Negotiating Identities: Gay Catholic Men

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Table of Contents

1. Abstract.................................................................................................................. 3

2. Acknowledgements.................................................................................................. 4

3. Introduction............................................................................................................... 5

4. Methodology........................................................................................................... 9

5. Literature Review.................................................................................................... 13
   • Social Identity Formation......................................................................................... 13
   • Sexual Identity Formation....................................................................................... 18
   • Religious Identity Formation................................................................................... 21
   • Sexual and Religious Identity Formation................................................................... 23

6. Findings.................................................................................................................... 25
   • Theme One............................................................................................................... 25
   • Theme Two............................................................................................................... 41
   • Theme Three............................................................................................................ 55

7. Discussion & Conclusion........................................................................................ 65

8. Epilogue.................................................................................................................... 68

9. Works Cited............................................................................................................. 72

10. Appendices............................................................................................................. 73
Abstract

While original research on identity formation located human identity growth and change in discrete (and usually early) stages, contemporary research considers human identity as growing and evolving identity throughout the life cycle. A secondary limitation of earlier research is the narrow population sample. My research uses contemporary theories of identity formation to understand an under-researched (or research-ignored) group: gay Catholic men. Identifying a group of men with two potentially competing identity factors, I ask the research question(s): What common themes exist among gay Catholic men when negotiating their identities? Specifically, what are the common themes for men located in a major US urban center? To answer this question, in 2011 I conducted an exploratory qualitative study of identity formation among 10 gay Catholic men, ages 24 to 68, in the greater New York City area, to illuminate common themes among each participant’s identity formation.

Participants of diverse backgrounds were recruited from DignityUSA for ethnographic interviews averaging one hour in length. Grounded theory practices and deductive analysis were used in this exploratory study. Findings suggest three common themes of identity negotiation and understanding centered on coming out, the institutional and pastoral Church, and acceptance within the family. These themes bring insight to challenges the participants faced when combining two distinct identities.

Keywords: gay, Catholic, church, identity, male, qualitative, interviews, ethnography, religion
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Introduction

Gay Catholic Men

Men who are both gay and Catholic are a distinct and research-ignored population. In forming their identities as gay Catholics they face challenges different from men who are just gay or just Catholic. Social psychology literature explains the independent challenges of gay and Catholic identity formation, but has not fully covered the formation of both identities simultaneously. The research literature on the subject of gay Catholic men is small and inadequate for a subject that is relevant in American society now more than ever. In the United States gay men are not typically perceived as religious because their views do not align with traditional Christian values. For example, same-sex marriage is endorsed by the gay community while the Catholic community vocally opposes same-sex marriage. In the same way, Catholic men are not viewed as gay because of the Catholic community’s negative stance on homosexual activity. Combining gay and Catholic identities poses challenges and risks to a unique population of men, and those around them, who choose to maintain their Catholic faith while accepting their sexual identity. My study will show the common themes that exist among a sample population of gay Catholic men when they negotiate their sexual and religious identities.

Significance

Throughout the past three years the debate between the Catholic Church and gay community on gay marriage equality has become mainstream news. The same-sex marriage debate is one example of the public conversation between the gay and Catholic communities that shows the differences between the communities and the struggle for gay and Catholic men whose identities are tied to both. Furthermore, other religious denominations have begun outwardly accepting homosexual men. The acceptance of homosexual men into religions, not including Catholicism, turns attention to the Catholic
Church’s negative stance on homosexuality. The perceived conflict between religion and sexuality is now a national topic of interest and more important to understand for everyone affiliated with the gay or religious communities.

The recent molestation scandal within the Catholic Church is also tied to the debate about sexuality and religion because the molesters are often perceived as, or affiliated with, the gay community. Thereby a negative image of homosexual men within Catholicism is created and projected to the public outside of the Catholic Church. Gay Catholic men especially feel the burden of the molestation scandal because the public views gay men in the Catholic Church as perverts when priests are accused of molesting younger boys. Additionally, gay Catholic men see the Catholic Church as a hypocritical institution because the Church protects the priests (gay or not) who molest children. My study shows how gay Catholic men perceive and feel about the molestation scandal at a time when this matter plays a large part in how the Catholic Church is viewed by the public as a worldwide institution.

I expect that the conflict between the gay community and the Catholic Church will continue. My research is important to help understand the unique challenges of gay Catholic men when they are negotiating their identities and attempting to find acceptance in both religious and gay communities. The Catholic tradition will hold strong in its views against homosexuality and likely never dissolve. I hope that my research will help others understand the unique challenges and views held by gay Catholic men when they are negotiating both identities. My experiences as a Catholic-born and now gay male parallel many of the study participants’ own experiences, and I hope other gay Catholic men can find comfort in similar experiences they read about here.
Research Questions

The simultaneous formation of two identities that are perceived to be opposed poses the question how these gay men form their identities while combatting challenges unique to their situations. In my study I set out to understand the common themes that exist among gay Catholic men when they formed their gay and Catholic identities. More specifically, I asked what common themes existed for gay Catholic men in the New York City chapter of DignityUSA. DignityUSA is a nation-wide organization designed to provide programming for LGBT Catholic people. Programming at Dignity includes Catholic masses, support groups, and opportunities for socializing with other LGBT-inclusive Catholics. Through education, advocacy, and support, DignityUSA works for respect and justice for people of all sexual orientations, genders, and gender identities. Dignity had been an active organization for over 40 years with local chapters across the United States.

Forthcoming

In the following chapters I will provide the methodology of my study, a review of existing literature, findings, a conclusion and discussion of the findings, and an epilogue. The methodology of my study, described on the following page, is expanded upon more technically in Appendix A. An overview of the literature sets up a theoretical framework and supports the need to answer my research questions. Answering the research questions will fill the gap in social psychological literature about the formation of gay and Catholic identities. I will discuss three common themes that I have found among the ten participants and describe the findings in detail. A discussion and analysis of the findings will follow. In the discussion I will expand upon ideas for further research on this topic. Last, an Epilogue will provide a summary of my own experiences as a gay Catholic man. The Epilogue is also where I discuss my possible biases as a researcher because of the similarities in my experiences and the experiences of
the participants. The Appendix can be referred to for a chart of each participant’s characteristics, demographic charts and tables, a coding chart, the recruitment letter, and a more detailed methodology.
Methodology

**Population Sample & Selection**

I recruited gay Catholic participants via e-mail in New York City. I contacted DignityNY and used a group mailing list to reach potential participants (see Appendix B for Recruitment Letter). I worked with a liaison to the Dignity organization in order to maintain contact over three months and ensure that I reached a minimum of ten participants. Ten males voluntarily consented to be interviewed and audio-recorded, have their interviews transcribed, and the data sanitized for analysis. A follow-up survey was sent to each participant after all ten interviews were conducted to gather demographic data about the sample population. I did not recruit lesbian or transgendered participants for my study because DignityUSA is largely composed of men. Finding lesbian or transgendered participants would have been difficult and out of the scope of this research question.

Each of the ten participants in my study will be referred to in the following chapters as Participant 1, 2, 3, etc. or P1, P2, P3, etc. Each participant was randomly assigned a number (1-10) after the interview for confidentiality throughout the analysis. The participants form a diverse group of Catholic schooling backgrounds and ages. Participants ranged from age 18 – 68, with three participants age 18 – 25 and seven participants age 50 and older (See Appendix C for Demographic Table). There were no participants between the ages of 26 and 49. One participant identified as Hispanic or Latino and the remaining nine identified as white. Nine participants said they attended some type of Catholic school, whether or not they spoke about Catholic school in their interview. One participant did not attend Catholic school. One participant entered the priesthood and at the time of his interview had left his position in the Church and another participant went to seminary but did not become a priest. One of ten of the participants said he was not affiliated with DignityUSA but heard about my study through Dignity and asked to participate. Three participants had been affiliated with Dignity for five years or less,
three had been affiliated for six to 15 years, and three had been affiliated for over 30 years (See Appendix C for Demographic Table). Affiliation with DignityUSA is defined by a membership contribution to the organization of $50 annually. Some of the main characteristics of each participant are described below to give the reader an idea of each man (See Appendix C for Demographic Table).

- P1 attended Catholic school and eventually went into the seminary, after which he moved to New York and came out to his family. P1 first came out as gay to another priest while they were traveling in Rome during seminary. P1 was white and 24 years old.

- P2 was 68 years old and white. P2 went to Catholic school for 16 years and had been affiliated with Dignity for 30 years. His first gay friends were at work and P2 said that he was surprised when his cousin told him he did not know he was gay in his thirties.

- P3 was a 60 year-old white man who attended Catholic school and was a Religious Brother before he was a part of Dignity for eight years. P3 described his coming out experience as the appropriate time because he missed the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At age 17 he told his mother he thought he had a religious calling but the process of becoming a Religious Brother was more difficult than he realized.

- P4 was 51 years old, white, and attended Catholic school. He had been in Dignity for 32 years. P4 admitted his homosexuality to himself when he was 19 and recalls that his home parish was very accepting and even first exposed him to homosexuality first.

- P5 went to Catholic school and had been part of Dignity for 10 years. He was 62 years old and white. When P5 was 18 he went to a bar with his gay teacher who was the first gay person he knew and moved to New York at age 20. At age 40 P5 told his family about his HIV-positive status.
• P6 was 58 years old and white. He was a part of Dignity for 34 years and attended Catholic school. At age 32 he married a woman and had children. It was not until his forties that P6 discovered he was more attracted to men and came out to his wife, leaving the marriage.

• P7 was 24 years old and self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. P7 went to Catholic school and considered the priesthood but did not go to seminary. He was affiliated with Dignity for three years at the time of the interview. P7 grew up in the south where he felt like a minority as a Catholic, which he says strengthened his faith.

• P8 experienced severe depression when he came out to his unsupportive parents in high school. He did not attend Catholic school but first came out to his guidance counselor in high school. P8 was 25 years old at the time of the interview and was in Dignity for three years.

• P9 was 57 years old, white, and raised as an Irish Catholic in the Midwest. P9 went to Catholic grade school, an all-boys Jesuit high school, and a Jesuit college. He nearly married a woman during college and later became a high school English teacher. P9 was an altar boy and he was not affiliated with Dignity.

• P10 was 68 years old and white. He attended Catholic high school and was in Dignity for 15 years at the time of the interview. He went to the seminary at a time he believed the Church was very progressive. P10 also served as a priest in the Catholic Church for 15 years but at the time of the interview he was on a leave of absence from his role.

Data Collection

I collected data by conducting individual interviews with each of the ten men in the summer of 2011. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol that I created based on a brief literature review and techniques for qualitative interviewing by
Miles and Huberman. I used a timeline activity at the beginning of each interview to introduce and learn about five major life events for each participant. The five specific events were recognizing one’s sexuality, baptism into the Catholic Church, coming out as gay, taking on an independent religious identity, and other identity alterations. I asked participants to document these specific times and describe experiences surrounding each event in their lives on a timeline template that I provided to each of them (See Appendix D for Timeline). Following the timeline activity I focused interview questions on Catholic upbringing and culture and on a combination of experiences related to living out both gay and Catholic identities (See Appendix E for Interview Protocol).

Each of the interviews was audio recorded on my password protected laptop, and I transcribed each audio file within one year from the interview date. Before each interview I told participants that they could turn off the recording at any time they felt uncomfortable, but no participants chose to do so. Each interview took place in a private room at the New York City LGBT Center, a location that I determined was a safe space for sharing such personal experiences. Funding from Stanford Undergraduate Advising and Research was used to rent space for conducting and transcribing each interview.
Literature Review

A review of existing literature holds its place in each research study as a way to give background knowledge to the reader and bring a greater perspective to the field(s) in which the research findings will be relevant. In the following chapter I have outlined the importance of processes of identity formation generally, sexual identity formation, and religious identity formation as they apply to this qualitative study. In order to fully understand how gay Catholic men form their identities over a lifetime, specifically in the greater New York City area, the reader must know what these three processes entail individually. Last, I will present a case study of work, similar to my own, that highlights the intricacies of gay and Catholic identity formation over a lifetime. Upon completion of this chapter the reader should understand the theoretical framework on which my qualitative study relies to highlight the importance of studying two individual identities being formed in one lifetime, a topic that has not been extensively covered in social psychology literature.

Social Identity Formation

Henri Tajfel and Erik Erikson are social psychologists with theories of identity formation that are most relevant to my study of gay Catholic identity formation. I will start by introducing the reader to standard definitions that are important to comprehend before understanding the analysis of this research.

Henri Tajfel (Cambridge University Press, 1982) defines social identity "as that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." (p. 2) This "limited definition" is justified by Tajfel in order to discuss social identity at large with agreed upon
limitations. While the participants I interviewed more than likely have multiple social group memberships that make up their social identity, I am most concerned with the influence of the gay community and Catholic community on their identities.

One cannot write of social identity without acknowledging the interpersonal to intergroup continuum of identity. Intergroup behavior is defined by Sherif (1996) as "individuals belonging to one group interact[ing], collectively or individually, with another group or its members in terms of their group identifications." (p. 3) Intergroup behavior is relevant to this research because of the interactions participants have between their gay and Catholic community groups, and how those interactions affect other social groups outside of the two. These "groups" must also be defined in order to give the reader full clarity. A "group" as defined by Shaw (1976) is "two or more persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences and is influenced by each other person." (p. 15)

In my study the two groups are the gay community and the Catholic community. Identity within these groups will be defined later in this chapter. Social identity, intergroup behavior, and social groups are important to how a person fully forms his individual identity.

Moving towards the theories related to intergroup behavior, Tajfel shows how social identity is directly affected by and affects group behavior through his Social Identification Model. The Social Identification Models states that "individuals structure their perception of themselves and others by means of abstract social categories, that they internalize these categories as aspects of their self-concepts, and that social cognitive processes relating to these forms of self-conception produce group behavior." (p. 16) Intergroup behavior is important to understand because the participants in this study rely on their interactions between the gay and Catholic communities to form their identity from both experiences. Identity formation can lead to group conflict and its influence on the perception of oneself. "Our perception of ourselves and others is more influenced by group memberships in some contexts
than others. (e.g., Bruner and Perlmutter, 1957; Dion 1975; Dion and Earn, 1975; Doise and Weinberger, 1973; Sherif, 1966) Particularly is this so, apparently, in situations of intergroup conflict or discrimination." (p. 19) The Catholic community's discrimination and the gay community's conflict with the Church make the issue of intergroup behavior primary to understand in order to comprehend the complexities of identity formation for gay Catholic men.

Erik Erikson’s (International Universities Press, 1959) theory of identity formation, the “Stages of Psychosocial Development,” deals less with the concepts of intergroup identity and focuses on the idea of ego identity. Marie Jahoda (1950) and Erikson define ego identity as “a healthy personality [who] actively masters his environment, shows a certain unity of personality, and is able to perceive the world and himself correctly.” (p. 53) Furthermore, “the sense of ego identity, then, is the accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity is matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others.” (p. 94) Erikson divides the lifetime into eight stages of development for ego identity, explaining “that each item of the healthy personality to be discussed is systematically related to all others, and that they all depend on the proper development in the proper sequence of each item; and that each item exists in some form before ‘its’ decisive and critical time normally arrives." (p. 54) The item that must be developed is within a stage, and "each stage becomes a crisis because incipient growth and awareness in a significant part function goes together with a shift in instinctual energy and yet causes specific vulnerability in that part." (p. 56) The eight stages of crises are not all relevant to this study, as the development of intergroup identity and sexual preference do not come into play until the fifth through eighth stages, which I will explain more thoroughly here.

The fifth stage, and first important stage to understand for the reader, is the conflict of identity versus identity diffusion, which Erikson states takes place during puberty and adolescence. A person in this stage is “preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they
feel they are.” (p. 94) Here, adolescents are “desperately seeking for a satisfactory sense of belonging.” (p. 95) This is the first stage relevant to this research because it presents the first opportunity for peer-to-peer acceptance. With this acceptance also comes the possibility of rejection, especially for gay youth that do not fit the typical mold of what may be considered “normal” at this age. At this point we can also see the inequality in the two identities at hand. While Catholicism can go undetected as a part of one’s identity, often being gay cannot because of effeminate actions or qualities that are associated with sexual identity. In other words, being gay is more apparent, and therefore more easily detected and can lead to a rejection of the in-group. "The danger of this stage is identity diffusion...where such a dilemma is based on a strong previous doubt of one’s ethnic and sexual identity." (p. 97) Erikson highlights sexual identity here as a main factor, further validating the importance of sexuality in identity formation throughout this stage of psychosocial development. While “tolerance” is not the main issue here, the analysis of this research will be very focused on commonalities between participants when they began to feel left out or unaccepted by their peers, which would be during this stage. Acceptance becomes a strong theme tied to this stage of the participants’ lives in my analysis. Intolerance becomes “the necessary defense against a sense of identity confusion." (p. 97) "It is difficult to be tolerant if deep down you are not quite sure that you know what you look like to others, and that you will know how to make the right decisions without, once for all, committing yourself to the wrong friend, sexual partner, leader, or career." (p. 98) The participants are seeking tolerance and acceptance from their families, friends, and sexual partners.

Identifying as gay has much to do with a person’s relations with others, making the sixth stage of late adolescence or early adulthood quite important. This stage, called intimacy and distanciation versus self-absorption, states that “where a youth does not accomplish such intimate relations with others and his own inner resources may either isolate himself and find... highly stereotyped and formal interpersonal relations, or he must seek them in repeated attempts and repeated failures.” (p. 101) On
the other hand, distanitation is the “readiness to repudiate, to isolate, and, if necessary, to destroy those forces and people whose essence seems dangerous to one’s own.” (p. 101) The hopeful outcome of this stage is genitality, “one of the chief signs of a healthy personality, which is the potential capacity to develop orgastic potency in relation to a loved partner of the opposite sex.” (p. 102) Here it is interesting that the Catholic faith and gay culture seem to clash directly. The Catholic Church advocates for marriage between a man and a woman, as the definition of genitality, while the gay community regards the insistence on opposed-sex-only partnerships as unfair, even immoral. In order for a gay Catholic male to comprehend these opposing forces and develop an identity from this crisis could be very difficult and painful. Through the analysis special attention will be paid to the common way these gay Catholic men reconcile the opposing mentalities and continue to form their identities based on their own self-concept with influence from each group. Gay marriage is an example of opposed views that I revisit in the analysis.

The seventh stage of Erikson’s Stages of Psychosocial Development is generativity versus stagnation, in which “generativity ... concerns the establishment of the next generation. Where such enrichment fails regression from generativity to an obsessive need for pseudo intimacy takes place, often with a pervading sense of stagnation and interpersonal impoverishment.” (p. 103) Again, this is a divisive issue between the Catholic and gay communities. The Catholic Church would argue that men identifying as gay would be stagnant here because they will not and should not establish the next generation. The gay community advocates for a more familial structure between partners, including adopting children. These opposing influences may create a harsh divide in the identity formation of gay Catholic men. The research analysis will focus closely on the note of family acceptance and culture in the participants’ lives.

The final stage Erikson introduces is the stage of integrity versus despair and disgust. He defines integrity as “the acceptance of one’s own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions.” On
the other hand, “despair expresses the feeling that the time is short, too short for the attempt to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity.” (p. 104, 105) Some participants’ experiences show “integrity” because they do not express regret about their coming out stories and decisions. Others express despair because of rejection by the Church or gay community and regret their decisions. The role of life reflection and how one feels about the outcome of one’s life may be the stage at which some of these participants find themselves. I will use this framework to assess the identity formation between integrity and despair, and how it might be common across participants’ experiences.

Tajfel’s theory of identity formation focuses on the individual and its relation to a group identity, and how the two interact. Erikson’s theory of identity formation focuses solely on the individual and internal battles of creating a whole identity throughout the lifetime. Both of these theories are important, as each process affects the participants when they form their combined gay and Catholic identity. The participants’ self-concepts are influenced by gay and Catholic communities (Tajfel), and participants partake in identity formation that is solely an internal development over time (Erikson).

**Sexual Identity Formation**

To form a greater understanding of what influences and forms a sexual identity, I have turned to William Wilkerson’s “emerging fusion” account of sexual identity and Mark Blasius’s gay existence conceived as an “ethos.”

William Wilkerson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) describes an emerging fusion of sexual identity as the experience of desire, our biological constitution, the social roles and norms of society, and our individual choices, all codependent upon one another to form one’s whole sexual identity. Each factor of sexual identity is essentially and internally related to the other factors, Wilkerson says (p. 4, 5). Wilkerson describes his post-positivist, sophisticated realism as a satisfactory negotiation between essentialist
understandings of identity as stable and based upon given experiences and postmodern understandings of identity as socially constituted experience and unstable (p. 11). In a postmodern view of sexual identity, Wilkerson states that one’s experiences are contextualized by social roles and categories and that their “desires take on social meanings,” which they understand in response to others (p. 8, 9). The analysis of each participant’s identity formation process will take into account each factor that contributes to their sexual identity: experience of desire, biological constitution, the social roles and norms of society, and individual choices. As Wilkerson states, each is important to the sexual identity formation process and will be important in the analysis of how each participant forms his gay identity in relation to other participants, with possible contrasts to the formation of their Catholic identity at the same time. Furthermore, intergroup identity (see Tajfel) comes into play in the sexual identity formation process specifically through one’s desires and how a person understands them in relation to those around them. For this reason, Wilkerson highlights the deviant identity, or the impulses and actions that generate specific responses from a social group, which are incorporated into the “Me” of the individual, and “provide a stable identity defined in relation to the social group.” (p. 72, 73) For gay Catholic men, the groups that respond to their actions are gay and Catholic communities, of which they are both a part, that form their defined identity.

While sexual identity may seem easily definable, history shows that sexual identity is constantly changing. To keep this in mind throughout my analysis, I will return to Wilkerson’s depiction of changing sexual identity. Wilkerson states “the response to the expressions of desire lead individuals to conceive of their desire in terms of socially specific ideals and roles that are evidenced through the normed reaction of the community. As norms and roles change, so do individuals’ identities.” In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries men who engaged in homosexual acts were still masculine, whereas today “object choice is seen among many in the US as the leading edge of a sexual identity, and gendered mannerisms (non-masculinity), occupation, and so on” are seen as the result of such a choice (p. 80, 81).
In addition, identifying as gay can be a political act that reinforces homosexuality as a deviant role in society, while also conserving the social structure of roles presented for individuals to fulfill. Wilkerson says the adoption of a gay identity can be liberating because of the freedom from denial and confusion, and a clearer way towards full identity recognition (p. 84, 85). Both the changing nature of sexual identity and the political relevance are important here. The reader must understand that identity is not static, and therefore this analysis of identity will most likely present new or unusual factors that have not been recorded in identity formation theory. I see my research as a natural step in the evolution of social psychology, specifically for populations as specific as gay and Catholic men. The political importance of a gay identity should be noted, as gay men often must recognize their identity as a political action for others, just as much as for themselves. The liberation involved in gay identity recognition will be a strong theme throughout the analysis of these qualitative interviews, as it is common among many participants.

Mark Blasius’s (Princeton University Press, 2001) theory of gay existence as an ethos expands the number of factors that contribute to gay identity. He argues that gay existence should be conceived as an ethos rather than a sexual preference or orientation, a lifestyle, subculture, or even a community (p. 143). He defines ethos as “a shared way of life through which lesbians and gay men invent themselves, recognize each other, and establish a relationship to the culture in which they live.” (p. 145) It seems that Blasius’s approach could be taken as pertinent only to gay men interacting within a gay community. Intergroup identity is at play, but I believe the ethos is meant to encompass all aspects of life and interactions. I believe in addition to (and sometimes repetitive of) Wilkerson’s factors that make up sexual identity, we can also include sexual preference and orientation, lifestyle, subculture, and community in the identity composite. Blasius also encourages the idea that history has formed much of the gay ethos we know today, and as history changes so does the ethos of the gay person. In other words, sexual identity is changing and historically representative as Wilkerson describes it.
Here I would like to include a small portion of literature about sexual identity in an urban setting because this research study is specific to an urban area. Dennis Altman (Outerbridge & Dlenstfrey, 1971) found that open sexuality among men in New York and San Francisco gay urban domains was a part of both sexual liberation and identity (p. 250). My study takes place in New York City because of the general progress of the area in terms of forming gay domains, such as the one mentioned by Altman. These areas are very important to the identity formation process of gay men living within and visiting the space. Furthermore, it is a “theme of the politics of sexual identity at the urban level that coalitions with other identity groups is attractive and necessary.” (p. 251) Therefore, we know that the gay population necessarily interacts with other identity groups, and brings reason to study the specific interaction of gay Catholic men in an urban setting.

**Religious Identity Formation**

The third and final process I will describe is the religious identity formation process. James Provost and Knut Walf (Stichting Concilium, 1994) divide the Catholic religious identity into two parts, one of the Catholic Church as an institution and one of the individual Catholic person. After the Second Vatican Council the Church identified itself as “the perfect society, and without total identification with this Church and its norms and values, no salvation for men and women would be guaranteed.” (p. 6) In this definition of the institutional Church’s identity, it is easy to see that dominance from above determines those who wish to be a part of the Catholic tradition. The distinction here between the institutional Church and the local or pastoral church is very important to my research question. Findings in my analysis show that the worldwide Catholic religion is divided into two very different churches in the minds of gay men. The church on the local level functions in a very different and less domineering way than the institutional Church. Provost and Walf distinguish between the two by adding that “the
Church is the people of God, in which all believers in principle have equal rights,” directly opposed in many ways to the interpretation of the first definition (Constitution on the Church, 12) (p. 8). This opposition is captured perfectly by this quote: "identity refers...to the knowable, substantial permanence of the entity, in this case the church, ... however, this doctrine 'from above' is diametrically opposed to the reality which characterizes the everyday life of a parish." (p. 28)

There is much opposition and an acknowledgement that complete identification with the Church is not only impossible, but also inhuman, resulting in only a partial identification (p. 13). "The Magisterium has drawn attention several times to the serious harm done to the community of the church by attitudes of general opposition to church teaching which even come to expression in organized groups." (p. 10) "What does the high value attached to the individual conscience mean if the appeal to this conscience is not encouraged, and in cases of doubt there are threats of church stigmatization (e.g. abortion, homosexuality)?" These quotes show the importance of being critical of the institutional Church, to which many of my participants relate.

In recognition of the differences between the two levels of the Church, the authors advocate for plurality among Catholics. “Pluriformity in unity is presumably the only formula for the future, not only from a social perspective, but also for religion and the Church." (p. 134) The plurality cannot be diminished by the governing institution as it permeates religious identity everywhere (p. 33, 34). The religious identity of the local church is often marked by pluralism and by conflicts that entail this pluralism (p. 32). Therefore, the real identity of the Church, both institutionally and pastorally, is located in the identity of the local church. The study of gay Catholic men who exist in a local parish is the most true to the form of Catholic identity that exists in the United States. The reality of Catholicism is found by understanding members of a local church congregation, not by understanding those who serve the institutional Church. In my analysis I will focus on how participants define their Catholic identity, whether
in relation to the Church’s teachings or in their own terms, which I see as the truest way to find common themes of Catholic identity formation among these men.

**Religious and Sexual Identity Formation**

The text most similar to my own research is Thomas Stevenson’s text *Sons of the Church* (Harrington Park Press, 2006). From 2000 to 2004 Stevenson interviewed 44 men who identified as homosexual and Catholic in Chicago. Additional interviewees, ages 26 to 68, were from Ohio, Iowa, Louisiana, Connecticut, Arizona, and England. Stevenson notes expectations of the interviews, in particular pain and suffering. He reconciles his assumption with the experience of finding joy in the interviews. The text uses an analysis based on the emotion and experience of each interview, without support from previous material to inform the analysis. Stevenson does not explore themes of reconciling identities through justified qualitative methodologies. My study uses previous research and literature to inform my findings. Stevenson also does not discuss the negative aspects of forming a gay and Catholic identity. His analysis is organized around experiences of childhood, integration of homosexuality, coming to terms with sexuality, intimate relationships, and accepting larger groups, such as the Church or gay community. By understanding Stevenson’s analysis and framework I give a more thorough analysis to the common themes amongst gay Catholic men in New York City. Furthermore, my research focuses my research question in one specific geographical region. Our findings overlap when we discuss integration of homosexuality and coming to terms with sexuality but I give a more thorough understanding to the negotiation of the Catholic identity for men in New York City.

In addition, John Boswell explains the historical intolerance of homosexuals in his text *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (The University of Chicago Press, 1980). Boswell argues against the assumption that religious beliefs support prejudice against homosexuals. Boswell tries to
determine what selects the prejudice against homosexuals, if not the Church. This question opens the conversation about how the divide among gay men and the Catholic Church came about today. The historical context will provide a basis for the Church/sexuality divide that I will explore, and provide insights about negotiating identities as described by the interviewees.

Conclusion

The Literary Review has set up a theoretical framework to answer my research question about what common themes exist among gay Catholic men when they negotiate their gay and Catholic identities. The self-concept is influenced by group identity of the gay and Catholic communities according to Tajfel and the individual ego identity is developed over time according to Erikson. Furthermore, a sexual identity is constantly changing based on socially specific ideals says Wilkerson. Blasius also contributes that there is a gay ethos influenced by history. Provost and Walf tell us to be critical of the institutional Catholic Church and say that a religious identity is found in the local or pastoral Church. All of these theories contribute to the identity formation process of gay Catholic men. Stevenson has contributed preliminary findings about common themes of sexual identity integration and coming to terms with homosexuality, while Boswell shows that there is a historical divide between the gay and Catholic communities.
Findings

Theme One: Coming Out Gay and Catholic

Experiences embracing sexual and religious identities can parallel one another. Coming out as gay and Catholic are similar in the process of accepting both identities. Coming out as gay is a process that begins internally and transitions into outward expression of gay identity. Similarly, Catholicism may begin internally as a built-in cultural component of identity. Coming out as Catholic may occur when a man embraces his Catholicism independent of Catholic culture.

Another parallel of identity acceptance occurs during the process of accepting, rejecting, and finally re-acquiring an identity. A Catholic man may accept his religious identity, leave the Church, and return to the religion after some time away. In the same way, a gay man may accept his sexual identity, reject his sexuality outwardly, and then later re-affirm his identity publicly.

In the Closet

Coming out is a common experience among gay men. Coming out is not defined exclusively by the number of times another person is told that a man is gay. In fact, the coming out process begins internally for many gay men when they accept their own sexuality. In the interview protocol each participant was asked how he became aware of his gay identity and how he admitted this identity to himself, not just by telling another person.

This study argues that in order to come out internally as gay, a man must define what gay means. At young ages gay is often described simply as “different.” Forty percent of the participants first became aware of their difference, or gayness, in their teenage years, and another 40 percent started figuring out their difference in childhood. In this sample population, internal acknowledgement occurred often
during adolescence. Early acknowledgement shows that coming out internally is seen as the first stage of the coming out process. The confusion in finding a definition of gay is not entirely cleared up when young men have sexual experiences, although such experiences may lead to a greater sense of clarity than before. We see that a clearer definition of gay comes in the participants’ experiences of attraction to other men, but attraction that does not lead to physical expression.

In response to the question of when they knew for the first time that they were gay, half of the participants spoke about not understanding the definition of gay. In some cases participants described an undefined “gay” as feeling different from their peers. P5 illustrated he knew he was “different” when someone told him he was not normal and he exhibited behavior not consistent with masculine stereotypes: “There was something different about me, but I didn’t know what it was and I didn’t have a name for it. During high school I remember once somebody said I was a faggot.” P1 and P2 said that gay was undefined, leading to confusion in both of their lives. For example, P1 said, “I think I was attracted to males on some precocious, emotional level even as a child.” P2 commented on his peers’ understanding of his sexuality: “I don’t think they thought I was gay, they just thought I couldn’t throw a ball,” he said, which led to more confusion in his own self-understanding. Being able to throw a ball is also a masculine stereotype, and one way which the participant became different from his peers.

P2 described an absent gay culture contrasted to the pervasive masculinity in his all-boys Catholic high school. In this setting P2 knew he was unlike masculine stereotypes and discovered the definition of gay. Similarly, P8 spoke about the Marist Brother in his Catholic high school whom he came out to as gay, an experience of much pain and suffering.

P3 and P6 discussed sexual experiences when admitting their sexuality. In childhood, P3 said he had a sexual experience with a friend that led to knowing he was gay. P6, who was previously married to a woman, had sexual experiences with men in his thirties that allowed him to understand and admit his
sexual orientation. P9 reduced his experience to knowing he was gay when, in Catholic school, he was not stereotypically masculine, which made him apathetic about speaking of his sexuality. For P10, he knew he was gay but refused to admit the fact to himself, saying, “I’m not sure how much I admitted it to myself but I certainly knew it.” One unique story was told by P4 who admitted his gay sexuality by first coming out to supportive friends as bi-sexual. Then he came out to his college and high school friends as bi, and finally to his parents. P4’s experience is an example of coming out to the people with whom the man was closest, and felt most comfortable around, followed by less close people.

P10 explained that looking back during the time of the interview he knew he was gay, but would not have understood his sexual identity when those experiences occurred. “I can think of one particular moment where it was very clear to me now thinking back where there [were] earlier moments and crushes I might have had,” he said. P10 acknowledging his internal acceptance of his sexuality during the interview is an important consideration as many gay men acknowledge their awareness of sexuality now but not at the time of their first gay experiences. Last, P7 mentioned that lacking a definition of gay hindered him from embracing his sexual identity internally. “I didn’t connect two and two together and say that, ‘Okay, this means I’m gay or bisexual,’” said P7.

In the sample population sexual experiences between the participants and other men led to a more precise definition of gay. Participant 3 described his first sexual experience as “play[ing] a little touchy-feely and [he] knew then that [he] was gay.” Another participant did not understand what gay meant even after his first sexual experience with another male in childhood. “I was fooling around with my best friend at the time who now is also gay whom I still speak to vaguely but I didn’t know what that was,” he said.

One unique experience was a participant who identified a gay teacher in his school and contacted the man. The teacher attempted to sexually assault the participant, but P5 was able to come
out to himself as gay by meeting with the teacher. He told the story, “I called him up on the phone and I said, ‘I think I’m like you... Is there a place where we go,’ and he told me there was a bar down in Town. Sure enough we got to the bar and he started touching me so I pushed him away and cried.” In this story the gay culture of the bar to which they went and the presence of some sort of gay role model, or older gay man, helped the participant acknowledge his sexuality.

Coming out fully to oneself, “admitting it to themselves,” revealed themes of attraction to other men and sexual experiences with other men in participants’ narratives. Here participants shed more light on where they found their first attraction to males that led to acknowledging their sexual orientation. In different accounts, attraction to men occurred during moments of isolation, after attraction to women, in the media (such as newspapers, novels, and musicals), and at school. Furthermore, sexual experiences with men after attraction to women, and sexual experiences with male friends led to a fuller gay acknowledgement of oneself.

Attraction to men was a common response among all participants when they began thinking about their difference from straight boys. Interestingly, when given the interview prompt about admitting sexual identity internally, P4 asked if the question implied a distinction between attraction to other men and understanding that he was gay. The complexity of coming out internally is shown here because many times attraction to other men can be present without defining gay sexuality. Attraction led one participant to a definition of his own sexuality as gay, even after gay was undefined earlier in his childhood. Four participants spoke of an attraction to men, specified in one case as an emotional attraction in childhood. In another situation it was an attraction to a family friend who helped the participant realize he was gay. Physical attraction was described by P1 as “appreciate[ing] good looking men and movies stars, and when [he] watched TV [he] always knew who the most handsome actor was,” while emotional attraction was specified by P6 when he said that “emotional bonding led to physical contact with men.”
Half of the participants associated attraction with masculine figures in their lives. Participant 4 explained his isolation from friends and family led to a self-learning that allowed him to think about and experience his attraction to men. “This [was] the first time it was just me, and I couldn’t really reach out to someone else so I think I realized a lot of things about myself. And I remember being like, ‘Oh I think I’m attracted to male name,’” he said. Another participant said he was attracted, first emotionally and then physically, to men during his twenties while he was intimate with women and even married. In his thirties he was more attracted to men, which led him to admit and understand his gay sexuality.

“[Physical contact with men] was very infrequent ....maybe twice in my early twenties, and it wasn’t until I was well into my thirties that there was more active sexual contact with men,” he said.

In addition, one participant spoke about masculine figures in the media who were attractive. He said that a gay pornographic novel in his teens led to his first experience of masturbation, but it did not lead him to speak openly of his sexual desires. Another man described the Bible as a source of attractive masculine figures.

Isolation, fear, and anxiety were subliminal themes during this phase of coming out, but are relatively less intense than when the men later came out to others.

Out of the Closet

The range of coming out experiences is varied and complex. Acknowledging sexuality internally, as we have seen, is often viewed as the first stage in the process. The next step in coming out is to tell other people in the gay man’s life. The people with whom the man feels closest are usually confided in first. These people can include peers, family, parents, roommates, or other important people in his life.
Each participant in the interview protocol was asked to describe the moment he came out to another person. I asked each man to describe whom he was with when he came out, how he decided to come out, and why. I asked each participant why coming out occurred at the time it did and why that time was positive or negative. Last, participants were asked if they could re-live their coming out experience what they would change, if anything.

Many factors influence the coming out experiences of gay men. Participants in this study brought up themes related to gay culture and community, friendships, intimate relationships, strong emotions prior to coming out, sexual experiences, and the influence of media that helped each of them come out.

Five of the participants spoke of a gay culture or community, the gay bar scene, or a gay role model involved in the time they came out. Inherent to the gay culture were gay friends who played a large role in the coming out process. Seven participants mentioned friends in their coming out processes, whereas four men specified that their friends were gay. For some participants gay friends became intimate partners who helped them come out. P9 was introduced to the gay community and had a gay friendship in New York City, also around the time he had an intimate relationship and found love with another man. “I met a fellow teacher who was gay...and found a gay bar in the city...and got connected to some gay people in the city – met the guy that I fell in love with and was my first lover,” he said in response to my question about first coming out.

For P5 his friendship with another man led to an intimate sexual relationship with that man that made him feel more integrated. He also felt integrated through the New York City gay community and through a gay friend. P8 was friends with a man who eventually became an intimate partner after the man’s isolation in Catholic high school. He mentioned before coming out he felt invisible, depressed, and fearful/anxious from being in the closet during high school.
For other participants gay friends and intimate partners were separate but both may have helped in the coming out process. In P4’s case, he had gay friends and a gay community in college but did not come out until he felt it was time to do so. “I had gay friends, I was involved in the tiny gay community at my college so I knew other gay people,” he said. “There was Rent playing in the background so it was time to talk – and I needed to talk to someone too, so it was helpful.” Eventually P4 found a gay community, gay friends, the gay bar scene, and an intimate relationship with another man that helped him come out.

P2 did not come out to his coworkers but he had gay friends and a gay community in his personal life that allowed him not to feel shame about his sexuality. “I had a group of gay friends [at work]. I could honestly say I don’t think I was ashamed of my gay life, I had so many good gay friends,” P2 said. P10 came out as a teenager when he was in a bar with his childhood friend.

P4, who first came out as bi-sexual, came out as gay to his friends later in college. After college he experienced coming out to his high school friends and parents, which he described as more difficult because he lacked a gay community or gay role models. Last, P2 explained that he had a sexual experience before he came out as gay, yet he came out to friends as gay during the same time of his sexual exploits in his twenties. “I didn’t tell other people, I mean, I was having sex for years before I actually told – I mean I told other gay men. I made gay friends,” he said.

Seven participants mentioned strong emotions that were associated with their coming out experience. These included fear and/or anxiety, a general emotional build-up, suppression, isolation, guilt, denial, anger, pain and/or suffering, depression, anger, regret, shame, and unsafety.

For P10 his fear and anxiety were associated with his integration into the gay community through the bar scene, which he described as fascinating and frightening. “I was panicking, like I was really freaking out because I was absolutely fascinated, interested, invested in one way, but on the other
hand you know wondering, ‘Where the hell am I? What am I doing here?’” Furthermore, leading up to his gay coming out he felt it was his personal responsibility to do so, which may have led to some feeling of guilt in his experience.

P9, P8, and P3 all spoke of a specific build-up of emotions before they came out to someone. In his twenties P9 felt repressed and a sense of emotional build-up until he could not take it any longer and came out. Afterwards, P9 described his indifference about admitting his sexuality to others. For P8 his Catholic High school was an affirmative place where he came out to his Marist Brother, but that was contrasted by his unaccepting home life. The participant described an angry moment with a building-up of emotions leading up to the first time he came out to his mother, who responded with anger in return. “In the middle of fighting it just came out. And she reacted very angrily, upset, all sorts of things. It didn’t go very well. I guess it was one of the more painful parts of coming out and my adolescence in general,” he said. The experience was described in terms of negativity, pain, and suffering, ultimately leading to depression.

P3 spoke of a friend he had in religious life whom he first came out to after he felt he could no longer hide his sexuality. During his time in the religious life he was isolated and felt as if the emotions were too strong to keep hidden. The combination of isolation and lack of a sexual outlet led him finally to an intimate relationship with a man, in which he felt he could share his emotions more freely.

Guilt and isolation also played a large part in participants’ experiences of coming out. For P5 his Catholicism made him question whether his gayness was right or wrong, something he battled with strongly and felt very guilty about. “There’s always the mixture of oh my God it’s great but is it right? I was raised in a very strict Catholic family so is this really what I’m supposed to be doing? It’s exciting but also scary.” He became integrated into the gay community but with suffering about his guilt from Catholicism as a result. Coming out his first time, P1 was in a Catholic confessional with a priest. When
he came out to the priest he described the experience as full of pain, suffering, shame, and guilt. Later P1 came out a second time during seminary and felt much more affirmed by the priest. The contrast in P1’s coming out experiences show the variation in gay men’s coming out processes.

P6 felt isolated and as if his life was not integrated during his marriage to a woman. When he finally came out to his wife he explained his regret for not coming out sooner because of the people he directly affected by not coming out. He also described the experience as inevitable because of his isolation and unintegrated lifestyle. Sometimes gay sexual experiences can be associated with guilt as well. P9’s Catholic high school made him feel guilty for his sexuality so he prayed out of guilt. He also felt extremely isolated and confessed his masturbation out of guilt. “[I] went to an all-boys high school and increasingly knew, but never acted on it. It was like I figured it was wrong and... maybe I could pray it away.” Interestingly, during college he was in an intimate relationship with a woman and nearly married her, one might assume as a result of his early guilt. P9 had an un-planned coming out in college when he had a sexual experience with another man for the first time and felt guilty, but very liberated. He went on to be able to admit his sexuality to himself and learn about himself through the sexual experience.

P2 had his first sexual experience in his teens in NYC but did not come out to any of his co-workers or friends, which may be interpreted as a result of his guilt or shame. P4 came out before his first sexual experience with a man, showing that the order in which people come out and experience sex is not linear. I assume he was not ashamed or guilty because he was already out of the closet during his first gay experience. P4’s example shows that sexual experience with the same gender does not lead to coming out in every case.

Last, I would like to acknowledge the role of media and the unique qualities of NYC in these stories. Five of the participants spoke of New York City specifically as a place where they first came out. Their coming out in New York City shows the historical and cultural importance of the context of this
study. Further, three men spoke of media (such as newspapers, movies, and Catholic booklets) that were associated with their gay identities. For Participants 9 and 6 media were linked to NYC as a new and profound place where they might feel more integrated as gay men. “So I began reading and thinking through the potential for coming out,” said P6 after seeing a movie related to NYC. P9 remembered, “When I was 10 years old I saw a Sunday New York Times Arts and Leisure section ...with the big full-page ads for the movies and stuff. I thought, ‘Oh wow, this is where I want to be.’” For P5 the Catholic media he saw were a source of his first gay exposure to gay role models. “My mother had these missionary booklets so I read one of them and it said ‘Return to Sodom and Gomorrah’ and it was a picture of gay people and I was like, ‘Oh my God I think I can relate to these people.’” Media for these participants played a significant role in how they learned about gay sexuality and came to accept their own identities.

**Catholic at Birth**

All but one of the participants were baptized into the Catholic Church before their first birthday. The exception was a participant who was baptized before he turned four years old. Six participants spoke of what I am calling an integrated religion during their adolescence, or Catholicism at birth. Two of the participants specified that integrated religion was a product of their parents’ religious beliefs. For P10 his parents were Catholic and he was surrounded by the Catholic culture from birth, including Catholic high school and college, and regular attendance at mass. He accepted his religious identity independently during college when he made his own decision to attend mass. Similarly, for P4 his parents played a large role in his integrated religion because his entire family was unquestioningly Catholic. Ironically, he concluded that religion was also the reason his parents accepted his gay sexuality: because of the Bible’s messages of love. “Religion was something that was always just present in my life. Any ideas of Christianity were reasons why my parents had to accept me. I grew up in a family where we went to
Church every Sunday. Within my family the existence of God is unquestionable,” he said. For P10 the ritual of the church was a part of the Catholic culture, along with parental influence, that integrated his religious identity from the start. He specifically mentioned that he “felt so close to God during [his] first communion.” P9 explained that his integrated religious identity from an early age began with the nuns in his Catholic school and his mother’s religious beliefs and practices. Catholic school and college provided an integrated religious culture, and therefore identity, for P8 from an early age, which taught him to be an intellectual Catholic. The Church also held a special place in his heart because of its association with his home and memories.

P9, P4, and P1 introduced the idea of an exploration of spiritualties, not limited to the Catholic denomination. P9 explained his ingrained Catholicism as similar to “being Jewish, you are whether you practice the religion or not.” His religious exploration for a higher power occurred when he “tried Buddhism and all kinds of stuff and of course, eventually [he] had to go back to [his] roots.” For P4 and P1 the integrated religion was present from birth, but spiritual exploration was always an option. P4 described his exploration through a religious Buddhism book that “came off [his] dad’s shelf. Religion has always been an open question,” he said. P1 spoke of limitless opportunities to explore religion when he “branched off ... and explored [his] life so [he was] not limited to Catholicism but [he] identified very early on [his] own as Catholic.”

Each participant approached their independent Catholic identity in a different way. Some of the participants spoke of an early Catholic identity starting from childhood and culminating in their teens when they entered seminary. “Well, since it was always there for me since birth and in my life structure but then having decided at least to explore my Catholicism greater at 17 entering seminary was certainly the most classical approach,” said P1. Two participants spoke of life-altering events, a death and a fire, which brought them more in line with their own religious identity. P2 stated after a fire in his apartment, “I said ‘You know I need to have something, I just have to back off for a minute and I’ll go back [to
church] and see what that’s like,’ and I went there and I never left.” Participant 4 questioned the afterlife following a sudden death in his family. He said, “That was the beginning of my faith being active as opposed to child-like,” because of the larger questions associated with death that he had to think through. P3 spoke of his Catholic identity when he began his religious life as a teacher in a Catholic school. P5 accepted his religious identity simultaneously with accepting his sexuality. In NYC he felt comfortable with both his gay and Catholic identities through Dignity. For P4 his Catholic identity was reinforced when he was challenged by others. He first took on his identity in college when he became the religious minority, whereas he had been the religious majority at home. Then when he was in a relationship with an atheist, he was again forced to embrace and even defend his religious identity.

Three participants spoke intermittently of Vatican II, the future of the Church, and progress within the Church. P1 specifically spoke about the time of his birth when the Catholic Church was going through a phase of liberation with Vatican II and the noticeable progress of the Church. He was so optimistic about the progress that he entered the seminary and found he had a vocation to the priesthood. In addition, P1 spoke of the Catholic community as a socially acceptable solution to his hidden gay identity. He spoke of the time: “It was the absolute height of the reforms, the Vatican II reforms ... liberation theology ... the sexual revolution. It was at the very height of the church being the most progressive institutionally that it would ever have been. I was very fortunate to be in seminary at a time where it was pretty cool.” P10 briefly mentioned Vatican II when he spoke of Catholic culture and ritual, which affirmed his attraction to the religion even as he took it on independently. P9 mentioned Vatican II because of his anger towards the Church in its current state. “I’m a child of Vatican II, the Church is the people of God, I am the church,” he said. It was Vatican II that kept him involved to this day and helped him realize that the Church is made up of himself and those he is around, even though the Church does not accept its gay congregation fully.
Three of the participants brought up the theme of good and bad people within the Catholic Church. Participant 3 spent the most time discussing the bad people in the Church who created pain and suffering for him in the religious life. Yet he saw how the good Catholic people had sacrificed to be in the Church, and he appreciated them more. His perception of good people led him to a vocation in the religious life. He had experiences with bad Catholic people that caused him to leave the religious life. He spoke of the environment at his school to become a Brother as full of good and bad people, and said, “I had just had it, I’d had it with living with these people. And I felt bad because so many of them I liked but some of the ones I had to live with and some of the negative experiences... might have poisoned me.” P8 described good people in his Catholic high school and college experiences. Specifically, a Catholic Marist Brother affirmed his gay sexuality in high school and the affirmation continued in his college experience. P5 spoke of good Catholic people that not only talked about God’s work but also took part in the work of the Church, sending a clear message that their actions mimicked their words. He said, “This is God’s work – it wasn’t just sitting in a church praying, it was going out there and meeting with the people that needed help.”

**Coming Out Catholic**

In addition to accepting his independent religious identity, I asked each participant if he had to come out as Catholic to anyone. Coming out as Catholic is not thought about as often, or in the same way, as a gay coming out experience.

Participants only came out as Catholic when they were in a gay environment. Three participants spoke about surrounding themselves with gay men, which made it necessary to come out as Catholic. P4 and P5 specifically said that when they were out with gay friends at bars, or with friends they associated with the bar scene, they came out as Catholic. “Once I was hanging out at gay bars and had a lot of gay
friends and was dating a lot, [being Catholic] suddenly became a thing to worry about telling people,” P4 said. Furthermore, coming out as Catholic to his gay friends interfered with his dating life because other gay men were not accepting of P4’s Catholicism. Opposite of P4’s experience, P3 said that coming out as Catholic during his Gay Straight Alliance meeting showed him that his Catholicism was a common trait among some of his queer peers. For P3 that experience affirmed his two identities.

The general message about coming out as Catholic was that it felt unnecessary. For example, P2 emphasized that his Catholicism had been integrated into his life since birth and it was something he believed people already knew about him. Therefore, he said, people did not care that he was Catholic. “People didn’t ask you where you lived, they asked what parish you were from,” said P2 to show that his Catholic identity was something others already knew. P3 also implied that people did not care that he was Catholic. P3’s neighbors knew he was a Christian, just as he knew they were Jewish. P9 said he was not reluctant to come out as Catholic but was not outwardly Catholic and didn’t feel it necessary to be outward about his religion. P9 explained it as “not something he wore on his sleeve, but he never backed away from it.” Part of P9’s lack of showing his Catholicism outwardly was because he felt that he had ownership in the Church, and therefore coming out Catholic was not necessary to justify his presence in the Church.

P1 and P4 spoke of multiple coming out experiences. P1 found himself coming out as both gay and Catholic at the same time. P4 said, “You have to come out to your Christian family and community as gay and you have to come out to your gay community as religious.” When P4 came out as Catholic to people whom he felt disapproved of his religion, he would limit discussions with them and often screen his language to exclude anything religious. “If I’m with someone who I feel is particularly anti-religious or really uncomfortable .... I’ll be like, ‘Oh this is what the universe wants me to do,’ instead of, ‘Maybe this is what God wants,” he said. Similarly, P5 spoke of a compartmentalization between his friends that accepted his Catholicism - mostly other Catholic people - and his friends that did not accept his
Catholicism. The compartmentalization led to dual personalities that he showed based on the people with whom he surrounded himself.

P10 gave a unique description of his coming out because he was a priest. He said that coming out as Catholic and a priest to other gay people was harder. Sometimes he found himself defending his position in the Church, and said the casual conversations he had with other gay men were exhausting. “I would be exhausted by being pulled in religious directions at something that was meant to be convivial,” he explained.

Conclusion

In the discussion of the first theme, coming out as gay and Catholic, I have shown how gay Catholic men negotiate their sexual and religious coming out experiences. When in the closet, defining “gay” becomes a priority for men. The definition is partially discovered through sexual exploration with other men, but mostly discovered through each participants’ attraction to other men. A Catholic identity “in the closet” differs for participants because it comes from an integrated culture and family background that is present at birth. Without knowing about religion the participants automatically become Catholic. The participants explained that religious exploration was present as they grew up and learned more about their religious identities. Furthermore, a religious identity was taken on independently by participants when they were removed from the existing culture of Catholicism and made their own decisions. The participants showed that in this process of taking on a religious identity independently many factors are at play. The integration of religion from birth, as well as life-altering events, challenges to their religious beliefs, the historical progress of the Church and Vatican II, and good people within the Church help participants take on their identity. The institution of the Church differentiates many of the experiences of taking on a religious identity from taking on a sexual identity.
When the participants spoke of coming out to another person as gay there was an emphasis on being surrounded by a gay environment (gay bar scene, gay community, gay role models) and gay friends, who sometimes turned into intimate partners. In addition, coming out was a point of emotional build-up for many participants when they felt they could no longer remain in the closet. For some participants sexual experiences with other men helped them come out, and for other participants books, newspapers, and novels helped them learn of their sexual identity and acknowledge it to others. Coming out as Catholic was thought of as less important by the participants because they emphasized that acknowledging a religious identity was unnecessary. The times when the participants had to come out religiously were when they were with other gay men, which led to a compartmentalization of their identities based on the level of religious acceptance shown by the gay men to whom they came out. Coming out sexually and religiously are similar in that they both take place in gay environments around other gay men. The difference is that coming out as gay is seen as a very necessary, almost inevitable, part of a gay man’s process of self-acceptance, whereas coming out as Catholic is mostly unnecessary.
Theme Two: Negotiating the Pastoral and Institutional Church

The Catholic Church declared in the *Letter to Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* that homosexual activity is not morally acceptable. The Church’s doctrine regarding homosexual behavior is “based on the solid foundation of a constant Biblical testimony.” These statements are made with the understanding that a distinction exists between the homosexual condition or tendency and individual homosexual acts. The biblical interpretation of homosexuality is widely debated within the Catholic community, and specifically among gay Catholics. Recently Matthew Vines, a Harvard student, was highlighted in major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and Huffington Post as he fought homophobia in the Christian community. Vines’s argument that the Bible never truly addresses same-sex orientation or loving same-sex relationships reflects the relevant and ongoing debate about homosexuality in Christianity. Candace Chellew-Hodge also argued in *Religion Dispatches* magazine that the oft-cited biblical passages actually refer to “abusive sex,” and that a condemnation of “loving, committed gay and lesbian relationships” does not exist in the Bible. The six Bible verses that supposedly refer to homosexual behavior are widely known and debated within the Christian community. The passages include Leviticus from the Old Testament, which states that “lying with mankind as with womankind” is prohibited, the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and several Pauline passages.

The Catholic Church’s stance on homosexual behavior creates a conflict for gay Catholic men because the institutional Church does not condone homosexual behavior and therefore gay men feel rejected by the Church. For this reason society assumes that gay men cannot be Catholic. In other words, the intolerance of the Church has created an assumption that gay men were forced away from Christianity, and Catholicism specifically.
Interestingly, some gay Catholic men are still faithful to the Church in their own ways. One way gay men remain faithful is through a separation of the institutional Catholic Church from the pastoral or local Catholic Church. Separating the pastoral Church from the institutional Church gives gay Catholic men a place to find acceptance. Another way gay men often navigate the intolerance of the Catholic Church is to become priests and thus part of the hierarchy of the Church. By becoming priests, gay men remain celibate and Catholic. The Catholic Church has been populated by gay men who became priests, some of whom come out as gay after their time serving the Church. P10 is a participant example of this type of celibate Catholic priest who later came out as gay. P6 spoke about the importance of gay people in the Church when he joked, “Who knows what kind of personnel level they’d be at if they got rid of all the gay priests that are [in the Church]. I mean, how would they staff the Church?”

In the remainder of this chapter I will refer to the institutional Catholic Church as the organized Catholic hierarchy. The institutional Church can be thought of physically as the Vatican, but extends across all countries within a hierarchical structure of bishops and priests. The institutional Church also encapsulates the rules, regulations, and traditions upheld by people within the hierarchy. On the other hand, I will refer to the pastoral Church as the Church at the community level, which usually includes one priest overseeing a congregation of practicing Catholics.

**The Institutional Church**

*Negotiating Institutional Church Teachings*

Gay Catholic men who do not enter the priesthood or who are not celibate are not accepted by the institutional Church. To reconcile intolerance by an institution, I believe, gay Catholic men rationalize the Church into irrelevance. The Church is no longer the authority to anything gay Catholic men do
because they are not accepted by the institution. Gay Catholic men who find the Church’s teachings important remain priests and/or celibate and part of the hierarchy.

In order to negotiate the institutional Church’s teachings against homosexual behavior the participants spoke about the irrelevance of the Church. The Church seems irrelevant because of its distance and sense of being out of touch, to the point that some participants hypothesized the deconstruction of the institutional Church. Furthermore, participants spoke about negotiating Church teachings by picking and choosing rules and regulations to follow in their own lives and remaining intelligent Christians with the ability to make their own decisions about which teachings were appropriate to believe.

Six participants spoke about the irrelevance of the Church’s rules and regulations as applied to their own lives. P10 summarized the irrelevance of the Church teachings well when he said, “I feel that the Church is out of touch. I feel people are voting with their feet. I’d rather people take ownership and refuse to go [along with the Church].” P2 said, “I just don’t think the Church has any relevance to me at all. I don’t buy into their magisterium. I don’t buy into their rules, their regulations, and proclamations. What I buy into is the good works, the charity, and the prayer life.” P4 also implied that rules and regulations of the Church had no importance to him. He said, “I have maintained that a religion is not what people far away say it should be, it’s not what the men in power say it should be, it’s about individual communities. I have become more anti large Church, which has happened over the past year.” The flexibility of the Church’s rules made P6 angry. He said, “The hierarchy is less and less relevant and the Church is living in its own world and concept of the world, frequently as if what they had to say made a lot of difference to the gay or straight congregations.” P4 described his battle with the institution in a simple question: “How do I associate with this tradition that officially is so rabidly anti-gay?” “The hierarchical Church is just ridiculous towards us,” P1 summarized. He continued, “The Catholic Church is an embarrassment to itself, it’s shameful. All the misogyny, the homophobia, and backwardness of the
Church.” These participants showed how the institutional Church’s rules and regulations seem distant and do not apply directly to their lives.

P9 spoke about the Church’s stance on marriage and the irrelevance of Church teachings in his own life. He said, “Matrimony is the only sacrament administered by the people themselves. So I figure I am married by Jesus so screw the Church and screw the state. I don’t need those assholes.” When he spoke about gay marriage P10 said, “I was really glad the Church leaders were embarrassed and horrified that nobody was listening to them because what they said did not have a ring of truth.” The contradictory and inapplicable rules make the Church hierarchy seem irrelevant to gay Catholic men. P2 explained the Church’s irrelevance even as it applied to straight people by saying that 20 random Catholics on the street would have no idea what he was speaking about if he repeated what the Pope said. He said, “I think 95% of married couples who are able to have children are on birth control – they don’t listen.” The Church seems irrelevant not only to him, but to many Catholics who choose which rules they will abide by and which they will not. Yet letting go of Catholicism is difficult for these participants. P9 said, “I’m fed up with the Church in a lot of ways. I’m very angry at the Vatican because they are completely wrong about gay people. But again, I’m a child of Vatican II, the Church is the people of God, and I am the Church. It’s my Church and nobody is going to kick me out of it, and if they don’t like it, too bad.” P9 showed that the institutional Church is irrelevant in its rules and regulations, but gay Catholic men still want to be included in the tradition.

Three participants spoke of the Church’s irrelevant rules and regulations leading to a nonexistent institutional Church in the future. P2 predicted the downfall of the institutional Church because of its irrelevance. He said, “I think the hierarchy will crash in 20 years, and you’ll live to see a whole new structure where there will be married people, there will be women, and they won’t listen to the current nonsense.” P4 clarified that he would not practice Catholicism if the institutional Church alone existed, without his accepting pastoral Church. He said, “Certainly if I no longer feel comfortable in any Catholic
Church I will no longer be Catholic,” signifying his reliance on the pastoral Church as the only part of the Catholic religion that kept him within the tradition. P9 spoke of the future when he said, “We’re moving into the era of the Church of the Holy Spirit and the institutional Church is going to wither away.” P9 also spoke of the Pope’s role in creating a more accepting institutional Church. He said, “The Pope is not supposed to be a symbol of authority, he’s supposed to be a symbol of unity.” The gay Catholic men imply in their statements that the institutional Church will cease to exist for most Catholics if it does not change and become more accepting, for example, of gay marriage or birth control.

One way gay Catholic men negotiate Church teachings is through picking and choosing the regulations to follow. A pick-and-choose mentality is a product of the irrelevance of some of the Church teachings. P3 and P10 are examples of participants that described their decisions about what to believe. P3 described himself as a supermarket Catholic, picking and choosing what he wanted to believe of the religion, because the Catholic Church was completely wrong about some topics. P10, when asked about conflict with Church teachings, said, “Well I probably feel less in conflict now because I pick and choose. Without being cavalier about it, I think the Church, the tradition of 2000 years of people who have tried to follow Jesus, has something important to say.” For P10 it seems that the tradition of the institutional Church was very important, yet he picked and chose which teachings he followed in his own life. I believe picking and choosing Catholics are a product of the Church’s outdated policies concerning the acceptance of homosexuality. P5 also described the difficulty of reconciling the Church teachings. He said, “My generation of men were brought up to know that gay was filthy, dirty, and bad, and Catholic was good. So to put the two together was very difficult for people who were of a certain age. To understand that you can be Catholic and follow the rules of the Catholic Church, or the rules that you feel are important to you and that you can understand, was difficult.” These gay Catholic men gravitate toward the Catholic tradition but pick and choose teachings to apply in their own lives as a way to negotiate unacceptance in the Church.
Last, participants spoke of an intellectual Catholicism that helped them rationalize how the institutional Church’s teachings should apply to their own lives. P6 explained that Catholic school taught him to be intelligent about the relevance of Church teachings to his own life. In particular, how teachings about homosexuality were in opposition to his own beliefs. He said, “I was taught from my earliest days in grammar schools that the primary Catholic teaching is that conscious is paramount above all things: above Church teachings and above pronouncement of the Pope. If you, in good conscience, do not believe something is wrong, then it is not sinful if you’ve properly taken into consideration what the Church teaching may be and what it is.” He continued, “I felt perhaps Church teachings were in conflict with good scriptural analysis and the history of the Church. It wasn’t so much me in conflict, it was the Church who was in conflict with its own tradition and teachings.” P9 spoke about realizing he did not have to compromise his intelligence in order to continue practicing Catholicism. He said, “You can be smart, an intellectual, and a Christian. If I had not known that I could be all three, I think I’d be an atheist or something because I’m not checking my brains at the door. I firmly believe that God does not want me to leave my intelligence behind. I always say that God does not want you to be an asshole, so don’t. Any religion that’s telling you that you have to be an asshole is wrong, plain and simple.” P8 said, “I believe that you should be allowed to think critically about what the Church teaches and not just blindly accept it.” P5 said that, for him, staying in the Church was always about creating change. He said, “I always wanted to tell my friend, ‘You have to stay in the Church to make change happen. You can’t just run away from things.’ So I think that’s why I stayed all these years.” These four men showed that to be Catholic does not mean that one does not have agency in how the Church’s teachings apply to one’s life. In some way, the participants negotiated the Church’s unacceptance with their own opinions to partially accept the institutional teachings.
Political Hypocrisy and Scandal

The hypocrisy of the institutional Church, as seen by gay Catholic men, is attributed to contradictory teachings in the Bible and the cover-up of molestation scandals in the Church while the Church continues to forbid homosexual behavior. Such contradictory teachings include the use of birth control and allowing Catholics to eat fish while practicing homosexuality and gay marriage are forcefully unaccepted. The Church’s hypocritical political stances and teachings have made gay Catholic men question the Church’s moral authority.

The participants spoke about the institutional Church’s hypocritical rule enforcement and the Catholic people’s subsequent hypocritical rule-breaking. For example, P2 talked about birth control as a case study in how Catholic people do not listen to certain Church regulations, yet Catholics enforce the exclusion of gay marriage from the Church. He said, “I’m similar to you and your wife on birth control. If the husband and wife are Catholic they’re not letting the Vatican make their decision on how they are creating a family.” P5 spoke of the guilt that the Catholic institution instills when he said, “I think there’s a lot of conflict with the dogma of the Church [in that] if you don’t say your prayers or this or that, at a young age [the Church] taught you that you were going to hell.” Catholic guilt becomes a part of the hypocrisy in that it teaches an obedience to the rules and regulations that the Church deems appropriate, such as opposition to gay marriage. Birth control is not directly endorsed by the institutional Church but P5 made the point that the Catholic congregation chooses to uphold certain standards against gay marriage and ignores rules that condemn the use of birth control. The place of women in the Catholic Church was also a topic of contention. P10 said, “I think the whole papal system is problematic. If the Church was being truly honest about the ordination of women it would recognize women have this vital role to play in the Church and they would bring them into the government of the church in another way.”
Gay marriage came up often in participant interviews because it is an example of how the Church selectively turns a blind eye to certain rule-breaking but closely monitors the exclusion of gay marriage. P10 said, “We’ve decided to sink our teeth into and hang onto things like gay marriage. Whereas a kosher dietary law is really insignificant. If you eat shrimp we’re not going to stab you to death. Well why one and not the other?” P2 also emphasized that the institutional Church is contradictory in its teachings because gays cannot get married yet people have sex for 20 years before marriage, which the Church does not approve. P3 said that in his opinion for the Church to say that gay people do not have the same rights as everyone else to marry one another is hypocritical. He said further, “I think what some of the people in the Church have done to hurt people will put them in hell, but it’s not going to put me in hell for loving my partner.” P2 emphasized here the contradiction of the institutional Church teachings: to hate someone for their homosexuality is just as, if not more, sinful as participating in homosexual acts.

The Church as an institution also acts in hypocritical political ways when it determines, for example, that homosexual behavior does not align with Catholic practices. The issue of gay marriage is largely a political question concerning the equality of same-sex relationships. The Church’s stance on the issue shows how the institution is also a political force. P8 commented on the Church’s political actions when he said, “It’s almost disgusting to me how the Church raises so much money to stop gay marriage and when a gay teen gets bullied or commits suicide they say absolutely nothing. That’s yet another thing that made me lose respect for a lot of people in the hierarchy.”

P10 summarized the sentiment of gay Catholic men toward the Church’s teachings and how the Church has changed over time, specifically the division between the pastoral and institutional Church. He said, “I think in terms of the hierarchy and the official mouthpiece of the Church you have wild inconsistencies. My own bishop made really nice statements back in the seventies about gay folks but then they followed up with all these doctrinal pronouncements, which are not workable at all. [The
pronouncements] fly in the face of a loving God and a Church that is truly welcoming. I think on the local level you have parishes that are doing a great job at welcoming.”

P8 contrasted the hypocrisy of the Church with what he finds affirming about the Church, one possible reason why gay Catholic men gravitate toward the Catholic tradition. He said, “If something about the Church makes me feel uneasy or if I feel is hypocritical, I turn away from that, whereas if something is inspiring or life-giving then that’s God calling you towards that.”

The recent scandal of child molestations by priests in the Catholic Church is a concern to gay Catholic men because so many priests within the Church are gay or take part in same-sex molestation. The connection between child molestation in the Church and the intolerance of homosexuals by the Church is troublesome to gay Catholic men because it makes the institutional Church seem as though it contradicts itself. A double standard exists in the “rules” of the Church when the institution turns a blind eye to homosexual priests, without punishment for their molestation, but rejects homosexual acts by the congregation. The gay priests have not been punished by the Church for their acts of molestation, but rather are hidden from the law. Yet the institutional Church has decided to reject gay Catholics in the Church who are not celibate or not priests. The scandal is especially concerning to gay Catholic men because the Church has priests who are involved in same-sex molestation, which creates a hateful stereotype of gay Catholic men. This stereotype, as seen by the public, may cause confusion between gay men and molesters. This is another concern for gay Catholic men about how they are perceived.

The Church molestation scandal and how it was handled played a large role in the degradation of the institution’s authority. Nearly every participant spoke of the molestation scandal when they spoke about the Church’s irrelevance and limited applicability to their lives.

The third participant summarized the view of the Church by many other participants. He said, “I think the Church has lost its moral authority. It is wrong when the Church white washes all of this abuse
and then takes people who are responsible for pushing some of these men around from place to place and then pulls them to the Vatican so they can’t go on trial or can’t go to jail. They have lost their moral authority. I’m very angry about that. Those people should be held accountable.” Further, he said, “The Church uses its power to insulate from justice the people who do the wrong things.” P6 said, “The Church is reacting like an organization, not the people of God. When the priest pedophile issue came about they circled the wagons. They acted like an organization. They transferred people out somewhere else the way perhaps a corporate body would do. They put things out as if the old Church wasn’t subject to civil authority and I think there is still that level of thought - that they really aren’t subject to civil authority.” P8 spoke about the loss of a moral authority in the Church and how the Church mindlessly exerted its power over anyone. P9’s family rejected the Church completely because of the scandal and cover-up. In the opinions of gay Catholic men, the institutional Church’s response to the scandal lessened its credibility and power in their lives.

P4 compared the reaction of the Church when gay marriage was approved to the Church’s response to the sex scandals. He said, “When gay marriage passed the Arch Diocese of New York came out with something like, ‘This is a terrible thing that will have damaging ramifications throughout generations to come, which we can’t even imagine.’ I was like, ‘Wait, did you mean to release this press release during the child molestation scandals?’ because that would actually be a more appropriate response.” He continued that the Church’s contradictory response, in his opinion, destroyed American Catholics’ faith. For gay Catholic men, the institutional Church’s rejection of marriage equality is much more damaging in comparison to the lack of morality in covering up molestations within the Church.
The Pastoral Church

The pastoral Church, while it varies by community, was described as a more accepting and welcoming place. The pastoral Church was tied to family history, personal values, and in one unique case, the first exposure to other gay people. Furthermore, Dignity as a pastoral Church became the avenue for most participants to reconcile their gay and Catholic identities.

P4 explained that his pastoral Church experience was quite varied. He gave an example of hearing “the priest give a fantastic homily calling for equal treatment and positive affirming treatment of gays and women priests.” But then he said another parish in the town next to his own had a “campaign against same-sex marriage.” That is to say, while the institutional Church is one organization, the pastoral Church cannot be generalized to one single experience.

For P4 the pastoral Church was closely tied to his family. He said, “We went to church every Sunday. My parents subscribed to a 1970s grounded Catholicism. In terms of the actual Church itself, they are not particularly wed to it per say, although apparently we’ve had serious discussions about whether they should just cut loose and do something else.” P3 said his pastoral Church was aligned with his own values. He said, “The theology of my Church, the social practices of my Church, the social norms, and the religion are all in line with me as opposed to if I walk into the Cathedral.” P1 described the pastoral Church as understanding, supportive and respectful toward gay men. P2 said, “I think most pastoral churches, if they did not have the big ‘C’ magisterium, would be welcoming.” The Church hierarchy is not welcoming, he said. For these reasons, the tone of participants when describing experiences in a local Church were much more focused on feelings of welcome and acceptance.

P4 also had a unique experience in his own community parish. The pastoral Church was a place P4 first learned more about gay people. He said, “I had this vague idea what gay people were before the youth minister showed us the Laramie Project” – a play about the reaction to the murder of Matthew
Shepard, a gay Wyoming student, in 1998. In this way, his Church was probably one of the most accepting places in comparison to other pastoral Churches described by participants and in comparison to the institutional Church.

P6 said, “I think you’ll find that when you have an individual pastor counseling somebody he’s not necessarily as bound by the party line as comes out of the organizational Church.” When comparing his local Church to the institutional organization P4 said, “I was not raised with a hateful, closed-off, small-minded religion. I was raised with a spirit and a love and a faith, not something that hurt people.” P4’s experience mimicked many of the other participants in that the institution felt harmful while each of their local parishes were more accepting. When coming out as gay, P8 described the local Church as “accepting, but on a larger scale the Church wasn’t accepting” of his sexual identity. P8 also said there was a paradox where “the Church on a local level was accepting and affirming, but on a hierarchy level it was oppressive and sending out all these statements against gay people and gay marriage around the world. I think LGBT inclusive people in the Church are afraid to come out as allies because of the punishment they would face from the Church.” P5 said, “I go back to my local parish and ... I feel it’s okay to question and it’s okay to have different ideas. We may not all think the same thing but we can at least question.” P5 was also the only participant who spoke out against his pastoral Church. He continued, “I go home to my local parish and it’s the same thing. I remember the priest has talked about homosexuality and not in a good way.” These participants showed that gay Catholic men see a strong divide between the institutional and pastoral Church.

The mass at Dignity was a crucial part of how gay Catholic men formed their identities and accepted the pastoral Church while not necessarily accepting the institutional Church. The theme of acceptance and comfort in Dignity as the pastoral Church became apparent when I spoke with five of the participants. P2 said that having other gay and lesbian people around during mass was important for creating an accepting environment. He said, “When I joined Dignity and I realized the amount of
sexuality in the clergy and the Church it was really much more of an accepting place.” Comfort for P5 was associated with being around people that were spiritually uplifting, as opposed to a Catholic institution that spoke out against homosexual acts. P5 said, “I go into Dignity mass and [am] able to put my two identities together and be around people that are spiritually uplifting that happen to be gay or gay accepting. That just makes me blossom and makes me feel comfortable.” “I am more comfortable accepting myself and the mass is better at Dignity, there is a sense of community,” said P6.

The political implications of the pastoral Church’s view are also important to gay Catholic men. In Dignity P4 felt that he could relate more to Dignity teachings because they were targeted toward a gay Catholic population. In reference to Proposition 8 he said, “I’m glad when something like that happens anyone giving a homily at Dignity addresses it and helps me deal with it spiritually and emotionally. The challenges [reconciling such a political action are] unique to the vast majority of people at Dignity.” P3 spoke of Dignity as a comfortable, free, and accepting place because he “didn’t have to hide when [he] went there and everyone [was] in the same boat.” For P2, he has abandoned the Catholic Church but still identifies as Catholic because of his involvement in Dignity. He said, “I like the idea of having the doors of Dignity open as long as people are still questioning [their identities]. The Church isn’t the right answer and you can have a good life and be comfortable as a gay Catholic man. It’d be easy enough if everybody else would just say screw the Church, but some people can’t do that. They have to reason it out and emotionally feel it out and Dignity is a good spot for that.” Dignity has become a place of reconciliation of identities and of acceptance for these gay Catholic men. Dignity also serves as these men’s pastoral Church.

**Conclusion**

In the minds of gay Catholic men the institutional and pastoral Catholic Church are divided around issues of relevant teachings, hypocritical rule-enforcement, and acceptance. The participants
spoke about the Church’s intolerance of homosexuality leading to irrelevant teachings, to the point that they predicted the institutional Church may one day deconstruct. To reconcile the irrelevant teachings, many of the men decided to pick and choose the Catholic teachings they would apply to their own lives. The participants also spoke about living intelligently as a Catholic and not letting the institutional Church “think” for them. The hypocritical rule enforcement of the institutional Church also led many gay Catholic men to speak about gay marriage and the weakened moral authority of the Church because of the molestation scandal cover-up. Issues about gay marriage and the molestation scandal are important to gay Catholic men because the Church’s stance on such issues is often projected to a more public audience.

Oppositely, the pastoral Church was a place gay Catholic men spoke of in terms of acceptance. Specifically, Dignity has become a pastoral Church that provides a space where these gay Catholic men can accept both their gay and Catholic identities simultaneously.
Theme Three: Locating Oneself in the Family

When gay Catholic men take on their identities, family members become an important component of the identity formation process. First, because family is the foundation of many men’s Catholic upbringing, as stated in the previous section. Second, because family is often seen by gay men as the most difficult group of people to come out to about their sexual identity for fear of rejection by those people closest to each of them. Nine of ten participants brought up their family in some form during each interview. Once I recognized that locating oneself in the family was an important part of being a gay Catholic man, I began to structure specifics questions about family influence into each interview protocol.

When I say ‘locating oneself’ I mean that these gay Catholic men are not only fulfilling a unique intersection of identities within society, but also usually fulfilling that role as the only person in their families who is gay and Catholic. This can lead to fear, anxiety, and confusion in seeking acceptance by other family members and seeing themselves as an integral and normal part of the family.

One way the participants have located themselves in their families is through their gay sexual identities. For those participants who made the decision to come out to their families, it was a very important point in admitting their sexual identities to people of great influence in their lives. Coming out to family is important because close family relationships can mean more impactful rejection if the gay man's sexual identity is not welcomed. It is important to note the difference between the need to come out as gay to family, as opposed to the inherent Catholic identity that each participants’ family already knows and accepts.

For each of the following three participants, coming out to family members was highly anticipated and sometimes feared but eventually met with positive reactions. As the only gay person in each of their families, it is a unique position to fulfill within a family and often these men lack role
models, such as brothers and sisters, to help navigate coming out in the family setting. P4 described the unique situation of coming out to family well. He said, “Coming out to my parents was the hardest part because I’m really the only gay person they are close with in their lives.” P4 also puts into words well how many gay men feel about coming out to people so important in their lives. He said, “I was sick, I would lie awake because I knew my parents were very hard to sit down and talk to so I had to set up a time to sit down and talk to them. I had this impending doomsday coming. It was a feeling of huge weight on my chest that I was going to lose the people that were most important to me.” P9 did not come out to his father for a long time because of his fear of rejection. He said, “When I finally came out to my father he said, ‘Oh the hell with the Church. God is all just and all merciful, the rest is horseshit. As long as you’re happy and as long as you’re a good person. I knew guys in the army that were like that, they were friends of mine, and I didn’t mind it.’” P9 continued to describe his happiness and relief at his father’s reaction, a sign of how difficult it was for him to imagine a future without acceptance of his sexual identity from his father. P9 said, “What could be better than that, you know? I was extremely lucky not having a guilt-ridden relationship with my father.” P6’s parents were not alive when he finally decided to come out about his sexuality but he described the experience of coming out to his extended family. He said, “My cousins were very supportive. I remember coming out to them and one cousin saying, ‘You know, I invited you over for Christmas Eve this year, whoever you bring as your guest we’re fine with.’ The other cousin said, ‘Whoever you are, whatever you are, know that we all love you, we’re all family.’ I had great support from family.”

The coming out stories of gay men to their families are highly varied. Two of the participants in this study had negative experiences when they tried to come out as gay to specific members in their families. These experiences were in contrast to other less negative coming out experiences within the family, which shows how the variety of family dynamics might play into whom a gay man chooses to tell. P3 described his experience when his brother asked him if he was gay, a question to which he did not
respond. He said if his brother were to ask again, “I’d say to him, ‘Look, did I ever come here and say did [your wife] suck your cock last night? Or did you fuck [your wife] last night? Have I ever done that in the 40 years you were married?’ He’d say to me, ‘No.’ ‘Well then, that’s your business and I’m keeping my business to myself.”’ P3 contrasted this story when he said he was out of the closet to his sister. This shows how a variety of family members also creates dynamic relationships in which a gay identity may be known by some in the family while others have no idea. In P3’s opinion, it was not his brother’s business to know his sexual identity. Similarly, P8 described his negative experience when coming out to his mother. He said, “I had come out to my mom and it was in the middle of this huge argument.” His experience led to depression and suppression caused by his mother and father’s negative reactions to his sexual identity. P8 described his parents as controlling and stabbing when they wanted him to remain near them during college. He said his mother said, “‘Oh why do you want to go away so much? Oh is it because you just want to faggot around over there?’ The way she said that made it clear to me how much the element of control was present in their want to decide my future.” P8 contrasted his experience with his parents when he said, “My extended family knows I’m gay and have oppositely been more encouraging and accepting. I remember my grandma calling my cousin and asking her if I had a guy yet. I was shocked by it because I hadn’t come out to her directly. It’s painful because I think, ‘Ok, these people in my extended family accept me and then my mom and dad are supposed to love you unconditionally but don’t.’” Again, the experience among family members is highly varied and creates a location within the families of these gay Catholic men in which they must find a balance between their sexual and religious identities being known and accepted or unaccepted.

The remaining two participants avoided possible rejection by choosing not to come out to their families at all and seeking acceptance without acknowledgement of their sexual identities. Never coming out to their families was the path that P2 and P5 chose, yet their sexuality was always an unspoken assumption. P2 said, “I never sat with my parents and told them. They didn’t really want to know. It was
an assumption made.” He continued to tell of a time his family member asked him if he was gay in his thirties. He said, “The first time he ever asked me if I was gay I was already in my thirties. I just laughed because it didn’t even dawn on me that he didn’t think I was. I never had the conversation. I mean all my brothers knew I was gay. They would hint at it but we never really had the conversation about it, I mean they certainly know I’m gay.” P5 described a similar experience when I asked him why he thought he came out as gay at the best time possible for himself. He said, “I was away from my home town where my family lived, in NYC, where gay people were and I felt like this was the best place for me.” P5 later described that his family knew he was gay when he brought his gay friends home but it was never a subject of conversation among his family. Furthermore, P5 never felt as though his family accepted his entire gay identity. He said, “My family has always said thank you for respecting us and not bringing all that craziness here. I said to myself there is a part of me that wants to tell them that they want me to keep a side of myself hidden from them. It’s not being my true self.” P2 and P5 locate themselves within their families by not acknowledging their gay and Catholic identities. Instead, their sexual identities are unspoken.

The Catholic culture and tradition are a large part of each participants’ families. Another aspect of locating themselves within their families is through the evolution and continuation of their Catholic identities. The influence of Catholic family practices, including scheduled religious traditions and schooling, throughout adolescence was talked about by seven of the participants. P2 summarized Catholic school as a continuation of family Catholicism when he said, “Your parents make you what you are. I was baptized a Catholic, I went to Catholic school for 16 years.” P2 continued about specific family expectations around Catholicism. He said, ”Mass was mandatory and Catholic school was mandatory. We were also expected to tag along [to Church]. My parents never lost their faith. Their entire life [Catholicism] was an important part of them.” P4 explained the Catholic traditions of his family that influenced him. He said, “I grew up in a family where we went to Church every Sunday and said grace
before dinner together.” For P6 growing up in the Catholic Church and his parents’ influence on his experience made him more religious. He said, “I’ve grown up with the rituals of the Church so I am comfortable with them. I’ve been participating in the ritual since teenage years, even the most conservative of rituals.” P3 spoke about the influence of his parents’ religion. He said, “My father was Lutheran and my mother was Catholic so she factored into my religious identity very strongly.” P3 also decided to join the religious life for some time of his life and explained his mother’s positive reaction. He said, “I got a lot of positive support from my mother, oh she thought this was the best thing since sliced white bread.” These participants show how Catholicism was not really a choice in their upbringing and therefore an integrated part of their identities. To choose to not be Catholic in their families might be seen as a decision to no longer be a part of the family because Catholicism is such an important component of their family cultures. This is one reason why these gay Catholic men often struggle to retain their Catholic identities while trying to accept their gay identities.

P5, P8, and P10 showed how negotiating gay and Catholic identities was difficult when Catholicism was a part of their upbringing but they were no longer living with their families or the strong Catholic influence. Independent religious identity leads to questions of guilt and right versus wrong about sexual identity. For P5 his Catholic upbringing led to some of his guilt about his sexual identity when he became independently religious. He described this when he said, “I was raised in a very strict Catholic family so is being gay really what I’m supposed to be doing?” Questioning his gay sexual identity came from his strict Catholic upbringing and the teachings against homosexuality in the Church. P8 echoed the same sentiment about taking on his Catholic identity independently of his parents and the Catholic teachings with which he had been raised. He said, “Living in my parents’ house you had to go to Church every Sunday, which seemed so regimented. To be able to explore my faith on my own in college and think critically about it is what I think inspired my greater religious development. If I didn’t want to go to Church every Sunday I didn’t have to and I could just read about it and explore.” P10’s parents
brought him up with his own critical view of the Church, outside of being taught to think critically about religion in school. He said, “My parents were supportive of the local parish but we were brought up with a healthy suspicion of the pillars of the Church – the people that needed to be noticed.”

When participants four and five spoke about locating themselves within their families by coming out as gay and retaining their Catholic identity, the results were positive experiences. As time passed P4 and P5 had experiences in their families that made negotiating their gay and Catholic identities easier because of the acceptance of their families. The acceptance is a way that these participants have solidified their locations within their families and been able to accept themselves. P4 told a story about going to an openly anti-gay Church with his parents that first began his parents’ changing views towards gay Catholic men. He said, “My parents didn’t get it. They just really didn’t understand how upset I was so they kind of forced me to go back on their time. I put my foot down a couple weeks later. I said, ‘If you understood how mad and sad [going to that Church] made me and how much it hurts me to be there now you would never ask me to go there again.'” P4’s story resulted in a few changes that he described. He said, “I think my parents are less conservative because of me. Two months ago my mother walked out of a Catholic Church because she wasn’t going to listen to ‘that stupid priest’ talk against same-sex marriage.” P4 explained that his father has changed his views of Catholicism so much that the following resulted. He said, “My father will say to me sometimes when I get really pissed, ‘Why even bother being Catholic?’ My mother is probably [now] less Catholic than I am.”

P5 first had to justify to his family that he could be gay and still be Catholic. He said, “When I went back to my family and they said, ‘Well you’re sort of Catholic.’ I said, ‘Listen I go to mass, a real mass, and am still gay.” P5 also described how his mother had changed her views to the point that she left the Catholic Church. He explained, “My mother left the Catholic Church about 30 years ago. She said, ‘I was a questioning Catholic and they don’t like questioning Catholics.’ There are certain things she has changed her issues on like gay rights. She has opened up and said the Catholic Church is very stifling for
her. Years later she showed up at group name and she said, ‘I just want everybody to know that my son is a special gift from God,’ and she gave each of the men a hug.” For P5 this was a huge turning point in his acceptance by his mother and each of their conflicts with official Church teachings about homosexuality.

Part of the familial culture of Catholicism includes Catholic schooling. Nine of the ten participants said in the follow-up survey that they attended some type of Catholic schooling, which included elementary, middle, or high school, and seminary or college. Attending Catholic school at a young age meant that parents were the ones deciding upon such a path for their child, and therefore school was a continuation of the family Catholic culture at home. The participants in my study who attended Catholic elementary schools often continued in their Catholic education through high school, which I hypothesize is typical of children that attend Catholic elementary schools because of their parents.

Attending a Catholic school during adolescence is inherently a decision made by a child’s parents. P2 and P6 both specified that their parents played a role in their Catholic education. P2 said, “Your parents make you what you are and I went to Catholic grammar school, Catholic high school, and Catholic college. Catholic school was mandatory, it wasn’t even a question of not going.” P6 echoed the same idea when he said, “My parents saw to it that I went to a Catholic grammar school. They encouraged me when I wanted to go to a Catholic school.” P2 and P6 show the common theme of Catholic parental influence through school.

Three of the participants continued in their Catholic education when it became their own decision. Sometimes this included college, seminary, or another type of formal Catholic education. P3 spoke about Catholic college in his pursuit to become a Religious Brother, while P1 and P10 attended seminary. P3 said, “In the process of becoming a Religious Brother [the Church] put you through college. You were monitored and lived in a house with people like yourself. Later I’d had it with living with these
people.” P1 identified the seminary as a place he took on his independent Catholic identity. P1 also said, “I was very fortunate to be in seminary at a time when the Vatican reforms happened and I saw the progression of the Church weekly.” Participant one came out to his family after leaving the seminary. P10 talked about his decision to enter the seminary and his experience. He said, “I prayed for three years before deciding to go to the seminary. I loved the seminary – when I was there it was a very progressive place. I was living with this big group of guys whom I considered close friends.” P10 also said, “Studying scripture and seeing the variety of ways that scripture can be interpreted and how it is historically conditioned depending on culture and the author helped me accept both identities. Understanding scripture and tradition is a much more complex process than many of us realize.” For these participants, Catholic school played a large role in their lives and frequently had an effect on their identity formation.

P6 described his entire education as affiliated with the Catholic Church and P7 described Catholic school as part of his entire life. P4 did not attend Catholic school and P5 said, “I did not enjoy my Catholic school.” While the experiences of the participants was slightly varied, 90 percent of the participants attended some form of Catholic school. I believe that Catholic schooling plays a large part in the identity formation of these participants and contributes to the reasons that these participants chose to continue practicing Catholicism as they negotiated their gay and Catholic identities.

Conclusion

For gay Catholic men finding acceptance in one’s family, locating oneself, is a process full of fear, anxiety, happiness, and growth. Participants rely on their families and Dignity to provide a foundation to their lives, so it is important that these participants find acceptance within their families in order to negotiate their contrasting identities. As P4 said, “Both my family and Dignity have given me major roots and stabilization.” As the gay Catholic men attempted to locate themselves in their families they shared
experiences of coming out about their gay identities, recalling religious traditions of their parents, and, in two cases, changing their parents’ attitudes towards homosexuality and Catholicism.

The experiences recalled by the participants about coming out as gay to their families were highly varied and showed how family dynamics can have a large effect on those family members to whom they choose to reveal their sexual identity. Coming out to certain family members resulted in some positive coming out experiences to find acceptance in the family, some negative experiences with exceptions of acceptance from some family members, and some unspoken coming out experiences.

Some participants spoke about the influence of their Catholic upbringing when they were asked about seeking acceptance within their families. The data shows that many struggles are created for gay Catholic men when they are coming out about their sexual identities to their families, but the same struggles do not exist for their Catholic identities. The Catholic culture was engrained in their lives so early that Catholicism was not a tension within the family, but rather may have created tension for participants about accepting their gay identities. The tension for the participants came in the form of guilt about their sexual identities and questioning themselves about right versus wrong when concerned about their gay identities.

Last, two participants spoke about the positive influence they created when locating themselves within their families by changing their parents’ attitudes towards the combination of their gay and Catholic identities. These participants spoke about how their parents had grown through struggles to accept both their gay and Catholic identities and question the Catholic Church’s teachings and practices to oppose homosexuality.

Additionally, Catholic school was spoken of as a decision of the participants’ parents. Three participants continued their religious education as independent Catholics, two of whom went into
seminary. Nine participants attended some form of Catholic school, which makes it seem that Catholic school plays a part in participants wanting to find a way to reconcile their faith while coming out as gay.
Discussion & Conclusion

My qualitative study of 10 gay Catholic men in the New York chapter of DignityUSA found three common themes of the identity formation process including coming out as gay and Catholic, acceptance in the institutional and pastoral Church, and locating oneself in the family.

The first theme was how gay Catholic men negotiate their sexual and religious coming out experiences. While coming out as gay is managed by the men through sexual exploration and experimentation with other men, coming out as Catholic is less of an issue because it is culturally integrated through family. The institutional Catholic Church and the men’s experiences within the Church became the largest differentiator between coming out as gay and coming out as Catholic. At a point of emotional build-up from being in the closet, the participants said they came out as gay when they were surrounded by a gay community (gay bar scene, gay community, gay role models). Coming out as gay and coming out as Catholic were similar experiences for the participants because both were in the context of a gay community. Coming out as Catholic, mostly to other gay men, was seen as less important while coming out as gay was inevitable. Understanding how these two types of coming out about an identity are similar is important for recognizing the unique experience of gay Catholic men and how they can be open about each identity in different contexts.

The second theme was participants’ experiences between the pastoral and institutional Catholic Church. The male participants spoke about differences between the pastoral and institutional Church’s relevant teachings, hypocritical rule-enforcement, and acceptance of homosexuality. The men said that the institutional Church’s teachings were not relevant to their lives because the teachings are unaccepting of homosexuality. The irrelevance led the men to pick and choose the teachings and to think intelligently about, rather than blindly accept, the Church’s teachings that applied to their lives. The hypocrisy of the institutional Church came up when the gay Catholic men spoke about the molestation
scandal and cover-up by the institution that followed. The institutional Church’s stance on child molestation is so important to these gay Catholic men because the Church’s stance is often projected to the public and many times the perception of molesters in the Church is confused by the public with gay men who are in the Church. The pastoral Church was oppositely spoken of as more accepting and a place where gay Catholic men could accept both their identities. Specifically, Dignity served as a setting of the most acceptance. Knowing that gay Catholic men can find acceptance without the institutional Church is important so other gay and Catholic men understand that they can retain their faith and be gay.

The third theme was how the men found acceptance in their families, or how they located themselves within the family. In order to negotiate their contrasting gay and Catholic identities, locating themselves within their families is important, and a process of fear and anxiety. On the way to finding acceptance in the family the participants spoke about coming out as gay to their families, becoming part of the religious traditions of their parents, and changing their parents’ views on homosexuality and Catholicism. Three themes emerged when participants came out to their families about their gay identities. Some participants were accepted openly, others were rejected by their families or certain family members, and others did not speak of their gay identity around family. The coming out experiences in the family were shown to be highly varied. The struggles of coming out to family as gay do not exist for the Catholic part of the participants’ identities. Rather the men spoke about feeling guilty or questioning themselves in their gay identity because of the influence of their parents’ strong Catholic traditions and values. Two participants spoke about their parents’ transition from a rejection of homosexuality, as taught by the Church, to an acceptance of homosexuality and their sons. Furthermore, Catholic schooling was a very common experience for the participants and a reason I believe the men worked through their difficulties to remain Catholic and gay. Finding acceptance in the family is important to show as an example for other gay Catholic men to navigate their own path towards
acceptance. Understanding that acceptance can be found in a variety of ways will help readers persevere in their own experience of finding family acceptance.

I recommend that further research include a generalized survey based on the three themes that have emerged from this thesis. The survey could be distributed nation-wide via DignityUSA chapters across the country. Furthermore, the ever-changing nature of sexual identities and the fact that history forms much of the gay ethos discussed in the Literary Review justifies continuing this research as society evolves in acceptance of homosexuality. A longitudinal study would help depict how the Catholic Church and gay communities are evolving together to determine if more or less acceptance is present and how intergroup identity is affected.
In the Epilogue I will provide an overview of my own life experiences as a gay Catholic man and describe the biases that may affect my analysis, which come from my upbringing and experiences.

Growing up as the youngest of four siblings in a Catholic home meant that I attended mass every Sunday morning, usually accompanied by Sunday school, and every holy day. I understand that the strict Catholic upbringing which I experienced was a product of my grandparents' strong Catholic values that were passed to my parents and ultimately passed on to me in the way I was brought up.

My earliest memories of being raised Catholic were the mornings in the pews of mass every Sunday. I specifically remember the first Sunday that I was no longer allowed to bring toys to Church. I had to grow up and listen to the priest instead of playing my own imaginary games. I also remember Catholic school, which I attended from Kindergarten through fourth grade. In Catholic school I remember well the students who were not Catholic but attended the private school because it was the better option in the medium-sized town in which I grew up. Looking back, elementary school was the first time I noticed Catholicism as a culture or community in which those not part of the tradition felt excluded. Now I see my Catholic schooling as a major reason for my academic development, although I don't look at it as a place where I learned to think critically about Catholicism as some participants said. Most likely, I did not think about Catholicism critically because I was so young. The Catholic school experience defined my friendships and interactions at an early age, much like my participants spoke of their Catholic communities. Mass was not something I enjoyed, but I remember attending twice each week, once in school and the other with my parents on Sundays.

My parents were very actively involved in my Catholic upbringing. They decided to put me into Catholic school and ensured my Catholic education continued through Sunday school when private
Catholic school was no longer an option. In the fifth grade I moved to a smaller town across Kansas where only one public school existed, and thus the end of my formal Catholic education. Sunday school culminated in a two year confirmation class in which my parents co-taught me and twenty of my peers. I believe that my Catholic upbringing gave me many values and taught me to do the right things. Teachings such as treat your neighbor the way you want to be treated were very important to learn, and I associated those teachings with religion. I was never critical of the Catholic lessons, and I think that is because I was never exposed to alternate points of view or criticisms of the Church. The intellectual criticism of the Church that many of the participants mentioned was never part of my story until I began college. In college I was exposed to diverse opinions and more capable of making my own judgments. I knew and understood the molestation scandal in the Church, but I never devoted much energy to thinking about it. I remember serving as an altar boy and wondering if the priest in my home parish ever touched young boys. To my knowledge, the priest was not gay and did not behave inappropriately. I assumed that priests who were molesters were gay, but I did not really know what “gay” meant at that time, and I didn’t consciously know that I was making a connection between child molestation and homosexuality.

Throughout junior high and high school many of my closest friends were also serious Catholics. I never dated a girl after junior high or throughout high school. I fondly remember defaulting to my Catholicism and being a "good Catholic boy" who did not disrespect women. Therefore, I did not date women and pretended that my religion was the reason I was not dating or interested in women in high school. Sunday morning church outings became more a part of our family routine than something I felt obligated to attend. Mass was followed by lunch out at a restaurant, a rare occasion and something I would not miss. I never felt pressure from my peers about their unaffiliated religions, if they practiced a religion at all. The only deviation from my devout Catholic life came in the form of my sister's rebellion from the Catholic Church during her college years. I recall staying with my older siblings over the
summer and coming to learn that my sister did not attend mass every Sunday morning. At this discovery I realized that not every Catholic went to Church every Sunday morning, but I never skipped mass while I lived with my parents.

I did not come out of the closet about my sexuality until my first year at Stanford as an 18-year-old freshman. College was the first time I was exposed to people that were out and accepting about homosexuality. In fact, I dreamed of coming to California during high school because I had heard of California as a very accepting place. During my early adolescence I had many gay experiences, although I did not know that "gay" is what my behaviors and attractions were called. Much like the participants, I was attracted to, and had young sexual experiences with, my male friends.

In junior high and high school my only gay role models were found on television and the internet. I remember watching The Real World on MTV and feeling sympathizing with the gay men on the show. Internet is where I turned to find other gay men in the form of pornography, one thing many of the older participants in my study did not have. My parents confronted me upon finding my web browsing history and immediately assumed other people may have forced homosexual pornography onto me. This was not the case, and while I was scared by how they told me how wrong it was to watch such things, I continued to do it because it was what I was attracted to.

Since coming out in my first year of school I have found myself drifting away from high school friends who continue to practice Catholicism. Today I do not practice traditional Catholicism by attending mass every Sunday morning. Instead I still find time to pray on my own and prefer the non-organized religious aspect. Like many of the participants, I do not agree with much of what the institutional Church does, though I am still interested in the institution and follow news about it on occasion. Mostly I am bothered by the way the institutional Church spends money on its own development, yet preaches that everyone should give up all their riches to enter heaven. I’m also
bothered by how often the Church is asking for money from the congregation. When I return home to Kansas I try to go to Church with my parents, and I find it troubling to see them continually give money to the Church because I associate giving money with supporting the institutional Church.

As a gay Catholic man my experiences qualify me to conduct this research because I have an inherent understanding of what most of these men have gone through in forming their identities. The negative part of conducting this research as a gay Catholic man is that I bring my own biases because of the way I experienced the formation of my own identities while I was raised Catholic. My first bias is that I do not believe in the Catholic Church teachings against homosexuality and I am no longer a practicing Catholic. In the analysis my distance from Catholicism could come across as a negative view towards the Church and a more positive view of the experience of the gay community. Another major bias is my hope for a reconciliation between the gay and Catholic communities. Wishing for reconciliation is a bias that may overplay the positive aspects of the negotiation process and how much I hope this research will help other gay Catholic men like myself. I also need to acknowledge that the participants knew I was from Stanford University, and therefore may have felt intimidated or less willing to share their experiences. Additionally, I did not share my religious or sexual identities with the participants unless they asked. This may have contributed to a less comfortable environment for the participants to share information because I would assume they would be more trusting if they knew my orientation. I am not claiming that I have captured the entire scope of what it means to form a gay and Catholic identity.
Works Cited


Appendices

Appendix A: Methodology

In this exploratory study I employed a combination of grounded theory practices and deductive analysis to decompose the data and develop a cohesive theory or model of themes among gay Catholic men’s identity formation. Grounded theory is an analytical technique that uses an inductive approach to construct a theory based on interview or observational data (Merriam, 2002). Conversely, deductive approaches included codes composed of themes from previous literature and my interview protocol. The analysis involved a multi-staged process that followed systematic analytic procedures as defined by Miles and Huberman (1994). The first stage was a multi-pass analysis of codes applied to the research data, including descriptive, interpretive, and pattern codes in order to build upon existing themes within the coding process and generate ending codes that demonstrated emergent patterns in events and relationships (Miles and Huberman, 1994). The second analytic stage, which took place in combination with coding, was creating analytic memos after each pass of coding. These analytic memos helped to “(a) clarify an idea, (b) tie the idea to information from a case, and (c) differentiate the idea from already existing codes” (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

I used multiple verification strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative data. I triangulated the interview data with the following tools: (a) follow-up survey sent after the interview period, (b), achieving descriptive validity through cross-checking interview recordings and transcripts with memos I had written after each interview (Maxwell, 1992) and (c) previous themes from research included in the literature review such as Stevenson’s Sons of the Church.
Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Sent via e-mail:

Hello,

My name is Brennen Clouse and I am a student from Stanford University visiting NYC for the summer. I am excited to join [organization] here and learn more about the organization. Academically, I am very interested in gay and Catholic identity. For this reason, this summer I am conducting a research study on the two identities. I am looking for 12 or more gay, Catholic, male participants for one hour in-depth interviews about being gay and Catholic. If you identify as such and would be interested please contact me at bclouse@stanford.edu. I will also be at future [organization] gatherings and would love to talk with anyone who might be interested in participating. If you have any questions or would like further information please don't hesitate to contact me. Thank you for your time and I look forward to meeting everyone!

Best,

Brennen Clouse
### Appendix C: Demographics Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Catholic School</th>
<th>Dignity Affiliation (Years)</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
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<td>Gay friends at work, came out to cousin in thirties</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Admitted homosexuality at 19, first gay exposure in home parish</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Went to gay bar with teacher, HIV positive</td>
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<td>Not affiliated</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Attended seminary when Church seemed progressive, former priest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Appendix D: Timeline

**Figure 1.** Timeline.

A timeline image was presented to participants to write on about each life event they described during the interviews.
Appendix E: Interview Protocol

Timeline Activity

The first activity I’d like to do with you today will be a timeline of your own life. Following my instructions I will have you mark specific events in your life relating to your gay and Catholic identity and explain each significant event. The timeline starts with your birth and I’d like for you to write your age at the opposite end where “present” is located. Your age is also important for describing demographics of this study. The following events should be approximations to the best of your knowledge.

1. The first event on the timeline I’d like for you to mark for me is when you first knew for yourself that you were gay, whether others knew or not at this time.
   - Can you please recall for me how you knew this and admitted it to yourself?

2. If you were baptized into the Catholic Church will you please mark the point at which this occurred in your life?
   - If you remember, can recall this experience and how you decided, if you did, to be baptized.

3. Understanding that coming out is an ongoing process, will you please mark on the timeline the first time you came out as gay.
   - Can you please recall this experience for me, including who you were with, how you decided to come out and why?
   - Can you recall if there was a reason you thought this was the best time to come out?
   - If you could come out over again, what would you change about your experience and why?
   - Family influences (inserted for later interviews)

4. Please mark on the timeline when you took on your Catholic identity for yourself, independent of outside forces, such as parents and guardians.
   - Can you please describe to me how you decided to take on this identity, people that may have influenced your decision, and what the process was like?
   - Can you recall if there was a reason you thought this was the best time to become independently religious?
   - If you could do it again, what would you change about your experience and why?

Timeline Follow-up

- What sort of changes occurred between the last two points you marked on the timeline, coming out and being independently religious?
- How did you deal with these changes and what did they make you feel like?
At what point on the timeline did you accept being both gay and Catholic? Can you recall some of your struggles, if there were any, in making it to this point? Was there a reason in your mind that this age was the best time to accept both identities? If so, what was that reason?

5. Last, please identify on the timeline any moments in your life you feel your sexual or religious identities have changed.

- Can you describe what kind of changes each of these events were?
- What influenced the change and why did you feel strongly about changing at that time?
- What is your current sexual and religious identity?

Ok, moving away from the timeline I’d like to ask you some questions specifically about being Catholic:

Catholicism

- Can you recall a time when you had to come out to anyone as Catholic?
- What was the experience like, who was it with, and how did it make you feel?
- Are you “out” to people in the Church about your sexual identity?

- Can you please describe a time when you felt in conflict with Church teachings?
- How did you deal with this conflict?
- Have you felt this way more than one time or has the feeling changed or evolved?

Now I’d like to ask you some questions about being both gay and Catholic:

Gay/Catholic

- Can you please describe a time to me when you were comfortable expressing both your Catholic and gay identity.
- What made this event more comfortable and who were you with?
- Do you think you have felt more comfortable expressing both identities simultaneously more or less as time has passed and why?

- Can you please recall a time when you felt uncomfortable expressing your Catholic and gay identity simultaneously. Did you have to hide your identity?
- Why did you feel this way and with whom were you expressing these identities?
- In this situation how did you feel after the situation and in moving forward?
• Are you out to people in the LGBT community about your religious identity?

• In your own experience, how would you describe the relationship between the Catholic and gay communities?

• What kind of differences, both positive and negative, do you experience between the Catholic and gay community?

• How do you describe conflict, if it exists, between your gay and Catholic identities to other people? How do you help people understand a conflict exists?

• If you were not involved in either the queer or Catholic community, but were involved in the other, what do you think your perceptions of the community you were not in might be?