Identity Interaction: Exploring the Spiritual Experiences of Lesbian and Gay College Students

Patrick G. Love   Marianne Bock   Annie Jannarone   Paul Richardson

Researchers explored the experiences of 7 lesbian and 5 gay male college students in the area of spirituality. Participants shared the challenges they faced, how they dealt with those experiences and challenges, and how their spiritual identity development related to their sexual orientation. Findings include the categories of reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spirituality, as well as issues of awareness, acceptance, and patterns and relationships related to sexual orientation and spirituality. Five of the participants had reconciled their spiritual and sexual identity, a few were actively struggling with these two aspects of their identity, and others had not yet dealt with this issue and kept the two aspects of their identity separate.

The topic of spirituality is no longer taboo in academe. Despite strong cultural norms considering issues of religion or spirituality to be private matters, the topics have emerged as a focus of scholarship in higher education. However, in the face of this growing emphasis on spirituality, there is a population of college students for whom the topic of spirituality has been a significant challenge and often a source of great pain (McNeill, 1988; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989): lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. People of all sexual orientations often see issues of spirituality and sexual orientation as contradictory and conflicting. This is not surprising given that spirituality is so often assumed to be the same

thing as religion (Chandler, Miner Holden, & Kolander, 1992; Love, 2002). Also most mainstream religious denominations reject nonheterosexual orientations, though there are those (e.g., Reform Judaism, United Church of Christ, Unitarian Universalism, and Metropolitan Community Church) that do not. Although many denominations formally declare that homosexual orientation is not "sinful" (i.e., only its behavioral expression is sinful), the lived experience of many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people is that of rejection by most religious denominations.

Yet despite this unwelcome environment, evidence exists that at least a portion of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual student population places a priority on their spirituality (de la Huerta, 1999). For example, Love (1997) found spirituality to be a driving force in the work of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students addressing issues of oppression at one religiously affiliated liberal arts college. In general, spirituality represents a significant challenge for many lesbian and gay college students. What little research has been done has indicated that many lesbian and gay people experience a spiritual loss while developing their identities as people (Ritter & O'Neill, 1989). One need only follow the national media for stories of the pain, anguish, and violence that this reality causes lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. An example was the nationally reported deaths of Stuart Matis and

Patrick G. Love is Associate Professor of Higher Education at New York University. Marianne Bock is practice manager at Neurological Associates of Wilmington, NC. Annie Jannarone is Director of Student Disability Resources at Kent State University. Paul Richardson is Associate Executive Director of the Alumni Association at San Jose State University.

Clay Whitmer (Miller, 2000), gay men who after struggling to be both devout Mormons and gay, committed suicide.

An additional challenge facing sexual minorities is the development of their identities as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people. Each marginalized group in society faces challenges in identity development, given negative messages being received from society. However, identity development for nonheterosexual people is an even greater challenge, due to the fact that most families and society in general do not provide the role models and visible socializing experiences to help them develop their identity and define who they are as lesbian, gay, or bisexual people (D'Augelli, 1994). Therefore, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young people have great challenges developing their identity related to their sexual orientation (D'Augelli) and they often feel rejected by the structures and institutions (i.e., religious denominations) through which most other people develop their spiritual identity. To understand better the relationship between sexual orientation and spirituality, this study explored the experiences of lesbian and gay college students at two public research universities in the area of spirituality. Participants discussed the challenges they faced, how they dealt with those experiences and challenges, and were asked to examine their spiritual identity development vis-à-vis their sexual orientation.

Identity Development

The notion of identity has been the focus of an enormous amount of scholarship, research, discussion, and conflict. The concept of identity first emerged in developmental literature in the late 1940s (Erikson, 1968), though its roots go back to the early 20th century and Freud's work. Identity was the central notion in Erikson's work in psycho-social development theory. That tradition has continued with Chickering's work (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) on the psychosocial development of college students. Erikson's work focused on an overarching and integrative notion of personal identity. In fact, a person's identity that was fragmented, unintegrated, or "confused" was considered problematic. Erikson recognized, however, the complex and dynamic nature of a person's identity. Identity was seen as paradoxical in that its basic form persisted over time, yet changed and evolved continually; and it had a genetically determined "ground plan," yet was significantly shaped by social, historical, and interpersonal forces and personal experience.

During the past 20 years, research and theorizing on identity development has focused predominantly on socially and culturally constructed aspects of identity, including gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, and disability status. In a number of these areas, stage models were proposed. Most of this work focused on identities that were marginalized and oppressed in U.S. society, such as female, racial and ethnic minorities, and homosexual identities. These models were also proposed as separate from other aspects of an individual's identity. Although never assumed to be simple, the complexity of identity has been re-emphasized. For example, stage models (Rhoads, 1997) and the concept of a central identity itself (Sampson, 1985) have been criticized. Also, interacting identity dimensions have been considered, such as the work in bi- and multiracial identity development (Poston, 1990; Renn, 1999; Wardle, 1992), bisexuality (Fox, 1995; Zinik, 1985), and the impact of multiple oppressions on identity development (Reynolds & Pope, 1991). Jones and McEwen (2000) developed an empirically generated model of multiple dimensions of

identity in a study of 10 traditional-aged college women. They discovered a dynamic and complex process of identity development driven by a core personal identity influenced by such socially constructed elements as sexual orientation, gender, religion, class, culture, and race.

Identity Development Related to Sexual Orientation

Levine and Evans (1991) synthesized a variety of sociologically and psychologicallybased gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity development models from the 1970s and 1980s. They identified four general developmental levels across these models: first awareness, self-labeling, community involvement and disclosure, and identity integration. Identity integration involves accepting one's own sexuality, gaining greater clarity of personal identity, and achieving a deeper sense of self-acceptance. Most theorists also argue that at this point, one's sexual identity is incorporated as one part of the person's larger, overall identity. Levine and Evans recognized problems with the models, especially the fact that there was little empirical testing of the models, and most of them focused on White gay men.

D'Augelli (1994) moved the discussion away from essentialist notions that identity development related to sexual orientation is comprised of hierarchical and sequential stages, that it is achieved by early adulthood, and that it remains fixed throughout the life span. In his life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development, D'Augelli identified three sets of interrelated variables that shape an individual's identity: personal subjectivities and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections. Personal subjectivities and actions refer to an individual's perceptions, emotions, and actions related to her or his sexual orientation and the meanings she or he attaches to them. Interactive intimacies refer to the effects of family, peers, friends, intimate partners, and the meaning attached to and the messages received from these interactions. Sociohistorical connections take into account norms, policies, laws, and cultures in the organizations, institutions, or geographic areas within which the individual exists during particular periods. The sociohistorical connections are especially salient to this study, given the norms, policies, laws, and cultures existing within various religious denominations regarding sexual orientation. The historical dimension highlights that these issues are currently being contested within religious communities and are continuing to evolve.

D'Augelli's (1994) model describes six interactive processes, which he made clear are not sequential stages. They are (a) exiting heterosexual identity, (b) developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, (c) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, (d) becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, (e) developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and (f) entering a lesbian/gay/bisexual community. D'Augelli (1994) emphasized the impact of environment, context, and history. He also pointed out that given the heterosexism that exists in U.S. society there are few visible appropriate socializing forces for young gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; therefore, much of their individual development is a consequence of their own choices and actions. In comparing D'Augelli's work to the Levine and Evans (1991) synthesis, the first three elements of their synthesis (first awareness, self-labeling, and community involvement and disclosure) appear in some form in D'Augelli's model. However, the notion of identity integration is absent.

Spirituality, Spiritual Development, and Spiritual Identity

Definitions of spirituality vary widely, due in part to its dynamic nature and to its relatively recent emergence from theology into the scholarship of such areas as developmental psychology, counseling psychology, social work, medicine, and nursing. A common element of many definitions of spirituality is a search for meaning and purpose (e.g., Chandler et al., 1992; Decker, 1993; King, Speck, & Thomas, 1995). Tillich (1959) proposed that spirituality involves a focus on ultimate concerns and meanings of life. Parks (2000) agreed: "All human beings compose and dwell in some conviction of what is *ultimately* true, real, dependable within the largest frame imaginable. Human beings, either unself-consciously or self-consciously, individually or together, compose a sense of the ultimate character of reality" (p. 20).

Helminiak (1996) identified spirituality as a central element of all human experience along with the elements of organism (physical body and processes) and psyche (thought, emotions, memory, personality). In his conception, it is the spiritual aspects of human existence that make us human. He defined spirituality in a distinctly secular fashion. To Helminiak, spirituality is synonymous with spiritual development because it is the process of human becoming, the process of growing in authenticity. Others have incorporated notions of God or a higher power into definitions of spirituality. God, higher power, greater force all relate to issues of the "ultimate" as Tillich (1959) and Parks (2000) described. As Parks (2000) indicated, a person of faith may well deny the existence of a supernatural being called God, but that individual would at least be living with confidence in some center of value and with loyalty to a some cause. As Helminiak (1996,

p. 5) pointed out, "Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and much of Western humanism have obvious spiritual intent without any reference to God."

The notion of spirituality as a developmental process akin to other human development theories is a fairly recent phenomenon. Traditional theology (the presumed theoretical "home" of spirituality) articulated spirituality as either a fixed aspect of the human experience (i.e., nondevelopmental) or a process of development described by three stages in a spiritual life: the purgative, which is movement away from sin; the illuminative, where one grows in virtue; and the unitive, where one attains union with God (Helminiak, 1987). These "stages" are not discrete, hierarchical stages; they are addressed simultaneously. Although theologians and developmental psychologists have focused on spirituality and spiritual development, there has been less focus on the concept of one's spiritual identity— one's sense of self, definition, and experience as a spiritual person. Certainly, one aspect of spiritual development is the development of a spiritual identity. In fact, Helminiak (1987) argued that spiritual development only begins when an individual reaches a reflectively, critically, and analytically self-aware stage of development, typically in or near adulthood— that is, when she or he begins to develop a spiritual identity.

Helminiak (1987) added several defining factors to spiritual development. He argued that authentic self-transcendence is a prime criterion of spiritual development and it is also the central principle needed to explain spiritual development in a nontheological context. Authentic self-transcendence is a conscious and self-aware process. By authentic, Helminiak (1987) meant that the individual is motivated by an ongoing personal commitment to openness, questioning, honesty, and goodwill.

Another factor Helminiak (1987) added is the individual's openness to things spiritual and openness to developing spiritually. To develop spiritually, one must desire wholeness, authenticity, and genuineness. Most spiritual development theorists recognize that at some point, further development is not guaranteed; one must *want* to develop. Finally, Helminiak (1987) was specific in arguing that spiritual development involves the whole person.

Our working definition of spirituality is that it is our drive for meaning, authenticity, purpose, wholeness, and self-transcendence. It involves our self-awareness and the desire to connect with others. Given this definition, it is that much more important to explore these issues with lesbian and gay students, because many of these students have experienced pain and loss in this aspect of their lives. There has been little research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students related to spirituality and spiritual identity development. In this study we sought to address that void by exploring the spiritual experiences and challenges facing 12 lesbian and gay college students.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted from constructivist paradigmatic stance and, specifically, an interpretivist perspective, in that we sought to produce descriptive analyses and understandings of the particular socially constructed phenomena we were exploring—spiritual and sexual orientation identity interaction. Four researchers (one straight man, one gay man, one straight woman, one lesbian) recruited 5 gay male and 7 lesbian college students from two public universities. The researchers each identified themselves as gay affirming, so in addition to interpreting social phenomena, the research also focused on issues of marginalization, thereby adding an element of critical theory to the research perspective.

The researchers varied in their own degree of spiritual identity development and religious involvement, though each described themselves as either Christian (though varying in strength of identification) or from a Christian background. Students were recruited by placing flyers on each campus, advertising in the student newspaper on one campus, and through presentations at the LGBT student organizations on each campus. All the participants were undergraduates and ranged in age from late teens to late 20s, though 10 of the 12 were traditional age (18 to 23 years of age). None of the participants were known to the researchers prior to the study. Based on observation and interaction, it was determined that all of the participants were White. These were self-selected participants who tended to be "out" on campus. For many of them (though not all), spirituality was a topic of interest to them. Therefore, this was a select group of lesbian and gay college students. We interviewed few students who had a "low" spiritual identity and no students with a "low" sexual identity. Each student participated in an in-depth interview (ranging from 60 to 120 minutes) with two interviewers who were the same sex as the participant. The interviews were semistructured and explored each participant's history and current thoughts and experiences related to issues of spirituality, the challenges and obstacles they have faced, and how they have dealt with those challenges and obstacles. The two public universities were located in a Midwestern state. Both had LGBT student organizations, but neither had an office dedicated to the support of LGBT students. Although the campuses were not described by the participants as welcoming, instances of reported overt homophobic actions were rare.

Data analysis used the unitizing and categorizing methods adapted from Guba and Lincoln's (1989) constructivist inquiry methodology and Glaser and Strauss' constant comparative method (1967, Strauss & Corbin 1990). The researchers attempted to establish the trustworthiness of the research process through addressing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement (5 months spent recruiting participants and collecting data, 18 months in data analysis, and 2 years from initial interview to initial analytical report), peer debriefing (emergent themes, categories, and theoretical constructions were reviewed and critiqued by colleagues), and member checks (later interviews were geared toward confirmation of emerging results, immediate feedback was solicited during interviews, and each participant was offered the opportunity to review the tape and transcripts of her or his interview [but all declined]). Transferability is enhanced due to our describing the contexts under which study was conducted and the scope of applicability of research findings. Dependability and confirmability were established through the process of data analysis and the construction an audit trail of transcribed interviews, analytical memos, emergent themes, and findings.

All interviews were transcribed, reviewed by a researcher, and corrected. To start the formal analysis process and address issues of trustworthiness, each researcher coded the same transcript, which was then discussed as a group. Two researchers (a man and a woman) coded each subsequent transcript. The researchers coded eight transcripts, compared and discussed each in depth, and developed themes and categories. Then the researchers coded the final four transcripts, compared and discussed them, and added and adjusted themes and categories.

FINDINGS

This research was focused on spiritual identity and sexual identity and how the participants in the study experienced their interaction. Not surprisingly, we came to recognize just how complex this dynamic is, considering the issue of religion vis-à-vis spirituality, as well as spirituality/religion vis-à-vis sexual orientation. Therefore, findings related to the relationship between spirituality and sexual orientation are also addressed. For example, one of the first findings is that although the researchers took pains to differentiate spirituality from religion, most of the student participants discussed spirituality and religion interchangeably. Nearly all the findings discussed focus on students' relationships with facets of organized religion (e.g., Campus Crusade for Christ, the Roman Catholic Church, church camp, fundamentalism). So the focus that emerged was how gay and lesbian students' sense of spirituality emerged or stalled from their experiences (or lack thereof) with organized religion. That is reflected in the categories that emerged.

Categories of Sexual and Spiritual Identity Interaction

The categories described in this section—reconciliation, nonreconciliation, and undeveloped spiritual identity—represent several elements of identity development and identity interaction. Given the specificity of our recruitment for this research project, all participants had a substantial degree of identity development as gay or lesbian, which they could articulate. Based on the interview data, it was clear that each of the participants had addressed the first three levels identified by the Levine and Evans (1991) synthesis. This means that participants had experienced coming to

realize that they were gay or lesbian, they identified as gay or lesbian, and all were participating to some degree with the LGB community (at least through their participation in the LGBT student organizations), and all were to some degree publicly out. However, not all participants experienced identity integration (the fourth category of the Levine and Evans synthesis), especially related to the integration of their identity as gay or lesbian and their spiritual identity. Similarly, when comparing participant experience to D'Augelli's framework, the participants clearly had achieved substantial identity development as lesbian and gay people:

1. All had exited heterosexual identity.

2. All had established a personal lesbian or gay identity status.

3. All had developed a lesbian or gay social identity, that is they each had some form of network of people who knew and accepted their sexual orientation (D'Augelli, 1994).

4. Ten had come out to their parents and other family members.

5. Nine had experience in developing a lesbian or gay intimacy status, though this was a issue of struggle for most participants (as it is for most traditional-age heterosexual college students [Chickering & Reisser, 1993]).

6. All were members of a lesbian and/or gay community, and many were actively committed to working on issues of social justice related to sexual orientation.

The point of comparing the participants to the Levine and Evans (1991) synthesis and D'Augelli's (1994) framework is to emphasize that the students in this study, if arrayed on a scale of underdeveloped identity related to their sexual orientation to an advanced identity, would cluster at the advanced end of the identity development scale. The same could not be said for their spiritual identity development. The students in this study ranged widely in the degree and quality of their identity development related to spirituality. Given the self-selection of participation, most of the participants had spirituality as an interest or were aware of their spiritual identity. With regard to the interaction between their identities related to sexual orientation and their identities related to their spirituality, there were three clusters of students: students who had strong spiritual identities reconciled with their identities related to sexual orientation, students who had some degree of spiritual identity but whose identities were not reconciled, and students who had little or no sense of a spiritual identity. Each of these clusters is discussed in turn.

Degrees of Reconciliation

Reconciled students are those who embraced being both gay or lesbian and being a religious or spiritually grounded person. These were two mutually interacting aspects of an integrated self or identity. They were aware of the beliefs and practices in their religion that oppress gay and lesbian people and it may have caused them pain; however, they experienced no conflict or dissonance between who they were as sexual beings and who they were as spiritual beings. This was due primarily to the fact that they described having a direct and personal relationship with God (or a higher power), not mediated through a church, the Bible, or other structures or dogma, though they may have (but not necessarily) belonged to a church or religion and participated in religious or spiritual practice. Five of the 12 participants fit this category. They were Cathy, Felicia,

Barry, Carl, and Erik (all pseudonyms). We chose to use the notion of reconciliation rather than integration to describe this process of development, because reconciliation implies some level of perceived incompatibility between elements being brought together (in this case sexual orientation and spirituality), whereas integration does not. Reconciliation better reflects the students' perceptions of their experiences. Most of these students who have reached a point of reconciliation have worked through a great deal of conflict, pain, confusion, and challenges.

Each of the participants had unique and varying experiences with religion, spirituality, and the relationship of these to their sexual orientation. However, there were a number of aspects of the reconciliation of identities.

Self-Efficacy, Self-Awareness, and Self-Acceptance. Participants shared examples where they had consciously reflected on who they were, accepted these elements of their identity, and maintained this reconciliation in the face of challenge. Cathy said,

> I just told him that I can't date him and be a part of Campus Crusade for Christ anymore. . . . I am tired of being this fake person. It's time to be Cathy, all of me, every aspect. He said, 'You're dumping me to be a lesbian, aren't you?' I said, 'No, I am dumping you to be Cathy.'

Erik indicated that "Achieving self-acceptance is the most important accomplishment in my coming out process and was essential for my success and spiritual growth."

Spirituality as Source of Strength. Participants described how they drew strength from the spiritual aspects of their lives. With regard to the oppression she experienced related to her sexuality, Felicia indicated that "a lot of times, my spirituality is the only thing I have; it is my source of strength."

Strong Sense of Spiritual Identity. Participants could clearly articulate who they were as spiritual beings and what they needed or wanted to do to meet their spiritual needs. Carl was converting to Judaism due to a need for a stronger connection between his spiritual identity and his religion saying, "I know who I am spiritually . . . [and] I just want a better connection with God, I think is what it comes down to."

Interaction Between Spiritual Identity and Sexual Identity. For most of the participants there was a conscious interaction between who they were as a sexual being and who they were as a spiritual being. Felicia shared,

> In San Diego we always marched in the gay pride parade with my church. . . . So in my church, it just sort of happened that I discovered my sexuality at the same time I discovered my spirituality. . . . My spirituality and my sexuality are both very important parts of my life and there are a lot of lines that they cross together.

Relationship With God/god/Higher Power. Most participants recognized some presence beyond the rational world. Barry said,

> I know there's some sort of higher power out there but I'm not set on putting limits on what that higher power is. It doesn't really matter to me if it's a he or a she or if this higher power was ever nailed to a cross. It doesn't really matter to me as long as I know there is something higher there that I need to look up to.

Separating Religion From Spirituality. Although most of the participants used spirituality and religion interchangeably in conversation, they also saw and practiced a distinction between religion and spirituality. Cathy said,

> Spirituality is almost an inner peace with yourself . . . a general belief in a force that's stronger than you, just some force

that's stronger than a human hand and believing in that with your heart and soul, and finding your own answers. . . . Religion tells you that this is what it is and you just blindly accept what people say.

Expressing Spiritual and Sexual Identity. Participants were out in multiple ways. They were out as gay and lesbian people, but they were also out as spiritual people. Barry indicated that,

> One expression of my spirituality is to help others grow—I am a special education major—and I see my sexual orientation as a major way in which I can make that happen. It really challenges other people, when they come to realize that I am both gay and spiritually focused.

Identity Integration. Although the overarching label is reconciliation, participants also spoke of issues of integration, such as the intermingling and dynamic interaction of these two aspects of their identity. Felicia felt that,

> My intellect and my spirituality and my sexuality, my everything that goes on in my little head are all, sort of, part of the same web and so they all cross. . . . I think people who are on more of an open spiritual journey tend to be on a more open sexual journey as well.

Nonreconciled Identities

Although almost half of the participants in this study fit into the reconciled category, their previous experiences, combined with the experiences of the other participants, helped us identify several other categories of interaction (or noninteraction) between sexual identity and spiritual identity. We found two distinct states or experiences among "non-reconciled" students: those who were aware

that these two aspects of their identity were not reconciled and those who were not aware. The reconciled students described previous experiences of when they were not reconciled, the participants who were aware of not being reconciled at the time of the study were Barbara, Darlene, Adele, and Evelyn, and the student who was not aware was Albert. Although not yet reconciled, Adele and Evelyn were able to see and articulate reconciliation as the point towards which they were working. For example, Adele said, "I think I'm moving along. I don't know exactly where I am. I think I'm getting a little more confident in my beliefs and kind of holding on to them, while living my life as a lesbian." Barbara and Darlene were from conservative and fundamentalist Christian upbringings. They were in the midst of struggle and had little idea of the eventual outcome of their struggle. Barbara talked about trying to actively figure out how to be both religious and a lesbian when she said,

> I started a basic outline of what I believe to be true and there are going to be differences in the way I feel and the way my pastor feels and the way my mom feels and that's okay. Though that's still very, very hard, very hard to accept [that these differences exist]. It's something that I struggle with daily.

In comparing the experiences of those people we identified as reconciled with those who were nonreconciled, it was relatively easy to see the pervasive negative effects of nonreconciliation. In Barbara's case other contradictions were related to but went beyond issues of sexuality and spirituality. For example, she stated a strong belief in "openness" in her relationship with others, yet it was clear that due to the conflict between her sexuality and spirituality there were many relationships where she was not open about one aspect of her life or another. For example, she was not

out to her parents or other members of her family.

The scholarship on bisexual identity development may be of assistance in making sense of the experience of the students in these categories. Robin and Hamner (2000) discussed the fact that many bisexual individuals feel the need to "compartmentalize" (p. 248) the conflicting aspects of their identity. Albert appeared to have done just that in keeping his gay identity apart from his identity as a Roman Catholic, thus he did not experience overt inner conflict. He considered himself a strong Roman Catholic—he attended church, and enjoys the traditions and rituals associated with Catholicism. In other areas of his life he was out as a gay man. He discussed each of these aspects of his life in great depth, yet saw no need to have them interact. On the surface he appeared to have reconciled these two aspects of his life (given the lack of overt conflict, such as experienced by other non-reconciled students), however, the distinct lack of interpenetration of either his religious practices and beliefs into his life as a gay man or vice versa reflected a lack of reconciliation— the two aspects of his life were distinctly "compartmentalized."

Barbara and Darlene, however, struggled because these two aspects of their identities were not compartmentalized, and they were actively struggling with the apparent contradictions they were experiencing. Given that this was not a longitudinal study we are left to wonder about the possible paths these women could take. Reconciliation is certainly one possible avenue, given the experiences of the reconciled students in this study. However, it could also be possible that they may eventually reject a spiritual identity or suppress their sexual orientation. Robin and Hamner (2000) also stress the role of community in the development of a bisexual identity.

However, with Barbara and Darlene they were struggling especially with acceptance within their religious communities, and did not experience full appreciation for their spiritual struggles in the lesbian and gay community, so their communities were contributing to the struggle rather than providing a supportive context within which to struggle. Albert, on the other hand, due to the compartmentalized nature of his sexual and spiritual identities, had a fairly high degree of comfort in both. He appeared to have no external motivation to address the lack of reconciliation between these aspects of his identity.

Undeveloped Spiritual Identity

Finally, we identified 2 students who at the time of the study appeared to be spiritually undeveloped as a result of either passive (David) or active rejection (Gabrielle) of spiritual issues. By "undeveloped" we do not mean immature, which would indicate some normative expectation that spiritual development is inevitable and that failing to develop spiritually is dysfunctional. In reviewing the spiritual development history of the other participants, there were several who at earlier points of time in their development could be placed in this category (though obviously at a younger age). Both students who were currently in this category appeared to lack a purposeful approach to their spiritual development. Neither of the students currently in this category articulated a commitment to the development of their spirituality in whatever form they might value. Either actively or passively, they avoided addressing spiritual issues or making any immutable commitments relative to their beliefs. David was particularly passive in regard to organized religion and spiritual traditions. We came to describe his journey as "directed drifting," where there was some intentionality to his explorations, just

not very much of either intentionality or exploration. For example, David said,

> I haven't latched on [to religion] so, and I haven't made up my mind whether or not there is a God. . . . So, it is a lot of floating and a lot of guesswork and a lot of, you know, self-struggle, I guess you could say.

On the other hand, Gabrielle demonstrated a more active rejection of religious and spiritual traditions. She stated,

> Well, let's see here. Don't believe in God. Don't believe in angels, the whole heaven and hell thing, don't believe it. Um, but I do believe that we have spirits, like when you die, your body dies, but there's something left.

Although rejection of organized religions did not represent an absence of some moral code or judgment on the part of either student, they did not necessarily associate having "morals" with spirituality or religions. David's undiscriminating acceptance of others' beliefs reflects characteristics similar to Baxter Magolda's (1992) independent and Perry's (1970) multiplistic knowers. Gabrielle's creation of her own belief system, seemed to reflect the "gut" knowledge of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule's (1986) subjective knowers. Both David and Gabrielle seemed to have some belief structure, albeit loosely defined. Both vacillated regarding the existence (or not) of a higher power, either through questioning or outright rejection, yet demonstrated little need or drive to resolve the issue. Having been exposed to an array of religious traditions and the resulting "mixed messages" may have served to create enough confusion over such issues that both students find themselves in a kind of spiritual no-man's land. Gabrielle, the active one, responds by saying, "leave me alone" and "don't challenge me." David, the passive one, responds with "whatever."

DISCUSSION
Process of Reconciliation

There are degrees of reconciliation that each of these students experienced and the sense of reconciliation appeared not to be static for even those students identified as reconciled, nor was the process linear. Each of the reconciled students had moments where she or he experienced lesser degrees of reconciliation and where the interaction of spirituality and sexuality created dissonance for her or for him. External challenges and obstacles invoked new crises that challenged the degree to which individual students had reconciled their spiritual and sexual identities.

The experience of reconciliation for these participants appears to have some similarity with other identity development models, but their experiences have unique elements as well. The participants' descriptions of reconciliation appear similar to the advanced positions in identity development models focused on biracial identity development (i.e., integration) (Poston, 1990), homosexual identity development (i.e., synthesis) (Cass, 1979), and ethnic identity development (i.e., achievement) (Phinney, 1990). That is, the identity elements in question become incorporated with each other and as part of the person's larger, overall identity.

A unique dynamic explored in this study was the interaction between one aspect of one's identity (i.e., homosexuality) and another aspect of identity development (i.e., spiritual identity) whose typical avenues of experience and development (i.e., religion, church, family, and community) most often reject homosexuality. In this vein, there are some simi-

larities to biracial and bisexual identity development, because biracial and bisexual people are trying to integrate and reconcile multiple aspects of their identities that have been at odds in our society. However, biracial and bisexual identity only address one type of identity at a time—biracialism is about race, bisexuality is about sexual orientation. The limitation of comparing these developmental schemes to the work in this study is that the interaction we observed was rooted in two types of identity at the same time (sexuality and spirituality).

Another similarity to other research is that in most identity development models that address interacting identities there are times when one identity may be stronger or "chosen" (Poston, 1990; Williams, 1999) as the dominant identity. Due to society's influence, bisexual people often first experience heterosexuality and when they discover the fullness of their sexual orientation may find themselves immersed in the homosexual aspect of their orientation. Biracial individuals may also proceed through cycles of choice and immersion before reconciling the multiple aspects of their racial identity. Renn's (2003) study of the identities of mixed-race college students indicate that the notion of biracial identity is quite complex and fluid, and influenced by multiple levels of the ecological contexts within which students exist. There appears to be a distinct dynamic for some of the "reconciled" students in this study. At some point for Cathy, she attempted to deemphasize one aspect of these interacting identities (i.e., she tried not to be lesbian) to focus on her religious/spiritual side. However, given her already advanced spiritual development and previous spiritual experience, her desire for authenticity ("I want to be Cathy") made for a fairly short experience of denying her sexual orientation.

Experiences Contributing to the Process of Reconciliation

It is not surprising that some of the experiences contributing to reconciliation for these students are similar to the experiences that contribute to human development in general. The particular experiences related specifically to spirituality and sexuality included: (a) having a religious background and religious experience; (b) attending church camp; (c) having an open, loving environment associated with religion, especially as children; (d) having a sexual or intimate relationship associated with or instigated by a religious experience; (e) the development of reflective self-analysis; and (f) the experience of working through challenges, difficulties, and conflicts between religion and sexuality.

For some of the students, having a religious foundation as children gave them an avenue to the development of a spiritual identity. It is a paradox—the experience (religion) that rejected the individual (gay or lesbian person) served as the means through which that individual eventually developed an advanced spiritual identity. The participants' descriptions of this process were reminiscent of Erikson's (1968) identity crises. These were often extremely challenging experiences that prompted questioning, reflecting on, and examining the self. It is this process of self-examination that can contribute to further development (or not). Without the religious exposure, the student may have had fewer resources to resolve or move forward through the crisis. This becomes even more salient when one considers that Savin-Williams (1995) indicated that many youth are coming out at younger ages (midteens). Earlier ages of coming out may mean an earlier disconnection from mainstream religious denominations and a failure to receive a religious foundation. Those participants who had no

religious foundation growing up tended to have a more difficult time finding the means through which to develop a spiritual identity. They did not have the language, traditions, or community through which to form even rudimentary notions of a spiritual identity. Nonetheless, this does not mean that we recommend everyone have a religious upbringing. In fact, the two participants who had fundamentalist upbringing struggled greatly in their identity development related to spirituality and sexuality. This finding does, however, suggest that the more open society becomes to alternative definitions of spirituality and alternative methods of spiritual development, the better for all, but especially gay and lesbian young people.

A great surprise was the role that church camp played for four of the participants and appeared for these participants to be somewhat an idealized environment. As Cathy said,

> It was my church camp [that drew me back to the church]. I absolutely love that place. That is a little piece of heaven in my life. I will always believe that, always. . . . I still have many, many friends from camp and I still go and I love it.

In some instances, it was at church camp where initial sexual relationships occurred within the context of a loving, accepting environment.

Differentiating Religion and Spirituality

We entered this study understanding that religion and spirituality were two separate concepts. However, we allowed our participants to define these concepts and to relate them as they saw fit. At least at some point in their experience all participants equated these two terms, though the "reconciled" participants more strongly differentiated them. In fact, two dominant patterns for "reconciled"

students were evident regarding this issue. First, some had equated the two (i.e., religion and spirituality) early in life and saw them as the same thing. At some point, a differentiation process occurred, eventually separating religion from spirituality. Some students considered themselves both religious and spiritual, but continued to recognize the distinct nature of these two concepts, both in their own lives and in the environment around them. Second, others also had equated religion and spirituality early in life and had seen them as the same thing. At some point, the entire "unit" was discarded. When the student came back to it, she or he came back to spirituality and sometimes left religion behind. Gabrielle, who had rejected religion (and with it any active consideration of spirituality), appears to be in the first part of this process. That is, she has discarded the unit of religion/spirituality. Whether or not she ever comes back to any aspect of it is an open question.

Coming Out as a Stimulus for Spiritual Development

In some cases, the coming out process served as a significant stimulus for spiritual development. In fact, some of the students from traditional religious backgrounds began the spiritual identity development process earlier (or were pushed harder to develop) than typical heterosexual young people, as described in the spiritual development literature (Parks, 2000). The stimulus for spiritual growth may be due to the conflict inherent between religious teaching, our study participants' emerging awareness of their sexual orientation, and the dissonance that this awareness generated. For heterosexuals, the perceived contradictions and questions of doubt related to religion/spirituality may emerge later as young adults, which then leads to a more advanced spiritual identity. However, Barbara

and Darlene, the two students from very conservative or fundamentalist backgrounds, had further to come in terms of being comfortable with their sexuality and further to travel in the development of a spiritual identity. In these cases, the coming out process opened up a chasm between their emerging sexuality and their religious beliefs that was difficult to bridge.

Interrelationship of Sexuality and Spirituality

As indicated previously, bringing together the notions of sexual orientation and spirituality has been counter to the norms of academe. Yet, this avoidance is a subset of a larger avoidance—bringing together the notions of sexuality and spirituality. Helminiak (1996) made a strong argument for the interrelationship of sexuality and spirituality. He indicated how sexuality is related to his tripartite notion of human experience—organism, psyche, and spirit. He referred to it as the spirituality of sex. Sexuality is related to each aspect of the human experience. As organisms we experience the physical desire for sex; our psyche desires the comfort, bliss, and emotional ecstasy associated with sex; and our spirits are drawn to sexuality's relationship to the intimacy with, caring for, and dedication to other people. Helminiak pointed out that sexual integration—the healthy balance of all three of these elements—is not widely achieved in the "sex-negative" culture of the United States. The struggle for an integration of spiritual and sexual identities is further exacerbated by the presumed synonymy between spirituality and religion, and religion's role in contributing to negative views of sexuality. Therefore, various aspects of our culture contribute to the dissociation of spirituality from sexuality and the fragmentation of our human elements (i.e.,

organism, psyche, spirit) with respect to sexuality.

Compared to sexual minorities, heterosexuals have the luxury of maintaining some degree of separation between their sexual identities and their spiritual identities, avoiding the dissonance between personal sexuality and spirituality that is typically generated for sexual minorities. In our culture of nonintegration between sexuality and spirituality this separation that heterosexuals can experience is a safe and adaptive, though not necessarily a healthy, practice. Gay and lesbian people (as well as other sexual minorities) are not afforded this luxury. For the students in this study, an identity as a gay or lesbian person was a *sexual* identity. The pressure they felt from society (i.e., church, school, family, neighborhood) was to have their sexuality interact with all elements of their experience. It identified these students as sexual beings, in ways that being heterosexual typically does not. So in a culture that distances sexuality from spirituality, gay and lesbian people who focus on their spiritual identity, immediately and more consciously experience the interaction of sexuality and spirituality. For some of the students in this study, this resulted in the painful problems of being aware of one's nonreconciliation, as experienced by Barbara and Darlene, or in the passiveness of David, or in the active rejection of Gabrielle. These students, by the acknowledgment of their sexual identity, faced significant struggles with regard to their spiritual identity. However, we can also assert that "the hotter the fire, the stronger the steel." As researchers, we have no way of formally comparing the degree and quality of reconciliation, as exhibited especially by our reconciled participants, to the greater population, especially to a heterosexual population. But we can say that we were extremely impressed

by the maturity, the depth of insight and reflection, and the level of identity integration and reconciliation of their sexual and spiritual identities, which was in part due to the struggles imposed on them by U.S. society. These students faced great challenges in terms of spiritual identity development. Yet, given the unavoidability of having sexuality interact with spirituality, some of them attained a great payoff in terms of growth, development, integration, and authenticity.

Theoretical Implications/Future Research

This research provides further evidence of the need to conceptualize nonlinear models of identity development. A linear or stage model of identity development may be helpful if one considers one aspect of an individual's identity without regard to the context of other aspects of their identity. However, the complexity of multiple identity elements inevitably leads to a breakdown in linear models. This has been found especially when considering the impact of multiple oppressions, such as in the case of racial and sexual minorities (Reynolds & Pope, 1991).

This study points out the complexity of the interaction between one's sexual identity and one's spiritual identity. Race was not a factor in this study given the racial homogeneity of the participant group. Adding the issue of race and ethnicity, and especially the religious and spiritual aspects of many racial and ethnic cultures in the United States, introduces an entirely new level of complexity to the issue of identity interaction and should be studied.

There is a need to further explore, define, refine, add to, and expand upon the categories discovered in the experiences of this group of students. This research represents but one small step in coming to understand the interaction between the spiritual identity and sexual identity of gay and lesbian students. Other issues that arose during this study that warrant further exploration include: the influence of sexual or physical trauma on spiritual development; the role of church camp (and the environment that exists there) in spiritual development; and the influence of conservative/fundamental religious upbringing on the ability to reconcile one's spiritual identity and sexual identity.

Practical Implications

Several practical implications for student affairs professionals emerge from this research. First, professionals should provide the means for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students to discuss and explore issues of spirituality and spiritual development. There are very few avenues for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students to discuss issues of spirituality and religion vis-à-vis their sexuality. For some of the participants in this study, the informal avenue they discovered happened to be another gay or lesbian individual who was actively addressing her or his own spiritual journey. More LGBT organizations need to address the topic, as church-related services or formal religious-based student organizations often are not friendly places for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender students to come with the hope of engaging others in discussions of their own spiritual journey and the challenges they are facing.

Second, student affairs professionals should promote open discussion of sexuality and spirituality so that LGBT students and their allies (and potential allies) can explore these aspects of development. There is a need for broader discussions of sexuality and spirituality on college campuses. As indicated above, Helminiak (1996) pointed out the

strong cultural norms that keep these aspects of identity distinct in the great society. These discussions would benefit to all students.

Third, institutions should explicitly state that spiritual development is important for all college students. Student affairs professionals need to continue to bring spirituality into education, not keep it banished to small sectors of campus (e.g., religious studies departments, campus ministry). The U.S. Constitution states that government institutions may not favor one religion over another, not that we must totally erase all notions of spiritual development from public life and the academy.

Conclusion

This was a study of the experiences of 12 students who took the risk of sharing with us their stories about their spiritual and sexual identity. For most of them, these stories involved sharing pain, struggle, and frustration. For some of them, the struggles have resulted in significant growth and a reconciliation of their sexual and spiritual identities. Most continue to struggle. Each of their stories reinforces the complexity of the issue of identity interaction in general and the additional complexity of the interaction between spirituality and sexuality. We end by thanking them for taking the risk. We have been changed by their stories and we hope that we have been faithful and accurate in their retelling and their analysis.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Patrick G. Love, 239 Greene Street, Suite 300, New York, NY 10003; patrick.love@nyu.edu

REFERENCES

Baxter Magolda, M. B. (1992). *Knowing and reasoning in college: Gender-related patterns in students' intellectual development.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Belenky, M. F., Clinchy, B. M., Goldberger, N. R., & Tarule, J. M. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing: The development of self, voice, and mind.* New York: Basic Books.

Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality, 4,* 219-235.

Chandler, C. K., Miner Holden, J., & Kolander, C. A. (1992). Counseling for spiritual wellness: Theory and practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 71*(2), 168-175.

Chickering, A. W. (1969). *Education and identity.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Chickering, A. W., & Reisser, L. (1993). *Education and identity* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In E. J. Trickett, R. J. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context* (pp. 312-333). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Decker, L. R. (1993). The role of trauma in spiritual development. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 33*(4), 33-45.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis.* New York: W. W. Norton.

Fox, R. C. (1995). Bisexual identities. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 48-86). New York: Oxford University Press.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park: Sage.

Helminiak, D. A. (1987). *Spiritual development: An interdisciplinary study*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.

Helminiak, D. A. (1996). *The human core of spirituality: Mind as psyche and spirit*. Albany: SUNY Press.

de la Huerta, C. (1999). *Coming out spiritually: The next steps*. New York: Putnam.

Jones, S. R., & McEwen, M. K. (2000). A conceptual model of multiple dimensions of identity. *Journal of College Student Development, 41*, 405-414.

King, M., Speck, P., & Thomas, A. (1995). The Royal Free interview for religious and spiritual beliefs: Development and standardization. *Psychological Medicine, 25*, 1125-1134.

Levine, H., & Evans, N. J. (1991). The development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities. In N. J. Evans & V. A. Wall (Eds.), *Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus* (pp. 1-24). Alexandria, VA: American College Personnel Association.

Love, P. G. (1997). Contradiction and paradox: Attempting to change the culture of sexual orientation at a small Catholic college. *The Review of Higher Education, 20*(4), 381-398.

Love, P. G. (2002). Spiritual development and cognitive development: Theoretical comparisons. *Journal of College Student Development, 43*(3), 357-373.

McNeill, J. J. (1988). *The Church and the homosexual*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Miller, M. (2000, May 8). As a pious churchgoer, Stuart Matis prayed and worked to change his sexual orientation. He died trying. *Newsweek*, 38-39.

Parks, S. (2000). *Big questions, worthy dreams*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Perry, W. G., Jr. (1970). *Intellectual and ethical development in the college years: A scheme*. Austin, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 499-514.

Poston, W. S. C. (1990). The biracial identity development model: A needed addition. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 69*, 152-155.

Renn, K. A. (1999, April). Space to grow: Creating an ecological model of bi- and multiracial identity development in college students. Presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, ON. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED430492)

Renn, K. A. (2003). Understanding the identities of mixed-race college students through a developmental ecology lens. *Journal of College Student Development, 44*, 383-403.

Reynolds, A. L., & Pope, R. L. (1991). The complexities of diversity: Exploring multiple oppressions. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 70*, 174-180.

Rhoads, R. (1997). A subcultural study of gay and bisexual college males: Resisting developmental inclinations. *Journal of Higher Education, 68*(4), 460-482.

Ritter, K. Y., & O'Neill, C. W. (1989). Moving through loss: The spiritual journey of gay men and lesbian women. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 68*(1), 9-15.

Robin, L., & Hamner, K. (2000). Bisexuality: Identities and community. In V. A. Wall & N. J. Evans (Eds.), *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus* (pp. 246-259). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Sampson, E. E. (1985). The decentralization of identity: Toward a revised concept of personal and social order. *American Psychologist, 40*(11), 1203-1211.

Savin-Williams, R. C. (1995). Lesbian, gay male, and bisexual adolescents. In A. R. D'Augelli & C. J. Patterson (Eds.), *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives* (pp. 165-189). New York: Oxford University Press.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Tillich, P. (1959). *Theology of culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wardle, F. (1992). Biracial identity: An ecological and developmental model. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED385376)

Williams, C. B. (1999). Claiming a biracial identity: Resisting social constructions of race and culture. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 77*, 32-35.

Zinik, G. (1985). Identity conflict or adaptive flexibility? Bisexuality reconsidered. In F. Klein & T. J. Wolf (Eds.), *Bisexualities: Theory and research* (pp. 7-19). New York: Haworth.