Current Understanding of What Helps & Harms in Resolving Sexual, Religious, & Social Identity Conflicts: Options for Those in Distress

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5-week Empowerment Workshop: Resolving Sexual & Religious/Spiritual Conflicts: “Where is God in All This?”

Starts July 3, Thursdays, 7-8:30 pm

Utah Pride Center (361 North 300 West, Salt Lake City 801-539-8800)

for all sexual orientations, atheists, agnostics, religions, etc

check lgbtqtherapists.com for more information and to register
Presentation Outline & Goals

• Look back and understand how historically we got it wrong
• Summarize our current understanding of the complex issues around sexual, religious, and social identity conflicts
• Describe various ways of resolving these conflicts & distress
  – Expand your viewpoint of the “problem” & what helps and what harms resolution
Main “Take-Home” Points

• Recognize the complex issues in resolving conflicts for LDS, same-sex attracted individuals
  – due to wrong and negating information, lack of accurate and affirming information, lack of options, pressures to live societal norms, & needs for acceptance
  • and the internalization, conformity, restricted views, opposing needs, repression, lack of exploration, shame, & compliance that may occur
  – Resolution involves a process of tension, crisis, exploration, education, reevaluation, grieving, reclaiming, & reconfiguration
  • similar to other maturity, growth processes
  • finding support, expanding perspectives, and providing autonomy (or free agency) are essential
Context & Background

**Context:**
- Historical: assumptions, dominant ways of thinking, agendas, biases (evolving or not)
- facts
  - what’s normal/natural, minority issues, gender issues, humans’ tendency for black/white thinking, some things can’t be controlled, unknowns & ambiguities, etc.
- personal identity development: cognitive, emotional, minority, sexual, and faith identity development
  - intrapersonal
  - interpersonal
- resolving an unsolvable problem
- etc.
Historical Background

• Mental health professions have historically and actively labeled erotic attractions to the same sex as sick or mentally ill and in need of change
  - Looking for a cause so that we can cure it
  - The search has reflected the changing social attitudes

• History of assumptions and attempts to “control” or “fix” homosexuality
  - Find the theory to understand and thus control it to make it “normal,” “make sense,” and go away to reduce tension and uncomfortable feelings
    • Heterosexuals trying to understand homosexuals
    • Similar to Whites understanding non-Whites
    • The search for the cause/treatment has had many false and harmful leads
Context & Background

• A long history of mental health disciplines working with religious institutions and legal authorities to ban sexual minorities from jobs, immigration, military service, marriage, and parenthood

• A significant societal shift occurred in 1970s regarding homosexuality: **LGB-Affirmative Theories and Interventions:**
  - Compares heterosexuals to non-clinical samples of homosexuals and bisexuals
  - Considers homosexuality and bisexuality as normal and mature variations of human sexuality (*research debunked myths*)
  - Investigates other reasons for problems within sexual minority populations and relationships (e.g., minority stress, the impact of homonegativity and heterocentric on psychological well-being)
Agendas in Conflict

• Two opposing (and extreme) clinical, research, religious, and political agendas have intersected around the issue of sexual orientation distress:
  - Each position tends to respond with a limited, exclusionary choice:
    • Be “Gay” or Be “Ex-Gay”
  - Religion “versus” Science-- intersections and incongruence
  - Internal conflicts reflect societal conflicts
• More information needed to understand motivating factors, what is possible, and how needs are resolved
Process of Identity Development: Who am I?

- **Became aware of being different:**
  - Atypical sexual arousal
  - Atypical emotional arousal: Falling in love
  - Atypical gender behavior & expression
  - Attractions were important part of their life once they became aware of them
  - No words to describe experience

- **Significant pressures to be heterosexual and to not be gay, lesbian, or bisexual**
  - Grew up in a heterocentric or “null” environment
  - Grew up in a homo- and bi-negative environment
Process of Identity Development: Who am I?

• Competing needs, roles, and values:
  Conflict of allegiance (Morales, 1989)
  – sexual orientation vs. religion
  – sexual orientation vs. family culture
  – sexual orientation vs. career
  – sexual orientation vs. ethnicity
  – individualism vs. conformity/collectivism

• Consequences for disobeying religion/family
  – Rejection & expulsion; considerable shifts in core identity, purpose, & sense of order; & loss of children/family & afterlife rewards & exaltation
Adopted negative self-concepts

- lost and alone
- a fag/dyke/pervert
- a sissy/tomboy or not-male, not-female
- damned, evil, an abomination, inferior, unlovable, a disappointment, powerless/stuck, a failure, unacceptable, abnormal, not good enough

“I just feel at a loss. If I live this lifestyle, this religion seems so much a part of me, and how can I live without it? Or if I choose to live like a good Mormon child should, how am I gonna live without this other part of my life, cause that seems so much a part of me?”

“We struggle to fit in, not just into society but within ourselves.”
Process of Identity Development: “Gay is not me & cannot be me”

• Coped maladaptively:
  **Isolated from self and others**
  – “Freudian” defense mechanisms
  – Sexual & relational solutions
  – Emotional coping & control/perfectionism
  – Hiding & isolating
  – Religious solutions
  – Escape via fantasies, substance abuse, & suicide

• Searched for understanding
Motivating Factors to Seek Change

• All participants felt a need to change because, to them, being heterosexual was the only solution to avoid unacceptability, damnation, isolation, confusion, rejection, self-hatred, powerlessness, and suicide

• **Underlying core needs**
  – Conform to social/family/God’s standards for acceptance and acceptability
  – Live cultural and spiritual values and ethics
  – Avoid a feared & disadvantageous “gay lifestyle”
  – Replace negative self-concepts
  – Experience hope, relief, & self-understanding
  – End negative effects from maladaptive coping strategies but still feel “in control”
  – Feel “normal,” included, and congruent
Positive Secondary Outcomes of Sexual Reorientation Therapy

“I was no longer alone.” “It made sense.”

- Provided with hope, relief, support, answers that fit their ideology
- Adopted a “non-gay” or same-gender attracted (SGA), repentant identity
- Found a place to belong, meet similar individuals, and feel normal
  - a place to express/experience both religious & sexual selves
  - enhanced closeness with others
- Behaviors became congruent with religion/family
- Enhanced gender identity and competencies
- Enhanced self-exploration
Does Conversion Therapy Work?

• Some participants reported experiencing a sense of contentment and belongingness and a change in self-acceptance, identity, focus, and behavioral patterns.

• However, *no generalized or substantial increase in heterosexual arousal* was reported, and participants were *not able to modify their tendency to be attracted erotically to their same-sex*.
  – if anything, participants became more asexual

• Changes seemed to occur in definitions of *self, sexual identity, and sexuality*, not in sexual orientation.
Does Conversion Therapy Work?

• However, harms did occur due to
  – being misinformed about realistic outcomes
  – being misled with unsubstantiated theories & treatments (false cures and promises)
  – blaming the person for not changing what they cannot change
  – internalizing treatment failure (“I’m weak”)
  – being reinforced that LGB must be avoided (agreeing with or not countering false information and societal oppression)
  – restricting education or exploration of options

Such aspects had the potential to increase despair, self-hatred, confusion, anxiety, depression, discrimination, unnecessary losses, intimacy difficulties, & suicidality
The Need for a Broader Approach

• Not all SSA individuals will benefit from an approach focused only on outwardly identifying as LGB
  – Expressed a need for *options* & a place where values and social circumstances were respected

• Given that the benefits gained could have been experienced in therapies other than conversion treatments, participants could not change sexual orientation, such approaches are contrary to scientific knowledge, and the potential exists for significant harms, it is thus *unnecessary* and *potentially harmful* to offer such treatments
  – “We are using the wrong words, asking the wrong questions, and approaching it so narrowly. . . . We’ve watched a lot of guys go through this. It’s not working. Now what else can we do?”
Emerging perspectives, studies, guidelines, & case studies

• Use a **person-centered** approach with individualized solution

• Provide a “holding environment” for the individual to have the respect and freedom to look at all aspects of her or himself

• **Explore the meanings and needs of experiences**

• and thus **embrace and integrate** these aspects into a coherent whole

  –**problem-solving balanced with empathy and self-direction with accurate information & exploration**

(e.g., Bartoli & Gillem, 2008; Benoit, 2005; Brzezinski, 2000; Drescher, 2000; Glassgold, 2008; Greene, 2000; Haldeman, 2004; Lasser & Gottlieb, 2004; McMinn, 2005; Schneider, Brown, & Glassgold, 2002; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Stanley, 2004; Throckmorton & Yarhouse, 2006)
Emerging Investigations of Sexual Identity Support Groups

Kerr, 1997; Thumma, 1991: Gay Evangelical Support Groups

• Reconstructed either their sexual identity or religious identity or both

• Reevaluated and replaced their self-denigrating beliefs by identifying faulty reasoning and receiving positive information to replace the former self-identity

• Reinforced the possibility of being both gay and religious by redefining meaning structures and prescribing the direction of future action
Emerging Investigations of Sexual Identity Support Groups

• Experience a sense of community, belonging, and collective identity that reinforce beliefs, values, needs, and concerns
  – Take on cultural norms and language
  – Receive an “antidote” to negative cultural scripts to manage emotions and reduce self-stigma
• Find role models and learn coping strategies
• Allow self-expression, catharsis, support, and interpersonal learning

(DeBord & Perez, 1999; Erzen, 2006; Morrow, 1996; Morson & McInnis; 1983; Ponticelli, 1999; Wolkomir, 2001; Yarhouse, Tan, & Pawlowski, 2005)
Potential Goals and Outcomes

• Expand perspective on self, sexuality, religion/spirituality, options, & relationships
• Develop self-acceptance & a positive self-identity
• Manage a sexual minority status
• Facilitate sexual self-congruence
• Manage conflicting, multiple social identities
• Resolve interpersonal decisions
• Achieve mental health and peace

• Avoid the aspects that harm or inhibit resolution or development
Dealing with the Dissonance

• Options to reduce shame, stigma, and dissonance:
  – (a) change the behavior that causes dissonance,
  – (b) add new beliefs that reduce dissonance, or
  – (c) change the environment that creates dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Mahaffy, 1996)

  • Consider new narratives or frameworks that permit a change in beliefs
  • Attribute one’s negative outcomes to prejudice or discrimination
  • Focus on the positive experiences
  • Challenge the stigma and those who stigmatize
  • Compare oneself and outcomes with others who share the stigma (Crocker & Major, 1989; Rodriguez, 2006; Yip, 1997)
Expanding Perspective

“No, no, that’s not a sin, either. My goodness, you must have worried yourself to death.”
Expanding Perspective

• Give yourself permission to explore/reevaluate what you have learned & how you might be getting too much of a one-sided view
  – emphasize your right to question authority
  – seek opportunities to encounter diverse viewpoints
  – Creates increased knowledge & informed decisions
  – & disillusionment, pain, and anger
  • Realizing those with whom you’ve trusted to instruct you may not know it all
• Normal individuation (parent-child) maturity process
Developing Self-Acceptance

• Meet others like yourself and find a place to belong
• Find your unique value and validate the “whole package”
  – Accept your sexual attractions and reframe them in a positive light to fit in with your evolving perspective and needs (e.g., a trial, a sin, a gift, a burden, a non-issue, etc.)
  – Become comfortable with your self-chosen and unique gender role and identity
• Find family and peer acceptance *(if possible)*
Developing Self-Acceptance

• Find inner strength and validation
• Adopt and live by your self-chosen ethics
• Address the negative consequences of living with this conflict, such as low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and addictions
• Through acceptance, we don’t gain the power to change our circumstances but develop the skills to determine our experience of those circumstances, which leads to more effective action
  – Pema Chodron: “To need something to change is to do violence to it.”
  – Carl Rogers: “The curious paradox is that when I accept myself I change.”
Facilitating Sexual Congruence

How do you define sexuality?

– **sexual orientation**: range of erotic, romantic, & affectional arousal, desire, and aversion to one sex compared with “other”
  • not “either/or”: all have some but minority exists
– **sexual orientation identity**: private and public identifications of sexual orientation, group membership
– **sexual script (identity)**: sexual values, behaviors, motivations, gender role, comfort with different sexual expressions, needs, drives, etc
– impacted by self-awareness, self-recognition, self-exploration, cultural norms/values, trauma, societal homonegativity & heterocentric views, erotophobia, & group affiliation
Facilitating Sexual Congruence

• Distinguish which aspects/variables of sexuality are able to be changed & what is harmful in hoping can be changed

• Acknowledge the range, quality, intensity, motivations, and complexity of your sexuality
  – such knowledge will determine the options available and adjustments needed in romantic and erotic relationships

• Sexual orientation is uniquely individual and inseparable from an individual’s personality and sense of self (Glassgold, 2008)

• How do you relate to your sexuality?
“Homosexual feelings are controllable”

• “Free agency” or “will” does not mean the person has complete control over self
  – Can indirectly create suppression, repression, denial, rationalizations, self-attack, cut-off parts of self
  – Long-term consequences of “controlling” sexuality
    • Sets up binge/purge, “repentance” cycle
    • Emotions and worth become dependent on restraining through obedience but never attained
    • When you suppress erotic energy (passion, creativity, connection, needs, drives), where does it go?
    • Loneliness, passive-aggression, resentment, bitterness, shame, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, rationalizations, compartmentalizing
Facilitating Sexual Congruence

• Cultivate *healthy sexuality* through
  – increasing *self-awareness and acceptance*: know and value attractions but not follow through with continual eroticizing or objectifying
  – making *decisions about behaviors*: develop relationship boundaries & limits, ethical center
  – enhancing *emotional intimacy* with others: know and express feelings/needs in nonsexual ways
  – find ways to *integrate sexuality* with other aspects of your self

• Develop your capacity for intimacy and commitment, regardless of partner choice
Managing a Sexual Minority Status

“I don't want to be defined by who I am.”
Constructing a Personalized, Positive Self-identity

What impairs identity exploration?

- Those who comforted you when bullies/badness came (e.g., God, parents, church community, friends) may now be the bullies.
- Can’t bear intolerable losses.
- Can reduce stress in short-term by keeping the familiar and avoiding conflict (not be “selfish” or “make” others upset).
- Can’t stand up for self because don’t know who you are or can’t be all that you are without more distress.
What Impairs Identity Exploration?

- Anxious to make the “right” choice but can’t choose—
don’t know all the information to solve the problem or
don’t know the “right” answer (besides the one that will please others)
  - can’t take a step and then evaluate

- Worriers tend to need lots of evidence before deciding
  - Avoid making the decision: have to be “certain”

- Universal needs for certainty/comfort:—those who suffer with anxiety don’t want any
  - Not experience happiness, pleasure, or joy, just “manage” to keep out negative

- White, conservative religious men may feel at a loss and not know how to deal with the loss of their majority status and privilege
What Helps Identity Exploration?

- **Normalize sexual identity exploration**: Consider similar to career, gender, and social identity.
- Make decisions **without knowing “the whole story”** or all the information but learning enough to risk “letting go”
  - Allow uncertainty and ambivalence
  - Avoid dichotomized options (face your “edge”)
- Have compassion for self, uncover the agenda, come to terms . . .
- Develop internal and external resources to withstand losses, fears, and discrimination often accompanied by being openly identified as a sexual minority.
Constructing a Personalized, Positive Self-identity

Identify, reject, & replace negative self-labels
• Become aware of how your self-concept and self-worth have been shaped by this struggle
• Replace with self-defined knowledge, reality-based self-definitions, deemed personally important, essential to your survival and ability to thrive
• Dismantle self-oppression and shame

Decide who you are and who you are not
• Which cultural norms fit and which do not
  – Give your self permission to keep some “heterosexual” identity (it is not “all or nothing”)
Managing Multiple Social Identities

- Increase decision-making skills for telling others about yourself
- Prepare to handle responses

Come to terms that not all possibilities are possible (King & Hicks, 2007)
- A process of coming to terms that not all choices are available and thereby mourning “lost selves”
- Permits alternate or new views of a possible self
- Facilitates maturity and identity growth
Managing Multiple Social Identities

• Create flexible ways of expressing the multiple aspects of your self in diverse settings
  – Develop all identities simultaneously or some sequentially
  – Reconstruct all aspects of your self
  – Or make a decision to live with the dissonance when no adequate resolution can be found
  – Focus on competencies within all cultural realms, as well as movement between different groups
  – When not valued, keep going back to self/safe spaces to find the strength to go back out
Managing Multiple Social Identities
Spirituality & Religiosity

• Religion can be a meaning-making system with a focus on addressing a quest for understanding & significance that motivates a person to discover & preserve the sacred or Divine
  – **Intrinsic Orientation:** motivates person to “live” religion
  – **Extrinsic Orientation:** motivates person to “use” religion for acceptance, status, or security (Alport & Ross, 1967)
  – **Quest Orientation:** motivates person to search for truth in “an open-ended dialogue with existential questions raised by the contradictions and tragedies of life”; inversely related to LGB prejudice
Managing Multiple Social Identities

Spirituality & Religiosity

• Religious values, beliefs, & behaviors can be sources of
  – **help** (buffer stress, provide order & answers in times of chaos/loss, enhance relationships/belonging)
    • Via ethics, service, forgiveness, hope, gratitude, love, compassion, & “letting go” through trust in higher power
  – or **distress** (maintain conformity through guilt/shame/fear, promote external locus of control, use heuristics to form rapid and incomplete judgments)
    • Prejudice, group conflict, suppression, powerlessness against vengeful deity, disillusionment, extreme or immature thinking (less reality-based), reactive actions, self-doubt
Managing Multiple Social Identities
Spirituality & Religiosity

  - Move from pure imagination
  - literal interpretation & concrete thinking
  - conforming to expectations of authorities
  - critical reflection of the complexity of life/self/others
  - being “alive to paradox”
  - to absolute love and justice (pure imagination)

- Each new stage requires the reworking of past solutions and contains positive possibilities but also negative potential
Managing Multiple Social Identities
Spirituality & Religiosity

- Clarify core religious values absent of condemnatory and persecutory elements
  - Identify the human errors of religion
  - Lessen distress caused by perfectionism, self-criticism, prejudice, and harshness in self-judgments that can distort religious values, be associated with them, or used to express religious values (Johnson, 2001)
- Refocus on using positive elements of religion
  - Base decisions on compassion, love, understanding, forgiveness, “more to be revealed”
- Improve your relationship with God from one based on guilt/fear to knowledge, acceptance, and openness to uncertainty & paradox
Managing Multiple Social Identities
Spirituality & Religiosity

• Consider ways to connect to God to see if you are loved despite your attractions or because of them
• Reclaim your unique spiritual gifts
• Explore variety of ways of being both spiritual & sexual minority:
  – remain faithful within religion but self-identify (to yourself and/or others) as SSA/LGB
  – feel spiritual outside the context of religion
  – explore diverse spiritualities and SSA/LGB-affirming places of worship
  – decide which elements of religion and spirituality to keep embracing
    • which to redefine
    • which to set aside
For Families & Couples

• Families go through a process of adjustment similar to the identity development process of the individual
  – The family will need to address stigma, stereotypes, disclosures, emotional processing, and resolution
  – Thus, a family's initial reaction may not represent its final position (Strommen, 1990)

• Research shows that parental attitudes play a important role in the child’s adjustment
  – Parental acceptance is important in reducing the risks for sexual minority youth
  – Increasing the safety and tolerance of sexual minorities in schools prevents distress and negative mental-health consequences
For Families & Couples

• Redefine goals and process:
  – Can we go back to unconditional love and acceptance no matter what happens?
  – Have realistic, modest, complicated sexuality expectations (Yarhouse, 2007)
  – Promote honest, integrity, and autonomy
  – Dialogue instead of debate about differences to promote understanding and awareness
  – Think of this as a lifelong conversation
  – Continue with important developmental milestones
  – Reclaim and redefine family
Recreate & Reclaim Family

Sexual minority families need to reclaim their role/purpose and thus reconfigure to become

- **a source of protection:** a place to feel safe, supported and advocated for
- **a source of socialization:** learn skills to live in society of how to relate to majority and minority, how to make decisions about boundaries/self-disclosures, & how to address gender and sexuality realistically
- **As a source of self-esteem:** role models, coping skills, positive message to offset negative attitudes
- **As sources of identity and belongingness:** break down isolation and feel value for the family (Daahlheimer & Feigal, 1994)
Summary

• Instead of “fixing,” ignoring, “overcoming,” invalidating, or arguing with those we are different from or aspects within ourselves:
  – Improve how you relate to your internal experiences, feelings, and needs
  – Improve how you relate to others, other communities, and society
  – Improve society’s relationship to yourself and other sexual and gender minorities

• Healing involves the power of relationships (internal and external):
  – Where painful experiences are fully witnessed and responded to by another and by self
Conclusion

• This population has been challenged to find self-congruence, God/family congruence, & institutional/societal congruence
  – been given a problem to solve with the wrong information and without all the information or space and freedom to solve it adequately or creatively
  – Our responsibility is to expand our awareness of the problem, possible resolutions, and what works and does not work (rethink how to navigate through this) but not force our own agenda on others

• *It is not really about changing sexual orientation or religion but ceasing the intolerance, discrimination, and separation that exist within those conflicted & living well enough with rejection & misunderstanding within our social situations*
Thank you

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