was in the process of ‘coming out’ as a gay man to those with whom he felt safe to do so and his world was in a state of transition. The changing context of his environment and his embarking on the ‘coming out’ process has influenced the context in which he views his identities.

All of the participants demonstrate an *Awareness of Separate Identities* and one identity seems to somewhat take precedence over the other. This may be dependant on various contexts such as stages of ‘coming out’, ideals, and perceptions of integrity.

### *Identity Conflict*

Each participant indicated that with a growing *Awareness of Separate Identities* came potential for conflict between the two. Perhaps one of the greatest contributions that the research

findings of this study offer is the notion that not all conflict within this dynamic is processed in the same way. In the examples provided, Bob indicates dissonance between his perception of self and stereotypes of gay men. The depth of this sentiment is evident when he relays the following incident:

"I distinctly remember when I was 19...seeing a group of men in a record store. Clearly, they were gay. I remember thinking, "I DO NOT WANT TO BE LIKE THAT." This was my ongoing thought for about four more years."

The fact that in the process of the online interview, Bob typed a choice part of the above statement in capital letters for notable emphasis is telling in and of itself; he did not want his own sexual orientation to be viewed in the same context as what he understands the 'gay stereotype' to be. Bob's next statement is also revealing in that he exposes where this dissonance originates: his spiritual values. He states:

"You see, ONE reason I resisted the "gay world" was that I had no interest in things seen as "typically gay." I never wanted to go to wild parties, have indiscriminate sex, etc.. I just wanted a fairly calm, quiet life--serving the Lord and sharing the beautiful gifts of our Father with one man. In a committed relationship. Many young (teens-->early 20's) people often don't see that option."

This statement seems to suggest that to Bob, the stereotype of being gay involved behaviours that are not in keeping with his spiritual ideals, namely a life of serving God in a

monogamous same-sex relationship. His religious beliefs were not reflected in any of the gay stereotypes that he was exposed to and this seemingly created some anxiety. This demonstrates the importance of context on the process of managing dual identities. Bob's statements also seem to shed light on his earlier emphatic differentiation between *being homosexual* (stereotypically or otherwise) and engaging in *homosexual behaviours*. Clearly Bob's initial identity dissonance was based on a discord between his values and characteristics and the perceived values and characteristics of those around him whom he identified as fellow gay men.

Bob's also speaks to the fear of talking about his sexuality, brought on by the conflict between identities. For example, he states:

"It was a bittersweet time, for sure. I loved THINKING about making out with boys, but I also had very strong feelings that NO ONE could know this was going on for me... I knew no other SELF-IDENTIFYING gay Christians at the time. However, I DID find out later than many of my Christian friends at the time were/are gay. I guess we were ALL afraid to talk about it."

Bob's above statement seems to suggest a tone of isolation and perception of extreme fear which later, upon his discovery of their similar sexual orientation, is seemingly somewhat dispelled. The intensity of Bob's fear is indicated by his capitalization of the words "NO ONE".

Like Bob, James's experience of dissonance between his identities was also founded in a spiritual context as he indicates in the following statement:

“I had difficulties with this for years! I somehow knew that God was calling me to be a priest, and at the same time I knew I was attracted to guys. Hey, more than ‘being attracted’ I actually had sex with men! I didn't understand this, having been brought up both at home and at church to believe that sex was only permissible under certain circumstances. One man, one woman, within marriage. But for my late teenage years, and through most of my 20's, I was wracked with guilt.”

James's dissonance was seemingly not so much rooted in stereotypes, but rather in the fact that the manifestation of his sexuality didn't reflect traditional relationship norms as promoted in the context of his home and church life. In this sense, James's initial dissonance was greatly a result of religious-based institutional doctrine – arguably an entirely different influence than Bob's internal ideals. James's conflict also takes a somewhat different form than Bob's fear in that he states he was “wracked with guilt”. This may be in part due to his admission of being sexually active whereas Bob indicates that he was never attracted to such activities outside the context of a monogamous same-sex relationship.

Eric's identity-related dissonance appears to be based in internal conflicts regarding personal morality. While he does not offer the root of these conflicts (i.e. spiritual ideals such as reported by Bob or James's guilt from sexual behaviours), he does indicate that his environment, notably an evangelical Christian church in which he is employed, triggers the conflict. He states:

“I have reconciled the fact that I am gay and that I am no less of a Christian. However, working in an evangelical church presents my conflicts. ...the environmental conflict

DOES ignite internal conflicts at times. Old feelings of right and wrong, sinful self surface from time to time.”

This admission demonstrates the importance of context on the process of identity formation. Since Eric is frequently in a religious and in a context that does not affirm his sexual orientation, his process of resolving his conflicting identities is hampered by his environment. Indeed, he indicates that his environment is capable of igniting internal conflicts and he seemingly shares James’s aforementioned periodic sense of guilt.

The conflict processed by each individual is unique to their specific contexts. This may be triggered by existing in a non-accepting fundamentalist environment, fear of a particular stereotype which doesn’t resonate with perception of self, or an inconsistency between behaviours and traditional ideology.

#### *Support in Resolving Conflict*

When most of the participants reflected upon the difficulty they experienced as teenagers and early adulthood, the conversations shifted to discussion about what factors influenced their eventual or ongoing journey of self-acceptance as gay men. Bob and James’ reported experiences exemplify the benefits of healthy peer support and acceptance. Both men claimed that through experiencing acceptance of their reported same-sex identity from other Christians, they were then greater equipped to accept themselves in an authentic manner.

Bob in particular pointed out the benefit of self-accepting gay Christian role models as being instrumental in his reframing of inner conflict and subsequent self-acceptance. It was not

enough for him to meet another gay man; he felt that meeting another gay *Christian* man was a deciding factor in the subsequent positive influence. This is evident when he states: "When I was in my early 20's, I met a man who helped me realize that there was nothing wrong with being gay. The MAIN reason I took him seriously was that he was a Christian."

Once again, Bob's capitalization of the word 'main' indicates the severity of his need to connect with other gay Christians who not only mirrored his identity, but also modeled to him a possibility that he was not aware of before. He adds "The man to whom I [refer] showed me that my "ideals" were, indeed, possible. He was very much a role model. He MODELED a lifestyle which I admired." The fact that Bob capitalized the word "MODELED" indicates how strongly this term applies to his process of identity resolution. I proceeded to ask Bob "And is it correct to gather...that if the man who reassured about your sexual orientation did not identify as Christian, his support might not have been as beneficial?" Bob replied, "Correct." This reiterates Bob's need for support in a Christian context to process his *Identity Conflict* and aspire towards resolution.

The absence of visible gay Christians in our society was duly noted by all participants (also re-enforcing the invisibility of this group as a whole). Eric, in particular, demonstrates the need for this support:

"I am distancing myself from the [mainstream] Christian community at the moment which is somewhat painful for me. I feel that it's the best thing to do to find inner peace. I am looking for other gay Christians with which to interact"

Due to the non-accepting context of his current religious environment, Eric reveals himself to be on a quest for support from other gay Christians. The fact that he specifically seeks support from others who identify as both gay and Christian echoes Bob's need for similar support systems. Eric identifies his objective as "inner peace", further implying an internal conflict is in process due to lack of external support (once again emphasizing the importance of context on process). He continues:

"Perhaps [if] there would be a larger Christian gay community...I would feel like I had a larger support group than I have at the present time. ... Also, it would be great if there was a better network of support for gay Christians. The information or knowledge is not always readily available."

This statement indicates an inaccessibility to tap into desired social support systems and engagement. However, he does state one avenue that he is currently pursuing to achieve this goal; the Internet. Eric emphasized the role of the Internet in bringing gay Christians together by saying, "I don't think I would have a sense of a gay Christian community without the internet... I find it through friends, talking to people on the internet, organizations such as [an online gay Christian group affiliated to his denomination]...".

While Eric is actively searching for a sense of community with other gay Christians, Ken further supports the importance of his church community on the lives of him and his same-sex partner. He states:

“Many of our gay acquaintances are in churches also. ... The part of the gay community that I and my partner see is a gay community where many members are churchgoers, sing in choirs as ‘paid singers’ or who have friends who participate in churches. Gays that we know and interact with are all very comfortable with churches and thus it is not hard to be Christian and gay to our gay friends.”

Ken and his partner are part of a supportive Christian network that facilitates social ease in living authentically as a same-sex couple. This ability to exist without immediate threat in his Christian environment further demonstrates the role of context on Ken’s process of integrating and authentically living his dual identities.

James spoke about the conflict he experienced regarding his Christian beliefs and his sexual orientation and he referred to it as a “burden”. When asked about how he dealt with his crisis, he responded with the following:

“I suppose the burden lightened when I realised that God loved me ‘just as I am’. This happened when I started plucking up courage to come out to friends and colleagues in the church.”

It is interesting to note that so influential was James’s support from friends and colleagues in his church, it actually favourably impacted his perception of God’s love for him.

One can clearly conclude from the given data that the support from other Christians seems to come from various contexts. This may include sources such as traditional fellow church members and spiritual community, other gay Christians on the Internet, or from role-

model figures who also identify as both gay and Christian. In each case, the importance of social support from other gay Christians or Christian allies is emphasized as a fundamental factor in the process of self-acceptance and ultimate identity integration.

### *Identifying as Activist*

Each participant indicated a form of activism that somehow reflected a perceived need of self or others. The process of facilitating change through activism was generally presented in a Christian context indicating that it was through their spirituality that the participants gave meaning to their processes of identity integration.

Both Bob and James' relayed experiences of fulfillment through Christian ministry seem to suggest an element of power through transformation. Both men initially considered their sexual orientation as a source of grief and confusion. However, they have somehow been able to turn a former liability into an asset of insight and purpose. While Bob is not in an official position of clergy, he speaks frequently about being of service to God and the fulfillment that this affords him. He states:

"I have often thought that being gay has given me such unique perspective as a Christian. I have 'outed' myself to friends (all of whom are Christians, by the way) because I felt in my absolute heart of hearts that these men were struggling in a way that I had as well. All it took was a little honesty (and bravery, I suppose) on my part to make myself a vessel of GREATLY-needed ministry in their lives. Especially in an area such as this, a little empathy goes a long way... It's a part of my being that has resulted in much

goodness in the lives of others. All in the name of Christ. I don't know that I could ask for much more personal/spiritual fulfillment than that.”

The fact that he capitalized the word ‘greatly’ during the interview speaks to the passion with which he feels his spiritual calling. The fact he indicated bravery as an element necessary in this form of activism also speaks to his conviction because one generally does not attempt bravery without purpose. Seemingly based on the importance that his initial role-model was to him, he in turn strives to model his Christian-based values to others who are in a similar process such as himself. As such, he sees himself as an agent of change through a ministerial form of outreach to other gay Christian men.

Bob also provides specific examples of how he has engaged not only in this form of one-to-one ministry, but also asserting himself against what he perceived to be an unjust media report on gays. He states:

“In one case, for example, a friend lost his very lucrative job in a law office. From the moment he shared his story, I KNEW he lost his job because of being gay [gays are not afforded protection from such discrimination in Bob’s geographic area of residence]...There was nothing to do but tell him my story. More than once, he has told me that \*my\* example has given him hope. What a true blessing from our Father. We somehow started talking about some gay-related issue, and it just ‘so happened’ that earlier that week, I had called a conservative radio talk show host and ‘gave him a piece of my mind’ about something he had said in a local paper. In the name of Christianity

<brief shudder> he said that gay people were 'like dogs'. I don't remember the last time something riled me so much. I read the article and went straight to the phone."

This scenario as relayed by Bob gives a glimpse into a motivation for activism; anger. The oppressive context of his environment (as a gay man being compared to dogs) provided an emotive response that resulted in a move towards social justice. Ken also relayed an incident where, like Bob, he contacted the media to convey his dismay regarding a negative portrayal of gays. For example, he states:

"I actively look for opportunities to educate heterosexuals when I see the need. One local TV station air the Pat Robertson show [an American anti-gay televangelist], and I have met with their management to lodge a complaint. I actually got to meet the Pat Robertson representatives."

By lodging a complaint against the television station and show in question, Ken is demonstrating an assertive form of formal activism. Another form of activism that Ken also employs, albeit perhaps more subtle, is self-disclosure. He discusses the various situations where this might be a tactic he employs.

"If I am asked what I did for Thanksgiving or Christmas, I say 'Bill [name changed] and I had our families over...' or whatever. I consider ours a 'don't ask, don't tell' church, but I have not yet met a congregation member who didn't understand what I was talking

about when I spoke of Bill and I as a family. Outside the church, I again will always mention Bill in situations where a straight person might mention their spouse.”

Ken expands on his need to work within a church context to bridge perceived differences of opinion regarding sexual orientation. For example, he states:

“The one difference it makes for me to be a ‘gay’ Christian rather than just a Christian is that I feel some obligation to work within the church so that the heterosexual Christians understand gays... In any situation where I could positively educate or open the mind of any Christian I would probably speak up. This obviously happens very rarely, but any time I can show anyone that their preconceived notions of gays (or Christians) is wrong, I would do so.”

In this statement, Ken speaks directly to one identity’s influence on the other. His same-sex identity provides a context in which he works within the structures of the church. Of interesting note is the fact that Ken uses the word obligation. He feels that because of his unique context as a gay Christian in a relatively mainstream church, it is incumbent upon him to educate others so as to dispel stereotypes. Ken also speaks of another form of activism in which he is involved.

“There are a lot of gays harmed by the church’s non-welcoming stance ... I and my partner show (to those of our congregation who know we are gay) that it is possible to be a normal Christian and gay at the same time. Also, I am involved with [a gay Christian

group affiliated to his denomination], which is working to change [the given denomination] to become accepting of gays. ...”

. Incidentally, one of the roles of activism that Ken chooses to engage in is being a model for other gay Christians affected by the church’s non-affirming stance. Eric spoke earlier about the importance that a denomination-specific same-sex group played in his support network and here we have Ken indicating a similar group serves as another vehicle for him in his activism. This suggests that such groups potentially serve important roles by supporting its members with their processes in more than just the singular context of providing support or facilitating change.

Eric made a statement during the interview that seemingly harmonized the idea of contextual and personal change when he introduces the term ‘friendship evangelism’. A quote from his transcript reads as follows:

“I try to show to other gay guys that I am a cool person who happens to believe in God. I don’t push my beliefs on them and they respect that and I generally get respect in return. Sometimes, they will inquire about religious things or moral type questions because they know who they can go to. Those of us in the gay community who consider themselves Christian need to show the Christian community that we are not different from them... In [Bible] college, we called this type of thing 'friendship evangelism'. It might be a misuse of the term but I like the term. Be a friend, live your life as an example and perhaps others will be drawn to what you believe.”

Eric proposes showing “the Christian community that we are not different from them” which echoes Ken’s sentiments of facilitating change within a structure, in this case, the Christian community. However, Eric also speaks of living his life as an example for others and this is highly reminiscent of Bob’s emphasis on modeling values and ideals. It appears that Eric is talking about ‘modeling’ on several levels as a form of social activism; the micro level on a peer-to-peer basis and the macro level on a communal basis.

Like Bob and Ken, Eric also demonstrates his frustration with media images of gays when he states “The Christian community needs to see the good in the gay community rather than the more interesting aspects that are always reported in the media.”

James’s reported spiritual calling to the priesthood within his denomination is less focused on ‘peer-evangelism’ but rather in becoming an agent of change within a traditionally oppressive structure. Indeed, he states “I made a decision that I felt I would be most likely to help effect change from within [the church] rather than from without.” However, James’s activism seems to go beyond the boundaries of the church and he specifies his motivation in this regard:

“To me, Christianity isn’t about ‘pie in the sky when you die’ – loving one’s neighbour means concerning yourself how people live now. That’s why I am involved with human rights issues, etc.”

Once again, the notion of personal investment in the wellbeing of others surfaces in the data. James speaks of becoming involved in human rights issues which demonstrates that his

concern regarding the oppressed transcends merely the oppressed same-sex minority to which he belongs. His activism has seemingly expanded to wider realms of promoting social justice.

It is interesting to note that all four participants spoke to facilitating change among Christians in some regard. This included modelling via self-disclosure and sharing experiences, instigating change within traditional religious structures, and dispelling myths and stereotypes among gay and straight Christian believers alike.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION

Rodriguez & Ouellette's (2000) state "it might not be the construct of [identity] integration that should be of theoretical interest in studying gay and lesbian Christians, but the process of integration instead." (p. 345). To this end, it is imperative that the processes and the contexts in which they occur inform best practice in social service delivery. From the themes outlined in the results chapter, numerous implications for practice can be inferred. This includes social service provision on micro, mezzo and macro levels – from individual psychotherapeutic service, to small group work, to community development on social planes both local and beyond.

#### *Awareness of Separate Identities*

Contextualizing the relationship between sexual orientation and spiritual identity can be extremely useful for practitioners who work with same-sex oriented persons. Booth (1995) claims "many therapists do not know how to handle either religious addiction, or the inevitable conflicts which result from the collision of religious beliefs and homosexuality – whether between a gay patient and another's religious beliefs, or between a patient struggling to reconcile religious messages and sexual orientation issues." (p. 59). When working with same-sex clients who indicate an *Awareness of Separate Identities*, it might be tempting to compartmentalize the two and refer the individual to address the spiritual components involved with a member of clergy (or whatever religious source of counsel their given religious affiliation affords). While seeking counsel from supportive clergy may be beneficial for the client, it may be presumptuous

to simply refer the client to another source of service due to one's lack of understanding regarding the contexts of co-existing spiritual and sexual identities.

A better understanding of the client's identity structure and perception thereof could also potentially facilitate some critical thought within the practitioner which can lead to greater self-awareness. To simply follow the 'norm' in our society that the Christianity and same-sex identity are contradictory and mutually exclusive would seemingly be a counterproductive stance in our work with gay Christian clients. Furthermore, since both sexual orientation and spiritual affiliation are generally invisible traits, special attention to misguided presumptions may be warranted. It would be both professionally and personally remiss to assume that a client who discloses same-sex orientation is a non-Christian. Likewise it would not be helpful to assume that all self-identifying Christians are heterosexual (a very common misconception in our heterosexist society). These presumptions further deepen the perceived chasm between same-sex orientation and Christianity, thereby enhancing the stressors and potential conflicts for gay Christians everywhere. This would be, according to structural social work theory, a form of oppression against gays and lesbians by perpetuating unquestioned norms.

Booth (1995) also urges social service providers to explore how they "may be carrying negative message about God into their own lives, and projecting those beliefs onto their clients – both gay and straight." (p. 65). Alternately, practitioners may also project unhealthy messages regarding same-sex orientation onto their clients by assuming that all gay males process identity conflict in the same way. If a marginalized group is not allowed the diversity afforded to the dominant majority, then oppression of the group perpetuates through assumptions, restrictions and projections. To this end, it is imperative that social service providers perpetually engage in self-awareness regarding their own identity and self-location regarding sexuality and spirituality.

Perhaps the greatest insight that the first theme in the research findings provides is the context of sexual orientation being by default and spirituality being by choice. This delineation between definitions is fundamental to understanding the process experienced by gay Christians in identity integration. Indeed, this could apply to same-sex persons of any spiritual persuasion (unless, of course, the spiritual ideology asserts the belief system itself to be innate to the practitioner). This finding would seem to be of particular pertinence to social service providers and counsellors who assist gays the process of integrating the two given aspects of identity.

By understanding how the client contextualizes their identities (choice versus innate), the social service provider is better able to 'start where the client is at' in regards to therapeutic approach. In assisting the resolution of cognitive dissonance, any task-oriented action plans or reflective discussions would seemingly be most efficacious when employing the context presented by the client. For an obvious example, if sexual orientation were deemed innate and spirituality a matter of choice, then any form of religious reparative therapy (the practice of attempting to change one's sexual orientation via spiritual 'healing' and prayer) would obviously not be a beneficial treatment plan. On a more subtle level, if a gay male is experiencing distress in his resolution of identity, an understanding of how much choice he feels regarding either identity would factor in achieving a treatment goal towards a wholly integrated self. It would also be beneficial to understand how the client contextualizes the two identities in relation to each other. Clearly, according the research findings of this study, we cannot assume that they necessarily view them in an equal light.

The research results include revealing statements that suggest one identity takes precedence above the other, frequently depending on level of self-disclosure. This can be seen

as supporting Alderson's (2003) attention to the importance of the 'coming out' stages and the implications of this context on the process of healthy identity integration.

### *Identity Conflict*

The fact that all of the research participants experienced some degree of conflict between their sexual orientation and their spirituality supports the literature findings that this conflict is often experienced by gay Christian males (i.e. Thumma, 1991; Buchanan et al., 2001; Kerr, 1997; O'Brien, 2004; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Wagner et al., 1994). However, the research results in this study caution the practitioner not to assume that all forms of conflict are processed in the same way and that each person's conflict has its own unique catalysts and dynamics. The fact that most of these catalysts are either external from the individual or internally triggered by environmental influences seems to suggest that any theory informing practice with this subgroup needs to account for existing social and systemic contexts.

Some of the statements reported by the participants indicate the pronounced role of the immediate environment in optimal identity integration. This seemingly supports Alderson's (2003) assertion that "The intensity of the intrapsychic battle depends on an individual's particular configuration of catalysts and hindrances, including the environmental influences that impact upon him." (pp. 7-8). This attention to context would also appear to address Eliason's (1996) concerns regarding the importance of accounting for "other aspects of identity and the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, religion, and other human characteristics may intersect with sexuality." (p. 11). It would be remiss to ignore these factors and yet try to be of benefit to the client by supporting their process of harmonizing their dual identities.

Environmental factors need to be taken into account when assisting clients in processing their *Identity Conflict* by helping them identify the factors that contribute to their dilemma. This would also stand true also when engaging clients in a process of finding a goodness of fit for them in their respective environments, or transforming their environments collectively so as to alleviate oppressive measures imposed by dominant groups.

### *Support in Resolving Conflict*

Alderson (2003) asserts and the research results indicate environment plays a significant role in identity development. As reported, the presence of a healthy integrated gay Christian in one's environment can have a tremendous impact on someone who is processing a need to similarly integrate their identities. Persons who demonstrate healthy integrated same-sex and spiritual identities can be powerful role-models to others who may not otherwise see integration as a possible achievement. This is only one example of how crucial external support can be, particularly during the formative years of one's identity development.

The findings of this part of the research support other similar notions found in existing literature. For example, Rodriguez & Ouellette (2000) state "Becoming increasingly involved in a gay-positive church, according to the leaders of such churches, enables gays and lesbians to alleviate the conflict between their homosexuality while increasingly enjoying integration." (p. 335). This assertion by church leaders was corroborated by the authors' independent research study in which the results indicate "[gay-positive church] members were significantly more likely to report being fully integrated than non-members." (p. 340).

The necessary role of Christian support can be taken even a bit further by including perceived support from God. One of the statements in the research findings indicates that the

level of self-acceptance can increase with a heightened awareness of God's love. This statement corroborates Kelly's (1995) assertion that positive images of God "are positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to loneliness, whereas wrathful-rejecting-impersonal God-images are negatively related to self-esteem and positively related to loneliness" (p. 216).

Regarding social work practice with individuals, it might be beneficial for the practitioner to explore existing social reflections in the client's life. What role-models exist in their lives? Where do they find these role-models and healthy social connections? If there is a lack in this regard, social network interventions may be an appropriate place from which to instigate action-oriented change. This would be a measure of intervention in keeping with the concept of collectivization as a tool in structural social work practice. Collectivization not only offers the gay Christian an opportunity to find support from others, but according to Mullaly (1997), leads to "positive changes in the conception of self" (p. 176). This occurs through the process of normalization, whereby exposure to and support from other gay Christians facilitates an awareness that the dynamic of a gay Christian identity and its frequently resulting conflict is not necessarily unique to the individual.

If the individual has concerns regarding anonymity or lives in a geographic location without benefit of a gay-positive church or group, an online community for gay Christians via the Internet may be an optional source of support. As found in the research results, the Internet can be a vital link for isolated individuals to connect with other gay Christians. It may be beneficial for a social service practitioner to have a reference of online supports available for clients who potentially could benefit from such a network.

When practicing community development within a same-sex oriented community, advocating for greater inclusion of gay Christians in mainstream events may also give greater

visibility to the fact that gay Christians not only exist in theory, but live their lives within gay and straight, Christian and non-Christian communities. An example of this might be extending emphatic invitations to gay Christian groups to partake in annual 'Gay Pride' celebrations or other community festivals, fairs and social events. Facilitating greater linkages between gay-positive churches and progressive 'gay-friendly' mainstream churches could also create a broader sense of community. If this were the case, perhaps closeted gay or questioning individuals (especially youth) in mainstream churches would have a less difficult time in finding healthy support from others of like mind.

A form of social service delivery on a macro level could include advocacy for social dialogue regarding same-sex concerns and religious belief structures. Non-existent yet perceived dichotomies could be dialogically explored and real differences of perspective could be discussed in a meaningful way that creates better understanding between currently pro- and anti-gay polarized spiritual camps. The message that gay Christians do exist can (via methods such as modeling) inspire closeted Christian youth in their oppressive environments with the message that their ideals are indeed possible. This could facilitate the greatest component of inspiration and a vital element of empowerment: *hope*.

### *Identifying as Activist*

The relevance of this theme to social work can be applicable in numerous ways. The notion of the oppressed having experiential knowledge as a unique base from which to educate and empower others is quite reminiscent of Freire (1998) and his assertions of engaged pedagogy and peer-to-peer androgogical education. Lindsey (2002) asserts "Our [gay Christians'] gay

knowledge translates into a call to the churches today...to be true to their mission to reach out with salvific concern to all God's children." (p. 117). The research participants speak in particular of their service for God as being a significant source of fulfillment. In fact, some believe that their sexual orientation and the perspective it affords them is the reason God called them to the ministry in the first place.

The relayed experiences of fulfillment through ministry seem to suggest an element of power through transformation. Same-sex orientation might have been originally considered a source of grief and confusion. However, the research results demonstrate that it is possible to turn what was once perceived to be a liability into an asset of insight and purpose. Finding a purposeful and fulfilling avenue to employ this collective uniqueness may empower gay Christians to transform their given environments towards acceptance and inclusion. This echoes Mullaly's (1997) assertion of redefinition as being a vital component in structural social work, thereby counteracting the influence of oppression on identity.

Perhaps some of the most applicable aspects of this study as a whole relate to clergy or those practicing social work within faith-based contexts. Since social work has its roots in Christian charity (Carniol, 1995), many social service organizations still exist under the umbrella of religious organizations. Social workers and ministering clergy employed by such organizations may well find that the acquisition of first-hand experiential knowledge regarding gay Christians' experiences may provide a greater knowledge base from which to practice. This would presumably contribute to an establishment of best practice when working directly with gay Christian men. For example, a Christian agency may be perceived by gay Christians to be inaccessible by default of being Christian-based. If gay Christians were afforded a formal

opportunity to voice these concerns, the agency could make an informed decision regarding any possible changes to address accessibility issues that they may previously have not been aware of.

A forum could be set up within a Christian organization to facilitate dialogue and gay Christians could be given the chance to share their testimonies and spiritual journeys, thereby allowing their voices to be heard and their stories to be told. These examples would also fit in with Mullaly's (1997) emphasis on dialogical relationships as a method of consciousness-raising regarding the challenges faced by gay Christians in society at large. Indeed, the research results demonstrate the participants' need to educate and inform others regarding misinformation and the inaccuracy of perpetuated stereotypes in many Christian contexts regarding gays. This would also behoove the process of normalization by demystifying the gay Christian dynamic. The concept of dialogical relationships via peer-to-peer interaction (i.e. friendship evangelism) as a method normalization must also be contextualized as a potentially instrumental part of the process in healthy identity integration.

Some of the activism reported by the participants is subtly incorporated in daily life circumstances as they arise. However, this is seemingly no less empowering than measures taken on a broader level. The act of self-disclosure as a form of activism was reported and in this regard, supporting a client in the 'coming out' process may not only serve a purpose for their personal process, but also benefit them by transforming their relationship with their environment into a context that affords them greater control through disclosure. A non-heterosexual individual need not fear discovery of same-sex orientation by others if self-disclosure is employed as a tool to counteract such fears. 'Coming out' can potentially influence the process of identity integration in a positive manner both through normalization and redefining one's relationship to the environment. It is incumbent on social service providers to recognize this

dynamic and to link the individual to sources of appropriate support through this process if need be.

Furthermore, avenues for gaining social networks could also be proactively developed, thereby affording gay Christians a greater visibility and a sense of tangible acknowledgment and validation. By facilitating collectivization among gay Christians through social networking, this community can also be mobilized to instigate social action through strength in numbers. Perhaps such endeavours would also lend to provoking greater social critical analysis of traditional Christian-based non-inclusive views through dialogue in various available forums. The potential of such change is limitless in its application to micro, mezzo and macro aspects of structural anti-oppressive practice.

#### *Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research*

The data obtained in this study is far from being conclusive. If anything, it simply demonstrates the complexity of dual identities often deemed to be in direct opposition. There are numerous angles of this study that can be used as catalysts for further exploration. While the focus of this research has been on the experiences of gay Christian males, it might be useful to research the attitudes and perceptions of social workers' in regards to the relationship between same-sex orientation and spirituality. This would enhance the study by affording the opportunity to cross-correlate gay Christians' experiences and social workers' perceptions. Any misperceptions on the part of the practitioners could then be addressed in a more concrete manner.

It might also be of benefit to explore the experience of gay men who identify with other religious faiths (presumably ones also traditionally deemed contradictory to homosexuality) and correlate their experiences with those of gay Christians. This might shed some light on the experienced relationship between sexual orientation and spirituality in a more comprehensive manner. It would also have been interesting to explore the research participants' definition of the word "Christian" to observe differences and / or similarities in self identification with the term itself.

One other suggestion for future research would be to examine the stories of gay spiritual men who utilized social services and how they may or may not have had their spiritual identity acknowledged in a meaningful way. This is especially important in light of the way in which the participants of this research generally ranked their level of spiritual identity above their sexual identity. Their experiences with social service professionals may reveal some discrepancies between client experience and the given worker's perceptions, presumptions or biases on the subject at hand. Through the publication of this research, other researchers may also find aspects of the reported findings that extend well beyond the scope of this study.

#### *Internet Research*

It would be remiss to exclude the unique method of Internet-based research from this discussion. The manner in which the data for this study was collected has tremendously impacted the study in tangible and undoubtedly intangible ways. For example, the process of data collection via real-time chat programs offers the participants the comfort and convenience

of their own homes and without physical intrusion of an interviewer. This comfort is demonstrated by the candour and openness of the participants.

The method of interviewing via the Internet also afforded the non-random sample of participants to cover a broad geographic region and I was able to access data from sources that ordinarily would not have been viable for me to physically connect with. The broad sample also ensured that the dynamics discussed were not necessarily unique to one specific region or dominant denominational influence. However, there are also some limitations with the online sampling methods that I employed. For example, the notice of recruitment was posted on a non-denominational gay Christian online group and yet all of the participants located themselves within a mainstream Protestant denomination. Perhaps posting a notice of recruitment in a secular gay forum would have drawn a greater response from the diverse spectrum of Christian-based faiths including Protestants and Catholics alike. Posting a participant recruitment notice on an online community site for gay Christians also potentially biases the sample in that those involved in such a community may already be well underway in their identity integration process. This would presumably decrease the opportunity for those in more conflicting stages of their process to have their voices heard in the research.

The method of saving the typed text verbatim reduced any chance of transcription error. However, all interviews were conducted without the benefit of visual cues (i.e. facial expressions to give context, body language, etc.) and thereby a traditional and often useful element of data analysis was not available. It might be beneficial to conduct a study that interviews the same participants both online and face-to-face and the respective processes of data analysis compared. Interviews could also be conducted in real time utilizing webcam features that afford the interviewer to observe the participant's visual cues while conducting the interview in text form.

These could then in turn be correlated with data analysis processes of the same data without the benefit of the webcam-based visual cues. As technology continues to evolve, the topic of online interviewing is rife with research possibilities examining various configurations of online and face-to-face interviewing techniques.

### *Summary*

The research findings in this study have only begun to scratch the surface of the dynamics and complexities experienced by gay Christians everywhere. By affording them a voice in the existing body of scientific knowledge, it is my hope that further explorations from numerous disciplines continue this pursuit for insights as can only be provided by those with experiential knowledge. To this end, continued inquiry into the lives of those within oppressed groups is necessary and their voices need to be heard for social work to evolve within structural anti-oppressive theoretical frameworks. As Mullaly (1997) asserts, “[structural social work] will continue to grow and develop as more information on the experience of all oppressed groups is received from the oppressed themselves.” (p. 133).

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## APPENDIX 1

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## INTERVIEW GUIDE

### **Dual Identity: The Experiences of Gay Christian Men**

**Principal Investigator:** Mary Russell, Ph. D.  
School of Social Work and Family Studies, UBC  
Phone: 604-822-2795

**Co-Investigator:** Tim Dueck, BSW  
Graduate Student  
School of Social Work and Family Studies, UBC  
Phone: 604-872-5548

- 1) Can you tell me about your identity as a Christian? Why and how long have you identified as Christian?
- 2) Can you tell me about your identity as a gay male? Why and how long have you identified as gay?
- 3) How do you see your same-sex and Christian identities in relation to each other?
- 4) Do you identify yourself as gay to other self-identifying Christians?
- 5) What has previously or might potentially influence you to disclose your same-sex identity to other self-identifying Christians?
- 6) Do you identify yourself as a Christian to others in the same-sex community?
- 7) What has previously or might potentially influence you to disclose your Christian identity with others in the same-sex community?
- 8) What reactions (if any) from other gays and lesbians have you experienced when disclosing your Christian identity?
- 9) How would you optimally prefer other queer persons react to any self-disclosure of your Christian identity?
- 10) In conclusion, do you have any additional thoughts that you would like to share regarding your Christian identity in relation to your same-sex orientation?

APPENDIX 3

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CONSENT FORM

**“Dual Identity: The Experiences of Gay Christian Men”**

Principal Investigator: Mary Russell, Ph. D.  
School of Social Work and Family Studies, UBC  
Phone: 604-822-2795

Co-Investigator: Tim Dueck, BSW  
Graduate Student  
School of Social Work and Family Studies, UBC  
Phone: 604-872-5548

I am in the process of conducting a graduate thesis as part of my completion of a Master's degree in Social Work. This study will explore the experiences of gay Christian men. Input from self-identified gay Christian men will be needed in order to better understand the dynamics of Christian and same-sex identities. This study will allow your story to be heard.

The study involves a 60 to 90 minute face-to-face interview, which will be audio recorded. In addition, you will be invited to provide follow-up input by reviewing the transcript for accuracy purposes and providing additional information. The information obtained will be used to identifying themes.

Your participation in this research will remain strictly confidential. This will be accomplished by removing all identifying information from the transcript and any other files relating to this study. A pseudonym will be assigned to your file. The person who will transcribe the audio recording will be asked to sign an agreement of confidentiality form. The original copy of the transcript, the computer disk and audiotape will be stored in a secured location and destroyed after 5 years unless you give permission for it to be used in a related study.

If you have any further questions or desire information with respect to this study, you may contact Mary Russell at 604-822-2795. If you have any concerns regarding your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Research Subject Information Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at 604-822-8598.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without incident. Should you choose to participate and sensitive subject matters arise that cause you distress, appropriate counselling referrals will be available for your benefit.

A small gift (approximately \$15.00 in value) will be given to you as a token of appreciation for your voluntary involvement in this research. This will be provided even if you choose to withdraw prior to completion of the interviewing process.

Your signature below indicates that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

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Participant signature

Date

---

Printed Name

---

Signature of a Witness

Date

---

Printed Name