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Sexual and Religious Identity Development Among Adolescent and Emerging Adult Sexual Minorities

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SEXUAL AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT AMONG ADOLESCENT AND EMERGING ADULT SEXUAL MINORITIES

by

Angie L. Dahl

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in

Psychology

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ABSTRACT

Sexual and Religious Identity Development Among Adolescent and Emerging Adult Sexual Minorities

by

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Utah State University, 2011

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As the majority of Americans identify with a religious affiliation, the religious context is an important backdrop upon which identity development occurs. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and allied (LGBTQA) youths, the process of development may be complicated in a religious context due to denominational positions on same-sex sexuality. While recent researchers highlighted the importance of contextual influences on LGBTQA developmental processes, few studies have examined LGBTQA sexual and religious identity development. The goal of the current study was to gain a better understanding and appreciation of LGBTQA adolescent and young adult experiences of religious and sexual identity development.

Eight adolescents (15-18 years) and 11 emerging adults (19-24 years) who identified as both LGBTQA and having been raised in an active Christian religious tradition participated in the study. The study included three phases: face-to-face
individual interviews, journal writings, and focus groups. In each phase of the study, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of sexual and religious identity development across childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood (if applicable). Findings from the current study supported three broad themes and several subthemes. Early in their development, participants described a behavioral religious participation and early awareness of their same-sex attractions. The young adult participants also shared a tendency to deny their attractions. During their middle phase of experiences, participants often self-labeled as LGBTQA. Religiously, participants shared they questioned their beliefs yet continued their religious participation. A proportion of the participants indicated experiencing guilt, conflict, and mental health difficulties, which many participants related to their emerging sexual orientation and religious involvement. The late experiences, which often coincided with sharing a same-sex attracted label with friends and/or family members, was marked by a religious disengagement, social consequences, self-acceptance, and personal values clarification. Using the participants’ own words these findings are presented, along with possible implications and suggestions for future research.

(151 pages)
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As I near the end of my formal training at Utah State University, I have been reflecting on the ways my experiences on the fourth floor of the education building have shaped my own identity, both professionally and personally. Certainly, I have been impacted by numerous individuals who have guided, challenged, and molded me into the person I am today. Undoubtedly, Dr. Renee Galliher has provided much of this direction. I would like to thank her for her encouragement, example, direction, guidance, patience, and most of all, her dedication, over the previous 5 years. She has been a model of mentorship that I hope to aspire to someday. Second, Maure Smith, program coordinator of the LGBTQA services at Utah State University, has been instrumental in helping me recruit participants for this project. Her insight and assistance have been vital to the project’s success.

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Angie L. Dahl
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the current study is to provide greater insight into the lived experiences of sexual minority adolescents and young adults raised in a Christian context. While a typical introduction in the field of psychology provides the empirical basis and rationale behind the study purpose, researchers using a qualitative methodology take a different approach (Glesne, 2006; Yeh & Inman, 2007). Rather, they provide the lens from which the researcher is situated, making the researcher’s biases, experiences and opinions explicit (Creswell, 2009). Following, the reader is introduced to the study from both an empirical perspective, as traditional in the field of psychology, and also a personal one, the lens by which this study came to life.

The Researcher

I was raised in a religious context. Throughout my childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, my father served as a pastor in a number of Midwestern congregations in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). As such, I was coined, “pastor’s kid.” As any pastor’s kid will attest to, I had the “opportunity” to attend religious services once, sometimes twice weekly in addition to being involved with other church-related activities throughout my childhood and adolescence. Additionally, my family often lived within 100 yards of the church, which also contributed to the way I considered the people within, and the building itself, a “second home.” After graduating high school, I chose to attend an ELCA liberal arts college, studying religion, obtaining both a bachelor’s and
master’s degree in this field from ELCA institutions. The first two jobs I held after college graduation were religiously-affiliated positions, working with youth and young adults in community and camp settings. Needless to say, I “did” a lot of church growing up.

It was not until my mid 20s that I really started thinking about the ways my own process of development was impacted by my religious involvement—both positively and negatively. While I was blessed by a community of support, I was also burdened by internalized guilt and a narrowed worldview. During this time of self-reflection, I worked fulltime as a camp director, supervising and mentoring college-aged staff, some of whom identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. I had the opportunity to be part of their process of development and watched them negotiate their sense of identity within a religious context; this sparked my interest in adolescent and young adult identity development. Concurrently, I was saddened and frustrated by the “religiously informed” prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory actions I witnessed towards individuals who identified as a sexual minority. At this point, being an “ally” emerged as central to my own identity, and the passion for this study was born.

I identify as a heterosexual, and as such, I am aware that I have privilege due to my sexual orientation and I am an “outsider” to the study’s topic. Rhoads (1997) suggested that researchers collaborate with participants, building rapport and establishing the trustworthiness of the research. As such, one of the primary, and more personal aims of this study was to establish these partnerships with the individuals I interviewed. This was done through the use of member checking, evaluating the accuracy of the interviews
as well as the participant’s own experiences during the interview and focus group process (Brzenzinski, 2000). The participants shared their investment and interest throughout the project. Even recently, two participants contacted me to inquire into the study’s status. As a result of their investment, I met 19, beautiful, talented, and resilient individuals who shared their stories with me. Following, I attempt to share their stories with the reader, highlighting their unique processes of sexual minority and sexual and religious identity development.

The Study

During adolescence, youth work to develop and define their sense of identity (Erikson, 1968). This developmental period between childhood and adulthood is often characterized by both excitement and frustration, as adolescents experience many physical, social, psychological and cognitive changes as they work to answer the question “who am I?” (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). For sexual minority youth (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning), the tensions of adolescence may be magnified, as youths work to understand their same-sex attractions and define their sense of self amidst a predominantly heterosexist society (Dahl, 2009). Researchers have developed several theories to understand the unique developmental challenges faced by sexual minority adolescents (e.g., Cass, 1984; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994); many have suggested the same-sex attracted youth’s experience of development during the adolescent years is unique, shaped by a myriad of contextual variables (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Rust, 1993; Savin-
Williams & Diamond, 2000).

A large majority of Americans state they believe in God and identify with a religious affiliation (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007). As such, the context of religion provides one important backdrop upon which childhood, adolescent and young adult development occurs. For sexual minority individuals, the tensions of adolescence within a religious context may be magnified, filled with fear and frustration (Dahl, 2009). Many religious denominations reject and condemn same-sex sexual behaviors (Sherkat, 2002). Research has established the importance of contextual influences on sexual minority development (D’Augelli, 1998); the state of this research on adolescent and emerging adult sexual minority religiosity is in its infancy. Existing research has provided retrospective data with adult samples regarding religious and sexual identity conflict resolution (e.g., Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001), but has not adequately documented the process of religious and sexual identity development. Further, the religious experiences of sexual minority adolescents are unexplored in the current literature.

The current study utilized a qualitative methodology to examine the interplay between sexual minority adolescent and emerging adult religious and sexual identity trajectories. Religious influences on sexual identity development and influences from one’s sexual self-identification on the development of a religious identity were examined. Participant perceptions regarding the relationship between one’s religious and/or sexual identities and resiliency was explored.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This review of the literature is divided into five sections: (a) a review of the history and current perspective of same-sex attractions and behaviors; (b) an overview of theories of sexuality and related identity development models; (c) an examination of the religious context and religious identity development; (d) a review of the research on sexual minority religiosity; and (e) the rationale and objectives for the current study.

History of Same-Sex Attraction and Behavior

Same-sex attractions and sexual behaviors have existed across time, and have often been considered a consistent and “normal feature of the human condition” (Naphy, 2004, p. 266). Prior to the advent of Christianity, there was very little religious or societal distress regarding same-sex sexual behavior. Sexual choice was bound by two separate constructs, procreation and love (Dahl, 2009). Sexual behavior within the construct of love was not bound by gender constraints (Naphy, 2004). Thus, same-sex attractions and sexual behaviors did not need to be hidden and were not stigmatized (Greenberg, 1998). However, societal values and attitudes towards same-sex behaviors changed dramatically with the rise of Judaism around 2000 BCE.

At this time, a new social construct for sex was born; the sole purpose of sex was procreation (Dahl, 2009). Jewish teachings stated it was “detestable” for a man to lie with a man as he does a woman (Leviticus 18:22, New International Version) and culturally, same-sex sexual behaviors were thought of as abhorrent. However, other societies
maintained different constructs for sex during this time period. For example, Eastern Mediterranean and Chinese societies conceptualized love and marriage as two separate institutions. Marriage served the purpose of procreation, and upon fulfilling this obligation, same-sex relationships were allowable to fulfill the need for love (Naphy, 2004). Still, across much of the early Judeo-Christian world, same-sex attractions and sexual behavior were categorized as repulsive and unnatural (Dahl, 2009). Recent biblical scholars have asserted that Judaic law prohibiting same-sex behaviors were not intended as a widespread prohibition of same-sex behavior. Rather, these laws addressed a specific social problem, gang rape (Gomes, 2002). Despite this claim, the Judeo-Christian ideals of sexuality spread quickly and became the new world reality throughout the following 4,000 years. As recent as 1973, the American Psychological Association (APA) deemed homosexuality to be a sexual disorder, furthering the impression of same-sex behavior as “abnormal” in the first and second editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM I and DSM II; APA, 1952, 1968). Varied forms of oppression and discrimination arose amidst these changing cultural connotations of same-sex attractions and sexual behaviors.

Alongside this prevailing attitude and socially-constructed value, individuals who identify as LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer) have been targeted, considered criminals and subjected to reform efforts. As such, social constructs of homophobia, internalized homophobia and heterosexism were created and defined. Smith (1971) was the first to use the term homophobia to describe antipathy and fear towards same-sex sexual relations, attractions, or identifications. Internalized homophobia occurs
when one directs the fears of same-sex sexuality towards themselves. *Heterosexism* is defined as a “form of oppression [which] asserts that heterosexual relations are the norm and each of us is unquestioningly assumed to be heterosexual” (Pugh, 2002, p. 165). This presumption is embedded in our social institutions and values; heterosexual couples are afforded privileges and advantages which same-sex attracted couples are denied (e.g., marriage). Homophobia, internalized homophobia, and heterosexism within society have been found to impact the psychosocial development of LGBTQ adolescents and young adults (e.g., Morrow & Messinger, 2006; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996).

Today, some of the barriers towards same-sex attractions and social forces of stigmatization are slowly changing. Laws are changing regarding the legality of same-sex marriage. Sexual minority couples can have a marriage performed and recognized in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Washington, D. C. In the workplace and across society, increased rights (e.g., healthcare, sick leave) are being provided for couples in same-sex relationships while gay-rights movements continue to be salient. While discrimination and prejudice still remain, Diamond (2005) noted society is slowly changing; over the past 30 years, both the visibility and affirmation of same-sex attractions and behaviors have increased.

**Sexual Minority Individuals**

Terms to define one’s sexual orientation have also shifted across time (Dahl, 2009). In the 19th century, the term “homosexual” was utilized to medically define same-sex behavior as abnormal, designating “heterosexual” as normal (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). The terms “heterosexual,” “lesbian,” and “gay” were introduced in the 1850s
(Weeks, 1986) and near the end of the 20th century, “gay” was the preferred terminology, linked to celebratory gay pride movements. However, many abandoned the use of the term “gay” as a preferred label for all sexual minorities, noting it failed to recognize the sexuality of women, bisexuals, and transgendered individuals (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005). Instead, many used the acronym “LGBTQ” to define those with same-sex attractions. As many people choose not to self-label or find it difficult to compartmentalize their identity into a single expression, this acronym is often inadequate (Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Diamond, 2005). Recently, the term “sexual minority” has been used in research settings and is defined to include people with same-sex attractions, identity and/or behavior.

Researchers tend to examine three different variables to identify their sexual minority sample, defining their chosen population (Dahl, 2009). Sexual behavior is one method of identification and is defined as engaging in sexual activity with a member of the same sex. A second method is one’s sexual orientation, defined as one’s attractions and feelings towards a member of the same-sex. Sexual identity is a third method of identification, the self-labeling of gay/lesbian, bisexual, or adoption of another label of personal meaning. While many individuals may “fit into” one of the aforementioned categories, the majority do not ever identify with a traditional sexual minority self-label (e.g., gay/lesbian, bisexual; Laumann et al., 1994). The following review of the literature encompasses studies that have defined sexual minorities in these diverse ways and will utilize the term “sexual minority” to refer to this population.

In light of such varied definitions of this population, prevalence rates of same-sex attraction and/or labeling are difficult. Researchers have found differing prevalence rates
(2-20%) depending on the sample characteristics (e.g., Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Satterly & Dyson, 2005; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005). Savin-Williams (2005) reviewed the literature to ascertain the prevalence of LGB self-labeling, attraction, and behavior and concluded between 15-20% of adolescents have some degree of same-sex orientation (sexual attraction) with less than half being exclusively same-sex oriented. The number of individuals who denote some level of same-sex attraction outnumbers the 3-4% who either self-identify as LGBTQ or report same-sex activities.

**Denominational Positions**

Historically, nearly every Christian denomination has condemned same-sex attractions and sexual behavior as immoral and sinful (Dahl, 2009; Sherkat, 2002). Recently, several denominations and churches (e.g., United Church of Christ, Episcopal Church) have parted with historically entrenched values and have accepted same-sex sexual behavior as a variation of ordinary, normal sexual expression. However, several denominations continue to be intolerant of same-sex attractions and/or sexual behavior. In the current study, participants identified their childhood religious affiliations as Latter-day Saints (LDS), Roman Catholic, and Presbyterian. As such, these three denominations and their current positions on same-sex attractions and sexual behavior are reviewed briefly to offer additional contextual insight into the participant’s lived experiences. It should be noted that each of these faith’s denominational positions on same-sex attractions has fluctuated across time, and as a result the church’s teachings on same-sex attractions today may or may not be similar to that experienced by the participants when they were coming out.
The LDS church is the second fastest growing church in the United States. The leaders of the LDS church assert that “homosexuality is a serious sin” (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS], 2007). The LDS church makes a distinction between “same-gender attraction” and engagement in sexual behavior with a member of the same sex (Dahl, 2009). Church leaders recognize that individuals may have inherent “temptations,” and these attractions themselves are not a sin. The LDS church released a pamphlet, *God Loveth His Children*, which provided guidelines for those with same-gender attractions, stating individuals should avoid obsession with or concentration on same-gender thoughts and feelings. It is not helpful to flaunt homosexual tendencies or make them the subject of unnecessary observation or discussion. It is better to choose as friends those who do not publicly display their homosexual feelings. (LDS, 2007)

According to the 2010 *Church Handbook of Instructions*, it is the behavior that is problematic. The handbook states that “homosexual behavior” is outside of God’s plan, contrary to the commandments, and those who have same-gender attraction should remain celibate (Brooks, 2010). Consequences for engaging in a sexual relationship with a member of the same sex include probation and/or excommunication from the LDS church. While the LDS church does not address the origin of same-gender attractions, stating they are a “challenge” given to individuals in the preexistence, they have suggested some LDS individuals “through individual effort, the exercise of faith… overcome same-gender attraction in mortality, [while] others may not be free of this challenge in this life” (LDS, 2007).

The LDS church’s statement, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*, is especially relevant to the participants’ experiences growing up. It was released in 1995,
and, therefore, may have been particularly prominent during the participants’ childhood and adolescence. This statement, one of five major proclamations issued by the church since its inception in 1830, delineated the church’s position on the role of the family, gender roles in relation to the family, and same-sex sexuality. In this proclamation, the LDS church defined marriage to occur solely between a male and a female, and outlined the path to happiness to include procreation. Further, the proclamation highlighted parents’ responsibility for raising their children to be “righteous,” which includes the requirement of marrying a member of the opposite sex and having a family. The proclamation warned against those who failed to fulfill their family responsibilities, stating they will one day be “held accountable before God.”

Similar to the LDS faith, the Roman Catholic Church tolerates same-sex attractions, calling its members to accept and respect those with “deep-seated homosexual tendencies.” However, Pope Benedict XVI calls those who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual to remain celibate stating,

Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.” They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved. (Ratzinger, 2005)

Finally, members of the Presbyterian Church are often welcoming and accepting of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In fact, the Presbyterian Church has been outspoken regarding issues related to prejudice and discrimination, fighting for equal treatment of individuals who identify as a sexual minority. However, the official church doctrine contradicts these social efforts, still asserting same-sex sexual behavior is
State of the Research

As both constructs to define the sexual minority population and cultural connotations for same-sex behaviors have shifted across time, research with sexual minority individuals has also fluctuated (Dahl, 2009). Since the 1970s, researchers have sought to identify and study sexual minority adolescents and young adults. At first, sexual minorities were labeled as “different from normal,” and research focused on these individuals as troubled and distraught, at risk for dysfunction (Savin-Williams, 2001, 2005). Similarly, the associated high risk for suicide, and plethora of negative risk factors faced by sexual minority youth became the focus of research in the 80s and 90s (Dahl, 2009). With the start of the 21st century, research has shifted towards an understanding of the normative, typical development of sexual minority adolescents and young adults as well as providing an increased emphasis on factors associated with resiliency (Savin-Williams, 2001, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997). These changes in research foci are reflected in the various theories and models used to understand the process of sexual identity development.

Theories and Models of Sexuality Development

Essentialism

Essentialist theorists hold that one’s sexual orientation is innate and biologically predetermined (Dahl, 2009). This theory of sexual identity development is based on an understanding of one’s true forms, or individual essences that are constant, and do not
change (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). The two forms of sexual orientation for essentialist theorists are homosexuality and heterosexuality, considered a permanent and essential aspect of one’s being. To understand the development of sexual identity, traditional essentialist theorists developed linear stage models where one “achieves” a same-sex attracted identity through a series of stages, eventually acknowledging one’s “true” sexual orientation (e.g., Cass, 1984; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1979). From this early theoretical backdrop, social constructionist theory emerged, offering an alternative perspective to understand the development of sexual orientation.

**Social Constructionism**

According to social constructionists, same-sex attractions and sexual behavior are defined within both culture and time (Richardson, 1993), a tenet amply demonstrated in the previous historical review of same-sex attraction, behavior and labeling. This theory is grounded in Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) work, who stated “social order is a human product...more precisely, an ongoing human production” (p. 52). For social constructionists, while biological drives may fuel one’s sexuality, actual behavior, identification and labeling exist within individual’s socio-cultural framework (Dahl, 2009). Weeks (1986) expanded on this:

> It [sexuality] is a result of diverse social practices that give meaning to human activities, of social definitions and self-definitions, of struggles between those who have power to define and regulate, and those who resist. Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency. (p. 25)

The realities of sexuality, labeling, and associated stigmas are a social construction and as such, sexuality is a facet of the particular society in which the individual resides.
One way researchers have demonstrated this theory is by establishing the steps of self-identification as more fluid than that described by traditional essentialist identity development models in both male (Stokes, McKirnan, & Burzette, 1993) and female (Diamond, 2006; Rust, 1993) samples. In a 2006 study, Diamond found 70% of women changed their identity label at least once since first identifying as lesbian or bisexual. From this study, Diamond highlighted one woman’s experience of her own sexuality.

For those of us who question, your whole life becomes a question. Do you then reach some level of understanding, and then it’s static. I don’t think so. When I’m with a woman, I’m not really a lesbian, and when I’m with a man I’m not really straight. Maybe if I spent ten years with a woman it would change the way I thought, and I would call myself a lesbian. I think your definition changes based on your experiences. I can’t really say, I still feel young; I still feel that I have a lot left to learn. (Diamond, 2006, p. 89)

Similarly, when examining the lives of 346 lesbian-identified and 60 bisexual-identified women Rust (1993) concluded:

Self-identity is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs. Identity is therefore a reflection of sociopolitical organization rather than a reflection of essential organization, and coming out is the process of describing oneself in terms of social constructs rather than the process of discovering one’s essences. (p. 44)

Sexual attractions and behaviors thus become culturally centric phenomena that are ongoing and dynamic.

Mirroring the stage models created by the essentialist theorists, various multidimensional frameworks of sexual minority identity development have been created (e.g., Gagnon, 2004; Garnets & Kimmel, 1993; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001; Laumann et al., 1994). These conceptualizations have attempted to recognize the wide variability of the individual’s experience of identity formation, and have suggested the process of self-
identification may not be as linear as suggested by essentialist driven stage models (Coleman & Hendry, 1999). The proposed frameworks recognize while many individuals have similar experiences (e.g., self-awareness, self-labeling, and disclosure to family and friends), the timing of these events may not be as linear and need not occur in every situation (Dahl, 2009). As a result, recent research has recognized sexual identity development as a fluid process, gaining meaning within specific contexts.

**Differential Developmental Trajectories Framework**

Savin-Williams (2005) described all identity models as “seduced by the intuitive appeal of conceiving of development as a simple, lockstep formulation” (p. 70) such that even more recent models of sexual identity development based on social constructionist principles (e.g., Horowitz & Newcomb, 2001) do not adequately account for the fluidity and uniqueness of sexual identity development. For Savin-Williams, the diversity of human experience cannot be condensed into a small number of simple steps, stating “the concept of separate stages inherently places brackets around something that cannot be bracketed” (p. 81). Alternatively, Savin-Williams provided a differential developmental trajectories framework for understanding the developmental experience of sexual minorities.

The first tenet of the differential developmental trajectories framework recognizes many adolescents experience similar pressures, biological changes, ethical questions and social experience regardless of their sexual attractions (Dahl, 2009; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997). Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) found sexual minority youth had
more in common with their heterosexual peers of the same sex than sexual minority youth of the opposite sex. Without consideration of these similarities, researchers may be at risk of attributing risk factors that may be part of normative development for all adolescents to only same-sex attracted adolescents (Savin-Williams, 2001; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Secondly, same-sex attracted individuals are different from heterosexual individuals in some ways which cannot and should not be minimized, including yet not limited to: biological differences, socialization experiences, coming out processes, family pressures and school experiences (Savin-Williams, 2001, 2005). Other research has highlighted the sexual minority’s unique experience, both victimization and social support (Williams et al., 2005), as well as school belonging and self-esteem (Galliher, Rostosky, & Hughes, 2004).

The wide variation within the sexual minority population provides the third tenet of the differential developmental trajectories framework (Dahl, 2009). Gender, ethnicity, individual personality characteristics, and life experiences are only some of the different factors that influence the individual nature of the sexual minority youth’s experience (Savin-Williams, 2005). For example, differences have been demonstrated across lines of self-identification, gender, and urbanicity in relation to the school belonging, depression and self-esteem variables (Galliher et al., 2004). Other researchers have highlighted this theme of variation within the sexual minority population (e.g., Bernal & Coolhart, 2005; Coyle, 1998; Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000).

Finally, the fourth tenet of the differential developmental trajectories framework,
though difficult to research, insists on the uniqueness of the individual experience. Each person’s individual trajectory is incomparable and unmatched to any other person’s experience (Savin-Williams, 2005; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 1997). Overall, the differential developmental trajectories conceptualization acknowledges both similarities and differences in the experiences of same-sex attracted and heterosexual youth while attending to the varied contextual and individual factors that impact upon the sexual minority adolescent’s developmental pathway (Dahl, 2009).

From both the social constructionist and differential developmental trajectories perspectives, social context matters (Dahl, 2009). Rust (1993) emphasized this, stating that self-identity “is the result of the interpretation of personal experience in terms of available social constructs” (p. 44). Despite the role which social context plays in the lives of sexual minority individuals and their identity development, D’Augelli (2006) stated recent scholarship still does not have a good understanding of these relationships. He called for researchers to gain a wider understanding of these “crucial contexts” of development. One of these crucial contexts and a major socializing force within America is religion.

**Religion and Identity Development**

As nearly 81% of Americans report a religious affiliation (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007), the context of religion provides one important backdrop upon which childhood, adolescent and young adult development occurs (Dahl, 2009). In the United States, 77% of Americans report a Christian religious affiliation and 4% of
Americans identify with another world religion (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007). Within the Christian tradition, nearly 31% of Americans identify as Roman Catholic, 21% as Baptist, 9% Methodist, with the remaining 39% identifying in smaller increments as Lutheran, Presbyterian, LDS, and other Christian denominations. Further, 90% of adults and 60% of adolescents say religion is an important part of their lives while 96% of adults and 95% of adolescents say they believe in God (Rosario, Yali, Hunter, & Gwadz, 2006; Wallace, Foreman, Caldwell, & Willis, 2003). Within this context, life values are prescribed; cultural traditions are created; and community is formed and strengthened. As such, the religious environment becomes an important milieu for adolescent sexual development.

Defining Religion and Spirituality

The act of defining and operationalizing religious context without reducing its richness or complexity is a formidable task. Religion is a construct founded in both omniscience and mystery, and by defining it, we attempt to put limitations on something that it often regarded without limits. While one universal definition of “religion” does not exist, Zinnbauer and Pargament (2005) defined religion as “the individual and communal search for the sacred” (p. 36). Communally, the construct includes faith practices, religious services and denominational religious beliefs. The communal aspect of religion serves as a major socializing force for the religious community (Corveleyn & Luyten, 2005) as it provides a framework for child, adolescent and young adult development to occur. Within the individual aspect of religion, individuals incorporate these organizational beliefs, feelings and practices into their day-to-day living.
Further, while psychologists have often measured the religious construct behaviorally (e.g., church attendance, prayer, biblical readings), religiosity also possesses both cognitive and affective dimensions (Hoffman, Knight, Boscoe-Huffman, & Stewart, 2006). The cognitive dimension includes both church-wide teachings on life and the nature of God as well as one’s personal beliefs. Affective dimensions of the religious experience include emotions experienced through ones religious involvement. In order to expand the discussion of sexual minority religiosity, the current study conceptualized religiosity not only through behavioral religious participation, consistent with previous literature, but also through both the affective and cognitive experiences as well. Participant understandings of their own cognitive, affective, and behavioral religious experiences were utilized to offer an understanding of their unique religious and sexual identity developmental trajectories.

Several authors have found sexual minority individuals tend to dis-identify with their childhood religions and identify as spiritual rather than religious (e.g., Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). While similar, spirituality is not regarded as synonymous with religion (Tan, 2005). Spirituality refers to a search for meaning and/or purpose, but without the context of an organized system or religious institution (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005). In the current study, participant’s own definitions of religion and spirituality were utilized to gain a wider understanding of both their perspective and experience.

**Religious Identity Development**

Throughout child, adolescent, and young adult development, the context of
religion is a source of guidance, cultural traditions, values, identity, community, and strength (Garcia, Gray-Stanley, & Ramirez-Valles, 2008). Researchers have studied developmental processes within the religious context and have developed several stage models of religious identity development. Fowler’s Stages of Faith is the most widely used model and provides six stages people progress through in their faith and religious development based largely within Piaget’s work (Fowler, 1981). The stages progress from the intuitive-projective stage (typically ages 2-7), where children are strongly influenced by the stories of faith portrayed by adults to a final, universalizing stage of faith characterized by love, justice and passion for a “transformed” world, a stage that is rarely obtained. Like other linear stage models, Fowler’s has been the source of many critiques. The underlying assumption of a unidirectional developmental sequence as the “normal” developmental process is problematic, as is the fact that many do not ever “succeed” in fully developing their faith identity, not reaching the universalizing faith stage. Further, there is not “room” for differences in the process of faith development which may be influenced by ethnicity, culture, or sexual orientation (Levy, 2008).

To account for some of these criticisms, some researchers have utilized a life course approach to gain a wider understanding of an individual’s religious trajectory. The constructs of trajectory and transition are analyzed in an effort to examine the “social forces that shape the life course and its developmental consequences” (Elder, 1994, p. 5). Trajectory refers to the broad pathways of an individual’s patterns of behavior over a life course (Elder, 1994). A religious trajectory includes the patterns of religious belief and/or practices which characterize one’s religious involvement over the course of a lifetime.
(Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, & Morgan, 2002). Trajectories are understood by examining the transitional events in an individual’s life course, which often serve to either reinforce or redirect an individual’s trajectory. By researching an individual’s overall life pathway, and associated turning points (i.e., transitions), researchers gain a larger understanding of the way people make meaning of life events and share them with others (Elder, 1994). Within the religious experience, researchers can gain increased understanding of how various dimensions of religiosity change (e.g., behavioral church attendance, cognitive beliefs and worldviews) across varied transitions (Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002). Garcia and colleagues (2008) examined the religious and spiritual trajectories of 63 Latino gay men (aged 18-63) who were raised in a Catholic context. The authors found the participants’ religious experiences transitioned across developmental transitions. During childhood, participants were taught about their religion through family relationships, cultural traditions, and schooling. In adolescence, participants experienced a conflict between their sexual orientation and their religious beliefs, which was largely resolved by adulthood. Resolution strategies included disengaging with their childhood religion, identifying as spiritual, compartmentalizing their identities, and/or participating in a more welcoming faith tradition. Other researchers have examined religious trajectories in heterosexual adult samples (e.g., Ingersoll-Dayton et al., 2002; Wink & Dillon, 2002).

Sexual Minority Religiosity

The presupposition and normative standard of heterosexuality is often salient within the religious context. For youth who are LGBTQ and/or questioning their sexual identity, the developmental task of identity development may be frustrated and
complicated in this environment of heteronormativity and condemnation (Coyle, 1998; Mahaffy, 1996). In fact, two-thirds of sexual minority individuals report conflict between their sexual and religious identities (Dahl, 2009; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Mahaffy, 1996; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). One participant’s statement highlighted this conflict:

Sure, I mean [being gay and Christian] is the big thing that religious gay people grapple with isn’t it? There’s homophobia in there, there’s fear of divine retribution, there’s all of those things. What if I’m wrong? What if there’s a Hell and I’m going there because I’m a faggot, and I have sex with men? (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000, p. 333)

As a result, many sexual minority individuals report tension and conflict as well as feelings of alienation and disenchantment with religion.

Researchers have found a large number of sexual minorities tend to disidentify with religion across developmental transitions (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Rosser, 1991; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). In a sample of 2,269 LGB New Zealanders, Henrikson (2007) noted 78% of the adult sample was raised religious, and 26% of the sample maintained a current religious affiliation. Within a sample of 11,699 heterosexual and sexual minority adolescents, Rostosky, Danner, and Riggle (2008) found sexual minorities to be significantly less likely than heterosexual adolescents to report being religiously affiliated. While sexual minorities are more likely to disidentify with religion than female heterosexuals, research suggests an equal rate of disidentification for male heterosexuals and male and female sexual minorities (Rostosky et al., 2008; Sherkat, 2002). Gender differences have also been noted in religious participation; some investigators have found that males are often more active religiously than females, a sharp contrast from research findings with predominantly heterosexual samples (Rosario et al., 2006; Sherkat, 2002).
Conversely, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found lesbians to be more active religiously than gay males in their sample of 40 gay and lesbian members of a gay-positive congregation. Due to both the conflictual nature of the religious context and the rate of religious disidentification, the same “protective benefit” that emerges in primarily heterosexual samples should not be generalized automatically to the sexual minority population.

**Religion as a protective factor.** Religion has been well-established as a protective factor for various physical health (McCullough, Hoyt, Larson, Koenig & Blazer, 2000; Oman & Thoreson, 2005; Wallace & Foreman, 1998; Walsh, 1998) and mental health outcomes (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Nooney, 2005; Rostosky et al., 2008; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). However, one of the limitations of this body of research is the lack of sensitivity to the sexual identity of the individuals sampled. As Rostosky and colleagues concluded, “as long as sexual minority identity development occurs in a social context of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization, sexual minority youth will face (and frequently overcome) psychological and social challenges to their health and well-being” (p. 561). Thus, the generalizability of these protective factors for individuals who identify as LGBTQ is questionable. Several authors have hypothesized that the experiences of conflict within the religious context may actually take a toll on sexual minority individuals rather than serving a protective benefit (Rostosky, Danner, & Riggle, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001).

Ten studies provide a preliminary perspective on the relationship between sexual minority religiosity and health outcomes (Table 1). While Rosario and colleagues (2006)
Table 1

Research Summaries: Sexual Minority Religiosity and Health Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Operationalization of religiosity</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clingman &amp; Fowler (1976)</td>
<td>128 homosexual adults</td>
<td>Church attendance</td>
<td>Higher levels of self-esteem for Gay Metropolitan church attendees vs. nonattendees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahl &amp; Galliher (2010)</td>
<td>106 sexual minority young adults (18-24 years)</td>
<td>Behavioral, affective and cognitive religiosity</td>
<td>Behavioral religiosity was not related to sexual orientation conflict, self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Affective and cognitive measures of religiosity were related to both risk and benefit. Results were not moderated by time elapsed since coming out or biological sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lease, Horne, &amp; Noffsinger-Frazier (2005)</td>
<td>583 LGB adults</td>
<td>Affirming faith group experiences (e.g., feeling accepted, coming out celebrations)</td>
<td>Affirming faith experiences were related to psychological health through decreased internalized homonegativity and greater spirituality. Participation in non-affirming religious contexts may be detrimental to LGB mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ream and Savin-Williams (2005)</td>
<td>395 LGBTQ adults</td>
<td>Religious identity, Religious disidentification</td>
<td>Increased religious and sexual identity conflict was related to increased levels of internalized homophobia. Religious disidentification was associated with less internalized homophobia and lower levels of general mental health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosario et al. (2006)</td>
<td>164 LGB adolescents (14-21 years)</td>
<td>Self-rating of religious commitment</td>
<td>Religious commitment was associated with less alcohol use, less binge drinking or marijuana use, and lower number of sexual experiences for male sexual minority individuals but not female individuals. Male religiously-committed sexual minority adolescents benefited from increased self-esteem compared to non-religiously committed sexual minority males. Religious females were more likely to experience gay-related stress than those not religiously committed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostosky, Danner, &amp; Riggle (2007)</td>
<td>764 heterosexual and sexual minority adolescents</td>
<td>Religiosity index comprised of 3 items: attendance, church activities and self-rated importance</td>
<td>Religiosity had no influence on cigarette smoking, marijuana use or binge drinking (i.e., 5 or more drinks in one setting) for sexual minority young adults while noting 9-20% decreases in substance use participation for heterosexual-identified young adults.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostosky et al. (2008)</td>
<td>11, 699 heterosexual and sexual minority adolescents</td>
<td>Proximal and distal religiosity</td>
<td>Both proximal and distal religiosity were associated with lower levels of binge drinking and alcohol use for heterosexual individuals; the same protective benefit was not indicated for sexual minority individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rostosky et al. (2010)</td>
<td>13,038 heterosexual, bisexual, lesbian &amp; gay emerging adults</td>
<td>Religiosity index comprised of 3 items: attendance, church activities and self-rated importance</td>
<td>Religiosity protected against heavy episodic drinking in heterosexual women but not lesbian women. The odds of alcohol use and heavy episodic drinking were increased in bisexual women who indicated higher levels of religiosity. Religiosity was found to play a protective role for alcohol use in male participants, regardless of sexual orientation.</td>
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*(table continues)*
## Study Sample Operationalization of religiosity Findings

**Tan (2005)**  
93 gay and lesbian adults  
Spiritual well-being, an index comprised of religious and existential well-being  
Measured existential (feelings about life) and religious (feelings about God) well-being. Religious participants were found to have higher levels of religious well-being. Existential well-being was predictive of self-esteem, self-acceptance and feeling less alienated. Religious well-being did not significantly predict adjustment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Operationalization of religiosity</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woods, Antoni, Ironson &amp; Kling (1999)</strong></td>
<td>106 HIV-infected gay men</td>
<td>Religious readings, discussions, prayer &amp; church attendance; Religious coping</td>
<td>Religious behaviors (readings, discussions, prayer) were associated with higher CD4+ T cell counts but not better affective functioning. Religious coping (seeking religious comfort, placing trust in God) was associated with lower depressive symptomology but not immune health.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

found religious commitment associated with lowered levels of binge drinking, substance use and risky sexual behavior in male gay and bisexual adolescents, their data did not support the same conclusion for female participants in their sample. On average, the males in the subsample had been self-identified for a longer period of time, and as such, the authors hypothesized the males may have better integrated their sexual and religious identities, allowing them to experience a protective benefit. However, using larger samples of LGB adolescents, other authors have concluded that religiosity has no influence on cigarette smoking, marijuana use or binge drinking for sexual minority young adults while noting decreases in substance use participation for heterosexual-identified young adults (Rostosky et al., 2007, 2008). Higher levels of religiosity have been linked to higher levels of self-esteem in some samples (Clingman & Fowler, 1976; Rosario et al., 2006), suggesting a protective benefit. However, sexual minority young adults who view God as judgmental have been found to have lower levels of self-esteem (Dahl & Galliher, 2010), and higher levels of religious commitment has also been linked to increased experiences of gay-related stress (Rosario et al., 2006; Ream & Savin-
Williams, 2005), challenging a protective benefit. The state of the current research seems to support that “religion function[s] as a source of resiliency as well as a source of risk” for sexual minority individuals (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005, p. 32).

Overall, the findings are mixed; the relationship between sexual minority religiosity and mental health is inconclusive. Diverse operationalizations of religiosity and measures of mental health may account for some of the variation. Further, none of the aforementioned findings have been adequately explored nor replicated. An in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of sexual minority adolescents and young adults is warranted to offer additional insight into the relationship between sexual minority religiosity and mental health. A clearer understanding of religious and sexual identity integration for LGBTQ individuals, as suggested by Rosario and colleagues (2006), may aid in the understanding of both the protective and risk factors associated with sexual minority religiosity. As noted by Rostosky and colleagues (2008), additional research is needed to “understand religiosity and religious contexts and both their positive and negative impacts on the health” of sexual minority samples (p. 561).

**Religious and sexual identity development.** Twelve published studies have examined sexual and religious identity development and integration in adult samples (Table 2). Research has established approximately two thirds of sexual minority individuals experience religious and sexual identity conflict while coming out (Dahl, 2009; Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Mahaffy, 1996; Schuck & Liddle, 2001), with individuals raised in more conservative faiths experiencing more conflict than individuals raised in other traditions (Henrikson, 2007; Mahaffy, 1996). In retrospective studies, this conflict
Table 2

Research Summaries: Sexual and Religious Identity Integration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Sample Description</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dahl &amp; Galliher (2009)</td>
<td>105 LGBQQ young adults</td>
<td>Two-thirds of the sample surveyed noted conflict between their religious and sexual identities when coming out. Overall, the LGBQQ young adult sample did not report a high degree of sexual and religious identity integration. Religious disidentification was found across developmental transitions. For those who integrated their religious and sexual identities, factors such as self-acceptance and increased knowledge were instrumental. Participants described several different experiences in combining their religious and sexual identities, including: a tendency to identify as spiritual rather than religious, leave religion, find a supportive faith environment and having to compartmentalize their sexual and religious identities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Garcia et al. (2008)</td>
<td>66 Latino GBT men who grew up as Catholic</td>
<td>Religious trajectory found in life history interviews mirrored developmental milestones. During childhood, religion was interwoven with the participant’s family, culture and schools. Religious and sexual identity conflict occurred during adolescence, which often altered one’s religious trajectory and was related to feelings of guilt and shame. In adulthood, conflict resolution strategies included compartmentalizing identities, decreasing participation, joining other religions or spiritual groups, and abandoning all organized religions. While 2/3 left the church, religion/spirituality remained an important force in their lives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henrickson (2007)</td>
<td>2,269 LGB adults living in New Zealand</td>
<td>Both women and respondents surveyed aged 40 &amp; older were more likely to believe in a “spiritual force” than men and/or those younger than 40 years of age. Christians noted their religious affiliation was more of a difficulty than a support. Participants raised Christian reported less family support than those without a religious affiliation. Participants with no current religion reported more life satisfaction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Konik &amp; Stewart (2004)</td>
<td>358 sexual minority and heterosexual college students</td>
<td>Examined the relationship between a sexual minority identity and identity development. For sexual minorities, a strong sexual identity was linked to advanced religious, political, and global identity development. Sexual minorities were more likely to demonstrate achieved identities (EOM-EIS) while heterosexual individuals were more likely to have foreclosed, moratorium, and/or diffused scores. Support and/or modeling was important for the development of identity in the sexual minority subsample.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahaffy (1996)</td>
<td>186 lesbian adult women with a previous or present affiliation with the Christian church</td>
<td>Used questionnaires to explore cognitive dissonance theory in relationship to sexual and religious identity conflict. Evangelical identity (i.e., belief in the infallibility of the Bible and devotion to Christ) predicted both internal and external dissonance. Those with an evangelical identity were most likely to struggle with their religious and sexual identities. Resolution strategies included modifying religious beliefs, disidentifying with religious affiliation(s) and/or living with the dissonance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitt (2010)</td>
<td>24 homosexual black men members of conservative African American churches</td>
<td>Conducted semi-structured interviews with men who were both out as gay/bisexual and active in their strongly fundamentalist churches. Participants utilized various strategies, including rejecting their sexual identity, rejecting their religious identity, compartmentalizing their sexual and religious identities, and integrating the seemingly disparate identities.</td>
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*(table continues)*
has been linked to feelings of guilt, shame, depression and suicidal ideation (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Shuck & Liddle, 2001). While this conflict may lead to a more difficult process of identity development, the forced consideration of one’s identity in a heterosexist environment might be a source of resiliency in LGBTQ individuals (Dahl, 2009). Konik and Stewart (2004) found same-sex attracted individuals are forced to
analyze their own identity in a variety of social milieus in the overarching context of a primarily heterosexist society. As a result of this advantage, they scored higher on an identity achievement measure than heterosexuals in their sample. However, additional research is needed to understand the factors related to both risk and resiliency for LGBTQ individuals who experience religious and sexual identity conflict.

Research supports four primary avenues by which sexual minority individuals have resolved religious and sexual identity conflict. First, many sexual minority individuals have reported considering themselves spiritual rather than religious in response to the conflict (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). By focusing on one’s spirituality, participants distance themselves from institutionalized heterosexism existing within organized religion(s) while continuing to search for a deeper sense of purpose, meaning, and self-acceptance. One participant described this experience.

I completely altered the way I look at religion. I feel that religion can be very dangerous, due to people being overzealous or worse. I have become very spiritual and accepting of all people’s individual beliefs. Through that, I know that each person’s spiritual needs are different, and it is a personal thing, and I have no shame in believing what I do, including homosexuality, and my being so. (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p. 12)

Secondly, sexual minority individuals may modify their religious beliefs and redefine their relationship with God (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Garcia et al., 2008; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Third, some sexual minority individuals report continuing to live with the tension by compartmentalizing their religious and sexual identities (Garcia et al., 2008), refraining from self-identifying in the religious context and vice versa. One participant described the experience of compartmentalization, “HA. Um, what
experience? When I’m in the religious part of my life, it’s like I just don’t have sexuality. That’s the only way it ever worked” (Dahl & Galliher, 2009, p. 11). Lastly, many sexual minority individuals have found resolution by leaving the religious context which is often the source of conflict (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Garcia et al., 2008; Schuck & Liddle). Some sexual minority individuals find resolution in abandoning religion altogether, while others find solace in gay-friendly churches and religious organizations.

For individuals who have remained religious, several factors have been highlighted that are associated with successful identity integration and self-acceptance (Dahl, 2009). First, social supports in both LGB friends and family members have proven beneficial in the process of conflict resolution (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Increased involvement in gay-positive faith organizations has also been found to foster self-acceptance and the valuation of a gay, religious identity (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Thumma, 1991, Wagner et al., 1994). Finally, sexual minority individuals have noted increased knowledge, found through biblical and other faith readings to aid identity integration (Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Yip, 2002).

In order to understand the process of religious and sexual identity conflict resolution, Levy (2008) interviewed 15 gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (aged 18-43) with a Christian upbringing for her doctoral dissertation. Levy delineated a five-stage process of conflict resolution, highlighting personal and contextual influences in this process. Resolution strategies utilized by participants echoed those found elsewhere, including seeking new knowledge, identifying as spiritual rather than religious, and/or engaging with a more affirming religious organization (e.g., Garcia et al., 2008; Schuck
& Liddle, 2001). The author concluded that “faith development is mediated by sexual identity, and sexual identity development is influenced by faith upbringing” (pp. 231-232). Similarly, the current study aims to consider the influence of one’s sexual identity development on one’s religious trajectories and conversely, the influence of one’s religious experiences and identity upon one’s sexual identity developmental trajectory. Unlike Levy, who focused solely on the process of conflict resolution, the current study aimed to examine this interplay across developmental transitions.

Finally, Brzenzinski (2000) also studied the process of sexual identity development of 21 gay males (aged 23-51 years) who were raised in the LDS church for her doctoral dissertation. From this data, Brzenzinski developed a model of sexual identity development in the context of conflicting identities. This model included an early awareness of feeling “different,” followed by feelings of guilt and shame. For many of Brzenzinski’s participants, these feelings elicited an attempt to change their attractions. When unable to change their attractions, participants faced a forced “identity choice,” choosing to live consistent with the teachings of the LDS faith and remain celibate or disengage with their faith and embrace their gay identity. As noted by Savin-Williams (2005), models of sexual identity development, while appealing, do not adequately account for the unique differential developmental trajectories of sexual minority adolescents and young adults. Rather than creating a model of development, the current study aimed to consider the ways sexual minority young adults negotiate their religious and sexual identity development by documenting both transitional points and key developmental experiences, as it is through such experiences we define who we are and
how we relate to the world.

Overall, this body of research has provided a preliminary perspective on sexual minority religious and sexual identity development. Sexual minority individuals tend to disidentify with religious affiliation across developmental transitions, partially in response to the conflict between their religious and sexual identities. Research has focused on the outcomes of this conflict, focusing on resolutions reached and factors associated with successful identity integration. However, the interaction of one’s religious and sexual identities and experiences throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood is not adequately documented. Further, research that has considered this interaction has primarily focused on individuals who were current members of gay-positive churches and organizations (e.g., Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Shallenberger, 1996), leaving this developmental interplay of individuals who were once active and later left organized religion largely unexplored in the published literature. Finally, none of the previous studies have utilized a qualitative methodology with a strictly adolescent and young adult sample. As the process of sexual and religious identity integration may be most salient in an LGBTQ individual’s life during the adolescent and young adult years, this approach may elicit valuable current and retrospective information about the reciprocity of one’s religious and sexual identities and experiences. A qualitative approach provides the ability to gain a richer understanding of the participant’s lived experiences than a quantitative methodology would allow (Ponterotto, 2010). As Garcia and colleagues (2008) stated, “More specific data are needed on religious involvement, commitment, and participation across the life course…to further decipher the impact of
religiosity on individuals’ health, personal relationships, sexual and gender identities, and civic involvement” (p. 433).

**Purpose and Objectives**

While recent research has established the importance of contextual influences on sexual minority development; the state of this research on adolescent and emerging adult sexual minority religiosity is in its infancy. The current study utilized a qualitative methodology to examine the interplay between sexual minority adolescent and emerging adult religious and sexual identity trajectories. Specific research questions included the following.

1. How do sexual minority adolescents and young adults describe the function and role of religion throughout their development (historically and currently)?

2. How do sexual minority adolescents and young adults describe the way their religiosity relates to their sexual identity development?

3. Overall, what factors related to one’s sexual and religious identities are associated with both resiliency and risk in sexual minority young adults?
CHAPTER III
METHODS

Overview

When a researcher wants to explore a topic in-depth for which little information is available, inquire about a sensitive or emotional topic, and/or gain the individual participant’s unique perspective on a situation of interest, a qualitative approach is recommended (Glesne, 2006; Padgett, 1988). Ponterotto (2010) stated a qualitative methodology is especially relevant when working cross-culturally, as it facilitates both understanding and appreciation in interactions potentially troubled by “misunderstanding, stereotypes and conflict” (p. 583). For the current study, a phenomenological design was utilized in order to understand the point of view and experiences of sexual minority adolescents within the Christian religious context (Creswell, Hanson, Plano Clark, & Morales, 2007; Wertz, 2005). A phenomenological study offers “thick descriptions of people’s lived experiences- how it is that they experience what they experience, how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, and make sense of it” (Borgman, 2009, p. 509).

Participants were eligible for the study if they identified as a sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer), were 14-24 years old, and identified as having been actively raised in a Christian religious tradition. Individuals within these age ranges have the ability to provide valuable information regarding the developmental interplay of one’s sexual and religious identities during a key timeframe of this process of identity development and integration. Participants did not have to be currently religious
to participate.

Participants were recruited through email listservs, word of mouth, and fliers at local community and campus support organizations (i.e., Utah Pride Center, university gay straight alliances), coffee shops, and a social networking website (see Appendix A). Interested individuals contacted the student researcher via email or telephone after hearing of the study. Upon contact, a short screening survey was conducted to verify their eligibility in the study, including religious activity during childhood. Adolescent participants who met criteria were provided the parental consent and adolescent assent form (see Appendix B) and were asked to obtain parental signatures before making an interview appointment. Three adolescents who initially contacted the researcher to participate declined from participating in the study after obtaining the parental consent form. After reading the parental consent form, they may have decided they were unwilling to obtain consent or were no longer interested in the study. Alternatively, they may have had difficulty getting their parent to consent to study participation. Young adult participants were informed about the nature of the study and appointment was made for the initial interview, at which the informed consent was signed. Recruitment of participants continued until interview content suggested that saturation has been reached, as interviews were no longer yielding new content. Nineteen individuals (8 adolescent and 11 young adults) participated in the study.

During the first phase of the study, all participants participated in an in-depth interview regarding their religious and sexual identities over the life course and were provided a cash incentive of $15 for their participation. Interviews lasted between 45
minutes and 2½ hours, with the adolescent interviews taking less time than the young adult interviews. Interview questions addressed general and religious demographic information, religious life histories, and the interaction of participant religious and sexual identities across developmental transitions of childhood, adolescence and (if applicable) young adulthood (see Appendix C). As noted in Appendix C, participants were asked to share their earliest memories of experiences related to their sexual and religious identities, providing a narrative starting with their earliest experiences. Interviews were transcribed using pseudonyms selected by the participants and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy after the transcribing was completed. To facilitate member checking, transcripts were provided to participants via email or hand delivery, as selected by the participant (Glesne, 2006). Participants were invited to provide further comments or clarification regarding the interview content. Seven of the adolescent and nine of the emerging adult participants responded to the member checking inquiry. One adolescent and two emerging adult participants were provided the transcripts, but did not respond to multiple attempts by the researcher to obtain verification and/or clarification. While the majority of the participants provided minor, if any comments regarding their transcript (e.g., “I say ‘like’ a lot”), one participant (Capernicus) expanded upon his interview transcript, sharing additional details regarding his process of sexual and gender identity development. The additional information was incorporated into the transcript and the data included in the current study reflects these changes made as a result of the member checking. Initial transcript analyses were conducted concurrent to the interview process in order to strengthen interview questions, engage in initial thematic analyses, obtain
missing participant information and pinpoint saturation (Glesne, 2006).

During the second phase of the study, participants were given the opportunity to record times throughout a 2-week period where they have had thoughts, feelings and/or experiences which have related to their religious and sexual identities. Four adolescent and nine young adult participants wrote about their religious and sexual identities in a journal format on five different occasions over the 2-week period. Typed and hand-written journals were collected by the researcher. Participants were paid $3 per journal entry, with a maximum incentive of $15. At the end of the first two phases of the study, interview transcriptions and journal writings were analyzed for emerging themes and coded for both qualitative thematic and content analyses using a hierarchical coding technique (Glesne, 2006).

Focus groups were conducted with a subsample of participants to clarify emergent themes following the initial data analysis. This was done to improve the credibility and validity of the information gathered. Five adolescents and eight young adults participated in two separate focus groups (one adolescent and one young adult) and the participants were paid $15. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes. Focus group transcriptions using pseudonyms were analyzed using a similar methodology as outlined above.

The interviews, journals and focus groups provided for triangulation of the data, providing multiple forms of information to answer the research questions, consistent with recommendations made by Glesne (2006). All data were reviewed again at the end of the data collection, and codes were revised as necessary to most accurately reflect the experiences of the participants (Glesne, 2006; Yeh & Inman, 2007).
Participants

Eight adolescent and 11 emerging adult individuals whom identified as a sexual minority and having been actively raised in a Christian religious tradition participated in the study. Table 3 provides additional information regarding the participants’ chosen pseudonym, age, sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliations across developmental transitions and extent of study participation. All participants were White American. The study was situated in Utah where the majority of the population identifies as a member of the LDS church. As such, 16 of the 19 participants identified as having been raised in the LDS faith. In order to provide a richer understanding of the participants themselves, additional descriptive information is warranted and provided below (Glesne, 2006). Certainly, these participant summaries are incomplete; it would be an impossible task to fully describe any one individual in the limited space allotted. However, some of the relevant contextual variables are provided for the reader to gain an understanding of some of the factors which influenced the participants’ unique developmental transitions and trajectories (e.g., childhood community raised, values/goals, and information regarding the participant’s coming out process).

Adolescent Participants

Tommy was a 15-year-old bisexual female who was raised in an urban community in the West. She was raised in a Roman Catholic family and was attending a private Catholic high school at the time of the interview. Tommy described herself as a creative individual, which was evident by her brightly colored leggings, mismatched
Table 3

Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sexual orientation and gender</th>
<th>Childhood religious affiliation</th>
<th>Religious affiliation while coming out</th>
<th>Religious affiliation reported at interview</th>
<th>Study participation(^a)</th>
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<td>LDS</td>
<td>Agnostic/Atheist</td>
<td>I, J, F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)I = interview, J = journal writing, F = focus group

shoes, and retrostyle dress she wore to the interview. Tommy first recognized same-sex attractions as age 12. At age 13, she came out to her family and friends. Tommy shared frustration with her mother’s inability to accept her sexual orientation, telling her “it’s
just a phase you are going through.”

Alonsa was a 17-year-old lesbian female who was raised in an LDS family. She grew up in a suburban community in the west and was a senior in high school at the time of the interview. She described herself as a “supernerd” and stated she spent time watching Dr. Who, drawing fan art, and attending Harry Potter parties. At age 8 or 9, Alonsa first thought she may be attracted to members of the same sex. At age 10, she learned about evolution, which she described as pivotal in her decision to identify as agnostic. At age 14, she self-labeled as lesbian and came out to a few close friends at age 15. At the time of the interview, Alonsa was not out to any of her family and was only out to a select few friends.

Alexia was a 16-year-old bisexual female who was raised in a western urban community. She described herself as a creative thinker, and shared her interest in fashion and film during the interview. While her family was not religious, she attended an LDS church twice weekly with her neighbor and best friend throughout her childhood. Because her family was not religious, she felt both her coming out process and process of religious disengagement was less chaotic than some of her peers. She first identified same-sex attractions at age 10. At age 13, she self-labeled as bisexual. Alexia is now out to her family and friends.

Capernicus was a 17-year-old transgender straight male who was raised in an LDS family. He spent the majority of his childhood living in a mixed urban and rural community in the West. Capernicus was a junior in high school at the time of the interview and he was considering dropping out of high school and getting his GED. He
shared his future dreams of being a “hippy,” which he described as moving to the west coast, living in a van, taking baths in the river, and living off the land. Capernicus was raised as a female but recalls feeling “gender neutral” throughout much of his childhood and adolescence. He stated he first recognized same-sex attractions at age 13 and self-labeled as “gay.” When he was 15 years old, Capernicus came out to his parents as a lesbian female. At age 17, he began to self-identify as male.

Clyde was an 18-year-old gay male who lived in a mixed urban and rural community in the West throughout his childhood. He was raised with his two siblings in an LDS family. He was a senior in high school at the time of the interview and planned to attend college the following year. He first identified same-sex attractions at age 11. He self-identified as “gay” at age 13 and is currently out to both his family and friends. He described his relationship with his father, who holds a leadership position in the LDS church, as very difficult since coming out.

Erika was a 16-year-old bisexual/pansexual female who was raised in a Presbyterian faith tradition. Erika shared while she uses both the terms “bisexual” and “pansexual” to describe her sexual orientation, she prefers “pansexual,” which she described as her love and attraction having no boundaries. She grew up in a mixed urban and rural community in the West and currently lived with her biological mother and sister. Growing up, she spent most Sundays and Wednesdays with her father, stepmother, and stepsiblings. Her father’s family was religiously active and she attended church activities once or twice a week with them throughout her childhood. She described herself as a “big-time debate-nerd” and presented as very open-minded and comfortable
with herself. As a child, Erika first identified same-sex attractions at age 11 and labeled herself “bisexual” at age 12. At age 13, she shared her sexual identity with a friend and is currently out to her family and friends.

Andrew was an 18-year-old bisexual male who grew up in a western urban community. His parents divorced before he was born, and as a result, he was raised by his mother and grandmother. He attended church weekly growing up with his grandmother, who was an active member of the LDS church. At age 12, Andrew stopped attending religious services and at age 13 first identified as gay. Andrew described himself as artistic and shared an interest in graffiti art and photography. At the time of the interview, he had graduated high school and was working full-time to save up money for college. Andrew is currently out to his family and friends.

Joseph was a 15-year-old gay male who was raised in the Roman Catholic faith. He spent the majority of his childhood raised in a mixed urban and rural community in the western region of the United States. He was in ninth grade at the time of the interview and stated he liked to play video games, go online, and volunteer. He was interested in pursuing an advanced degree in science, and shared his religious beliefs had been significantly impacted by this interest. He first identified same-sex attractions at age 12, and self-labeled as “gay” at age 13. At the time of the interview, Joseph had shared his sexual orientation with only a few close friends. Joseph was from a predominantly religious community and had experienced a lot of discrimination for his perceived sexual identity. Though he was not “out” in the school environment, he was often perceived to be gay; as such, has been subjected to bullying by his peers. During the interview, he
shared how these experiences had a large impact on his process of identity development. Joseph came out to his parents during the course of the study in the time that elapsed between the interview and focus group.

Young Adult Participants

Jane was a 24-year-old lesbian female who was raised in the LDS church. She grew up in an urban community in the West. She lived with a roommate and worked full-time in the healthcare field. At age 12 or 13, Jane remembers exploring her sexuality, but did not recall when she first experienced same-sex attractions. She was extremely active religiously, holding several leadership positions in her church throughout her childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. She described her first kiss with a girl as pivotal to her disengagement with her faith and sexual self-identification. She first adopted the label “lesbian” to describe her sexual orientation at age 23. She was currently out to her family and friends.

Marla was a 20-year-old bisexual/pansexual female who was raised in the LDS church. She grew up in a mixed urban and rural community in the West. Marla lived alone and was employed as an editor. She described herself as having a passion for service work and her thoughtfulness was evident in her interactions during the interview. Marla first identified same-sex attractions at age 9. She described her family as very “open-minded” and “laid back,” which she stated helped ease her process of identity development. At age 18, she self-identified as gay and shared her identification with a friend. During the time that elapsed between the interview and the focus group, Marla was “forced” to come out to her mom, who asked her if she was a lesbian.
Elliot was a 20-year-old bisexual female who was raised in the LDS church. She grew up in urban communities in the “bible belt” region of the United States, where she described herself as a “religious minority.” Her experiences as a religious minority had a large impact on her religious identity development growing up. Elliot presented as a highly motivated student, as she was in the process of completing her bachelor’s degree and planned to enter graduate school the following semester. She first identified same-sex attractions at age 10, and labeled as bisexual at age 19. At age 20, Elliot shared her sexual orientation with a friend and was not currently out to her family.

Alex was a 21-year-old straight transgender male. His family moved to a suburban community in the West when he was 6 years old, previously living in the eastern United States. He was raised in an LDS family. He was a full-time university student. As a child, Alex was raised as a female, but frequently had the feeling that he was a “male trapped in a female body.” Alex first identified as a bisexual female at age 17 and came out to his parents as a lesbian female at age 19. During the course of the study, Alex came out to both family and friends as a transgender male and plans to fully transition to a male over the coming years.

Apollo was a 19-year-old gay male. He was raised in an LDS military family, moving frequently throughout the United States and abroad. Apollo described himself as creative and shared his hope to have an art-related career in the future. At the time of the interview, he worked full-time in customer service. Apollo first identified same-sex attractions at age 12. He labeled himself “gay” at age 17 and at that time, came out to his close friends. In the time that elapsed between the interview and the focus group, Apollo
came out to his parents, which Apollo stated has strained his relationship with his father.

Lynn was a 22-year-old lesbian female who was raised in an LDS family. Her father was in the military and her family moved frequently throughout her childhood. As a result, she spent much of her childhood as a religious minority and recalled her experiences as a Mormon living in the predominantly Baptist south as central to her religious identity. She first identified same-sex attractions at age 15. She dropped out of high school at age 17 and earned her GED. She self-identified as “gay” at age 20. At the time of the interview, she had been out to her friends for 2 years but had just recently come out to her parents. She is currently enrolled in classes at a university and was living with her parents.

Wil was a 24-year-old gay male who was raised in an LDS military family throughout the United States. He has 14 siblings and stated that he loved having a large family growing up. His parents divorced when he was a child and he has lost contact with his biological father. Wil first recognized same-sex attractions at age 9 and self-labeled himself as “ bisexual” at age 14. Wil dropped out of high school at age 15 and earned his GED. He lived with his mother whom he described as his best friend, and worked full-time as a banquet server and wedding planner. Wil has an eccentric personality and described himself as the “life of the party.” He shared pictures during the interview of himself dressing as “Hannah Man-tana” and described his excitement for dressing in drag. Wil was out to both family and friends.

Bryce was a 19-year-old gay male raised in an LDS family in a rural western community. Bryce presented as a highly-motivated individual. At the time of the
interview, he was attending university classes to earn a bachelor’s degree and shared his goal of earning a master’s degree in the future. He described himself as active and social, and was involved with many campus organizations. Bryce first recognized same-sex attractions at age 12. When he was a senior in high school he had his first “male kiss,” which he described as pivotal in the development of both his religious and sexual identity. He self-labeled as “gay” at age 19 and shortly after came out to his family and friends.

Ryan was a 19-year-old gay male who grew up a suburban community in the West. He was raised with his three siblings in an LDS family. He was a freshman in college taking courses and shared a goal of attending graduate school in the future. He first recognized same-sex attractions at age 13 and came out to his mom at age 15. Due to strained family relationships, Ryan moved out of his family home during his junior year in high school. He described this year as transitional in his identity development, as he was forced to explore his beliefs, values, and relationships when living apart from his parents. He described his family relationships as improving and is currently out to both family and friends.

Rob was a 24-year-old gay male who was raised in an LDS family. He spent his childhood and adolescence in a mixed rural and urban western community. He first identified same-sex attractions at age 16. He served a 2-year mission for the LDS church at age 19, which strengthened his religious beliefs and challenged his sense of sexual identity. Upon returning home from his mission, he self-labeled as “gay” and was currently out to family and friends. In keeping with his religious beliefs, Rob was
attempting to live a celibate life at the time of the interview. He was hoping to find a balance between his sexual identification as gay, his LDS beliefs, and his desire to have a relationship with a man. He is currently a full-time university student.

Dane was a 22-year-old bisexual/omnisexual transsexual male who was raised in an LDS family. When describing his sexual orientation, Dane stated “I don’t really care about labels” but felt “omnisexual” was a better descriptor than “bisexual” as the term includes individuals whose gender identity may not coincide with their biological sex. He grew up in a rural community in the West. Dane was raised female but had thoughts of being a “boy trapped in the girl’s body” as early as age 6. Dane described a religious disenchantment starting around age 8, stating that he had difficulty believing some of the basic tenets of the LDS religion. Dane first identified as a bisexual female at age 16, and came out to his mother at age 17. Dane identified as a transgender male at age 20, and began taking hormones to transition. Dane came out to his family as a transgender male at age 20 and was in the process of completing his transition during the study. He is currently a college student and hoped to go to graduate school in the future.
CHAPTER IV
FINDINGS

The 19 interviews, 64 journal entries, and two focus groups were analyzed for emerging themes as described above. The adolescent and young adult participants were conceptualized as two distinct groups and as such, their data were analyzed separately. In general, the adolescents self-identified as a sexual minority at an earlier age ($M = 13.13$ years, $SD = .83$) than the young adult participants ($M = 18.27$ years, $SD = 2.65$). All participants were out to at least one friend, at the time of the initial interview, and a similar proportion of the adolescents (75%) and young adult participants (63%) were “out” to at least one family member. Additionally, there was more variability in the adolescents’ religious experiences, which was considered an important variable to understanding their religious and sexual identity developmental trajectories. Finally, while adolescent participants were not required to be “out” to obtain parental permission to participate in the study, they did have to be comfortable with their parents knowing they were going to address both their relationship and religious experiences with the researcher, which may have influenced the characteristics of the adolescent sample.

Adolescent Trajectories

Adolescent participants were asked to share information regarding their religious experiences and coming out processes in order to gain an understanding of their religious and sexual identity development trajectories. As may be expected developmentally, the adolescent interviews lacked depth in comparison to the young adult interviews, and as a
result, were substantially shorter. In the process of analyzing the interviews, journal writings and focus group transcription, it was evident that adolescent’s experiences tended to emerge in three broad themes, including early, middle, and late experiences. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe their experiences across the developmental transitions of childhood and adolescence (see Appendix C), starting with their earliest memories of sexual and religious identity development, continuing through their current experiences. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that these broader themes emerged temporally. In order to gain a better understanding of participant trajectories, data relating to each research question are addressed across each of these broader themes in order to facilitate a holistic view of the ways in which participants’ religious and sexual identities intersected across developmental transitions.

**Early Experiences**

Participants were asked to share their earliest experiences regarding their religious and sexual identities. Participants’ first awareness of their religious experiences occurred between the ages of 5 and 7 years and the adolescents first recognized their same-sex attractions between the ages of 8-13 years. Two subthemes emerged during the early experiences. First, consistent with both their stage of development and religious identity development models, their religious participation was largely behaviorally focused. Several of the adolescent participants highlighted their enjoyment of these behaviorally-focused religious activities. Second, while participants shared an initial awareness of their same-sex attractions, often noting they felt “different,” many were not sure what to call their same-sex attractions.
Behavioral religiosity. Participants discussed a behaviorally focused participation in the church as a child. They recalled being involved with nursery programs, religious education, and sacrament meetings/worship services. Each of the adolescent participants recalled these experiences with fond memories. Tommy shared, “I actually remember really enjoying church. We had a really cool Priest…there was kneeling and standing and singing…it was pretty fun.” The food served during the church activities was a highlight for some of the participants. Joseph stated, “it [church] was kind of exciting…. I don’t know how to describe it, the atmosphere of going to church, having the fun of being with people that you know and donuts afterwards.” Capernicus also enjoyed the food, he said, “Like it was…I go to church to get goldfish and candy…like Halloween.” Similarly, Alonsa disclosed, “Back in the day church was fun. I’ll be honest the food was my biggest motivator. And, all my friends were there.”

Andrew, Alexia, and Erika also stated they enjoyed being at church, and shared they liked spending time with friends. Erika said, “I thought it was fun. I got to hang out with a bunch of other kids.” Similarly, Alexia, who attended church throughout her childhood with her best friend’s family, stated her primary motivation to attend church was these social relationships. She summarized her early religious experience, saying “I felt like I was like awesome and I was doing everything right.” While the majority of the participants enjoyed religious services as a child, Clyde did not enjoy church, and described his involvement as a “chore,” he stated, “Yeah, just going to church…the sacrament meeting, primary…every single Sunday.”
Unsure of label. Six of the participants shared an initial awareness of being “different” than many of their peers during these early experiences. While these participants realized they were different, they did not know how to describe their experience, and many of them had never heard the terms “gay” or “lesbian.” Alonsa shared her experience.

I remember realizing [my same sex attraction] before I had a word for it. I was 8 or 9... I didn’t realize that it was going to prevent me from a “future life of a husband and children.” I realized…all my friends were like “oh he’s so cute” and I didn’t see that... I’d see female friends...she is really cute. I’d try to be closer to them…. I didn’t realize that’s how you are and there is something different about that.

Alexia shared, “I didn’t really have an idea what it was called, I was just like, girls are prettier than guys…they look better, so that’s just kind of how I felt.” Similarly, Clyde shared,

I knew what I was but I didn’t know what it was. I remember asking my mom one time when I was really little in the car if a man could marry a man. I don’t know why I asked but I remember asking her that. She said no.

Capernicus stated, “I didn’t even know what gay was. I was not raised knowing any ‘bad terms.’ Bad…to my parents. I had no idea what it was…. I would say ‘gay’ but only as a derogatory term.”

Middle Experiences

The second overarching theme that emerged was that of middle experiences. This theme was characterized by a sense of exploration. At this time, many participants reported personally adopting an LGBTQ label and began to explore their sexual identity.

Two subthemes emerged within the middle experiences. First, as part of their religious
and sexual identity exploration, participants shared a tendency to question their religious beliefs. They reported questioning both the more general teachings of their religious faith and the specific teachings on same-sex attractions. Despite questioning the religious teachings, participants continued to attend church, largely out of respect for their parents. Second, a subsample of the adolescent participants shared they experienced some mental health difficulties which they related to their religiosity while other adolescents did not endorse mental health difficulties.

**Questioning.** During the middle experiences, participants shared a tendency to doubt and question religious teachings. Five of the participants stated they began to espouse a more rational worldview. Alonsa noted when she began to question her religious upbringing:

> My turning point religious-wise was probably when I was about 10. Because, the LDS church...puts on pageants..., I went to one and there were anti-LDS protesters...they had all this literature and they had websites...one was called josephsmithlied.com.... I researched it...and I was like “wait, what?” there are other options?

Tommy summarized her experience questioning the Catholic faith and their teachings.

> We talk about Jesus, who dies on a cross and then comes back to life magically and I know that...that’s something for people and I don’t want to like crush their faith...but it’s always been kind of weird..And, to have one...like one book...everybody believes...that could easily happen in 2,000 years with Harry Potter... It just seems like...it’s a little preposterous.

Similarly, Joseph shared when he began to question, “I started taking more science classes. I started learning about evolution...remember talking to the priest about evolution and how he was like ‘oh it’s not real’ or...one of the deacons said ‘it’s real but God started it.’”
Each of the participants discussed questioning his or her religious faith’s teachings on same-sex attractions. Erika, who has a gay uncle, described her experience when her church condemned her uncle’s sexual orientation, “They said God wasn’t happy with it and people like that needed to change…it was like the reparative thing, and it really made me upset because I never thought there was anything wrong with my uncle.” Alonsa shared several experiences where she questioned her religious education teachers during both the interview and in the journal writings. She described an experience with one of her teachers who she described as “homophobic.”

He has several brothers and one of his brothers does cocaine…. Whenever he would talk about his cocaine brother’s problems, he would also bring in his gay brother…he would associate them, like they both were big things…it really drove me up the wall. That is when I started to not only to question, but I didn’t buy the church, I disliked it.

Clyde, Capernicus, Alonsa, and Alexia, each raised in the LDS church, noted questioning the LDS church’s instructions to deny their same-sex attractions. Because their attempts to ignore their attractions were futile, they questioned the teachings of the church. Clyde shared:

Because it really sucked. Like, you go to this church every week and they are telling you that you are doing things wrong, you are not normal. They [the LDS church leadership] don’t really consider homosexuality a sin as long as you don’t act on it. But, thoughts are considered acting on it and in the Mormon religion, you have the big three—the big three sins; the top one I’m not even going to go into…the second is murder and then there is immorality. So thinking homosexual thoughts is immorality, right below murder. They put you at that level and you are holy crap, what? Then you realize you can’t change it and then you realize according to their doctrine you are pretty much eternally screwed.

Capernicus shared his reaction to what he was taught in the LDS church, “Are you kidding me? I can’t control who I am. You say I can ‘choose,’ why would I choose this
discrimination, this hatred, you know?.. They preach to accept and love one another and
do as Jesus would do....”

Mental health difficulties. Four of the participants shared difficulties related to
their mental health. Two of the participants raised in the LDS church reported feeling
depressed and turned to cutting as a method to cope with their emotions. Clyde stated, “I
think it [cutting] was a cry for help sort of, I think it was a lot of things…. Just a lot of
confusion really.” During the interview, Capernicus shared he had 376 scars from cutting.
He stated:

I was going insane. I was angry all the time. I had to play somebody I wasn’t and
I just was like, who cares anymore? I was really depressed so I was like…either
going to live to be who I am or I’m going to die to be somebody I’m not. I would
rather choose the first one because I like living though at the time I didn’t.

Capernicus also shared he was hospitalized after he overdose on ibuprofen in an effort
to cope with both his sexual orientation and related family conflict.

Joseph also experienced some feelings of depression. He related his symptoms to
the religious community he grew up in rather than his sexual orientation. He stated, “I
became depressed for a while. I lost my faith in religion and we live in a religious
community. I now think of myself as an outcast.” When asked about his mental health in
relationship to his sexual orientation, Joseph stated:

I was removed enough to feel bad or guilty but I still had a lot of preconceived
stereotypes that I got from the church. Like, all gay people are flamboyant, that
they are all child molesters, things like that…of course gay people are like scary
and they hate children.

Similarly, Erika stated she had the thoughts “I still could go to hell, God will hate me,
everyone else, my whole family is going to hate me” which made her feel bad about
herself. While Erika had these worries, she did not endorse symptoms of guilt as a result of her attractions.

Conversely, four of the participants specifically shared they did not experience religious-related guilt or associated symptoms of depression. Alonsa described her early cognitive and affective religious disengagement as instrumental for her mental health during both the interview and in her journal writing. She stated, “If I would have been connected to the church when I was 13 or something like that I probably would have had that problem, but, the earlier you give it up, the better off you are.” Similarly, Andrew attributed his early religious disidentification to play a protective benefit.

**Late Experiences**

During the late experiences, participants further defined their sexual and religious identities. Five subthemes emerged during the late experiences. First, participants shared a tendency to disengage with their religious faith. Half of the adolescent participants continued to participate in church activities, largely out of respect for their parents, despite no longer believing in the church’s teachings. Second, many of the participants began coming out, sharing their sexual orientation with selected friends and family members. Third, participants shared both positive and negative consequences related to their perceived or actual sexual orientation. Fourth, participants shared their process of accepting themselves as LGBTQ. Last, participants identified their own values and clarified their religious beliefs. These subthemes and their relationship to risk and resilience are discussed below.
Religious disengagement. Each of the participants stated he or she cognitively and affectively disengaged with their childhood religious faith during their adolescent years. Joseph described his experience.

I lost faith in the church…the Pope saying “oh we shouldn’t distribute condoms in Africa because that’s bad….” I started focusing more on learning about evolution because I really enjoyed biology. I don’t know, I guess also it was a way to rebel against the religious, the very, very religious town [I] live in. I started identifying myself as not being religious even though I still prayed and went to church.

Several of the participants related their disengagement to their self-identification as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Clyde shared he had difficulty denying his same-sex attractions as he had been instructed by the LDS church. As a result, he disengaged.

I took in all the facts, if I believed in the church, there had to be a way to fix it but if I didn’t believe in the church then there was no way to fix it…. I could try to fix it but I don’t know if I can and so like, you can try, and you try to control your thoughts…there is no way to fix it so it’s not true. They can’t go together it has to be one or the other, you know.

Similarly, Capernicus said, “the final justification for why I don’t go to church anymore is that I’m gay…., I tell my mom, ‘your religion does not accept homosexuals.’” Alonsa shared her experience, “My beliefs that I know about my sexuality don’t go with the church…. I went with what’s in me more rather than with what’s in the church.” Clyde shared his reasons for no longer believing in the LDS faith, “I came out. Mostly that’s what it was.” Tommy shared, “me not identifying as Catholic was a really slow process, but I guess, I think that being bisexual kind of pushed that forward a little.”

Four of the adolescent participants continued attending religious services out of respect for their parents, despite no longer engaging cognitively and affectively. Clyde continued attending religious services until he turned 18. In reflecting upon this decision,
he stated:

I pretty much jumped through the hoops to make everyone happy for a while. It was really annoying, I was doing a lot of stuff I didn’t want to do really… I still did it, even after my parents found out I was gay…. Even after they found out I didn’t believe in it, I still did everything.

Similarly, Tommy continued to attend both her childhood church and her private religious high school out of respect for her parents. Alonsa shared her decision to wait to both come out to her family and behaviorally disengage with her childhood faith until she graduated high school. She stated, “Yeah, so… go through the motions. Whether you like it or not, the LDS church is a significant part of your world. You can’t just say ‘I’m not going anymore, this is wrong.’” While she still attends religious services with her family she stopped attending seminary religious education classes during the school week. She wrote about this experience, saying “I felt bad… I knew that I was disappointing my mom, who I know gets crap from other mothers in the ward about my lack of faith…and I knew that other students started to look down on me.”

Four of the participants had not only disengaged from their religious beliefs, but also stopped attending religious services between the ages of 11-13 years. Andrew, who was raised attending the LDS church with his grandma, described his experience, “I started getting older and I realized…that it [religion] wasn’t for me, I didn’t want to do it…. So I stopped practicing, stopped learning, stopped having faith towards Jesus or God, or whatever.” While Andrew does not regularly attend church anymore, he went to church with his grandma during the journal-writing phase of the study. He reflected on this experience in his journal, “Midway through I said to myself…. ‘Why did I come? I want to go back to bed’… but after my grandma took me out for breakfast…it was an
enjoyable experience.” Capernicus described the way his disengagement was tied to coming out.

Religion wise…I stopped going to church when I was 13…. I stopped going officially because when I came out I was…. I’m not going to something that hates me. I’m not going to put myself in that position where more people hate me. I go through that at school, I’m not going through that [at church].

**Selectively coming out.** During the late experiences, participants began to share their sexual minority identification with others. Six of the participants stated they purposely have not shared their sexual orientation with individuals who are religious because they feared a negative response. Joseph, who is only out to a very few friends, wrote about this in his journal.

The thing is, I feel scared to come out at all, with people screaming in the streets that I am a hell-bound demon trying to further the homosexual agenda…. I live in a community that vilifies gay people because of their God. They hate, insult, throw flame and vitriol, all because their preachers told them to. I’ve come to peace with my own religion and my sexuality. But how can they? I pray (and yes, that is an ironic choice of words) that I will be able to be myself, and publicly come out before I graduate from high school.

Similarly, Alonsa shared, “I have to keep this part of me quiet... I know a friend who came out, and it was him against the world... I’ll keep it quiet and at some point something will happen.” She later described her reason for keeping her sexual orientation quiet, “I am not out to my family yet. If it weren’t for the LDS church I would certainly be out to them.” Alexia reflected on her decision not to come out to her best friend, with whom she attended church for the majority of her childhood, “We’ve been best friends since we were like 3, but she has no idea. I know that she would probably be like weirded out, ya know?… I’m not ready to weird her out yet.” Similarly, Tommy stated, “I don’t come out to some people because I know they’re religious and I just…like, I don’t need
that kind of hassle…I know when to keep stuff to myself.”

**Social consequences.** Participants shared both positive and negative social consequences, often as a result of coming out. Each of the participants noted difficulty with family, teachers and/or friends as a result of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. Both Joseph and Erika have been targeted by their teachers. Erika said she has been frequently bullied by some students in her class. One day, when these students were taunting her, calling her “fag” and “dyke,” her teacher said to her, “We wouldn’t have an issue if you didn’t act like such a dyke all the time.” Similarly, Joseph’s teacher called him a “faggot” after he told the teacher he was participating in the Day of Silence to protest the discrimination faced by individuals who identify as a sexual minority.

Five of the participants shared difficult relationships with their family members. Erika discussed coming out to her step-mother, “She’s aware that I’m bisexual but it’s not talked about. You know, and when it is, it is usually just making fun of me blatantly…she’ll introduce me to people and say this is my stepdaughter, she’s a dyke.” Clyde, who shared he was gay and agnostic with his parents on the same day, called his experience “horrific,” and stated, “things were really bad for a while.” Tommy’s mother called her bisexuality a “phase,” she shared, “I remember telling my mom…. I thought she’d be cool with it…she just told me that I wasn’t old enough to be bisexual…that was kinda upsetting.”

Each of the participants shared the negative reactions they had received from their peers regarding their perceived or actual sexual orientation. Capernicus shared a loss of community after coming out, “when all was said and done and I probably lost about 50
friends or people I knew. Nobody talked to me. Cause I’m gay.” Similarly, Joseph reflected on being gay in a predominantly religious context.

    I guess being gay…is seen as not a good thing, a lot of threats, insults, even though I’m not out. Some people are cool about it, some people are not, and I guess that is going to continue to be a struggle throughout high school…a lot of close-minded homophobic people here.

Joseph, who is not “out” in the school environment, was recently targeted because people perceive him to be gay; he received a death threat in school from another student. Alonsa shared her experience, “People who you have been friends with for a long time…best friends…all of the sudden they learn something about you and you’re not [friends].”

Andrew was frustrated by the rumors that were told about him during his adolescence, “I remember the first rumor I heard about me, anal sex…but I’ve never had anal sex…. It was in 7th grade. You know, that hurt, why would someone say that, it’s not true.”

Conversely, seven of the participants shared positive experiences as a result of coming out. Capernicus noted, “When you come out you either make close friends or you lose a lot…. I lost a lot, but now that I look back at it, I lost barely anything. I gained a lot more.” Similarly, Clyde shared when he came out, “I totally lost that circle…that group of ‘friends.’ Then I made new friends.” Andrew shared similar sentiments.

    I gained more friends because of who I am. If I was just straight, I probably wouldn’t have the same friends that I have today. A lot of my buddies, mostly girls…are bi, gay, and some of them are just straight. They think that I’m really cool for being who I am, just expressing who I am…cause I think guys are hot.

Joseph also shared in this experience, “I think by being gay I have lost a lot of community I could have had, but in lieu of that I have gained a certain community…people who are more accepting or open to people of different sexualities.”
In addition to the new friends made in relation to coming out, four participants shared surprise at the ways some of their friends reacted to their self-disclosure. Alonsa shared her hesitation and relief after coming out to her best friend.

My best friend is LDS and I didn’t come out to her first and she found out from somebody else. She was so angry at me, she was like “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me first” and I was like “dude, you are LDS, you have a CTR ring on, you go to seminary…. I was just worried… with you I have more to lose, if you choose to reject me because of the LDS church I have lost my best friend, and these [other people I’ve come out to] who aren’t LDS, I’m not as close to, if I lose them, it’s not a problem.” Plus, the people who aren’t religious don’t care. So, I didn’t come out to her first and she was super upset. But, she’s cool with it now.

Similarly, Alexia shared her bisexuality with a close friend who she described as “really religious.” Her friend was reportedly very accepting, Alexia noted, “That was really positive to know that like someone that was religious like supported me.”

Self-acceptance. Five of the participants shared an increased sense of self-acceptance as a result of coming out. Alonsa described her experience, “It [coming out] was extremely scary. You’ve changed your entire future when you say it…it was really cool at the same time. Even now, every time I tell someone I think this is better…this is me.” Similarly, Andrew shared, “I’m doing what I want to do in terms of what is fun and what is right for me…this is who I am.” Capernicus reflected on his experiences coming out as a lesbian and then as a transgender male.

I’m a lot happier person and I know a lot. I’m 17, but I feel like I’m 40 sometimes…. I’ve gone through a lot of shit that not a lot of people have experienced. Coming out is a world of its own. Cutting is a world of its own… Coming out as being trans is a world of its own. There is a lot of isolation in it, but you realize that you can help a lot of people and there is a lot of love received in it… as much as there is hate and fear.

Erika also shared her experience, “I’m happy with who I am and I’m proud of myself for
being so accepting of it because a lot of people have so much trouble with it… I think it’s a good thing for me.”

**Values clarification.** As participants described their process of religious and sexual identity development, they also shared a tendency to further clarify their own values and religious beliefs. Three participants shared while they no longer were religiously active, they held onto some of the values they had been taught from their religious upbringing. Joseph shared a commitment to service work which he felt was linked to the Catholic Church’s emphasis of service. Similarly, Alonsa stated, “A lot of the standards of modesty have stuck with me, and I haven’t totally bailed, I’m not going to go drink and smoke pot now. Not theology part…just the rules, have stuck.”

Each of the participants shared their thoughts about their future religious and/or spiritual beliefs. Six of the participants shared they were in the process of exploring their religious and/or spiritual beliefs but did not feel organized religion was a good fit. Clyde stated, “religion doesn’t make sense to me because it is all manmade and I don’t really think that a human can speak for God… even to say that God is human is so, so, vain and pompous of us.” Erika shared:

I’m sort of apathetic about religion…. I’m open to change. There are experiences that will make you more religious, like near death experiences…. So, you know if something comes along and I believe in it or some proof along that proves religion…but I sort of doubt that will happen. I think I’m pretty set on that, but then again I’m only 16, so it could definitely change.

Tommy shared her process of religious exploration, “I know that there’s something… there is a God who cares and wants you to be good…a parent God…and that’s all I’ve got so far. I’m still thinking about it, ha ha.”
Alonsa was the only adolescent participant who was considering becoming involved with another religious denomination. She shared she was thinking of exploring the Unitarian faith. She stated:

[The Unitarian church] is really awesome, they don’t have set theology and a good portion of the people there would be LGBT-identified…[it] is cool…they have retained a lot of the good things that I see within the LDS church, like the community…but then they don’t have the theology along with it. That appeals to me a lot because it has the things that I like from being raised but it doesn’t have the things I don’t.

Joseph, who identifies as atheist, was the only participant who did not share plans for future religious or spiritual exploration. He stated, “I think I feel like I’ve come to a place where I don’t think I will really go back to being religious.”

**Young Adult Trajectories**

Participants were asked to share their experiences of sexual and religious identity development across the developmental transitions of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Consistent with the adolescent participants, the young adult’s experiences tended to emerge in three broad themes, including: early, middle and late experiences. For some participants, these overarching themes mapped onto the developmental periods of childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. However, this was not true for each participant, and individual experiences should be recognized as unique and contextualized, which will be highlighted through their experiences below.

**Early Experiences**

Participants were first asked to describe their early experiences of religious and
sexual identity development. Participant descriptions highlighted an early awareness of both their religious and sexual identities. Participants’ earliest memories of religious involvement began around age 7 or 8, though the majority of participants stated their families had been actively religiously since they were born, as Alex noted, “I was going to church from the moment I was out of the hospital.” Participants also shared their earliest memories related to their sexual identity development, with the young adult sample first recognizing same sex attractions between ages 6 and 16 years. Three subthemes, discussed below, emerged during these early experiences. First, participants described a behavioral participation in the LDS church, with a subset of participants relating their participation to a desire to please their parents. Secondly, the majority of participants shared a tendency to deny their same-sex attractions, consistent with what they had been taught through their involvement in the LDS church. Finally, participants described this time period as lonely, as they often could not identify individuals with whom to discuss their attractions and/or emerging sexual identity.

**Behavioral religiosity.** Each of the young adult participants described an early behavioral focus in their religious attendance in the LDS church. Participants shared memories of their experiences in primary religious education, their baptisms, and their transition to young women’s and young men’s religious education, which occurs at age 12 in the LDS church. Participants stated their involvement in religious activities was primarily behavioral, and seven of the participants described their participation through a lens of a desire to “fit in,” and do what was expected of them. Wil shared his earliest memories, stating, “We did activities and little kids stuff. I liked seeing other people. It
was what we did.” Bryce reflected on his experiences, “I never really had a connection
with God, it was more I do these things because these are the things that you do…it
wasn’t a choice, this was just what I have to do.” Apollo shared similar sentiments:

I was baptized…. I had the priesthood given to me when I was 12…. I feel like I
was pretty active, trying to fit into the LDS church…. I don’t want to say mold
but…like following all of the commandments and things like that.

Eight of the participants described their behavioral religious participation as a
result of a desire to please their parents. When reflecting about her early experiences,
Marla stated, “It [going to church] was something I did…. I felt happy…but I felt happy
because I knew I was supposed to do those things. I felt happy because I was making my
parents proud.” Ryan stated “I just remember it was more or less just because my parents
were telling me I’ve got to [go to church], there’s going to be consequences if I don’t
follow the rules…going through the motions of what I was expected.”

**Denying same-sex attractions.** Ten of the participants stated they initially
attempted to ignore their attractions to members of the same sex, consistent with what
they had been taught through their involvement with the LDS church. For the
participants, this included not acting on their attractions as well as attempting to ignore
the thoughts and attractions themselves. Lynn described this experience, saying “I didn’t
allow it [attractions to members of the same sex] to enter my mind. In the LDS church,
the sin is in thought not only the act. You’re supposed to control your thoughts. So I
never indulged those thoughts or even like went in that direction.” Jane had a similar
experience.

It was difficult because I was so trained…. It [same sex attraction] was such a
taboo subject within the church anyway. Same sex attraction wasn’t even
discussed, like, hardly ever. And I had heard it, but there was always this veil of secrecy around it kind of thing…. It was such a taboo subject that I felt like I shouldn’t even go there. Like, we’re not even going to go there in my mind. So I just turned the other way.

Bryce described his experience, stating “I definitely just avoided thinking about it. I avoided it…. If I was gay, I never told anyone.” Elliot described her experience using a metaphor of being “in the closet.”

At 10 or 11, I sort of like step into the closet and close the door most of the way and then 15 when I started dating the boy that got baptized and had the crush on his sister that’s when I like locked the closet door and hid in the corner of that closet cause I was absolutely terrified that I had a huge crush on her.

Rob also wrote about his experience denying his attractions, “It is interesting to look back. I laugh at myself because of how obvious it was…the fact I hated dating…that I would tell myself what girls I had crushes on instead of having a crush naturally….”

While this pattern of denying one’s same sex attractions and not acting on it emerged early in their development, for some, it continued throughout the participants’ developmental trajectories. For example, two of the participants continued to seriously date members of the opposite sex despite being exclusively same-sex attracted. Alex was engaged and Rob considered getting engaged to a female. They both related their experience to what they had been taught through their church, to deny their same-sex attractions and if possible, marry a member of the opposite sex and have a family. Rob shared his perspective on this decision.

Originally the church’s teachings were homosexuality is wrong, if you have homosexual feelings you need to fix them. Over past few years it’s been “we acknowledge that this happens and if you can get married awesome, do it. If not, don’t. Live a life of celibacy.” So I knew that those were my options at this point because I didn’t want to go against promises I’d made with the church and in my mind, with God. I really still believe those promises are with God and I didn’t
want to go against that and so it was either get married or be celibate.

Four of the participants stated they were unaware of what to call their same-sex attractions, which may have led to their tendency to deny their attractions. Wil stated, “I didn’t know that I was gay. I just knew I liked little boys. I knew what straight was, I didn’t know what gay was.” Similarly, Ryan recalled feeling “different” but did not know how to label what he was experiencing.

Loneliness. Six of the participants related a sense of loneliness when they reflected upon their early experiences of identity development. As previously noted, same-sex sexuality was often a “taboo” subject, and as may be expected, participants often felt alone as they attempted to negotiate their attractions. Ryan explained he felt “lonely…any time anything homosexual-related came on the TV, the channel would be changed or the TV turned off so we really didn’t talk about it.” Similarly, Elliot described her experience.

It was really lonely and so in the midst of this I’m like “Christ you are my friend and I need you and I need to not feel lonely,” and I still felt lonely and it was like “why are you torturing me like this? You know I will stand faithful cause that is what I am supposed to do.” That was the only thing I had to cling to because I hadn’t told my parents yet.

Participants had difficulty identifying a support system, individuals with whom they felt safe sharing their experiences. This difficulty heightened their sense of isolation. Dane stated:

I couldn’t talk to my friends…most of them were religious. Even the ones who were either another Christian sect or weren’t religious at all, this is still really a small town, I probably should wait…because my high school didn’t have a GSA or anything close to it.

Even when participants sought out support, their sense of isolation was
(compounded as their same-sex attractions were ignored, often invalidating their individual experience. Bryce experienced frustration when he sought counsel from both his bishop and a counselor regarding his attractions and interest in pornography. In discussing his experience with the counselor, he stated:

He was trying to fix me of my porn problem... but he would never address the issue, “it” being gay. I remember at that time being frustrated because that was when I was wondering, “Why are you not even addressing it? Why are you throwing it out? You aren’t acknowledging the fact that it’s not straight.... Maybe the problem isn’t that I’m looking at porn, but maybe it’s that I’m gay.” I had that idea that it might be a problem but no one would address that.

While this sense of isolation emerged early in their development, this feeling continued for many participants as they began to question the church’s teachings and further explore their sexual identity.

**Middle Experiences**

The middle experiences, characterized by tension and chaos, emerged following participant’s initial experience of early awareness, as described above. During this time, many of the participants personally self-labeled as gay but did not officially come out to family or friends. For many, these experiences emerged during the period of adolescence. However, not all middle experiences aligned with this developmental period. For example, Jane, who self-identified as a lesbian at age 23, described going through this process of questioning and exploration during her young adult years whereas Wil, who self-labeled as bisexual at age 14, described having many of these experiences during his late childhood and early adolescence.

Five subthemes emerged during the middle experiences. First, a proportion of the
young adults described feeling disconnected to their childhood faith while the other subset of participants shared feelings of connectedness to their faith. Second, participants shared a tendency to question both the general teachings of the church and those regarding same-sex attractions. Third, consistent with the participant’s religious upbringing, a proportion of the participants attempted to change their same-sex attractions through meetings with their bishops, prayer, therapy and religious rituals. Fourth participants shared internal turmoil regarding their sexual identities; their experiences are consistent with the construct of internalized homophobia. Finally, several of the participants experienced feelings of depression and/or anxiety during the middle experiences. The subthemes which emerged and their relationship to both risk and resilience are discussed below.

Feeling disconnected versus connected. Participants varied considerably in their religious beliefs and feelings of connection to their church. Five male participants described feeling cognitively and affectively disconnected to their church while continuing behavioral participation, often to please their parents. Apollo and Wil described their lack of connection, stating they didn’t really enjoy their experiences at church. Apollo stated, “It wasn’t any fun, I just didn’t find get a whole lot of enjoyment out of it…. I didn’t have any strong feelings I guess…. I wasn’t internally involved with it.” Both Ryan and Bryce related their feelings of disconnectedness to their sexual identity. Bryce stated, “I felt distant from 12 on. I kind of knew that I was gay so it kind of was tough to reconcile that. But, I put on a pretty good face.” Dane discussed his lack of connection as a result of a more logical, rational worldview.
Conversely, four female and two male participants described feeling both affectively and cognitively connected to their religious upbringing. Alex described his dedication to the church, stating:

I was really, really, really into it. I was very, very enthusiastic about the faith like I was entrenched in it…. I loved it because every time I went I was like, “okay I’m doing the right thing. This is the right place for me to be. They teach good things and I want to do good things in the world.”

During his early adolescent years, Rob described a period of rebellion which included breaking the law and being expelled from school. At age 13, his sister encouraged him to return to the “ways of the church,” which was a transitional point in Rob’s religious identity development. He described his response:

I started reading the *Book of Mormon*, like read a lot in one night. I just sat down and read about 100 pages of it and loved it. I really felt really, really strongly about it and what I was reading. It was kind of one of those…. I know its cheesy, but like an overnight conversion. I went from this extreme to the other. It really had a huge impact on me…. I was very holier than thou.

The four female participants maintained positions of leadership in their churches, performed temple rituals, and shared personal convictions regarding their religious beliefs in relationship to these experiences. Elliot described feeling connected while she was performing temple baptisms for the dead and Lynn shared feeling close to God during a fast and testimony meeting, “where they talked about the presence of the holy ghost being this burning in your chest and this overwhelming feeling of love, and that was the only thing that I struggled with letting go of my religion.”

**Questioning.** Ten of the participants noted a period during which they questioned church doctrine and/or the actions of the members of their church. Elliot described her experience questioning what she had been taught.
I spent some time fighting with seminary teachers and starting to ask a lot more questions and I started coming to them with questions that they didn’t have answers for like doctrinal scriptural questions. I’m like, “these two doctrines don’t line up why?” My seminary teacher was like “I don’t have an answer for you.” A week later he still didn’t have an answer and he’d been looking for one and so I started to have a lot more questions.

Seven of the participants described an experience of questioning the church’s teachings on same-sex attractions. Three of these participants specifically discussed their questions regarding the LDS church’s statement, *The Family: A Proclamation to the World* during the interview. Elliot also struggled with the church’s directives to deny her same-sex attractions and recognize them as her personal “cross to bear,” as her personal experience did not justify labeling her attractions as “bad.” Similarly, Apollo stated:

> I remember there were Sundays where we would talk about homosexuality and there’s a little pamphlet that we would read through. I remember feeling like ill just being there because, I don’t know, it’s kind of the idea that none of them knew that they were actually talking about me, and it’s not something I chose.

This was also a predominant theme during the young adult focus group, where participants felt the LDS doctrine, instructing individuals with same-sex attraction to live celibate, required them to live a “loveless” life. Participants questioned how they were taught being gay was a “challenge” given to them in the preexistence, and as Lynn stated during the focus group, “being gay is your own personal cross to bear. So when you choose to leave the church and live the ‘gay lifestyle’ you are failing at your job to bear that cross. You aren’t trying, you are giving up.”

Three of the participants questioned the LDS church’s teachings on the role of women. Through young women’s, their religious education, they were instructed on the women’s role to raise a family, care for the children, keep the house in order, and provide
meals for the family. Marla stated, “Sometimes I had those thoughts where I was like ‘I don’t want to learn this’ because…I never really wanted to be the standard household wife.” Dane, raised female, shared his experience, “They were talking about like getting married and how to find the right husband…. I was like ‘I don’t really care to have a husband’ because I had never met a guy that I liked.” As a result of her questioning, Lynn began to disengage with her religious beliefs, “I think just as I got older, the teachings they started shifting towards being a wife and being a mother, and…. I started removing myself emotionally from the church.”

Additionally, four of the participants questioned the actions of other church members, feeling like their actions did not match the teachings of the church, as Apollo noted, “It’s always a little different. What the church actually teaches versus what is acted out.” Bryce shared a similar sentiment, “People in the church didn’t always do what they were supposed to do or…went along with the teachings…it was a community full of liars. I felt like I fit into that too. I didn’t like that.” Lynn reflected on an experience during seminary, a high school religious education class, which was a transitional experience in the development of her own religious identity.

There was a girl whose parents were just divorced and got a temple divorce—that means that the sealing of their family was broken, so she was no longer either sealed to her mother or father. So, she felt like in the sense that when you die, you are no longer part of their family, you are lost spiritually. She started crying, and the seminary teacher kind of made her feel like shit because her parents got divorced. Somehow, sexuality came up and he said “I think if my wife ever was gay or said she was gay I would be done with her” and that’s when it clicked in my mind, this isn’t right, you don’t treat children like this and you don’t treat other people like this.

Marla began to question when one of her peers, a male holding a leadership position in
the priesthood, forced himself upon her sexually. She shared, “I think about that a lot because of the position he held…. I had moments of resentment…. I don’t think he’ll ever know how that really feels because it’s terrifying.” This experience was a traumatic turning point for Marla as she began to see her life in a “different light.”

As a result of this period of questioning, several of the participants talked about disengaging emotionally and cognitively from the LDS church. Bryce stated, “I needed to turn it off so I didn’t go crazy” though he and others continued to attend religious services and activities throughout their adolescence out of respect for their parents. Dane stopped believing in the church during middle school, yet continued attending religious services throughout high school. He described his experience saying, “I was like, you know what, this is not worth being guilty all the time when I have friends who are not religious and they are perfectly happy.”

**Attempts to change one’s same-sex attractions.** Eight of the participants also shared either personal attempts and/or suggestions made by others to change their same-sex attractions. Five of the participants sought advice from their church, typically their bishop, regarding their attractions. Alex stated:

I believed if I was so faithful, I was so active that it [my same-sex attractions] would kind of just go away. Because I’m doing everything I need to do, that’s what the church teaches…. So I started becoming even more involved and reading my scriptures a lot more and praying a lot more. And I carried around a little Book of Mormon with me and would just like read it because I wanted to get rid of this.

Elliot’s bishop provided her with additional callings and leadership positions in the church, in order to work away her attractions. Rob shared his conversation with his bishop.
I just told him, “I think I’m attracted to some guys”… I just kind of downplayed it a lot. He was just like, “well if you pray hard enough it will go away.” In my mind, it’s like “I know,” but really deep inside I was like “what the hell have I been doing for the past 23 years? I know it’s not working.”

Additionally, two participants’ bishops recommended repentance. Both Wil and Dane’s bishops approached them to discuss their same-sex attractions and encourage them to become more “worthy” in the eyes of the church. After one of Dane’s first lesbian partners “outed” him after she repented, his bishop told him, “It’s okay if you are gay and if you want to be worthy, come and talk to me.” Dane never went to talk with the bishop about repenting in order to become fully active in the LDS church.

Similarly, four of the participants described experiences of trying to “pray away” their same-sex attractions. Alex stated, “I would pray a lot and be like ‘please I am doing everything you ask me God, please take them away.’” Dane turned to prayer regarding his gender identity. He stated, “I was praying, ‘please God, please Jesus, whoever, make me a boy. I want to wake up tomorrow and I want to be a boy.” Three participants described their decision to not act on their same-sex attractions with hopes that their same-sex attractions would dissipate. As Lynn stated, “Some people are alcoholics and some people are child molesters and some people are gay and they just need to work on not acting on it.”

Four of the participants attended therapy in an effort to discuss, and possibly change their same-sex attractions. After telling his parents that he had same-sex attractions, Ryan discussed his parent’s reaction.

So they called our family doctor because they didn’t know what to do. Like I said, it’s totally foreign because we had no gay friends or family members to our knowledge. So, they called our doctor…and he recommended therapy. From there
I started therapy and my therapist happened to be a church leader himself. Jane, whose parents also recommended therapy, recalled one of her meetings with the therapist, “I said… ‘what would you say if I decided to go ahead and just date this girl?’ And he said, ‘I would say, are you insane?’ And I said ‘oh alright well… I’m going to do it anyway.’” After sharing her intentions to date another woman, the therapist proceeded to tell Jane about the negative outcomes she would face if she chose to act on her same-sex attractions, including depression and suicidal ideation.

Rob shared a positive experience when attending Evergreen International, a controversial therapy loosely associated with the LDS church to “diminish same-gender attractions.”

It was actually really good for me for the most part. I would say anybody that’s coming to terms with being gay and feels like the church is an important part of their life should go to Evergreen. They may not agree with what’s going on there. My experience with it was that it was a support group for people who want to stick with the church. So we talked a lot about pornography and things that we’re trying to avoid…and we would try to build healthy relationships with men. There was a little bit an underlying feeling of change but…it was really good for me to be able to talk about things. It was a little too conservative…closed-like.

**Internalized conflict.** Participants also discussed feelings of inadequacy and associated experiences of guilt. Eight of the participants discussed feeling like they were inadequate or defective. Lynn shared, “I always felt I lacked something. In sacrament and young women’s, they tell you…all these things you should be doing, and I wasn’t doing any of them. So, church wasn’t an uplifting thing, it just made me feel inadequate.” Marla shared her experience.

Around midway through my junior to the end of my senior year I was somewhat conscious about how I felt inside didn’t coincide with the places that I was holding in the church. I didn’t feel like I was a good enough person to be like
laurel president…. Whereas I was a fine person…. I don’t know why, I didn’t feel like I was living up to that.

Elliot shared, “I spent all this time struggling with it and I…started to tell myself ‘you’re defective and this is wrong’ and ‘if you ever act on it you are going to burn for eternity in hell.’” Alex had a similar experience.

When I was 16 or 17…I had started having sexual attractions towards some of my friends, I was like “dang it, this is bad.” First of all, I’m having attractions towards my friends…and second of all, I’m having attractions toward women at all. That’s bad.

Nine of the participants shared their experiences of guilt. Bryce, Rob, and Jane each shared experiences of guilt after their first kiss with a member of the same-sex.

Lynn shared similar sentiments stating, “You can be gay, it’s not a sin to be gay, it’s a sin to act on it. It makes you feel like shit when you do act on it.” Alex reflected on his experience of guilt in his journal.

I think back to those years where I would pray this beautiful part of me away. It couldn’t be beautiful…if it wasn’t of God. I call bullshit…. Because this beautiful part of myself made men in Salt Lake uncomfortable, I went through torture. I tortured myself because it had been drilled into my head by those I love…that this beautiful part…of me was evil.

While the guilt emerged for many of the participants during the middle experiences, it continued throughout and after their coming out process, as Apollo shared.

There was still like an immense amount of guilt about it and I think it’s been a long process of my like shaking off that idea that it’s bad…this was like about six or seven months after I’d stopped going to church and came out to anyone…there was always these like leftovers, the remains of the what I was taught, I guess. It impacted my how I felt about it for a long time.

**Mental health difficulties.** During this time, several participants developed symptoms of anxiety and/or depression as they attempted to negotiate their sexual and
religious identities. Seven of the participants discussed their experiences of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation. Rob shared his thoughts when he first realized he was gay, “I check out guys at school [and] I look at underwear ads of guys,…crap…I think I’m gay. I was so depressed…. [I] cried myself to sleep, it was really devastating.” Jane shared her experiences.

It was a really, really bad winter. I just like stopped eating…. I didn’t have anyone to talk to like I was just completely…. I just didn’t eat anything. I dropped like 30 pounds in like a month it was bad. I was just this gaunt dead thing and just it was just awful.

Ryan experienced frustration when his therapy efforts were unsuccessful despite dedicated implementation of the cognitive and behavioral strategies.

I can’t handle this right now I’m just I’m just sixteen I can’t do this you know. I said I was getting depressed and he [doctor] prescribed me antidepressants and I was I was on antidepressants for about six months. That’s when I started having panic attacks I’d never had them before in my life…it was just too much. Every time I went to therapy I felt worse about myself and my situation and I began thinking if these [attractions] aren’t going away, I’m going to disappoint my family. I’m not living up to the church standards if I don’t get this fixed. I felt at times that I was better off ending my life.

Alex stated because of “the stress I was putting myself under and the stress that, by proxy…the church and the community had put me under, I was very, very suicidal off and on for a few years.” Dane shared a similar experience, “I thought, if I kill myself and make it look like an accident, like a terrible car wreck, my parents would be okay, they won’t have to be like ‘oh that gay kid that we had,’ they wouldn’t disown me.”

Both Apollo and Alex related cutting as a response to the various stressors they experienced during them time. Alex shared, “I was under a lot of stress and I had started cutting myself because I felt so incredibly guilty for being gay. I wanted to punish myself
so I used cutting."

Three participants shared experiencing increased anxiety during this time. Rob shared:

I started having like small panic attacks at church. I don’t fit in. I’m not getting married, I’m not working on getting married, and I don’t believe everything that they believe—not only religiously but culturally. I’m not conservative, I follow gay rights...and because of that people question my beliefs. So it was really hard for me to go to church...so I’d only go to two meetings instead of three, and then I’d only make it to sacrament meeting, and then I’d only go to half of sacrament meeting because mostly it was because of the panic attacks. I was really stressed about that because I really wanted to hold onto religion.

Both Alex and Bryce also experienced panic attacks when they made the decision to come out to either family or friends.

Late Experiences

During the late experiences, many participants who had self-labeled during the middle experiences came out to friends and/or family members. As noted previously, while all of the young adult participants had told at least one friend or family member about their identification as LGBTQ, not all participants identified as fully “out.” The late experiences were largely characterized by identity reconciliation and resiliency. Four subthemes emerged in this theme. First, participants shared efforts to reconcile their religious and sexual identities through religious disengagement and/or involvement in other religious and/or spiritual paths. Second, while participants noted hardship and social consequences related to their coming out processes, positive themes of personal and social acceptance were also salient. Third, participants shared they were able to more fully accept themselves and others as a result of disengaging with their childhood faith
and coming out. Finally, participants described a process of values clarification and plans for future identity exploration.

**Religious disengagement and coming out.** Ten of the participants discontinued their behavioral involvement in their childhood churches at the time of the interview. Lynn shared her rationale, “The church and homosexuality are not compatible…it just doesn’t fit. No matter how you try to bend it, it’s fine as long as you’re celibate; it’s just your own personal cross to bear.” Jane wrote in her journal, “My LDS God hated me. So I fired him. I felt so separated from his love. To feel condemned by your idea of God when you…living how you think you’ll be happy is confusing and agonizing.” Alex shared similar sentiments.

Coming out as gay fueled a part of me to look at my religion which I had never been able to do before. I had seen actual fact that what I had been taught as a member of the church was not true. Before, I couldn’t accept that being gay was “okay” because it would mean that everything I had ever learned...really focused my entire life on...wouldn't be true. What would happen? So, accepting myself as gay was instrumental in being able to look at things really…. I know more about the Mormon religion than I did when I was a part of it.

Five of the participants described the development of a relationship as a key turning point to their religious disengagement. Jane said:

I realized… this is a relationship and this is something that I’ve wanted in the deepest part of myself…. Because of something like gender, I’m going to throw this away? I didn’t know where I stood with the church...because those things [church and her attractions] didn’t match up it was just, “well, I guess I’m done with the church.”

Bryce stopped attending church after his first male kiss. Similarly, both Marla and Elliot shared how the experience of a meaningful relationship triggered their disengagement.

Marla said, “I wanted to be more holistic. I wanted my life to be that way. I felt the only
way to do that was to not be part of the church. Then, I started to identify more as bisexual.”

At the time of the interview, Rob was the only participant who had not religiously disengaged with his childhood faith. He was very committed to sharing his love for the LDS church with other individuals with same-sex attractions and his belief that his sexual identity and religious identity could be integrated. He did this through leading regular support groups and blogging about same-sex attractions in the LDS faith. During the interview, he did share that this process was a struggle, as he desired to have a relationship with another man in the future. Four months later, when Rob attended the focus group he introduced himself saying, “I don’t really identify as LDS…if anything I identify as Christian now.”

**Social consequences.** Socially, the participants described both negative and positive consequences to their coming out. Eight of the participants shared difficulty with their families or partner’s families while coming out. Many of the participant’s immediate families shared disappointment and disgust regarding their same-sex attractions. Dane described his estranged relationship with his entire family as a result of first coming out as a lesbian, and secondly, coming out as transgender. Wil shared his horror when his brother threatened to kill him after he came out to his family.

Six participants talked specifically about a difficult relationship with their mother as a result of coming out. Ryan shared his mom said, “I can’t believe you want to live this life. You know I hope you get a boyfriend that you know beats you up.” Due to strained family relationships, Ryan moved out of the house. He reflected on this, “The reason I
moved out was because me and my mom were getting so bad with each other…when we got to the point of physical fighting…my dad decided that it was best that I leave.” Bryce also shared his mother had difficulty accepting him as gay, stating, “My dad told me that if I broke my mom’s heart anymore that he was going to choke the shit out of me.” Lynn shared her experience after her mother asked if she was a lesbian, ultimately forcing her to come out.

She just kind of started crying and said that I was sick and perverted, that God thinks this is wrong and that I was disgusting and I make her sick. And just hearing those things from someone that is supposed to love you unconditionally…. Just hearing those really hurtful things from you know, your mother…. I don’t know. It sucks, it was awful.

Many of these negative social reactions were strongly connected to the family members’ religious beliefs and related understandings of same-sex attractions. Alex shared a confrontation he had with his girlfriend’s relative, who stated:

Well one of us must be wrong and I’ll guess we’ll see after we die…. He was like, you know you’re going to go to hell…. Alex, I don’t know how to say this to you because I don’t know if you want to hear it, but the devil is very powerful and can make people believe things.

One of Alex’s relatives also had difficulty when he came out as transgender. According to Alex, his relative said, “The difference between gender identity and biological sex is one of the greatest lies Satan has told the world…. I have complete and utter disgust for your hideous immoral crime.” Bryce, who was out to his friends and immediate family, wrote about his fears surrounding coming out to his extended family in the future.

I really want them to accept me but I am afraid they will be blinded by their “faith,” and not be accessible to me…. I am afraid the Mormon Church might be the separation from me and my family. I hope that never happens.

Dane shared a pamphlet, *Our Trans Children*, with his parents notifying them of his
gender identity and plans to transition. He reflected on this saying, “I tried to muster the
courage…to be there when they read it. I couldn’t. I was afraid of their religion and how
it would make them hate.”

Participants stated their family member’s reactions had slowly become more
accepting in the time that had passed since they came out. Dane shared his mother’s
progress, who initially refused to speak with him after he told her about his plans to
transition from a female to a male, “My mom…introduced me to someone the other day
as her son. ‘This is my son.’ Okay, moving up…I mean I also have sideburns, so ‘this is
my daughter she’s very dutchy’ [might not work out as well].” Similarly, Jane shared
with the focus group that she has started to enjoy going “back home” to visit her parents,
and though she has been judged by both her parents and friends, she stated, “I still feel
that sense of community.”

Nine of the participants shared positive and supportive reactions from both friends
and family members during the interview, a subtheme that was confirmed during the
focus group. Dane’s comment during the focus group highlighted this, “I don’t want to be
bigoted the other way…because you are LDS I don’t think you’ll like me, so I don’t like
you. I don’t want to, it’s not the case, everyone is different even inside the church.” Five
of the participants contrasted their mother’s reaction to their father’s, who were
reportedly more accepting. Elliot shared, “I told them separately and mom cried. Dad was
more like ‘okay, pass the salt’ about it… ‘don’t act on it… what’s for dinner?’” Ryan’s
father responded, telling him “We’ll love you no matter what.”

Six of the participants shared that their friends and colleagues, including those
who were religious, were very accepting and supportive. Dane shared, “I had a friend who was Lutheran and he’s told me ‘being gay is totally fine.’” Bryce shared his experience coming out to his coworkers during a conversation on how to work with individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

There were a bunch of people in there that I was really good friends with and I hadn’t told, and I was like, “actually, being gay myself…” and everyone was like “really?” It was cool, that’s how I came out to everyone that I work with. They’ve been receptive and sought my advice. It’s been really nice.

While Apollo expected one of his friends to respond negatively when he disclosed he was gay, “she was like, it’s cool, it’s fine…. I’m totally fine with it… I’m just going to take some time to get used to it.”

Finally, four participants highlighted the importance of local support organizations, particularly their local campus GLBTA offices. Jane shared, “Towards the beginning of this last year…I went, finally went, into the GLBTA services…, which was a singularly awkward and awesome experience for sure.” Dane also found support in his gender transition from his GLBTA office. The director of his university’s GLBTA office helped him identify resources for his transition, and developed a training workshop for his boss and coworkers regarding transgender issues. He shared his experience coming out as transgender, “I was scared to do it but…I was like…[director of the GLBTA office] will beat them up if I have any problems. I’m glad there is an office…because someone can beat them up for me.”

**Self and other acceptance.** Participants related a sense of open mindedness and self-acceptance as a result of having gone through the coming out process within a religious context. Nine of the participants stated they were more open minded and
accepting of other’s worldviews and experiences. Dane shared, “I feel like…it [coming out] forces you to open your mind, where other people choose to open their mind…. I was forced to open my mind. It’s like…either live repressed or open your mind.”

Similarly, Lynn stated:

It [coming out] was more of a positive experience with me. Since I grew up in a very close minded family, it allowed me to look at my other fellow human beings as equals. Growing up I saw African Americans as not my equal, homosexuals as not my equal, and nonmembers as not my equal. So I think I’m kinder to other people than I was before and I’m more open minded.

Apollo also shared, “I’m definitely a lot more open minded…tolerant and accepting of things whereas before when I was trying to be the religious person.”

Six of the participants related an increased sense of self-acceptance as a result of coming out. Alex described his experience; first, coming out as a lesbian; second, coming out as atheist; and third, coming out a transgender, as facilitative of his own self-acceptance. He wrote about his identification as transgender in his journal, “I look in the mirror now and I see myself…my body, my dress, is now a better reflection of my soul…. I get this feeling that this is right, this is the way it was supposed to be.” Bryce shared that coming out was the best thing that had ever happened to him. He stated, “It [coming out] really wasn’t huge…wasn’t as big as I thought it would be…wasn’t as hard. It was like…I can be gay, I can be happy, I can have a relationship, and I can get married someday.” Jane reflected about her experience coming out.

What kind of person has been through that fire and been okay? Think of this confidence that you have; think of the absolute at peace inside yourself that you gain. There is nothing… no one can give that to you. You have to go through that yourself and you have to figure it out and it is absolutely priceless.

Three participants described their process of self-acceptance as a result of
understanding themselves as the way “God made them.” Elliot shared, “The ‘bisexual me’ took off her homophobic, heterosexual costume and said ‘I’m what God or evolution or something made me to be.’” Similarly, Alex shared his process of self-acceptance, “I was like you know what, I’m gay. And, God made me this way. He’s happy with me this way, and he made me this way because he wants me to be this way.”

**Values clarification.** As participants went through the process of coming out and religious disengagement, they described a tendency to further define their religious beliefs and clarify their own values. As noted, all of the young adult participants disengaged with their childhood religious affiliation by the time of the focus group. When describing their current religious beliefs and future plans for religious engagement, Jane, Alex, and Bryce each described an interest and current goal of exploring religious denominations with a more welcoming stance on same-sex attractions. During her interview, Jane stated, “People need the freedom to discover their beliefs and I’m still in the process of finding mine…. It’s important to me…. I think I’m just coming into that phase of discovering where I am spiritually.” Jane wrote about this exploration in her journal after attending a Unitarian service. While she initially felt guilty during the service, she said “I began to realize as I looked around the congregation and listened to the refreshingly intellectual sermon that I didn’t need to. I would not be judged here…. that was certain as I eyed the rainbow name tags.” Alex and Bryce both shared they had attended an Episcopalian church occasionally and were in the process of refining their religious beliefs.

Apollo and Marla both identified as spiritual rather than religious. Apollo
explained, “I don’t really agree with organized religion because I feel like there’s no way you can really encompass everyone with it so I…. I am more supportive of…spirituality within oneself.” Marla shared:

I love spirituality. I’m very, it’s good for my soul kind of feeling…. Love seems so much more important than religion does. And, so that’s mostly where my religion lies I would think is just in, and love in general for everybody.

Both Rob and Ryan were in the process of defining their relationship with the LDS church during the time of the interview and focus group. Rob stated, “I believe these things I believe and I know what I don’t believe…. I’m in the process of figuring out…filtering out what I don’t believe and embracing the things that I do.” While Ryan had stopped attending LDS services, he experienced conflict regarding the fact that he was still a member but inactive. He wrote, “The past several months I’ve been rolling along…without a specific direction in the church…. I’m trying to work up the courage to speak with my bishop…tell him my plans for dating and finding a partner.” Ryan shared a fear that he may be excommunicated from his childhood faith if he talked with the bishop.

Both Dane and Elliot identified as atheist. Dane stated that “if there is a God,” he felt he was on the “right path,” having good morals, values, and an understanding of right and wrong. Elliot wrote about her experience since identifying as atheist.

I found confidence in the literal revelation of my own intelligence and serenity in the logic of the scientific method. I found security in evidence and stability in abandoning feeling-based, arbitrary “knowledge.” I found profound morality in atheism, more than I ever did in Christianity…. I am free to be myself as a whole, bisexual and all. I am a thinking thing.

Seven of the participants shared they had integrated some of their childhood religious values into their adult lives. Several of the participants identified their childhood
religious faith’s teachings regarding monogamy, the importance of family, substance use and service work as central to their own value system. Bryce stated:

Coming from a Mormon background, they teach such good core values about being a good person. My favorite thing that I learned from church was service. There are points in my life where I was questioning the church, they would ask me to bear my testimony and I couldn’t get up there and say anything but I love the opportunities that I have to serve. I guess the fundamentals that I was taught growing up has really shaped the way I interact with people and given me a good idea of how to be a good person. I love that. I’ll never say that the church teaches you to be a bad person because it doesn’t. It teaches you to be a good person.

Similarly, Rob shared that as a result of coming out, “I have been able to rethink a lot of my values and really identify my values…and just reshape my entire life.”

**Additional Themes**

When coding the adolescent and young adult interview and focus group transcriptions, and journal writings, three additional themes emerged. These themes, though interesting, are not directly related to the research questions but provide greater insight into the developmental trajectories of the adolescents and young adults. These themes included the importance of the internet as an avenue for support during the coming out process, the unique experiences of gender identity development for those who identified as transgender and/or transsexual, and the fluidity of labels used to describe the participant’s sexual orientation.

**Internet Support**

As noted, during the early experiences both the adolescents and young adults had difficulty naming their same-sex attractions. Though they recognized feeling “different,”
many of the participants did not know what they were experiencing. Many of the young adult participants worked to deny these attractions and shared a sense of loneliness as they attempted to negotiate their same-sex attractions amidst a heteronormative context. Eight of the adolescent and young adult participants reported they sought information and support online as they tried to both identify what they were feeling and secure support. Tommy shared she was able to label her feelings of being different at age 12, after learning more about being bisexual on the internet.

I didn’t think I was bisexual…it just never occurred to me…when I realized that it was possible for me to be bisexual, I was just like ‘Oh! That makes some sense!’…. I thought about it a whole lot…. I had a crush on one of my friends…. I didn’t like wake up one morning and was like ‘oh, by the way, I’m gay’…. I just realized that I had always been that way, I just had never noticed.

Both Joseph and Rob found supportive blogs and chat rooms online which they said were instrumental in normalizing their sexual attractions and providing support. Similarly, Alonsa shared, “If you do lose your family [when you come out], there are people who were LDS and also lost their families…they are easier to find with the internet…it is easier to build a sense of community.”

Both Clyde and Bryce used the internet to meet other gay males, and shared they met their first boyfriends online. Clyde shared his experience.

The first real…relationship that I had was actually online…. I met this guy who was from Canada. I still have not met him to this day and I still do not know if he exists or not but he pretty much controlled my life for six months. I was really, really attached and dependent on him.

Gender Identity Development

Capernicus and Alex identified as a transgender male and Dane identified as a
transsexual male. Each participant shared an early feeling of being male though they were raised female. Capernicus shared his experience.

Even at age 8, I was a lot different than other kids. At 8, I remember thinking, “I’m a little boy.” When I was 5, my mom went to buy me cowboy stuff because I was a cowboy back then. Somebody called me a cowgirl and I got very mad at them and said I’m a cowboy not a cowgirl at age 5. So, I’ve never, ever, associated myself as a little girl. They dressed me up in dresses and I’d be like “Oh mommy, let me out.”

Dane shared, “I told people even when I was really little, like 3rd grade, ‘I’m a boy trapped in a girl’s body.’ I would get called into the counselor’s office [and they would tell me] ‘you can’t say that.’”

Each of these participants initially identified as a bisexual or lesbian female, as they were unaware of how to label their experience. Dane shared his experience identifying as a bisexual female.

I start remembering, but I feel like I’m male, I don’t feel female at all. Then, I just…that I must be gay somehow and gay people must feel like they want to be boys. And, like lesbians must feel like they want to be boys and gay men must feel like they want to be women…. A lot of them fit those stereotypes…butch lesbians and effeminate gays. They must feel like they want to be the opposite or something.

Later, upon learning about the difference between gender identity and biological sex, each of the participants came out as transgender male. Alex shared his experience coming out as transgender.

I thought, I’m androgynous, but I’m more male than I am female. After a while I was like I’m a lot more male than female. Then, I was like, I’m pretty much male. So, at this point, people call me Alex and I strap and pack and they use male pronouns. I look in the mirror now and it’s like “ah hah” that is me. That is me and it feels so good to do that. I’m free. I am, I have always had this thing about being true to myself so to look in the mirror and see myself, it’s like, this is so right.
Sexual Identity Label

Participants also shared the label which they have used to describe their sexual orientation has fluctuated. Seven participants initially identified as “bisexual” or “asexual.” Both Joseph and Erika initially labeled as bisexual. After using the label “bisexual” to describe his sexual orientation, Joseph stated he realized, “yeah…I am not really into that [women].” Rob also initially identified as bisexual which he felt was an “easier” way to identify in the LDS church. He stated, “I think a lot of Mormons do this when they’re in the process of coming out they say that they’re bisexual because that makes it easier to accept like…. I’m attracted to guys but I’m attracted to girls too.” Participants during the adult focus group confirmed the tendency of first identifying as bisexual, stating it was often easier for families to accept a bisexual identity because the same-sex attracted individual would still be able to marry a member of the opposite sex and have children. Both Apollo and Lynn identified as asexual because they did not experience any attraction to members of the opposite sex.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

The formation of a coherent sense of identity is one of the key developmental tasks of adolescence (Erikson, 1968). As the majority of Americans identify with a Christian religious affiliation (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2007), the religious context is an important milieu by which identity development occurs. The majority of Christian religious denominations reject or condemn either same-sex attractions or same-sex sexual behavior (Sherkat, 2002), making this process of identity development potentially chaotic for some LGBTQ adolescents and young adults. Recent researchers have highlighted the need to consider various contextual influences on sexual minority identity development (e.g., Rust, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). The purpose of the current study was to gain additional insight into the process of religious and sexual identity development in sexual minority adolescents and young adults who identify as LGBTQ and were raised in a Christian religious tradition.

In the current sample, three broader themes emerged as descriptive of adolescent and young adult religious and sexual identity development trajectories. Consistent with the process of development and the way participants were asked to describe their experiences across the developmental transitions, the themes identified indicate progression from early to middle and late experiences. Within these larger themes, several subthemes were delineated. It should be noted that these experiences were largely contextualized, and the themes were not conceptualized as lockstep, linear stages, as discussed further below. Participant’s early experiences included an initial awareness of
one’s same-sex attractions and a behaviorally focused religious participation. During the middle experiences, both the adolescents and young adults described a period of exploration during which they questioned their religious beliefs and many participants adopted a LGBTQ label. These experiences were described as especially chaotic and stressful for the majority of the young adult participants and a smaller proportion of the adolescent participants. During the late experiences, participants began to solidify their sense of sexual and religious identity. Participants also tended to disengage with their childhood religious tradition, share their sexual orientation with others, clarify their own values, and accept themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or transsexual.

As evidenced by the results presented, the experiences of the adolescent and young adult samples were both similar and different. While the goal of qualitative research is not to draw comparisons between groups (Glesne, 2006), such comparisons are sometimes beneficial to help the reader gain greater insight into the lived experiences of participants themselves. As such, some comparisons will be made throughout the following discussion. However, it is acknowledged that a quantitative methodology is needed to draw more concrete conclusions between groups, and such comparisons are not the primary focus of the current study.

**Early Experiences**

Participants described an early behavioral focus to their religious attendance. Through the interviews, focus groups and journal writings, they shared their memories of attending early nursery programs, religious education programs, Sunday worship
services, and other social activities throughout their childhood and adolescence. For many of the participants, this was a positive experience. With the exception of Clyde, who did not enjoy his early experiences, the adolescent participants recalled fond memories regarding their participation, and highlighted their enjoyment of the food and social connectedness that came from their religious involvement. When reflecting on their early participation, the young adult participants highlighted their reasons for church attendance to include a desire to fit in and please their parents. Many of the young adults also shared pleasant memories regarding their attendance. The behavioral nature of the participants’ early religious experiences is consistent with both their developmental level and past research, which has highlighted the way religious values and beliefs are shared with children through participation in religious activities (Fowler, 1981; Garcia et al., 2008).

When raised within a heteronormative, religious context, Wagner and colleagues (1994) suggested sexual minority individuals might experience an early awareness of being “different.” Many of the adolescent and young adult participants shared this experience. Several of the participants recognized their experiences were unique yet did not have words to describe their experience of same-sex attractions. These experiences are consistent with some of the earlier models of sexual identity development, including Cass’s (1984) stage entitled “identity confusion” and Troiden’s (1979) stage referred to as “sensitization.” While these stage models provide a useful framework for discussing sexual identity development more broadly, the experiences of the participants do not map perfectly onto either model.
Both Cass (1984) and Troiden’s (1979) models have suggested individuals early in the process of sexual identity development internalize the negative stigmas surrounding same-sex attractions as a result of their feelings of “differentness.” As Savin-Williams (2001) suggested with the differential developmental trajectories framework, participant experiences in the current sample are contextualized and stage models as discussed above do not fully describe the participants’ experiences. Consistent with what the young adult participants had been instructed through their involvement in the LDS church, they worked to deny their same-sex attractions during this early stage. This resonates with Brzenzinski’s (2000) findings in her sample of 21 gay males raised in the LDS faith. As a result of both the stigma surrounding same-sex attractions and their early attempts to deny their attractions, the young adults described feeling lonely and isolated. Their experience speaks to the challenge of recognizing same-sex attractions within a conservative, non-accepting religious context. In contrast, the adolescents shared less internalization and negative outcomes associated with these experiences of early awareness. While there are a number of reasons this difference may have emerged, it attests to the way linear stage models fail to account for the individualized, often contextualized, experience.

**Middle Experiences**

Consistent with both the process of identity development (Erikson, 1968), and the development of abstract thought (Piaget, 1972), participants shared a tendency to question the teachings of their childhood faith during the middle experiences. These
questions emerged as participants experienced conflict between their religious and sexual identities, and found their personal experiences of same-sex attractions were not congruent with what they had been taught by their churches. While several of the participants questioned the general teachings of their churches, participants also challenged religious teachings on same-sex attractions.

Despite experiencing conflict between their sexual and religious identities, participants continued to behaviorally engage with their childhood religious faith. Several of the male young adult participants shared that though they attended religious services, they felt disconnected to their childhood faith. Some of the participants linked their feelings of disconnect to the identity conflict they experienced while others attributed their lack of belief to adopting a more scientific worldview. In contrast, many of the female young adult participants shared emotional and cognitive connectedness, often holding positions of leadership in the church. The early experience of being disconnected may have served as a protective factor, as these male participants shared less negative outcomes than their female counterparts who seemed to internalize many of the negative stigmas associated with a same-sex attracted identity. Future research might examine differences between religiosity by gender and sexual orientation as it relates to mental health outcomes. Recent work by Rostosky and colleagues (2010), discussed previously, serves as an example of such a research agenda.

As noted, the young adult participants shared their experiences of internalized guilt and their attempts to change their same-sex attractions. These experiences are consistent with the construct of internalized homophobia (Smith, 1971). The majority of
participants, including those who reported they were less connected to their religious beliefs, reported some degree of internalized homophobia. The stories shared by the participants who were more connected to their faith during this time tended to report more extreme experiences of conflict and guilt. Certainly, the methodology chosen for the current study cannot provide definitive conclusions regarding the relationship between religiosity and internalized homophobia. Ream and Savin-Williams (2005) found individuals who reported higher levels of religious and sexual identity conflict also reported higher levels of internalized homophobia. It is probable that the process of identifying as LGBTQ in a nonaffirming, conservative faith would be source of greater conflict for those who are more religiously connected.

The construct of internalized homophobia has often been associated with experiences of depression and feelings of worthlessness (e.g., Wagner et al., 1994). The young adult participants, many of whom shared experiences of internalized conflict and homophobia, also experienced difficulty with depression, suicidal ideation and anxiety. This finding is not surprising as both Morrow and Messinger (2006), as well as Savin-Williams and Cohen (1996), found depression more common among LGB individuals raised in a Christian environment. In contrast, the adolescent participants did not share as many stories of internalized conflict, depression, guilt, suicidal ideation or internalized homophobia as the young adult participants. Clyde and Capernicus both raised within the LDS faith were the exceptions, as each experienced intense feelings of depression, which they related to their sexual and religious identities. Additional research is necessary to gain additional insight into the different experiences of the adolescent and young adult
participants and factors related to resiliency. It may be useful to consider relationships between age, timing of sexual identity development milestones, religious involvement/connectedness, internalized conflict and psychosocial outcomes.

Late Experiences

During the late experiences, participants tended to come out and share their sexual orientation with friends and/or family members. A similar proportion of the adolescent and young adult participants had come out to their families at the time of the interview, with every participant having shared their sexual orientation with at least one friend or family member. Many of the adolescent participants reported selectively choosing who they shared their sexual identity with; several participants noted they were hesitant to share their sexual orientation with religious friends. Given the nature of the contexts in which they were raised and the official position of the predominant religion in the areas from which participants were recruited, compartmentalizing identities in certain contexts may be a beneficial and self-promoting move, especially while remaining dependent upon their parents for much of their support (Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001). This process of selectively choosing when and to whom one discloses a same-sex attracted identity attests to the resiliency of LGBTQ youth and young adults, as they work to successfully negotiate the coming out process in a religiously dominant context.

As noted, seven of the participants initially identified as “bisexual” or “asexual,” later changing their sexual identification to gay, lesbian, or transsexual. Rostosky and colleagues (2010) noted a similar trend in the highly religious sexual minority women in
their sample; the authors hypothesized these female participants might have found it more socially acceptable to identify as bisexual. Similarly, many of the individuals in the current sample were raised in religious traditions that emphasize family and opposite-sex marriage as a primary avenue to happiness and fulfillment; as such, participants may have found it more acceptable both socially and personally to identify initially as asexual or bisexual.

Both the adolescent and young adults demonstrated a tendency to disengage with their childhood religious traditions. While all of the adolescent participants shared they had disengaged emotionally and cognitively with their childhood religious traditions, half of the adolescent participants continued or planned to continue attending religious services until they turned 18 and/or moved out of their parents’ homes. Similarly, the young adult participants shared a history of early cognitive and affective disengagement, many participants waiting until they moved out of their parent’s house to stopped attending religious services. These findings highlight Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, and Hecker’s (2001) suggestion that sexual minority adolescents are especially vulnerable to the dilemma of choosing between their sexual and spiritual/religious identity. They may be feeling pressure to follow the familial path, outwardly participating in their religious organization while inwardly struggling to reconcile their emerging sexual orientation with their religious beliefs. (p. 440)

The cognitive and affective disengagement provided one avenue by which some participants were able to more effectively cope with their sexual and identity conflict. By no longer believing and/or internalizing the problematic messages of their faith communities, LGBTQ individuals may experience less dissonance and embrace their
same-sex attracted identity more fully. This overall pattern of religious disengagement is consistent with that found in other LGBTQ samples (e.g., Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Sherkat, 2002). As late adolescents and young adults, regardless of sexual orientation, demonstrate a propensity to decrease religious participation, future research might consider rates of disidentification within and between samples of heterosexual and sexual minority adolescents and young adults.

Cognitive and affective religious disengagement may have been a health-promoting move for the participants in the current sample. Dahl (2009) found that sexual minority individuals who were members of faith groups with nonaffirming stances experienced significantly more conflict and negative psychosocial outcomes than those who reported no religious affiliation. Similarly, in the current study, participants who religiously disengaged prior to coming out seemed to indicate better psychosocial health indices during these developmental processes than those who came out and disengaged concurrently. Future research could examine the relationship between the timing of religious disengagement, coming out and psychosocial outcomes to gain a more definitive understanding of this experience in the wider LGBTQ population.

While all participants shared they had cognitively and/or affectively disengaged with their childhood faith, participants shared different pathways to sexual and religious identity conflict resolution. These strategies were similar to those found elsewhere (Dahl & Galliher, 2009; Garcia et al., 2008; Schuck & Liddle, 2001). Consistent with Dahl (2009), the majority of the sample did not identify as being both LGBTQ and religious concurrently. In fact, only three of the participants described current religious
involvement and/or exploration. Rather, participants described themselves as spiritual or having no religious identity. The majority of the participants stated they were open to future exploration of their religious and/or spiritual beliefs, with many of the participants emphasizing spirituality rather than engagement with organized religion. This is consistent with research conducted with adolescent and young adult samples which suggests that individuals grow in their spirituality across time and decrease religious participation, in both lesbian (Tan, 2005) and heterosexual samples (Engebretson, 2004; Markstorm, 1999). Finally, three of the participants left their childhood religion completely and indicated no future plans to engage with religion and/or spirituality.

Several psychosocial factors emerged as important during this time. As Rust (2003) noted, “Identity is the link connecting the individual to the social world. Change in sexual identity usually leads to changes in the individual’s relationships with others and with society as a whole” (p. 227). As might be expected, experiences of social strain were highlighted by both the adolescents and young adult participants. Rostosky and colleagues (2007) hypothesized about these experiences and suggested the teachings of religious organizations may function to sever social support experienced by sexual minority individuals. The adolescent participants tended to describe more social difficulty with friends as a result of their actual or perceived sexual orientation whereas the young adults shared social strain with both immediate and distal family members. Given the fact the adolescents tended to self-identify and come out earlier than the young adults, adolescents often first came out in their home communities and schools, which may have resulted in experiencing, and thus reporting, greater strain with peers. Many of the young
adult participants waited to officially come out until they moved out of their childhood homes and often, the community they grew up in. This afforded them the opportunity to develop new friendships and communities; they might have sought out more affirming social contexts after leaving their childhood homes and as a result, experienced less strain with their peers. Further, the religiosity of the family members of the adolescents was more diverse than that of the young adult participants, which may have contributed to different levels of familial strain reported. Certainly, a quantitative methodology considering age of coming out and social strain could provide more definitive conclusions surrounding this experience.

Conversely, the participants highlighted positive social experiences related to their sexual identification as well. Both the adolescents and young adults shared unexpected positive reactions from some of their religious friends and family members. While participants shared they lost some of the individuals they once called “friends,” as a result of coming out, many reported their social connections had expanded and diversified. The participants highlighted the importance of high school and university gay-straight alliances and LGBTQ support organizations. Rotheram-Borus and Langabeer (2001) noted negative social experiences may be “less destructive” when positive role models are secured. In the current study, participants found support, friendship, and affirmation in their emerging sense of identity through these organizations, further attesting to the critical role these organizations play in the lives of individuals who identify as LGBTQ.

Through this process, participants shared an increased sense of self and other-
acceptance. For some participants, this process of self-acceptance emerged as they began to view their sexual orientation as created and ordained by God, a finding highlighted elsewhere (Dahl, 2009). Certainly, as one begins to more fully embrace their sense of identity, it is logical that they would experience more self-acceptance, and an increased sense of empathy and openness to other’s experiences and identifications. This attests to the resiliency of the current sample, as they were able to successfully negotiate the complicated task of coming out within a predominantly conservative religious context. As would be expected developmentally during the late experiences, participants also shared a tendency to further clarify their own values, religious and spiritual beliefs. Some of the core values gained from their childhood religious faiths continued to be central to their own sense of identity.

The majority of participants shared a desire to continue exploring both their religious and sexual identities in the future. Many of the adolescent and young adult participants discussed plans to explore their spirituality, become more involved with the LGBTQ community, and/or become romantically involved with a partner with the hope of having a family someday. As the process of development is a lifelong endeavor, it is expected that participants will continue to further define their sexual and religious identities, continually being shaped by their contexts and experiences. The data provided above is simply considered a “snapshot” of the participant’s own development during three key developmental periods- childhood, adolescence and young adulthood.
Personal and Contextual Factors

The qualitative methodology utilized for the current study offered an opportunity to consider some of the unique contextual influences which play a role in the experiences of LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised in a Christian context. As participant experiences were contextualized and not always linear, both the overarching themes and subthemes were not conceptualized as stages, though the temporal nature of the larger themes is recognized. Consistent with Savin-Williams’ (2001) differential developmental trajectories, a variety of contextual factors influenced participant’s experiences, and as such, a rigid linear trajectory does not adequately represent their experiences. While similarities allowed the subthemes to be grouped temporally, every participant did not endorse a lockstep linear trajectory of identity formation. For example, a subset of participants indicated they had disengaged with their religious faith cognitively and affectively prior to coming out, which may have served a protective role in their own process of coming out. Certainly, variations in denominational affiliation, personal commitment and family religiosity are three ways participants differed religiously, which may have impacted their unique developmental trajectories, as discussed previously. Additional personal and contextual factors are highlighted briefly below, though it recognized that it would be an impossible endeavor to highlight each factor which may have impacted the participant’s unique developmental trajectories.

Adolescent Versus Young Adult Sample

While some of the adolescent and young adult experiences overlapped, the two
groups’ experiences were qualitatively different. One potentially promising finding from the current study is that the adolescent sample shared less distress and negative psychosocial outcomes in relationship to their sexual and religious identity development. There are several hypotheses which may explain these differences, and it is likely that the differences which emerged are a result of a variety of contextual influences on these developmental processes. Future research might utilize a quantitative methodology to consider the following hypotheses. First, the adolescent subsample was unique. As noted, sexual identity “milestones” were different between the two samples. The adolescents self-identified as a sexual minority at an earlier age and were equally “out” to family as the young adult sample, despite being younger. By delaying the coming out process, the young adults may have been exposed to, and internalized more negative messages regarding same-sex attractions. This may have influenced their experiences of conflict and mental health difficulties. However, this hypothesis is in contrast to some studies which have found early identifiers to be at higher risk for negative psychosocial outcomes (e.g., Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). Further, the adolescents were required to obtain parental consent for study participation. While the adolescent participants were not required to be “out” to gain consent, it is acknowledged that the adolescent subsample in the current study is likely substantially different than the general population of LGBTQ adolescents raised in a Christian context. In fact, the current adolescent sample may be more “open” regarding their relationships and religious beliefs than typical samples of LGBTQ adolescents. In contrast, the subsample of emerging adult participants is similar with regard to developmental milestones to LGBTQ samples studied elsewhere (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003).
Secondly, there was more variability in the adolescent’s religiosity than the young adult sample. While the young adult participants were each raised in the LDS faith, three of the eight adolescent participants were not raised in the LDS faith. Further, while three of the LDS adolescent participant experiences (Alonsa, Clyde, and Capernicus), mirrored the experiences of their young adult counterparts, two of the LDS adolescent participants (Andrew and Alexia) attended services regularly throughout their childhood with extended family and friends. These religious differences may have impacted the degree to which the adolescent participants internalized the messages they heard regarding same-sex attractions as the emerging adult participants may have faced a more challenging religious context than the adolescent participants.

Finally, as noted by other authors (e.g., Diamond, 2005; Rotheram-Borus & Langabeer, 2001), societal values surrounding same-sex sexuality are changing. Through increased positive media coverage of issues related to LGBTQ identities, increased LGBTQ visibility in both the workplace, and increased anti-discrimination legislation, adolescents may have been exposed to more positive messages regarding same-sex sexuality than their young adult counterparts. Therefore, it is possible and hopeful, that the adolescent participants simply internalized fewer negative messages regarding same-sex sexuality as they were exposed to the “ordinariness” of same-sex attractions (Savin-Williams, 2005).

Sexual Orientation Histories

As noted previously, the adolescent sample used for the current study was unique.
They reported earlier ages of self-labeling and identifying than the young adult sample and/or other research samples of LGBTQ individuals (Savin-Williams, 2005). Sexual minority young adults who participate in research studies typically self-disclose in the late teens, often around high school graduation (Savin-Williams, 2001). The young adult participants in the current study shared sexual identity milestones consistent with this finding, suggesting some congruency between the young adult sample and existing research on sexual minority individuals. Similarly, both the adolescents and young adults in the current sample disclosed to friends before family, and were more “out” to friends than family. This trend has also been noted in studies using other samples of sexual minority young adults (e.g., Dahl, 2009; Savin-Williams, 2001).

**Implications**

While the purpose of qualitative research is not generalization, but rather to highlight the lived experiences of the participants themselves, some implications can be gleaned from the study. First, from early on in childhood, participants described a feeling of “differentness,” and did not have words to describe their experience. For most participants, the messages regarding same-sex attractions available to them were negative, especially as they considered their childhood religious faith’s teachings regarding same-sex attractions. This may have resulted in participants internalizing negative stigmas about their same-sex attracted identity. It may be helpful to increase the visibility of positive role models for children and young adults; this can be done through incorporating information about successful, happy LGBTQ individuals through school
and media programs. Children can read about other children who have two parents of the same sex, and learn about authors, inventors, politicians, and other LGBTQ individuals who have made an impact on society. Rust (2003) suggested by intentionally increasing awareness and providing positive gay, lesbian, and bisexual role models, steps can be made to reduce the harmful effects which result from the internalization of negative stigmas.

Second, many of the young adults and a proportion of the adolescents shared their experiences of guilt and mental health difficulties while going through the coming out process. During this same time, the young adults reported feeling the most isolated. Schools and communities can work to increase the visibility of allies, providing a safe place for same-sex attracted youth. School counselors and therapists should work to increase their own sensitivity towards the complexities of coming out in a religious context. Practitioners should be aware that adolescents and/or young adults with same-sex attractions may not be able to rely on their immediate families and friends for support as they negotiate their sense of identity. As the participants highlighted their reliance on online communities and LGBTQ support organizations during the late experiences, school counselors and therapists should be knowledgeable about available community resources, in order to help LGBTQ youth secure adequate support networks. Certainly, programs which work to de-stigmatize LGBTQ sexual orientations are vital, as they may be one of the primary sources of support for LGBTQ individuals raised in the religious context.

Third, the data from the current study speaks to the resiliency of LGBTQ
adolescents and young adults. Despite facing the challenge of coming out within a conservative, religious context, the participants were able to negotiate and embrace their identity as LGBTQ. The participants’ resiliency was highlighted throughout their individual trajectories. When what they were being taught in their churches was incongruent with their personal experiences, participants had the confidence to question both the teachings and the authority of their faith communities. When they struggled with feelings of guilt, depression and anxiety, participants sought out support networks as their families and friends were often unavailable to them. During the process of sharing their sexual orientation with others, participants were strategic, sharing their sexual orientation first with those who would be positive and/or accepting. Even the participants’ involvement in the current study highlights their passion for sharing their stories, providing evidence that one can successfully negotiate the process of religious and sexual identity development in a predominantly religious context.

**Limitations**

When viewing this study from the lens of a traditional project in the field of psychology, a number of limitations emerge. Most notably, the small sample size and the qualitative methodology selected undoubtedly limits the generalizability of the study, a critique inherent to qualitative research (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2006). The participants themselves self-selected for the study by responding to either a recruitment email or poster. As a result, the participants are likely different than the larger population of LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised in a Christian religious faith. This is
particularly relevant given the majority of the participants were raised LDS. While there are similarities between the LDS faith and other more conservative denominations regarding the acceptability of same-sex attractions, some of more idiosyncratic teachings had an influence on the participants’ experiences (e.g., *Proclamation to the World*). As such, some experiences may not be consistent with individuals raised in different religious communities. The participants in the current study also self-identified as LGBTQ, and as such, the results may not adequately reflect the experiences of adolescents and young adults who identify same-sex attractions but have not self-labeled as LGBTQ. While some implications regarding adolescent and young adult experiences of sexual and religious identity development can be drawn from the participants’ experiences, generalizability is not the goal of a qualitative study; a quantitative approach is needed to draw more concrete, generalizable conclusions.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This study has offered additional insight into the experiences of religious and sexual identity development of 19 LGBTQ adolescents and young adults raised in a Christian religious context. The stories and experiences of the participants highlight the importance of considering contextual influences on the process of identity development. Participants initially experienced an early awareness of their same-sex attractions while maintaining a behavioral commitment to their religious upbringing. After this experience of early awareness, participants began to explore both their same-sex attractions and question some of their religious faith’s teachings. This process of exploration and
questioning was both chaotic and frustrating for the majority of participants as their own experiences of same-sex attractions did not coincide with what they were being taught. Finally, participants described a process of religious disengagement and sexual self-identification, which was often linked to increased feelings of self-acceptance and social connectedness. As the process of religious and sexual identity development is an ongoing, dynamic process, the data provided offers view of experiences during childhood, adolescences, and young adulthood. It is expected participant’s religious and sexual identities will continue to be shaped by their experiences throughout their development.

In qualitative research, it is acknowledged that the researcher is a part of the research project; as such, researchers are encouraged to continually monitor their own perspective and consider the ways in which their biases may interact with the emerging data. As I approached this project, I was keenly aware that my personal experiences within the religious context had a significant impact on my own process of development throughout childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Further, both my experiences and curiosity led me to ask questions about the experiences of LGBTQ adolescents and emerging adults raised in a Christian context. Without conducting this study, I would have been willing to make the assertion that coming out within a religious context is a difficult endeavor. Certainly, as I reflect on my personal experiences, my previous theological training, and my knowledge regarding the process of identity development, it is not surprising that the participants described their experiences as difficult and chaotic in an environment that is largely heteronormative and often discriminating. However, I
don’t think I was prepared for the large degree of admiration I would develop for the participants in this study. Despite the challenges faced within their religious environments, their families and their cultures, they were able to negotiate their sense of sexual and religious identity. Their resiliency was evident through the sharing of their life experiences, and for their time and their passion, I am grateful.
REFERENCES


Appendix A

Recruitment Email
Why am I getting this email?
Hello! My name is Angie Dahl and I am a doctoral student at Utah State University. I am working with Dr. Renee Galliher, psychology professor at USU, and we would like to invite you to participate in the research study designed to explore adolescent and young adult experiences of religious and relational development.

We are both active in affirming the GLBTQ community and hope that our research can be used to further support GLBTQ persons. The goal of our research is to develop a better understanding of religious and relational development in GLBTQ adolescents and young adults ages 14-24. We invite you to participate in our study if you self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, transgender, intersex, or use another label of personal meaning. You do not have to be currently religious to participate in the study, but must identify as having been actively raised in a Christian tradition and are between the ages of 14-24 years of age.

We apologize if you have received this solicitation in error. Please disregard if you do not identify as GLBTQ.

What would I have to do?
Your participation would involve initially completing a face-to-face 60-90 minute interview at the location of your choice. Additionally, you will have the option to participate in a journal writing phase of the study, where you will be asked to journal up to five times regarding experiences related to your religious and relational development over a two-week period. Finally, you will have the option to participate in a small-group discussion regarding experiences related to your religious and relational development.

What is in it for me?
You will be paid for every phase of the study you choose to participate. After the completion of the interview, you will be paid $15. If you choose to participate in the journal writing portion of the study, you will be paid $3 for each journal entry (with a maximum of 5 submissions, $15). Finally, upon completion of the optional focus group, you will be paid $15.

If you have any questions about the research, please do not hesitate to contact me, Angie Dahl, at 435-740-0693 or at angiedahl@gmail.com. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D. at 435-797-3391 or at Renee.Galliher@usu.edu.

How do I sign up?
If you’d like to participate in the study, please contact Angie Dahl at 435-740-0693 by phone or send an email to angiedahl@gmail.com indicating your interest. During the initial contact, you will be asked a few questions to determine your eligibility in the study (i.e., actively raised in a Christian tradition, currently identified as GLBTQ) and be provided with additional information regarding the study. If you choose to participate in the study, further instructions will be provided.

Thanks for your consideration!
Appendix B

Letters of Informed Consent
PARENT PERMISSION/YOUTH ASSENT
Adolescent and Emerging Adult Relational and Religious Experiences

Introduction/ Purpose. Angie Dahl, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University and Professor Renee Galliher in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University (USU) are conducting a research study to understand adolescent and emerging adult relational and religious experiences. We invite your teenager to be part of this study. There will be approximately 5-10 teenage participants included in this study. There will be approximately 15-20 total participants in this research study.

Procedures. Initially, your teenager will be interviewed regarding his or her experiences of religious and relationship development across childhood and adolescence. Specifically, we are interested in learning about how adolescents and young adults understand their romantic and intimate experiences in the context of their religious beliefs. The interviews are expected to last between 60-90 minutes and will be audio taped by the interviewer. The interviews will later be transcribed and coded by our research team. Transcriptions will be sent to some teenagers via email for content verification and clarification. Secondly, your teenager will have the option to participate in a two-week journal writing portion of the study. He or she will be asked to record times throughout the week in which experiences salient to religious and/or romantic relationships occur. Journals will be mailed to the researcher at the end of the two-week journal writing period. Your teenager will also have the option to participate in a small group discussion with 4-6 other teenage participants about experiences regarding romantic relationships and religion. The focus group is expected to last between 60-90 minutes. It will be audio taped by the interviewer. The focus group will later be transcribed and coded by our research team. To protect the privacy of your teenager, no one except the research team and your teenager will have access to the data from the interview, journal writing, and/or focus groups.

New Findings. During the course of this research study, you and your teenager will be informed of any significant findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research. In the event any information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you or your teenager, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent for your teenager to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.

Risks. Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts. Some people may not want to be audio taped or share personal information. Participants have the opportunity to decline to answer the interviewer’s questions if desired. Focus group and journal writing are optional parts of this study. Additionally, it is possible that your teenager’s personal information might be inadvertently seen by others during mail or email transmission. The researchers will encourage focus group participants to keep information revealed during the group confidential, but cannot guarantee confidentiality. We will work closely with your teen to best ensure his or her privacy throughout the study. Utah law requires researchers to report certain information to the authorities. This includes threat of harm to self or others, or abuse of a minor by an adult. If your teenager becomes upset or distressed during the study, the researchers will be able to provide referrals for counseling or other help.
PARENT PERMISSION/YOUTH ASSENT  
Adolescent and Emerging Adult Relational and Religious Experiences

**Benefits.** There may or may not be any direct benefit to you or your teenager from these procedures. We hope that your teenager has fun in this study. The information may help us learn more about adolescent relational and religious experiences. It will also help teachers, parents, and counselors in their work with teenagers.

**Explanation & offer to answer questions.** If you have any questions, please contact Angie Dahl at (435) 740-0693 or at angiedahl@gmail.com. You can also contact the Primary Investigator, Professor Renee Galliher at (435) 797-3391.

**Extra Cost(s)** There will not be any additional costs in participating in this research study.

**Payment/Compensation.** Your teenager will be paid for participation in each phase of the study: $15 for interview participation, $3 for each journal writing submission (maximum 5 submissions) and $15 for focus group participation. If your teenager will receive payments, gift cards or similar items of value for participating in this research, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has determined that if the amount your teenager gets from this study, plus any prior amounts your teenager has received from USU since January of this year total $600 or more, USU must report this income to the federal government. If your teenager is a USU employee, any payment he or she receives from this study will be included in his or her regular payroll.

**Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence.** Participation in research is entirely voluntary. It is your teenager’s choice to be in this study or any part of it. He or she can refuse or stop at any time.

**Confidentiality.** Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the researchers will see the data. All information will be locked in a filing cabinet in a locked room. The digital transcription will only have an ID number and not your teenager’s name. Identifying information in journals will be blacked out. Your teenager’s name will not be used in any report about this research. All identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

**IRB Approval Statement.** The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu. If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

**Copy of consent.** You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and keep one copy for your files.
PARENT PERMISSION/YOUTH ASSENT
Adolescent and Emerging Adult Relational and Religious Experiences

Investigator Statement  “I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or
my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and
benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have
been answered.”

Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D.  Angie Dahl
Principal Investigator  Student Researcher
(435) 797-3391.  (435) 740-0693
Renee.Galliher@usu.edu  angiedahl@gmail.com

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian  I have read the above description of the study and I give
permission for my teenager to participate.

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian  Date

Youth Assent (for those 7-17 years of age): I understand that my parent(s)/guardian is/are aware of this
research and has given permission for me to participate. I understand that it is up to me to participate
even if my parents say yes. If I do not want to be in this study, I do not have to and no one will be upset
if I don’t want to participate or if I change my mind later and want to stop. I can ask any questions that I
have about this study now or later. By signing below, I agree to participate.

Signature of Youth Participant  Date
INFORMED CONSENT
Adolescent and Emerging Adult Relational and Religious Experiences

Introduction/ Purpose Angie Dahl, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University and Professor Renee Galliher in the Department of Psychology at Utah State University (USU) are conducting a research study to understand adolescent and emerging adult relational and religious experiences. We invite you to be part of this study. There will be approximately 5-10 young adult participants included in this study.

Procédure Initially, you will be interviewed regarding your experiences of religious and relationship development across childhood and adolescence. Specifically, we are interested in learning about how young adults understand their romantic and intimate experiences in the context of their religious beliefs. The interviews are expected to last between 60-90 minutes and will be audio taped by the interviewer. The interviews will later be transcribed and coded by our research team. Transcriptions will be sent to some participants via email for content verification and clarification. Secondly, you will have the option to participate in a two-week journal writing portion of the study. You will be asked to record times throughout the week in which experiences salient to religious and/or romantic relationships occur. Journals will be mailed to the researcher at the end of the two-week journal writing period. You will also have the option to participate in a small group discussion with 4-6 other participants about experiences regarding romantic relationships and religion. The focus group is expected to last between 60-90 minutes. It will be audio taped by the interviewer. The focus group will later be transcribed and coded by our research team. To protect your privacy, no one except the research team will have access to the data from the interview, journal writing, and/or focus groups.

New Findings During the course of this research study, you will be informed of any significant new findings (either good or bad), such as changes in the risks or benefits resulting from participation in the research. If new information is obtained that is relevant or useful to you, or if the procedures and/or methods change at any time throughout this study, your consent to continue participating in this study will be obtained again.

Risks Participation in this research study may involve some added risks or discomforts. Some people may not want to be audio taped or share personal information. Participants have the opportunity to decline to answer the interviewer’s questions if desired. Focus group and journal writing are optional parts of this study. Additionally, it is possible that your personal information might be inadvertently seen by others during mail or email transmission. The researchers will encourage focus group participants to keep information revealed during the group confidential, but cannot guarantee confidentiality. We will work closely with you to best ensure your privacy throughout the study. Utah law requires researchers to report certain information to the authorities. This includes threat of harm to self or others, or abuse of a minor by an adult. If you become upset or distressed during the study, the researchers will be able to provide referrals for counseling or other help.
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**Benefits.** There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from these procedures. We hope that you have fun in this study. The information may help us learn more about adolescent and young adult relational and religious experiences. It will also help teachers, parents, and counselors in their work with teenagers.

**Explanation & offer to answer questions.** If you have any questions, please contact Angie Dahl at (435) 740-0693 or at angiedahl@gmail.com. You can also contact the Primary Investigator, Professor Renee Galliher at (435) 797-3391.

**Extra Cost(s)** There will not be any additional costs in participating in this research study.

**Payment/Compensation** You will be paid for participation in each phase of the study: $15 for interview participation, $3 for each journal writing submission (maximum 5 submissions) and $15 for focus group participation. **If you will receive payments, gift cards or similar items of value for participating in this research,** the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has determined that if the amount you get from this study, plus any prior amounts you have received from USU since January of this year total $600 or more, USU must report this income to the federal government. If you are a USU employee, any payment he or she receives from this study will be included in his or her regular payroll.

**Voluntary nature of participation and right to withdraw without consequence.** Participation in research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice to be in this study or any part of it. You can refuse or stop at any time.

**Confidentiality.** Research records will be kept confidential, consistent with federal and state regulations. Only the researchers will see the data. All information will be locked in a filing cabinet in a locked room. The digital transcription will only have an ID number and not your name. Identifying information in journals will be blacked out. Your name will not be used in any report about this research. All identifying information will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

**IRB Approval Statement.** The Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at USU has approved this research study. If you have any pertinent questions or concerns about your rights or a research-related injury, you may contact the IRB Administrator at (435) 797-0567 or email irb@usu.edu. If you have a concern or complaint about the research and you would like to contact someone other than the research team, you may contact the IRB Administrator to obtain information or to offer input.

**Copy of consent.** You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and keep one copy for your files.
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Investigator Statement: "I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff, and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised have been answered."

Renee V. Galliher, Ph.D., Principal Investigator
(435) 797-3391
Renee.Galliher@usu.edu

Angie Dahl, Student Researcher
(435) 740-0693
angiedahl@gmail.com

Signature of Participant: By signing below I agree to participate in this research.

Signature __________________________ Date: ______________
Appendix C

Interview Script
Interview Script

For our conversation today, I’d like to understand experiences related to your sexual and religious identities. I’ve got a few questions which I plan on asking, but please share anything you feel might be important for me in understanding your experiences as an LGBTQ-identified individual, and your experiences as someone who grew up religiously affiliated.

1) Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? (Probe for: childhood experiences: where the participant grew up, who the participant lived with growing up, sexual self-identification, current living situation, work and/or school objectives).

2) Often, our religious experiences begin during childhood. Can you describe for me your both your religious experiences and development of your faith or understanding of God starting in childhood through today?. (Probe for behavioral, cognitive and affective experiences of religion and major turning points in their religious/faith journey).

3) Can you describe for me your experiences identifying as LGBTQ (use label provided by participant in question one)? (Probe for: first awareness of same-sex attractions, age of first label, age of self-disclosure, major turning points in their journey identifying as LGBTQ). If not previously addressed, ask: How did your religious experiences and/or faith relate to your process of sexual identity development?

4) Sometimes these experiences related to the development of our sexual and religious identities can be related to difficulty and confusion while other times,
these experiences can be a source of strength, often even in the face of adversity. How do you think your experiences developing a religious and/or sexual identity are related to negative experiences? How do you think your experiences developing a religious and/or sexual identity are related to positive outcomes? (Probe for the relationship to self-esteem, depressive symptoms, anxious symptoms, sense of identity, community-strength, etc.)

5) How do you foresee your religious and sexual identities playing out in the future?

6) Is there anything else that would be helpful for me to know as you think about your religious experiences and self-identification as LGBTQ?
CURRICULUM VITAE

ANGIE LOANN DAHL

98 Penhurst Place, Logan, UT 84341...(435) 740-0693....angiedahl@gmail.com

EDUCATION

Ph.D.  Utah State University, Logan, UT  2011
       Combined Clinical/Counseling/School Psychology (APA accredited)
       Dissertation: Sexual and Religious Identity Development Among Adolescent and Emerging Adult Sexual Minorities
       Chair: Renee Galliher, Ph.D.

Ed.S.  Utah State University, Logan, UT  2009
       School Psychology (NASP approved)
       Chair: Renee Galliher, Ph.D.

M.S.  Utah State University, Logan, UT  2008
       Counseling Psychology

M.A.  Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN  2005
       Youth and Family Emphasis

B.A.  Concordia College, Moorhead, MN  1998
       Psychology/Religion

LICENSURE

01/10-Present  State of Utah School Psychologist Educator License (Level 1)

CLINICAL EXPERIENCE

08/10-05/11  Advanced Clinical Practicum Student
       Student Health and Wellness Center, Utah State University
       Provide behavioral health services within a primary care setting including: intake assessments, brief psychotherapy, behavioral consultation services, crisis consultation and collaboration with
primary care providers. Presenting problems include: ADHD, eating disorders, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, body image and identity concerns.

**Supervisor:** Scott Deberard, Ph.D.

**Total Hours:** 322. **Direct Contact Hours:** 111.

**08/09-5/10**

**Counseling Practicum Student**

*Counseling and Psychological Services, Utah State University*

Perform psychological services in a university setting.

Responsibilities included: individual therapy, group therapy, crisis consultation and campus outreach. Typical presenting problems included: depression, anxiety and concerns regarding identity, relationships and life transitions.

**Supervisors:** LuAnn Helms, Ph.D., Holly Serraro, M.S. (doctoral intern)

**Total Hours:** 325. **Direct Contact Hours:** 127.

**08/08-05/11**

**School Psychology Intern and School Psychologist**

*Weber School District, Ogden, UT*

Consult with teachers and parents, create behavioral and academic interventions, provide academic counseling, lead group and individual counseling sessions, participate on interdisciplinary team meetings and engage in related work at the junior and high school levels. Specialize in assessment, administering and interpreting the following assessment measures with K-12 students district-wide: WISC-IV, WAIS-III, WJ-III, GADS, GARS, Vineland, Achenbach TRF, CBCL, ICAP, and ADOS.

**Internship Supervisors:** Donna Gilbertson, Ph.D, Adam Schwebach, Ph.D.

**Total Internship Hours:** 785. **Direct Contact Hours:** 551.

**08/07-06/08**

**School Psychology Practicum Student**

*Union Middle School, Sandy, UT*

Participate in a variety of aspects of school psychology position in a middle school setting: teacher and parent consultation, behavioral interventions, individual therapy, group therapy, and IEP meetings.

**Supervisors:** Donna Gilbertson, Ph.D., Kristan Warwick, M.S.

**Total Hours:** 302. **Direct Contact Hours:** 172.

**08/07-08/08**

**Psychoeducational Assessment Assistant**

*Weber School District, Ogden, UT*

Perform assessments for special education re-evaluation and qualification. Administer and score the following assessments:
WISC-IV, WAIS-III, WPPSI-III, UNIT, and WJ-III. 
Supervisor: Maren MacFarlane, M.S. 
Total Assessment Hours: 100.

01/07-12/07 Clinical Practicum Student
Community Clinic, Utah State University. 
Primary therapist and co-therapist implementing behavioral parent training. Presenting problems included non-compliance, stealing and behavioral aggression in children ages 4-12 years old. 
Supervisor: Clint Field, Ph.D. 
Total Hours: 141. Direct Contact Hours: 70.

08/06-05/07 Interdisciplinary Trainee
Interdisciplinary Training Program, Utah State University 
Received training in issues related to persons with disabilities (e.g., disability laws, participatory action research methods, and disability organizations). Served as facilitator for research team in conjunction with Bear River Activity and Skills Center. 
Supervisor: Jeff Sheen, MSW. 
Total Clinical Volunteer Hours: 210. 
Total Didactic Hours: 100.

OUTREACH EXPERIENCE

Fall 2010 Graduate Practicum Relaxation Training
Utah State University Psychology Department 
Co-led training on stress and relaxation techniques for beginning graduate therapists.

Spring 2010 Utah State University Student Alcohol Screening/Awareness 
Counseling and Psychological Services 
Conducted brief alcohol screenings, met individually with students to discuss results and answer questions.

Fall 2009 Utah State University Student Anxiety Screening/Awareness 
Counseling and Psychological Services 
Conducted brief anxiety screenings, met individually with students to discuss results and answer questions.

Fall 2009 Utah State University Sexual Abuse Awareness 
Counseling and Psychological Services
Available to meet with students to debrief after a guest presentation.

Fall 2008  
**Utah State University Student Mental Health Presentation**  
Utah State University Psychology 1010  
Guest lecture on common mental health issues faced by college students.

Spring 2007  
**Disability Law Center Presentation**  
Cache Valley, UT  
Give psychoeducational presentations to local middle and junior high schools to increase disability awareness.

December 2006  
**Center for Persons with Disabilities Parenting Presentation**  
Utah State University  
Provide psychoeducational presentation on parenting and holiday stress for parents of children with disabilities.

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

01/11-05/11  
**Instructor**  
*PSY 1730: Strategies for Academic Success*  
Create course materials, lecture, and provide student support in a course designed to equip undergraduate students with basic study skills for success in the college setting.  
Spring Semesters, 1 Section.  
*Supervisor: Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, Ph.D.*

01/10-05/11  
**Instructor**  
*PSY 2950: Orientation to the Psychology as a Career and a Major, Utah State University*  
Create course materials, lecture, and provide student support in a course designed to equip psychology majors with skills necessary for undergraduate study. Supervise graduate teaching assistant.  
Fall and Spring Semesters, 3 Sections.  
*Supervisor: Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, Ph.D.*

08/07-08/10  
**Assessment Evaluation Assistant**  
*PSY 7350: Integrated Practicum, Utah State University*  
Review, score and provide feedback on taped psychological assessment administrations for graduate practicum course. Meet individually with students as needed to provide additional assessment training and support. Fall and Spring Semesters, 6 sections.
Supervisors: Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, Ph.D, Kyle Hancock, Ph.D., Susan Crowley, Ph.D, Melanie Domenech-Rodriguez, Ph.D.

1/07-12/09

Instructor
PSY 1010: Introductory Psychology, Utah State University
Independent instructor, responsible for all aspects of introductory-level undergraduate psychology courses including lecturing, providing student support, and creation of course-related materials. Supervise graduate and undergraduate teaching assistants. Fall and Spring Semesters, 4 on-campus and 1 distance conferencing course.
Supervisors: David Stein, Ph.D., Gretchen Gimpel Peacock, Ph.D.

01/08-05/09

Graduate Teaching Assistant
PSY 6410: Educational Assessment, Utah State University
Assist instructor in all aspects of graduate course, provide assessment demonstrations and student support. Spring Semesters, 2 sections.
Supervisor: Clint Field, Ph.D.

08/07-12/08

Graduate Teaching Assistant
PSY 6310: Intellectual Assessment, Utah State University
Assist instructor in maintaining grades, assessment demonstrations, providing student support, and occasional lectures for graduate-level course. Fall semesters, 2 sections.
Supervisors: Martin Toohill, Ph.D., JoAnn Tschanz, Ph.D.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

12/07-08/08

Graduate Student Researcher
Behavioral Pediatric Research Group, Utah State University.
Involved in all aspects of a research group investigating behavioral parent training with young children. Involved with coding tapes of child-parent interactions, researching the use of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy in conjunction with a behavioral parent training model and preparing conference presentations.
Supervisor: Clint Field, Ph.D.

12/07-08/07

Graduate Research Assistant
National Clearinghouse of Rehabilitation Materials, Utah State University.
Created fifteen continuing education online courses for Rehabilitation Counselors concerning medical aspects of disability. Project was part of the program development stage of a research initiative concerning distance learning for rehabilitation professionals. 
*Supervisor:* Mike Millington, Ph.D.

**PEER REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS**


**INVITED PUBLICATIONS**


**PRESENTATIONS**


**RELEVANT WORK EXPERIENCE**

08/06-08/07 Academic Counseling and Recruitment Graduate Assistant  
*Department of Special Education, Utah State University.* Serve as on-campus contact for a recruitment grant aimed future teaching professionals. Provide academic counseling.  
*Supervisor:* Bob Morgan, Ph.D.

01/01-08/06 Program Director  
*Pathways, Inc., Bemidji, MN.* Provide year-round programming and leadership at three outdoor camping sites for children, youth and families. Program small and large group experiences, facilitate high and low ropes course activities and maintain a safe and nurturing camping environment for children and youth.  
*Supervisor:* Paul Hanson.
**Youth Director**  
*Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Moorhead, MN.*  
Plan, create curriculum and implement programming for K-12 youth and families. Provide support for children, youth and families.  
*Supervisor: Morris Wee, Ph.D.*

### PROFESSIONAL SERVICE

**08/10-Present**  
**Academic Dean Search Committee**  
*Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services, Utah State University*  
Selected to represent graduate and undergraduate students on the search committee for the Dean of the College of Education and Human Services. Involved in all aspects of the selection process, including: application review, airport and on campus interviews.

**08/08-05/09**  
**Student Representative**  
*Psychology Department, Utah State University.*  
Elected to represent the psychology graduate students to the combined program faculty. Brought student issues to twice monthly faculty meetings, provided leadership in evaluating the clinical comprehensive exam process, organized departmental social events and Ph.D. applicant interview days.

### ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL TRAINING

**04/10**  
**An Integrated Approach to Complex Psychological Trauma Training**  
Presenter: John Briere, Ph.D., provided by Counseling and Psychological Services, Utah State University.

**06/09**  
**Professional Ethics Workshop**  
Presenter: Steven Behnke, Ph.D., provided by the Utah Psychological Association.

**04/09**  
**Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Experiential Workshop**  
Presenter: Steven Hayes, Ph.D., provided by Counseling and Psychological Services, Utah State University.

**09/08**  
**WAIS-IV Training**  
Provided by the Utah Psychological Association.

**09/08**  
**Multicultural Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Training**  
Presenters: Michael Twohig, Ph.D. and Melanie Domenech Rodriguez, Ph.D., provided by Utah State University.
09/08  Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Seminar  
Presenter: Michael Twohig, Ph.D., 3 credit graduate course, provided by Utah State University.

05/08  Acceptance and Commitment Therapy Training  
Presenter: Sonja Batten, Ph.D., provided by the Association for Behavior Analysis.

11/07  Utah State University GLBTQ Allies on Campus Training

GRANTS AND AWARDS RECEIVED

2010  Walter R. Borg Scholarship, Utah State University ($2,400)  
2010  Graduate Student Senate Travel Award, Utah State University  
2010  Department of Psychology Student Travel Award, Utah State University  
2008  Graduate Student Senate Travel Award, Utah State University  
2008  Department of Psychology Student Travel Award, Utah State University  
2008  Research Vice President Fellowship, Utah State University ($15,000)  
2008  Williams Institute “Premier on Empirical Research on Sexual Orientation,” Travel Award  
2007  Graduate Student Senate Travel Award, Utah State University  
2007  Department of Psychology Student Travel Award, Utah State University  
2005  Thrivent Financial Youth Leadership Grant, Co-Project Director ($45,000)  
1995-98  Presidential Scholarship, Concordia College  
1995-98  Dean’s List, Concordia College

GRANTS AND AWARDS APPLIED FOR

2010  Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship, Utah State University  
2010  Charlotte W. Newcombe Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship  
2009  Society for Research in Child Development Dissertation Funding Research Award  
2007  Psi Chi Graduate Research Grant

MEMBERSHIPS

Association for Contextual Behavioral Sciences (student membership)  
Psi Chi National Honor Society  
National Association of School Psychologists (student membership)  
Society for Research in Adolescence (student membership)  
Society for Teaching Psychology, APA Division 2 (student membership)