Sacred Spaces
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Guest Editor’s Introduction

LGBTQ Pastoral Counseling: Setting a New Scholarly Agenda

Cody J. Sanders, Ph.D.¹

For a few decades, pastoral theologians and practitioners have attempted to develop practical theories and theologies that help to meet the emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people in ways that affirm our dignity and worth and contribute to our health and wellbeing. It is one of the reasons this field was initially so appealing to me when I was a queer Baptist seminarian exploring graduate theological study. So it is certainly an honor to serve as editor of this issue of a journal striving to contribute further to this base of knowledge and practice for pastoral scholars and practitioners.

The articles in this issue of Sacred Spaces illuminate several areas of concern for pastoral practitioners working with LGBTQ people in ways that build upon previous literature in the field. But read a different way, these articles also serve to set a new agenda for pastoral theological engagement with LGBTQ concerns. With critical attention to the praxis of pastoral counseling and the pedagogy of pastoral theology and care, the authors contributing to this issue illuminate for us four areas of critical growth and imaginative development necessary for pastoral theologians to engage in the years to come.

First, a substantial number of articles herein contribute to the lagging literature in our field on concerns of transgender care and counseling. While the writing of pastoral theologians addressing concerns of lesbian and gay people has been comparatively robust, we have yet failed to give equally serious and sustained attention to concerns of trans people.

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In this issue, Horace Griffin helps practitioners to address transphobia as it arises in families struggling to embrace a trans family member – often a child. Griffin draws upon vignettes from his own practice and published first person narratives to offer guidance for clinical practice drawing on the literature of object relations theory. Malcolm Himschoot illuminates ‘practices of spirit’ for genderqueer and trans Christians, deconstructing the harmful dynamics foisted upon trans people by many theologies and offering, instead, converse practices of spirit toward the promotion of health and spiritual wellbeing: guilt/creation, shame/community, fear/vocation, disintegration/integrity. And Jeanne Hoeft offers a contribution unique in the field, addressing intimate partner violence among queer people by drawing upon queer theory in which she illuminates the additional challenges trans survivors face as they encounter the power of the sex/gender binary in shelters and programs.

What is largely still missing from the field’s literature is thorough treatment of gender identity and expression with attention to embodiments that transcend our typical picture of trans people as transitioning from male to female or female to male. For example, intersex persons, born with physical characteristics of both genders or ambiguous genitalia, and even those born with chromosomal variations beyond xx and xy markers, haven’t yet gained the treatment they deserve in the theological and clinical literature in our field. The articles you will encounter in this issue of Sacred Spaces point the way toward our future engagement with gender identity and expression. My hope is that they promote imagination for new types of theological engagement possible for the future.

Second, the authors featured in this issue move us toward greater engagement with the challenges and imaginative possibilities that queer theory poses to our field’s engagement with sexuality and gender identity. Queer theory critically pushes us beyond theories of sexuality and
gender that are dependent upon an imagined fixed, static, and “natural” binary of male/female, gay/straight and lifts the veil on the history and relations of power attached to these assumptions.

Jason Hays focuses attention – scant in the field up to this point – on bisexuality and sexual fluidity, aiming to help practitioners reconceive embedded theories and theologies guiding our praxis, often to the detriment of bisexual and sexually fluid clients. Hays does this through a full-bodied engagement with queer theory and theology, deconstructing both embedded images of God and embedded theories of sexuality, moving toward a “more dynamic, relational, and fluid” conception of both. Jeanne Hoeft, again, engages queer theory to deconstruct the sex/gender binary that limits our perspective and hinders our best practice in relation to intimate partner violence. And Insook Lee draws on queer theorists to deconstruct the homosocial-homosexual continuum influencing the understanding of same-sex sexuality in Korean contexts.

The question still lingering in my mind, ripe for further pastoral theological engagement, is how queer theory – often intensely critical of individualistic assumptions and relations of power embedded in psychotherapy – offers a more complete critique of the field of pastoral care and counseling, pushing us to imagine how our practices (beyond just those oriented toward LGBTQ clients) might more dramatically shift and change in relation to queer theory’s critique.

Third, these authors call pastoral practitioners to greater focus on the intersectionality of embodiment and the intersecting nature of oppression. Griffin draws upon his own embodiment as a racial and sexual minority to empathically and critically peer through a window into “a world that understands gender much too simplistically and monolithically.” Hoeft addresses the care and counseling of battered women and men in a way that “cannot separate what part of their experience is due to sexism and what part is due to heterosexism, racism, classism or any other way power is structured,” helpfully illustrating the intersecting nature of oppression as “fine-
tuned interlocking systems through social institutions, cultural practices, and symbol systems.”

While Lee engages intersectional embodiment in a way that, to my knowledge, is a unique contribution to the field of pastoral care and counseling, focusing on the merging of contemporary Western concepts of homosexuality with the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex and the ways this confluence impacts the lived human experience of Korean people.

Fourth, Mary Elizabeth Toler advances the literature in pastoral theological pedagogy engaging LGBTQ concerns in ways that are not often explicit in our field’s publications. Her vision of a “formational pastoral pedagogical framework” assists readers to consider how to develop our classroom contexts in ways that promote the “respectful, compassionate, educated, and theologically informed ways” that we wish students to engage LGBTQ people and one another. This is, of course, a challenge in seminaries and graduate theological programs encompassing students from diverse theological perspectives. Toler offers a model that is helpful to those who teach courses in which LGBTQ concerns are not the primary focus, but are a part of a more general introduction to pastoral care. I am hopeful that Toler’s article will help more of us to consider how to approach LGBTQ concerns by not only introducing the topic in class, but through developing pastoral pedagogies that are, themselves, models for addressing this embodiment of human difference in contexts of practice. These questions hold implications for those who engage in classroom teaching in seminary and graduate settings, as well as all who engage in clinical supervision.

It has been my pleasure to work alongside Ryan LaMothe and with these six authors in the construction of this issue of *Sacred Spaces*. I hope that you find this issue one that is both informative to your practice of care and counseling, as well as one that prompts your own
theological and theoretical imagination beyond the restrictive dictates of the status quo so that, in your own ways, you can pursue these new directions (and invent others) in our field’s engagement with LGBTQ lives.
Stop Switching: Transphobia and Pastoral Counseling Approaches for Families Struggling with Transgenderism

Horace L. Griffin, Ph.D.¹

Abstract This essay surveys contemporary studies, scholarship and burgeoning communities of transgender individuals which challenge traditional notions of gender and gender identity based solely on genitalia. Transgender individuals challenge social conventions based on genitalia and the limit of sexual expression as only being legitimate between cisgendered (gender identity that fits the sex/genitalia assigned at birth) female and male persons. Moreover, this work explores the following two areas: 1) recent ideological cultural shifts regarding transgender issues and the impact that such changes have had upon transgender individuals and their families and religious communities; 2) the need for pastoral counselors to commit themselves to the study of human sexuality, the social sciences (Susanna Cornwall’s work will be offered as a useful resource), and pastoral theology in order to assist individuals and families struggling with Christian faith and transgender issues.

Keywords Transgender, Gender, Sexuality, Pastoral Counseling

Social scripts and gender identity

“Stop Switching!,” Al’s mother, Mrs. W., chided to him as he walked down a Chicago street oblivious to the socially prescribed male walk. Although she only spoke two words to her pre-teen son, her admonishment revealed much about her cultural understanding of gender-

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appropriate comportment for a male child. A few years ago, Al shared with me his memory of his mother’s hostile reaction to his gait, identified by the larger culture as a “swish,” a socially disapproved effeminate walk for males. Mrs. W., an African American mother who embraced the larger society’s and black culture’s strict gender roles, hypermasculinity and homophobia, felt such “inappropriate” behavior warranted a sharp rebuke.

This story is a familiar one. It reminded me of a similar reprimand that I received as a gay, black son for my less than masculine walk. After listening to Al, also a gay black male, I reflected on his mother’s use of the black idiom “switching,” which differs slightly from the larger culture’s term, “swishing.” It occurred to me that the black term revealed a much deeper meaning, and I assert a more accurate one, that angered and terrified Mrs. W. She, like most parents, opposed Al’s walk because it did not embody the prescribed male norm for walking. In other words, Al was “switching” the social scripts for male and female walking. “Switching” carries a double meaning here—a walk like a girl (swishing) and changing or switching from a socialized male walk to a female one. It is also a story about the ways in which individuals perceive appropriate behavior based on gender.

Most parents and adults, like Mrs. W., unconsciously internalize social scripts and become enforcers of traditional female/male behavior. Adults generally understand that norms such as being polite, respectful, and fair are products of socialization. They often feel, however, that interests, desires and behaviors such as walking, talking, or the desire to play with guns as innate qualities based on genitalia. Likewise, most still view heterosexuality as innate, while asserting that homosexuality is a learned behavior. In recent discussions, this view has been noted as a glaring inconsistency about sexual desire, underscoring the heterosexual majority's
claim that they are unable to learn same gender sexual attraction or desire while, at the same time, insisting homosexuality as choice.

When parents see their child exhibiting “unnatural” qualities for her or his gender, they get alarmed that something is wrong with their child’s development. And according to the rigid cultural markers that define boys and girls, there is something wrong. Even the most progressive-minded parents may be troubled by a son who wants a Barbie Dreamhouse or, to a lesser extent, a daughter insisting on playing with toy trucks. Parents, products of a sexist, gender restrictive and transphobic culture, likely heard in their childhood the nursery rhyme identifying boys as made of “snips and snails and puppy dog tails” and girls made of “sugar and spice and everything nice.” Thus, the normative script for girls is sugar, spice and Barbie while boys must fit the rough dog nature compatible with rugged trucks.

Parents, with varying degrees of energy, spend time fitting their children into these puppy dog tails and sugar and spice gender categories so that their children emerge with female and male behaviors “appropriate” for their genitalia. According to those subscribing to gender restrictive behavior, humans with penises are males who should want trucks, guns and rough and tumble sports while humans with vaginas are girls who should want dolls, doll houses and Easy-Bake ovens. To be sure, there are hormonal differences that affect certain reactions. A good example is testosterone in males, which heightens sex drives and lowers voice pitch, but such biological elements must not be viewed as determinative for all or even most behaviors.

From the time an infant comes home from the hospital until she or he leaves for college, family members, neighbors, day care providers, teachers and peers are active in shaping, coaxing, creating, and even coercing behaviors and interests that fit the child’s nominal gender identity (Tanis, 2003, p.2). The child’s own interests are endorsed only to the extent that they
coincide with the culture’s definition of appropriate behavior. Though Al’s manner of walking caused no one harm – if Mrs. W. had a daughter walking in the same manner, she would have approved – Mrs. W.’s sharp disapproval communicated to Al that he had done a bad thing. When Al discovered that his “switching” caused a problem for his mother, he, like most males, began fitting in by more closely observing and imitating the walks of older males. In today’s culture, transgender individuals present the greatest challenge to gender norms and find themselves at odds with society’s conflation of genitalia, gender identity, and "gender-appropriate” behavior. They – by their very being – are a challenge, a perpetual defiance of this social mandate. This essay examines some of the pressing issues confronting transgender individuals, the social and religious fears and biases that diminish their personhood, and the pastoral care and counseling needed for their family members and themselves. I write as an openly gay, middle class, African American cis gendered male Episcopal priest, professor, pastoral counselor and pastoral theologian. And while I do not experience life as a transgender person, my experience as a racial and sexual minority allows me a window into a world that understands gender much too simplistically and monolithically.

A transgender narrative

In our current cultural climate, trans individuals are “coming out” in record numbers. Like the coming out of lesbians and gays decades ago, this coming out holds great potential for moving non-transgender individuals beyond our fears and prejudice to a place of appreciation for the gifts that trans people offer all of us within our social and faith communities. Anton Boisen (1960) claimed almost a century ago that our “living human documents” allow us deeper meaning about the human condition. He understood individual’s and groups' experiences as a document. As paper documents inform and educate us about matters, Boisen asserted that when Sacred Spaces: The E-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, 2016, vol.8
we study and observe human lives, they offer us greater meaning about the diversity of human experience. A generation later, Charles Gerkin applied Boisen’s theory about human narrative. In his pastoral counseling work, Gerkin “developed out of that insight a sophisticated new understanding of pastoral counseling as a retelling of the human story in ways that expand social horizons and liberate persons from oppressive forms of consciousness and destructive patterns of interpersonal relationships” (Couture & Hunter, 1995, p.9).

As heterosexual pastoral theologian, Larry Kent Graham (1997), used narrative pastoral theology in his telling of lesbian and gay narratives (Discovering Images of God: Narratives of Care Among Lesbians and Gays), I also focus my scholarship in this vein so that pastoral counselors may achieve greater understanding of LGBT narratives. This understanding holds the potential both for fostering health and wholeness for LGBT persons within their identities and for moving heterosexual and cisgender people toward full acceptance of LGBT people. In the past couple of decades, these living human documents of gays have allowed heterosexuals a greater appreciation for viewing lesbians and gays as fellow human beings sharing in the larger human story with themselves.

This writing offers a transgender narrative whereby we may learn about a population long misunderstood. It brings us closer to the particular pain transgender individuals encounter from those in their families, society and religious institutions. Like all bigotry and prejudice, hostile reactions to trans people are based in fear and a dogma that define them as ill and depraved. Many transgender narratives reveal pain and suffering encountered in a world apart from the cis-gendered world most of us inhabit. Their narratives tell us about their weaknesses and strengths, hopes and insecurities. Their story also reveals power, the power to inform, to heal and to transform. For non-trans people willing to recognize trans people as equal human beings, there is
great potential for moving beyond transphobia (the fear and/or disgust toward transgender persons). In my own evolution to be in community with trans individuals as equals, I have witnessed the power of hearing a sermon preached by a trans male priest at the National Cathedral and a trans woman affirmed through an ordination process. Still – given the current social and religious prejudice encountered by trans persons – they have understandable fears and doubts about true acceptance, success, and safety for their lives. In addition, many trans individuals friends, families and co-workers have those same fears. In such a climate, pastoral counselors and pastoral leaders can model greater compassion, support, and acceptance for trans people.

**Transgender identity**

Anthropologists and historians note that individuals have long identified with the other gender and, in some cases, both genders. Throughout time, space and culture, trans people have existed, often suffering in silence their disconnect between body and self-concept (Tanis, 2003, p.27). Cultures have responded to gender variance in various ways, with some cultures praising those exhibiting opposite-sex dressing and attributes as sacred individuals, while other cultures, such as the US, have a history of condemnation and murder of this embodied difference. Highly gender-restrictive readings of the Biblical text by religious bodies in the US and elsewhere are often used to justify opposition to gender variance.

Still other cultures, such as the Coptic Amhara peasants of Ethiopia perceive individuals with “alternative gender identities as…god’s mistakes” but exercise tolerance and accept them into the community (Murray & Roscoe, 1998, p.22). Despite this exceptional response, cultural leaders using religious language for trans individuals as “God’s mistake,” create shame for trans people and reinforce fear and negative attitudes about them in their families and communities.
this climate, trans people “may suppress [their] feelings in order to obey what [they] believe is God’s will or to keep peace within [their] families” (Tanis, 2003, p.25).

Although it is often assumed that a transgender person is simply a butch lesbian or an effeminate gay man, such a conclusion is inaccurate. In a rigid US culture that narrowly defines what it means to be female and male, lesbians and gays have often pushed the boundaries of what it means to be female and male while, at the same time, strongly identifying with and enjoying their female and male gender identity. Such gender non-conformity has also allowed heterosexuals, uninterested in traditional male and female roles, to choose careers that they find fulfilling for themselves, e.g., women in military and men in the Arts. When considering transgender issues, it is important to distinguish gender identity from sexual attraction.

Transgender is the “T” in LGBT. Transgender or trans is a term with broad meaning, but is commonly defined as “people who are knowingly crossing gender lines…and who transgress the…understood definitions of gender all or part of the time” (Tanis, p.19). Transsexuals, although often equated with transgender people, can be understood as a subset of the transgender category. Transsexuals “experience a desire to change [their]…bodies to appear differently than the sex that was assigned…at birth and generally access, or desire to access medical technology in order to accomplish this” (p.19). The terms for such transitions are male to female (M to F) and female to male (F to M). Transgender individuals may or may not change their genitalia through medical means.

In a culture of gender conformity, females and males experience restrictions based on gender, with a significant number resisting these strictures. Often this reality, which is problematic for gays and lesbians, can be traumatic for trans persons. Studies show that a large number of lesbians and gays participate in gender non-conformity and, despite the large number
of heterosexual males and females complying with the gender roles prescribed for them, there are parts of these roles heterosexuals also perform without happiness (see Fortune, 1995). No group has suffered more in this regard, however, than trans people. They do not see themselves as the world sees them. Trans people, of all sexual orientations, identify with and perceive themselves emotionally, mentally and physically as the opposite gender (Tanis, 2003, p.20).

It is only in recent decades that there has been a more enlightened social response to trans people, largely as a result of the historical and current Civil Rights Movement and the increased visibility of trans activists. Prior to this time, transgender people remained on society’s margins largely because of clinical definitions in the Diagnostic Statistic Manual (American Psychological Association’s official rating of psychological disorders) that labeled them as having one of several gender identity disorders such as Gender Confusion or Gender Dysphoria. The social scientific world is reassessing these early diagnostic approaches, which defined this population as having psychological disorders needing therapeutic treatment.

Historically, such individuals were placed in the larger category of cross dressers without distinguishing their various sexual identities, such as the early twentieth century lesbian/queer or possibly trans blues singer, Gladys Bentley, who openly transgressed social conventions by almost exclusively wearing male attire. This current study allows for a reexamination of those categorized simply as lesbian, gay or bisexual because of a lack of information about transgenderism. The insistence to dress differently may indeed be more than gender non-conformity and may point to a yearning for a different gender identity, as trans people document in their writings.

In my early years as a pastoral counselor, “Sarah,” a mother of a four-year old son, “Karl,” visited me distraught over her son’s strong desire to wear dresses. The four-year-old
found happiness when allowed to wear a dress, expressing that he liked the way it spins. In a sexist and homophobic culture that holds greater disdain for males in female attire (tomboys, females wearing pants, female restaurant staff in shirt and tie, and so on have all found greater social acceptance than males donning dresses), the parents argued with their son and each other over Karl's wearing dresses, eventually reaching a crisis point that prompted Sarah’s office visit.

After a couple of sessions, the mother revealed to me her greatest fears: ridicule of her son and her own discomfort that her son was not normal, perhaps ill. The couple’s Christian conservatism created the greatest discomfort for them. Sarah and her husband feared that their son would become gay if they did not put a stop to his dress obsession. She shared with me that they had begun taking him to a counselor to straighten him out.

I listened intently, acknowledging her fears as understandable in a society hostile to boys wearing dresses. I explained that the most common bullying comes from boys toward other boys who act like girls and that such sexist, homophobic and transphobic bullying is learned from families, churches and the broader society. I celebrated Karl, whose dress-wearing caused no one harm and only existed as a problem because of a gender restrictive culture. Despite my efforts in offering another perspective, it became clear that Sarah also believed her son had a problem. She, like Mrs. W., wanted her son to “stop switching” and act like other boys.

As I later reflected more closely on this case regarding Karl’s rebellion at being forced into pants, it occurred to me that he was more likely transgender. His contentment with dressing reminded me of my study of transgenderism and conversations that I have with trans people. This case raises a number of questions for us to consider about social scripts, gender roles and gender identity. Given the growing visibility of trans folks and gender non-conformists among family members, friends, colleagues and fellow congregants, how are we as pastoral counselors...
being called to address transphobia? How have church leaders been responsible for the current struggles of transgender individuals and their families? How are we being called to offer pastoral care and compassion for trans people and family members struggling with acceptance?

Object relations theory and pastoral care for transgender individuals and their families

As trans people become more visible within families, the Church and other faith communities, the coming out process, like that for all marginalized groups, has many challenges and costs that demand responses from pastors and counselors committed to the care of souls. As with lesbians and gays, who are in a constant coming out process from society’s assumptions, trans people live in a world replete with gender signifiers such as clothing, hairstyles, speech, etc. Here, assumptions are made about gender based on how one presents to the world. Trans individuals find it essential that their gender representations reflect their gender identity by adopting the signifiers of the opposite gender.

Trans people live with a gender that has been imposed upon them by others without ever feeling connected with that imposed gender. We can all imagine what life would be like if we were required to wear ill-fitting clothes every day. We would spend each day pulling and adjusting our clothes, while at the same time feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed and unhappy. A transgender F to M (female to male) student shared with me that his mother, after having had only two boys, waited years for a girl. After his birth with female genitalia, his mother and family members celebrated the long-awaited girl. Like other trans individuals, this student never felt that he was his parents’ daughter, always removing the barrettes from his hair placed there by his mother after leaving for school. The student eventually began the arduous journey of
becoming a trans male. His claim of male gender identity along with surgery created many battles within his family for a long time.

A particularly difficult issue for families and pastoral counselors is the notion that trans individuals are overturning God’s intention for them. Many painful arguments occur within families because family members feel that their transgender relative is experiencing identity confusion while the trans person declares that she or he never felt whole or connected with her or his imposed gender; they are simply connecting with the gender that provides mental, spiritual, emotional and often physical wholeness. Key pastoral counseling issues include helping family members with the above faith issue and providing a space for trans people and their families to express their emotions of anger, fear, disappointment and sadness. When trans individuals muster the courage to be connected with their true selves, family members often express fears about what will come with their family member’s new gender identity. This process typically taps into the family members’ feelings of confusion, anger, and sadness. There is sadness from saying good bye to the family member they thought they knew and all the dreams and hopes assigned to that person. “What do I do with the baby pictures?” one mother of a M to F (male to female) asked me as she grieved the loss of her son.

Since her question, over two decades ago, I have often thought about parents’ assumptions about their sons and daughters and the understandable difficulty of dealing with transgender children in our gender-focused and gender-restrictive culture. The first question that gets asked about a newborn – even before the more important question about the infant’s health – is, “girl or boy?” Medical technology now allows for parents, families and friends to know the answer to that culturally important question before birth. Parents then begin planning along gender lines, everything from the child’s name to the clothes and color of the room. All such
responses to the baby’s sex as female or male are based on genitalia. Most parents (and others) do not think about the significant number of cases, approximately one percent of births in the North America, with unclear genitalia or both genitals (Dreger, 1998). In Sex and Uncertainty in the Body of Christ: Intersex Conditions and Christian Theology, British theologian and scholar Susannah Cornwall (2010) sheds light on the rarely discussed topic of intersex – infants born with both genitals or indistinguishable genitalia. When such situations occur, more commonly than we think, doctors and family members agree on a gender to be assigned to the newborn, and then a surgeon carries out sex assignment surgery, aligning the sex and gender of the infant. These cases remind us that our bodies and our perceptions of gender identity are “more complex than a simple gender binary where every individual is solely and unambiguously male or female” (p.2).

Intersex is commonly thought to be a medical condition where the individual possesses both female and male genitalia or ambiguous genitalia “rather than one which inevitably affects sex-gender identity” (p.9). I include this reference to intersex, not as a means of explaining trans individuals, but simply as an example of nature’s or God’s creation of unclear gender identities, despite the claim to the contrary made by many, especially those in religious settings. Both intersex and trans people disturb us because they reflect the arbitrary nature of our gender claims, providing further evidence that the categories of “men” and “women” are arbitrarily and socially constructed rather than products of a natural and self-evident mold. And though trans people are usually born with unambiguous genitalia, Cornwall’s scholarship informs us that God’s creative intentions for who we are to be are not always nice and neat, clearly defined markings upon our bodies. When considering intersex or the more controversial terminology, Disorder of Sex Development (DSD), it becomes harder and harder to make the claim that God is clear, at least in...
terms of genitalia, for our sex and gender as male or female. In the case of “genitally-ambiguous newborns,” doctors conduct chromosomal and hormonal tests to “determine” the sex of the child, “advis[ing] parents to sidestep questions about the baby’s sex from friends and relatives until” the gender has been established (p.3). The process of sex assignment surgery is further evidence that gender is more fluid and dynamic than static. As pastoral counselors engage more trans individuals and their family members along these lines, this knowledge is helpful for both parties rethinking transgender issues. Such information helps families and communities develop a more complete understanding of the rich and complex nature of our bodies, sex and gender identity. This reality also allows a fresh hearing for gender theorists who have long opposed a hard line about how we present ourselves to the world.

The eminent Berkeley gender theorist, Judith Butler (1990), asserts that the way individuals present to the world is a function of the gendered scripts that are given by society and enforced by family. She claims that behavior, the way that females and males walk, sit, and speak, is performative rather than driven and determined by genitalia and hormones. Behavior is a “phenomenon that is being produced or reproduced all the time” (p.5). What Butler raises here is the socially constructed nature of behavior. When individuals exhibit behavior unacceptable for their gender, as in Al’s case, these individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, become the object of ridicule, scorn and even murder (Mollenkott, 2007, p.xiv). In Mrs. W.’s mind, she was doing what every good parent should do: teach her son to walk straight so that he will avoid personal and family embarrassment, danger and, most of all, gender confusion and homosexuality. Butler’s work highlights the fact that we perform gender. Those learning the social script well are gender performing. As we are seeing in violent cases throughout this culture and beyond, gender non-conformists can pay the ultimate price of losing their lives. In a
transphobic culture, the role of the pastoral counselor takes on even greater meaning, not just as a guide, healer and mediator, but one literally saving lives.

**Religion and pastoral counseling**

Pastoral counseling draws primarily from two areas: the social sciences – psychology most of all – and theology. In addition, the pastoral counselor draws from professional judgment, experience, a kind heart, loving care, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, biology and other areas in moving individual and families toward health and wholeness. Object Relations Theory, especially the work of Object Relations theorist, D.W. Winnicott, may be a valuable resource for pastoral counselors assisting trans persons and their families. Object Relations Theory is “a theory within the field of psychoanalysis which postulates that as the self develops it internalizes its early object relations, particularly those between the self and mother and these internalized relationships determine the quality of the self’s relationships in adulthood” (Hunter, et. al., 1990).

In his psychoanalytic work related to the individual’s self-identity, Winnicott theorizes that each individual operates within a “True Self and False Self” persona. He asserts the self is determined by social forces that participate in forming an identity early in one’s childhood. He, like other Object Relations theorists, also recognizes the vital role the family plays in shaping this identity. This influence is particularly profound in the dyadic relationship that the infant and mother share. The health of the individual is greatly affected by the dynamics between mother and child and the creativity that occurs in the context of play (Winnicott, 1971). In this process, the child discovers self, eventually identifying aspects that offer greater meaning in her/his/their world. Here one is also able to distinguish one’s true self from a false self. If an infant senses rejection or abandonment from what is felt at her or his core, the “false self develops as the
infant is repeatedly subjected to maternal care that intrudes upon, rejects, or abandons his experience” (Daehnert, 1998, p.251). Winnicott describes the necessity of living in one’s true self if the individual is to attain health and wholeness. As Butler describes gender as socially constructed, most of us fit with the gender imposed upon us and our gender identity. For Trans individuals and the gender imposed upon them, they ultimately describe never quite fitting in or performing gender as the world has prescribed to them.

In his compelling, Transgender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith, Justin Tanis, an ordained transgender gay MCC minister and Director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the Pacific School of Religion, states,

I remember wishing as a child that I was a boy, but I also remember feeling very strongly that the desire should remain a secret. I don’t really know why I believed that no one should know about these feelings, but they were strong. I would play that I was a boy or a man, in my room with the door shut at times when I felt no one would disturb me (Tanis, 2003, p.1).

As I indicated earlier, in trans persons it is a matter of dissatisfaction with the body in which they find themselves. It is a deep yearning to be the opposite gender. Decades ago, transsexuals communicated to a bewildered public that they felt trapped in the wrong body. This yearning is different from resisting the cultural sexism that restricts males and females from doing and being certain things. Many females – and males to a lesser degree – have opposed gender discrimination and broken down gender barriers, not because they felt that they belonged in the other gender, but based on their desire to be treated equally. Trans women and men often experience knowing who they are at a young age and “refus[ing] to lie about it” (Tanis, p.32). The defiance of Karl, Sarah’s son, in wearing a dress, knowing that his decision caused a major
crisis in his family, is the human spirit’s attempt for a true self existence. Many transgender children are also now aware that there are other transgender kids and adults in the world, which offers new hope and possibilities for them. Rather than live in misery every day feeling depressed and incomplete, some kids present remarkable courage and, as an eight-year-old trans kid told his therapist, “I can’t be what I am not, and I am not a boy” (p.32). For another transgender male, wearing a bikini felt just as strange, as foreign, as unnatural to him as the pants that Sarah’s son, Karl, refused to wear.

In the twenty-first century, individuals and family members are confronting a number of major issues that have surfaced in the last two decades; transgenderism is certainly one. The first task for a pastoral counselor is to allow the trans person and family members a place to be heard. One of the most valuable contributions that a pastoral counselor can provide is space for family members “in care and counseling that will be creative and diverse in response to the challenges of [trans issues]” (Couture & Hunter, 1995, 13). In this space, each person is allowed an opportunity for voicing feelings about the fears that surround living as a transgender person in an uninformed and even hostile church and society.

People generally oppose difference because they are uninformed about the group that is different. The lack of experience with a member of a sexual minority, even when the individual is a family member, creates a vacuum that gets filled with negative stereotypes, and the conviction that the individual’s life is morally inferior to those of heterosexual or cisgender family members. Hence, a transgender family member confronts perceptions based on social and religious prejudice, which creates confusion, depression and sadness for the non-trans family members as well as trans individuals. After providing space for emotions, it is important to establish clarity regarding what relationship is desired between the transgender family member

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and other family members. If a trans person and family members are working on reconciliation (which usually comes later for families struggling with a lot of traditional religious and social assumptions), it may be useful to meet with the transgender person separately from the family for a short or even a long period of time.

Pastoral theologian Nancy Ramsey (1998) writes that our “[pastoral] diagnosis relies on three sets of assumptions….[] anthropological assumptions, communally shared guiding values or worldview and mutually understood dynamics of authority in the helping relationship” (p.14). And though the pastoral counselor holds authority in the counseling relationship, it is essential that the counselor avoid telling the counselee “how to feel [and] does not plant feelings for the counselee to discover [or] infer from theory or prior experience what feeling the counselee should have” (Dittes, 1999, p.100). This is not to say that the counselor cannot explore this challenging issue with the transgender counselee, especially given the widespread suspicion and lack of knowledge about transgenderism. Counselors are, perhaps, most helpful if they think of themselves as “archeologist[s] guiding over terrain that belongs to the counselee but in which the guide can help the counselee notice things. However, the guide must not overload the archeological lecture and must not get too far ahead of what the counselee is noticing” (Dittes, 1990, p.100).

After an initial conversation with a transgender person and his/her family that allows space for anger, sadness and tears, the pastoral conversation can engage theological questions and scripture. Since the trans and cisgender family members are choosing a pastoral counselor rather than a secular therapist, they presumably want to engage spiritual and faith perspectives. Although the pastoral counselor considers social science and a commitment to do no harm, the trans individual’s and family’s faith are also to be considered. The pastoral counselor must first
work through her or his own feelings about transgenderism and God’s will before offering
guidance to trans people and their family members. Do trans people deny God’s intention for
them? In the Christian church context, there are theological concerns with two questions: *What
does the Bible say about gender identity?* and *Is it within God’s will that one changes genitals,
hormones and gender identity?*

For some religious leaders and pastoral counselors, transsexuality is viewed as “a medical
problem with a medical solution that does not necessarily have spiritual implications, while
others cite scripture that they believe forbids cross-dressing and gender reassignment surgery. [It
is even worse in unenlightened churches when pastoral leaders and congregants] won’t even dare
mention transgender,” ignoring their very existence (Tanis, 2003, pp.89-90). In a culture that
conceals intersex reality and refuses conversations about gender variance and the many sex
assignment surgeries that take place throughout the world, it is not surprising that this lack of
response is quite common, though it is, of course, disappointing. For many pastoral counselors
and pastors there is also a logical need to engage scripture. The issue of gender variance appears
to be addressed in scripture, even more than homosexual activity. Tanis writes gender variance
can be found in Genesis 1:26-28; 2: 4-9; Deuteronomy 22: 5/62; 23:1/67; Isaiah 56 1-5/69;

The most common scriptural reference associated with transgender people is the popular
text in Matthew 19: 11-12. In this passage Jesus says,

Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For
there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have
been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves
eunuchs for the sake of the dominion of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can.
Tanis suggests that this text actually presents Jesus as offering a range of human expression and he rejects the more limited reading by some scholars that the scripture is just about celibacy. Tanis’s reading gains further plausibility when one considers that the notion of transitioning one’s genitals into that of the other sex/gender would have been a foreign concept in the ancient near eastern world. In this twenty-first century where sex reassignment is a possibility, Tanis emphasizes Jesus’ words that “not everyone can accept this teaching” and lauds Jesus, “acceptance of those whom society has deemed dishonorable” (Tanis, 2003, pp.72, 74).

In the context of a contemporary issue like transgenderism, as pastoral theologian Ryan LaMothe (2001) notes, “narratives and rituals, which establish and maintain normative forms of the dynamics of faith and faith as vital concern, can also demonize, obstruct and pathologize (represent people as mentally ill) other forms of faith as vital concern. In short, those passions and experiences that are incongruent with more socially accepted forms are frequently portrayed as diseased or evil” (p.41). Parents and most of society use their conservative Christianity as justification for opposition to homosexuality and transgenderism which may – and frequently does – lead to verbal and physical violence and death. The death of an Ohio transgender female is a tragic example:

[On December 31, 2014, the Boston Globe] reported that Early Sunday, 17-year-old Leelah Alcorn died after being hit be a tractor-trailer while walking along a stretch of Interstate 71 near her Ohio hometown. The death was eventually ruled a suicide after a pair of social media posts,…garnered notice and served as a flashpoint for transgender progress in 2014.

Alcorn’s suicide note, which she scheduled for posthumous posting, explained how she reached the breaking point: At 14, she came out to her parents as
transgender, and they reacted by taking her to conversion therapy and cutting her off from social media. After protracted periods where she felt isolated and depressed, she wrote, “I realized that my parents would never come around, and that I would have to wait until I was 18 to start any sort of transitioning treatment, which absolutely broke my heart” (Johnston, 2014).

Leelah’s parents defended their actions and opposition by citing their faith beliefs. The Christian right has been quite vocal in promoting an anti-transgender viewpoint as synonymous with being Christian. In order to be Christian, one “must be either male or female, heterosexual and living within an identifiably ‘traditional family,’ in which women stand for submissiveness, passivity and lack of economic productiveness, but also for spiritual connectedness to God” (Mollenkott, 2007, p.177). Leelah’s parents are just two of many parents in our society and around the world convinced that their parenting is correct. This tragedy, like others that will be addressed later, points to the need for pastoral counselors’ wisdom and skill, which can help conservative family members of faith or fundamentalist Christian family members struggling with transphobia embrace other faith perspectives that do not deem trans people as sinful or evil.

If Sarah had another faith community informing her of simple facts about gender variance, she could have engaged Karl’s cross dressing as part of a gender and sexual orientation continuum rather than as a product of demonic forces or illness.

The increasing presence of trans people in congregations and their service as clergy greatly assist pastoral counselors and the families of transgender individuals toward viewing them as Christians or people of faith. Their witness of God’s presence in their lives brings about further transformation of non-transgender individuals within families and social and faith communities. This witness, along with other readings of the texts cited above, contributes to a
new understanding of transgender people and the ability to develop new perspectives regarding such persons. The process of reassessing traditional views by engaging contemporary studies and theological analyses is also beneficial for transgender people. One of the most effective ways that this can be done is for pastoral counselors to engage with transgender Christians or other trans people of faith and trans pastors who can serve as positive models for trans people and their family members.

Malcolm Himschoot, a United Church of Christ transgender minister, found the first passage, Gen. 1:26-28 quite helpful after undergoing gender transition. In pursuing his call into ordained ministry, he still needed to reconcile his faith with what he knew to be right for himself. In the documentary, Call Me Malcolm, Emily, his pastor at Washington Park United Church of Christ in Denver, CO, asserts in a pastoral counseling session that God declares transgender people in creation from the beginning. Genesis 1:26-28 reads,

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female, he created them.

According to her theology of transgenderism, she argues, “if you are looking for someone who incarnates the most clear and whole vision of who God is…based on our scripture tradition, it has to be a transgender person who has experienced both male and female…the most whole vision of the sacred that we are going to get” (Filmworks, 2004).

Finally, in pastoral counseling to transgender individuals and their families, it is critical that there is an affirmation of their humanity and a call for compassion for the plight of
transgender people. Carl Rogers’s client-centered therapy can be helpful for transgender folks struggling to overcome low self-esteem and even self-hatred to achieve self-acceptance. In an environment that affirms individuals and values their worth, such persons can simply be and thrive with mental, emotional and physical health. Drawing from Winnicott’s work, pastoral counselors can create a space for the emergence of the true self which leads toward wholeness. Such an approach will lower the number of transgender suicides and, through educating others, lower the rates of violence against transgender people.

Transgender people are currently one of the groups most targeted in violence and hate crimes. There is great social and religious contempt for transgender people and when acts of violence are directed at Trans individuals, “crimes against [them] are characterized by overkill and by underreporting…because law enforcement officers are hostile to [trans people] and sometimes the chief perpetrators of the abuse” (Mollenkott, 2007, p.74). A good example is the now infamous case of the Nebraska (F to M) female to male Brandon Teena, popularized by the powerful film, Boys Don’t Cry. In this case, the police’s failure in responding to his personal crisis and vulnerability left him as an easy target for the shooting that ended his life. According to The Blog, an agency that tracks transgender assaults and deaths, in 2014 alone, there were over one hundred attacks on transgender people, many committed by family members and some ending in death.

These statistics of transphobia and trans-hatred remind us of the work currently needed to save the lives of our family members, friends, colleagues and fellow citizens. A common factor in hate crimes committed against trans individuals is the severity of the attacks and the particularly heinous nature of the crimes. Pastoral counselors and pastors are well-positioned as resources for their counselees and parishioners and families confronting transgender issues.

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Regardless of where a pastoral counselor may find her or himself regarding the issue, each counselor can obtain information, offer compassion for trans people and become an advocate for legal protections against discrimination and violence as I have outlined here. The safe space created by a pastoral counselor is a wonderful act of pastoral care. At the heart of pastoral counseling is journeying with counselees toward health and wholeness. Leelah’s story is a haunting example of what can happen when a transgender person is forced into a stifling life of false self. Her parents refused her reality that eventually left her feeling that she had no choice but to take her life. She concluded that if she could not be true to herself then life is not worth living. Like many, Leelah understood that living into one’s true self allows for wholeness; however, her feeling of not having options to deal with her pain and suffering that she experienced as a trans individual is a real tragedy. Did she not feel like she could stay with relatives, speak with a counselor about leaving home or find support groups that might help her cope until she turned eighteen? While these questions cannot be answered, they remind us of the work that we must do now so that other lives will be spared this outcome.

Mrs. W., Sarah and Leelah’s parents have one thing in common: they wanted their sons to stop switching. Their responses created so much havoc in their children’s lives that one is not here for simply being true to self. If Leelah’s death can move us to reexamine our social teachings, religious messages and interpretations of scripture, then Leelah will get her last wish and her dying will not be in vain. As pastoral counselors, it is my hope that we consider the offerings of social science, along with teachings within our own faith traditions, teachings which remind us of the dignity of all God's people. Let us reimagine that there is the possibility for seeing all of us, including transgender people, as the manifestation of the complexity, diversity and beauty of God.
References


Practices of Spirit for Genderqueer and Transgender Christians

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Abstract The internalization of damaging messages has a negative impact on genderqueer and transgender Christians, when they seek to access faith resources during moments of challenge or life passages. The positive alternative can be transformative. In seeking the care of a pastoral counselor, a genderqueer or transgender person (trans* for short) may be seeking spiritual counter-orientation, so that they can build internal resources even as they access external resources for the living of their life. A combination of internal and external resources are important to overcome barriers for trans* people based on holistic oppression. This article maps out some of those aspects of oppression, to bring into view practices of spirit which can provide a positive alternative to dominant discourse, eliciting mental health and well-being.

Keywords Transgender, Counseling, Guilt, Shame, Fear, Disintegration, Creation, Community, Vocation, Integrity

Theology is rarely prescriptive for pastoral counselors. A methodology for each provider of care is based on that provider’s sacred tradition, and may be carried out implicitly rather than explicitly. This article errs on the side of explicit theology and directive spiritual practices. After defining genderqueer and transgender experience within the range of human experience of

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gender, and after locating that experience within embodiment which also touches many factors and diverse socio-economic locations, this article will look at four theological factors that influence mental health and well-being for genderqueer and transgender people (trans* for short). Readers of this article are understood to be interested in accompanying trans* people on a spiritual journey, and to be able to make use of four types of faith practices that could resource mental health and well-being for the care-seeker. In lieu of the abusive practices of guilt, shame, fear and disintegration, Christian care-givers could offer regard for creation, attention to community, respect for vocation, and belief in integration. Practices in line with these four alternatives will be explored, with trans* voices pointing the way.

Definitions and Context

First, a word on definitions. Gender washes human beings in a convoluted bath of understandings and expectations, which are commonly separated out into gender identity, gender expression, and gender role (Greenberg, 2006). Gender identity is self-understanding, and does not depend on genital or chromosomal assumptions or assignments. It is one’s internal sense of self, recognizable in introspective moments and not dependent on what others believe. Gender expression is how one presents to the world, comporting (or not) with one’s own understanding of gender identity. One can express gender by dress, speech, hairstyle, pronouns and more. Gender role is the set of allowances, proscriptions or prescriptions a society puts on all the different gender identities within that society, marking boundaries differently over time and age. The existence of more rigid gender roles does not mean that all people will confine themselves to those roles. Gender is convoluted enough that many people (not just trans* people) benefit from

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counseling, reflection, and conscious choice-making around exercise of stereotypes, privilege, and limiting behavior based on gender.

Trans* people are those who cannot easily get by without some kind of self-reflection and conscious choice-making around gender expression and gender roles, relative to internal gender identity, because there is something “between” or “across” about their gender identity, given the dominant two markers (M or F). A trans* person may be female, but believed to have been male at birth. A trans* person may be dual-gender, understanding themselves to be either male or female on different days. A trans* person may be androgynous, understanding themselves to be neither male nor female. Much clinical literature exists concerning transsexuals, who pursue needed access to medical care, hormones and/or surgical care for a congruent self-expression of gender identity (any degree of this is known as “gender transition” in female-to-male or male-to-female case studies). Yet in terms of the variety of gender, the clinically-presenting case may not be statistically or socially normative.

In the work of social change and theological reflection, non-binary transgender people came first, making space for gender diversity by defying societal conventions. This tradition is carried on by gender-nonconforming, gender-transgressing, and genderqueer people today who may name themselves within the trans* community but do not mean only transsexual. Meanwhile, some individuals use identifiers like “cross-dresser” to denote something they do part-time versus full-time, yet this is still very much part of their identity. Still other individuals participate in modes of gender within lesbian and gay communities which may blur the line between gender expression and more overt kinds of performance, i.e. drag performance, or queering it up across the butch/femme continuum. The boundaries on transgender experience are
blurry; but rather than clarify and police those boundaries, the care provider will accompany a person on their own exploration of the terrain.

A provider of care needs to identify their own biases and their own limitations to understanding the transgender spectrum, based on upbringing, enculturation, and personal experience of gender. Cisgender experience, unlike transgender experience, is generally that which has been congruent between gender identity and gender expression. Cisgender people may also seek medical and surgical care for their bodies, (i.e. cosmetic surgeries to counteract aging processes, or Lasik surgeries to enhance or repair impaired vision), but when they do it is perceived to be normative for their gender, not a change of gender. As far as gender role, many if not most cisgender people have engaged in “gender-bending” role behaviors, whether women in the military, stay-at-home dads, anyone falling in love with members of the same gender, or someone who has lost a job for having hair the perceived-wrong length. In contexts where social tolerance of diverse gendered behaviors is low, cisgender people may have something in common with trans* people, if they define part of their life story in terms of crossing or being in-between genders. Conversely, where social tolerance for multiple gender roles is higher, trans* people have something in common with cisgender people, in not having to define their lives by a struggle against others’ expectations.

People who find they have the same story, enough or in part, often create a culture together, with shared language. That culture further shapes or contributes to the self-understandings and gender identities that others will create in the future. Because this is so, there is great diversity within the trans* experience. Trans* people of a certain age who manage risk by living ‘low-disclosure’ rather than ‘coming out’ as transsexuals are not necessarily participating in the same culture as younger genderqueer people who boldly organize for Sacred Spaces: The E-Journal of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, 2016, vol.8
LGBTQ progress. Likewise: those able to identify with disability are not necessarily in the same current as those who do not identify with disability. Intersex people may identify with queer, trans or disability movements or may not identify with these movements. Trans* people who have inherited male privilege participate in a somewhat different culture than trans* people who have inherited being the targets of sexism. Trans* people with HIV and/or who may have a background in sex work perhaps learn a different culture when they become parents of soccer-playing children. The landscape of multi-faceted identity is convoluted. Language changes through time, with numerous labels on “trans” identities showing this strain over the past decades (Paige, 2001).

The care provider is wise to be alert to issues that are more or less human issues, not always to be reduced to categorical identity when counseling an individual who happens to be trans*. Not all presenting issues should be collapsed into the gender “issue,” and the care provider should be alert to avoid projecting personal work around gender onto the care-seeker, instead being prepared to resource and refer when limitations are identified. For the same reason, however, when considering the evolution of categories in the totality of life experience, not all trans* people need referral to a specialist for the reason that they need to explore gender.

Next, a word on socio-economic context. Just as gender is a complex feature of socialized embodiment, so are race, class, religion, ability/disability, sexual orientation, and ethnicity: all are complex features of enculturated existence. Some dynamics of oppression work similarly; some work in a multiplied fashion on the lives of people who may seek spiritual care and pastoral counseling. The first nationwide survey on transgender health found the worst outcomes for mental health among those people who had the lowest levels of employment, who were the most likely to be involved in the illicit economy, who faced the highest levels of police
harassment and who interacted most regularly with the prison system (Grant, Mottet, Tanis & Keisling, 2011). Trans women of color are most directly and negatively impacted by these factors. Not coincidentally, trans women of color are the demographic which is disproportionately represented each November on the Trans Day of Remembrance when names are called memorializing the lives lost to street violence and/or partner violence in the past year (Himschoot, 2009).

Mental health is not simply an outcome of good internal resources. It is also causally affected by external material conditions, namely the means to build a life and livelihood, or the lack thereof. For this reason, the annual Philadelphia Trans Health Conference promotes “health” as a combination of factors such as employment, education, dignity, choices, relationships, and also medical and mental health care; for the same reason, priorities identified by trans* leaders at a convening by the Arcus Foundation included criminalization, homelessness, and access to employment (Mananzala, 2014). Poverty linked to racism is not just job discrimination but also unequal history of equity and anti-wealth policies, so systemic that such racism-based poverty certainly will play out in churches and in the ability to access and to provide pastoral care. Providing affordable spiritual care to deal with despair and self-harm is important, in models that span individual, group and community settings. Meanwhile, faithful leaders appreciating their own social location can work theologically, prophetically, and pastorally to interrupt the cycle of multi-generational poverty, thereby reducing hyper-masculine, anti-gay and anti-woman forms of violence often perpetrated by men lacking sufficient social regard, dignity and self-respect.

When trans* people do seek care from a religious leader, some receive positive encouragement, such as Stonewall-significant historical figure Sylvia Rivera receiving a blessing from her Pentecostal pastor on her rite of passage to young adulthood as a girl (Duberman,
Many more face abusive language, constraints or interventions designed to curtail their gender expression or repress their gender identity – supposedly based on theology (to be deconstructed below). Family members as well as trans* people can be susceptible to these messages, especially if the damaging messages come from well-intentioned people in trusted networks of belonging or positions of power. To redress the toxic internalization of those religiously-received messages, conscious effort toward critical reference points for faith may be helpful to activate the positive resources of an individual’s spiritual tradition. Bridge figures and role models, as well as care-givers, may also help re-orient a trans* care-seeker to options, alternatives, choices, and empowerment, even while they find, foreground or create new or hybridized spaces in which to meet external needs.

**Mental health and theology**

In the afore-mentioned nationwide transgender survey, mental health and well-being were low across the trans* spectrum, compared to the general population (Grant, Mottet, Tanis & Keisling, 2011). Suicidality was high: 41% attempting suicide. By way of interpreting this statistic, although suicides are known to be common in the trans* community across age groups (Clements-Nolle, Marx & Katz, 2006), this is the case not because of something intrinsic to trans* people but because of the collusion of life-extirminating factors imposed upon trans* people. There is something powerful at work in the forces that conspire against a human spirit: the forces of guilt, shame, fear and disintegration. The same forces that work against employment and health, toward hate violence and over-incarceration, are the forces at work against an individual’s own mind and emotions. Christianity has been complicit in this perpetration of harm: from marginalizing or denying the presence and history of gender-variant
leaders of faith (Lopez, 2014), to enshrining two strict genders in law and custom, to denigrating queer people, to excluding transgender people from choirs and bathrooms, church ministries and leadership. Four aspects of “insidious effort” identified as fear, guilt, shame, and inferiority were first noted by Vanessa Sheridan (2001, p. 80) and in this article are named guilt, shame, fear and disintegration.

Where Christian religion has been part of the injury, many trans* individuals nonetheless experience it as a source of healing: from singing of spiritual songs; to prayer and meditation (Tigert & Tirabassi, 2004); from proclaimed testimony to acts of dedication; from the liberative and transformative meaning of the Sacraments to an embodied incorporation of paradox at its theological core. In addition, trans* people of faith are reclaiming with pride gender-variant figures from biblical and church history (Rohrer, 2011; Swenson, 2005; Toscano, 2012). Practices of spirit that manifest life and hope include regard for creation, a value on community, respect for vocation, and belief in integration. Each of these four strands will be examined in turn, to spin a thread that for some may be a lifeline.

Guilt / Creation

The first misguided message trans* people hear is one of guilt. The logic of guilt-producing messages often follows this form: “What is rare is odd; what is odd is bad; don’t be bad.” If one is outside the norm (or norms) of gender, and this is a core feature of one’s self, there really is not any way to not be that. So the message of guilt is inescapable and ineradicable, except by self-annihilation. This annihilative force of overwhelming guilt is repetitive and cumulative, and causes one layer of injury against a trans* person who wants to be a good – i.e. normal – person. This is false equation, of course. What is good is not normal, and what is normal is not good, necessarily; nor is what is exceptional, bad! The practice of Jesus was the...
practice of a sage who pointed to a lot of things in the natural world and said, “Look,” or “Consider” (Matthew 12:24; Luke 6:8). Jesus’ belief was the belief in a Creator who was the Source of the mustard tree and the bird in its branches, the One responsible for the seed and the grain, and all kinds of mysteries therein (Mark 4). To the extent that the modern mind can re-conceive of such mysteries, and hold them with humility, then the small thing of sideburns and hand lotion – “his and hers” – becomes a matter for curiosity and learning, not pre-judging and condemning.

Actions and activities abound for the trans* person to begin to regard creation, and all life within creation, as a startling and beautiful, complicated and nuanced thing – in which gender ceases to be defined as a matter of sin or sinfulness. For example: Read the Psalms – outdoors. Contemplate the Grand Canyon. Study quasars. Stare at a sunset for the sake of awe. Collect rocks. Grow something in the Earth. With joy and laughter, discover that pink and blue are both part of the sky; redwoods reproduce three different ways; juniper trees change their sex every so often; tadpoles and frogs could be considered two different species. The Creator of all may have a special place for humankind; but theistic faith cannot be so anthropocentric as to tell God, considering this great variety, that God got it wrong (in all but two cases). Science can be an agent of faithful revelation, according to Pat Conover, who says Christians “are drawn to an interest in the embeddedness of spirit in the midst of life” (2002, p.15). Isherwood and Stuart (1998) derive affirmation of every body from a cosmic Christ, process thought, and eco-theology. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott says: “There is no eternal or real separation between Creator and creation” (2001, p.86). Trans* people have proceeded to show reverence for the Creator by having a certain kind of humility in light of the complex diversity of all creation.
Shame / Community

Having grounded oneself with humility in relationship to one’s creative Creator, one can next examine the misguided message of shame, the idea that: “If you’re not like us, you can’t be one of us.” This message is one that humans send each other, out of fear or defensiveness, to preserve an in-group with some degree of homogeneity or purity. The impact is that the shamed person feels they do not belong, but instead feels that their people have rejected them. The impact on a trans* person is loneliness, stifling and incredible loneliness. Jesus was not known for imposing any such separation and alienation, nor being concerned with preconceived contamination. Rather he blurred ingroup and outgroup distinctions, interrupting stigma-based divisions on the way to creating new community (Matthew 8:1-4; Mark 5:1-20; Luke 7:1-10; John 4:9). Loving relationships among people not only allow for communion with the Divine, but also with one another, accepting change and growth along the way. Community is comparatively flexible in distinction to the practice of rigid conformity. Community in the Spirit is what Jesus promised when the Comforter would gather and lead individuals together in mutual forgiveness and provision for each one’s needs.

Actions and activities that create community, even when a trans* person feels forsaken and alone, can help them move to perceive and add relationships of support as necessary. For example: Draw a map of one’s family networks, and identify those who are tolerant members at the present time. Then draw friend networks, moving on to community groups and spaces. This is a form of asset mapping, and may draw out grief and sadness but also the creativity of making choices and turning over new leaves. Attend support group meetings and/or conferences. Form relationships of positive regard whether through the ball scene, or through the workplace – and keep doing it, whether those relationships mirror one aspect of your identity or more than one.
Those who are able to form community, with safeguards for an increasingly holistic referential fabric for all parts of themselves including their gender identity and expression, promote the greatest resilience in themselves. Educator Louis Mitchell says, “Resilience and connectedness are key in the transgender community to dealing with a certain amount of risk and vulnerability” (Mitchell, 2013: Lecture Notes).

Such resiliency networks can be formed by/among children, youth, families, adults, and seniors – in schools, activist groups, support groups, or religious spaces. Churches that are expressly welcoming (Open and Affirming) of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are helpful: the knowledge that congregations are capable of holding theology in which God is not limited by human bias can alleviate shame on a widespread level. Living out the welcome within one congregation is of course more difficult than proclaiming it, because the dynamics of difference come with power differentials. Work toward diversity and justice continues within communities, if they are to perform as true spiritual communities over time (Forbes, 2001).

Fear / Vocation

The third message which is spirit-threatening, soul-expiring, life-denying to trans* people is a message of fear. When aware of hate crimes, rape, assault, relationship loss, precedent under the law for loss of spouse and children, job loss, health discrimination, and daily micro-aggressions from paperwork to locker rooms; ongoing anxiety can be the result. The message of fear says that loss is normal, that safety is unlikely, and that a negative past predicts a negative future. It coaches individuals to stay in a small, contained place where they will attract no attention and be in no danger. To a degree, caution may be adaptive for survival. And yet an unwieldy degree of fear is the internalized form of homophobia/transphobia. This form of phobia damages oneself even before any perpetrator can. Managing anxiety, mending a personal feeling...
of security, and fending off phobia takes courage. Courage comes from a sense of purpose, which is also what Jesus offered when he said, “Follow me” (Matthew 4:19; Matthew 9:9; Mark 10:21; Luke 9:23; John 10:27). Religious rituals promote courage when they help people embrace their spiritual vocation, their sacred purpose in life, which is beyond fear of loss but which promotes unique gifts and contributions that can be shared with others.

Actions and activities to deepen the blessings of vocation for trans* people include some of the practices at the core of traditional Christian faith. Tanis (2003) explores “call” and “calling” for trans* people as that purpose which is nurtured in an individual’s life when they commit to a journey, show up to God, and discover what they will become. Rites and rituals within Christianity help people discover and affirm their calling, dedicating themselves unambiguously to life when faced with death. For instance: baptism (and re-naming) ceremonies; communion with liturgy of counter-memory and liberation; shared testimony and praise; Bible stories of the brave. Also in the church tradition are practices commonly enshrined in ministries of care, advocacy and outreach. Name your losses. Grieve them. Hear others’ stories/histories/herstories of survival and overcoming; tell yours. Research where progress is needed, and what progress has been made. Use arts, events, campaigns, or groups to build power. In whatever ways individuals tap into their vocation, they discover something that transcends fear and promotes appropriate courage. Aligning oneself with core purpose deepens a sense of well-being and satisfaction, and occasions surprise and discovery together with others.

In light of sacred vocation pursued in and through the activities of daily living, pastor and blogger Lawrence Richardson (2014) exhorts a trans*-specific practice of “showing up”:

“My message to every trans and gender non-conforming person reading this is: ‘God is love and you were made in the image of perfect Love. There is space for you in this world. There is space
at your church, in your desired career, in your family, on sports teams…and it is time to take your space. Show up! In large numbers or in small…your presence is valued and necessary. So when they stare or ask questions, answer them. Look them in the eyes proudly with your beautiful, handsome, artsy, brilliant, capable, transgendered self. Claim your space. Rearrange the seating to make room at the table. Correct people when they use the wrong pronouns. Hang up your own sign on the bathroom door. Tell them who you are and who you are not. Be bold. ” Such a spiritual practice, with God’s help, builds its own enthusiasm and courage in place of dread and anxiety.

Disintegration / Integrity

The last misguided message trans* people hear is the message of disintegration, based on dualism: either/or, mind/body, soul/sarx, boy/girl, straight/gay. Dualism’s message is: “you have to choose one.” Dualism and hierarchy together combine to subjugate the feminine, in comparison with the masculine, likewise ranking mind over and apart from body. Many religious dichotomies follow the same path: (i.e. in neglect of Earth, prefer heaven; in neglect of the poor, prefer the rich; the male rules over the female as clergy rule over the church). Early Christian testimony preferred paradox to any of these, however. Jesus was understood to upend the dualistic and hierarchical order of the Great Chain of Being, by saying “The last shall be first” (Matthew 19:20) and “Do to the least of these as you would do to me” (Matthew 25:40). Belief in Jesus’ resurrection later further pushed the matter of flesh and spirit together, as did all the miracles of feeding and healing and blessing by the early Church, as did the fact that women and men and eunuchs together went about proclaiming prophecy fulfilled (see Matthew 19:12; Acts 8:36). The doctrine of the Incarnation left the impression of God’s humble power in mortal vulnerability on Earth, counter-intuitively linked to immortal celestial might. Christianity has
carried on this tradition of power reversal variously, or not very well, over time. Yet the paradox of spirituality in embodiment can be recognized through the simple things: practices of potlucks and fasting; rising and kneeling to pray; anointing the sick; incense to smell; chimes to hear; and all manner of traditions that center spirituality in embodiment.

The integration of distinct possibilities that might all be true is a marker of spiritual maturity. When trans* people return with maturity to any earlier-imposed limits of dualism, they may make body modifications, or they may make interpretations for other people to come along on their gender identity/expression journey. They may request community rituals, assert pronouns, or reclaim earlier photos and relationships. Stand-to-pee urinary devices for men and voice lessons for women might represent ‘passing’ and fitting-in to a false ‘normal’ for gender; or, such interventions might represent milestones toward interpersonal regard and affirmation of self. The same steps could function in both ways, or neither – not every trans* person will have the same needs. Myths and stereotypes abound concerning hormonal experience, yet each person’s unique embodied experience is valid for them. Negotiating sexual practices is fundamentally about security rather than insecurity, leading to agency and safe choices. Family members, loved ones and professionals close to trans* people can consult extensive first-person accounts in comparison with current medical standards for more information.

Distinct individuals will enact particular investments to incorporate wholeness of body/mind, femininity/masculinity, flesh/spirit, journey/home. Spanning or transcending gender categories, however paradoxical that might be, trans* people embrace new possibility as a matter of faith. Actions and activities that promote the integration of paradox and possibility for trans* people are numerous. Walk the labyrinth. Journal. Paint. Fall in love. Read theology – while doing fitness activities. Pray through the postures of a day, through the seasons of a year; pray

Summary
In summary, practices of spirit are alive and well among trans* people, although each year many trans* people consider suicide, and the prevention of suicide should be among the considerations of pastoral care providers. Undoubtedly, more trans* academics and religious care providers are emerging everywhere (Terry, 2013), and will more fully develop advice, techniques, theories and methodologies in years to come. This article covers some preliminary Christian concepts related to dealing with guilt, shame, fear, and disintegration, by focusing on what a trans* person can do to pursue reverence for creation, community, vocation and integration.

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Queering Intimate Partner Violence

Jeanne Hoeft, Ph.D.¹

Abstract  This article seeks to raise awareness of intimate partner violence and abuse in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) relationships, to challenge the heteronormativity that may inform pastoral counselors and the church regarding this problem and to propose contextually appropriate responses. Queer theory provides a basis for disrupting assumptions of gender and sexuality behind feminist approaches to intimate partner violence and for looking more deeply into the power and control dynamic in abusive LGBTQ relationships. The article includes suggestions for preventing, interrupting, and responding to intimate partner violence which always requires attention to the multifaceted workings of power in relationships and their social context, especially, in this case, at the intersection of sexism and heterosexism.

Keywords Intimate partner violence, Queer theory, Power and Control

As society and churches become more open to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons, paradigms for living and thinking will change. Inclusivity with justice means more than allowing new people in the doors and at the table; it means giving marginalized persons power to influence what happens inside at the table. It even means redefining the table itself. As lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) relationships become more open and visible, those who want to affirm that visibility need

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to be open to learning anew what living in relationship means. Pastoral counselors and caregivers working with lesbian and gay couples cannot unselfconsciously use heteronormative paradigms for explanatory systems or “best” practices, if they want to be justly inclusive.

The goal of this article is first to raise awareness about intimate partner violence in LGBTQ relationships, a problem that is usually thought of in terms of men and women. In some ways this article stands in between two eras of gay liberation that pastoral theologian Cody Sanders (2013) describes: we are “just like you” and “learn from us” (p.5). Although when gay rights activists argue that LGBTQ people are “just like” everyone else they usually mean in positive ways, LGBTQ persons, just like others, sometimes live in violent relationships, and those who want to end domestic violence can learn more about intimate partner violence by listening to them. Some may argue that it is too soon to talk publicly about such things, especially in the context of religious circles where discrimination still runs high, yet justice requires full-recognition; it means bringing the best and the worst, the joys and the struggles to the table, so that all might be enriched and grow together.

**Queering**

With this article I intend to augment resources already available to LGBTQ affirming pastoral counselors and caregivers with tools to interpret and respond appropriately to LGBTQ intimate partner violence. Doing so requires queering, which means decentering

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2 In this article I use LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) unless referring to the work of another author who uses different terms such as LGBT. I use the specific terms, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, or queer when I intend to refer to a specific population.
heteronormative narratives and practices commonly assumed in feminist and other approaches to domestic violence work. I cautiously use the term “queering” to identify the method by which I am engaging intimate partner violence. I hope that it peaks interest, arouses discomfort, and elicits question marks and yet I am also fearful of its erasures and discursive boundary setting. Queer is often used as an umbrella or catchall term to indicate all those who identify with non-heterosexualites - lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, asexual - and as a way to avoid the continual additions to an ever-growing lettered shortcut – LGBTQIA (Cheng, 2011; Johnson, 2014; Sanders, 2013; Sullivan, 2003). I tend to avoid using the term “queer” as an umbrella term since it can erase the particular and significant differences in lives lived under each of the identities. However, queer can name the many who do not fit neatly into any of the categories or who understand themselves to live in multiple categories at once. Some identify as queer as a way to claim a more fluid sexual identity that does not get circumscribed by the already increasingly essentializing of familiar terms. Queer identity politics re-appropriates a term of derision into an identity of pride.

Emerging out of identity politics and LGBTQ emancipatory movements, queer theory deconstructs the notion of core sexual identities out of which one expresses sexuality and gender identity. Queer theorists such as Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 2004) argue that both sex and gender are social constructions enacted to maintain heterosexual hegemony. This disrupts the earlier feminist claim that gender is a social construction imposed upon sex, which is a biological given. The binary, male and female, is not an expression of that which is “natural’ or God-given but rather a sedimented human construction used to uphold heteronormativity. Queer theology (Althaus-Reid, 2004;
Cheng, 2011; Johnson, 2014) follows in this vein seeking to deconstruct heteronormativity in practices and doctrines of the church. As Marcella Athaus Reid (2008) states, queer theology is “not a theology of inclusivity,” in the sense that it argues for the inclusion of LGBTQ people into the church; it is a theology of “difference” (p.94). A queer theory, a queer theology, or a queer person claims a position outside the norm, seeking not to fit into existing norms but to be recognized and valued as a challenge to the assumptions about reality that lie beneath the norms.

My hope is to disrupt and decenter prevailing heterosexist norms in current modes of thinking about and responding to intimate partner violence. Consonant with queer theorist Nikki Sullivan (2003) I am using “queer” as a verb, but I am aware that if queering is an activity that intends “to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize” (p. iv), it is also at the same time constructing and positing new frameworks for thinking and acting. I am hoping to disrupt some of the assumptions found in intimate partner violence discourse based on what LGBTQ people have to teach us from their experience of intimate partner violence on their own terms and with the expectation and hope of further disruptions.

**Prevalence**

The usual estimate is that in their lifetime twenty-five to fifty percent of all women will experience violence at the hands of an intimate. This violence is 95% of the time perpetrated by men against women or their male partners (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2000). Early measures on the prevalence of intimate partner violence in LGBTQ relationships indicated rates comparable to heterosexual relationships, about 33 percent of all couples
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(Donovan & Hester, 2014; Hattery & Smith, 2012; Ristock, 2002). Recent reports (National Coalition of Anti-violence, 2014; Walters, Chen, & Breiding, 2013) show that violence between intimates is a significant problem for LGBTQ persons, especially for gay men, youth, transgender persons, and bisexual persons. About 44% of self-identified lesbians report severe physical abuse in their lifetime, but much of it was perpetrated by men, not their lesbian partners (Walters et al., 2013).

Statistical data is usually required by funding sources and needed to convince the public that intimate partner violence is a social problem worthy of their attention and resources, but prevalence statistics have been a site of contention in the field of domestic violence (for more discussion see DeKeseredy, 2011; Stark, 2007). Statistics gathered through police reports can give information on incidents of violent crime, but only those actually reported to or interpreted by the police as violence between intimate partners are reported as such. Since many LGBTQ persons are reluctant to interact with police and may not be willing to identify the perpetrator of a crime as an intimate partner, these statistics are of limited use. Broader surveys on lifetime experience are more helpful in estimating prevalence but until very recently they were not adept at capturing LGBTQ experience. LGBTQ experience is not represented when surveyors ask respondents to identify with one of two possible genders, or when they offer a limited range of sexual orientations and gender identities, or when they do not ask about the sex, gender identity or orientation of the abuser. A clearer picture of the prevalence and demographics of intimate partner violence requires much more contextualization; nevertheless it is clear that intimate partner violence is a significant problem in LGBTQ relationships.
**Queering Gender**

Pastoral counselors have excellent resources available to them on the subject of intimate partner violence, including resources by the Faith Trust Institute and work by Marie Fortune (1987, 2005), Carol Adams (1995), Pamela Cooper-White (2012), James Poling (1991, 1999, 2003), and Al Miles (2011). These authors follow the trajectory established by the early battered women’s movement that understands intimate partner violence as one manifestation of women’s oppression. In the 1970’s feminists began garnering social attention to the problem of domestic violence and battered women. Early feminist frameworks argued that battering was a manifestation of gender inequality under patriarchy, perpetrated by individual men against their wives and girlfriends but sustained by a social system that allowed, and perhaps encouraged, them to use violence to dominate and control women. Lenore Walker (1979) and others (Schecter, 1982) routinely pointed out that the two primary characteristics of batterers were that they were men and that they held stereotypical traditional notions of gender roles. Challenging boundaries between public and private, women’s movements brought what was once considered a private family matter into social discourse. Campaigns emerged to raise awareness, provide funding, train health care and criminal professionals, and pass new laws that would protect and care for victims and hold batterers accountable. It is now rare in the United States to hear any public person suggest that it is acceptable or understandable for a man to beat his wife. This can be counted as a mark of the influence of the battered women’s movements.

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3 Most of these resources make a brief mention of same-sex domestic violence. One pastoral theologian, Joretta Marshall (1997) devotes a chapter to domestic violence in lesbian relationships. David Kundtz and Bernard Schlager (2007) also give some attention to domestic violence in queer relationships.
In the 1990’s the feminist approach to battering was fiercely challenged by an approach to domestic violence that focused on individual personalities and pathologies, not gender, as the primary factor in violent relationships. This perspective found some of its basis in an early broad-based survey of families, the Conflict Tactics Scale (Gelles & Straus, 1988; Straus & Gelles, 1990), which found that violence was used as often by women as it was by men and suggested that most violence between intimates was “mutual.” Critics of feminist approaches were also quick to suggest that lesbian partner violence undermined the idea that women were always victims and feminists were compelled to respond to women’s use of violence (Lamb, 1999). Thorough critiques of the Conflict Tactics Scale (DeKeseredy, 2000; Stark, 2007) say, among other things, that the scale does not account for the context of the violence and whether it was used in self-defense, that it measures only discreet incidents, and that it does not ask about the level of severity. These convincing critiques do not, however, erase the reality that not all perpetrators are men and not all victims are women, a point that is necessarily highlighted when LGBTQ intimate partner violence is included in the discussion. We must seriously engage the question of gender’s role in intimate partner violence.

Shared concern for social structures of discrimination and oppression of marginalized people suggests a natural affinity between feminist and queer approaches to domestic violence. There is an increasing awareness of LGBTQ partner violence but as Janice Haaken (2010) reports, “In a typical series of training sessions at a shelter, one session may focus on domestic violence as a singularly male form of power and control while the next session may focus on the “hidden epidemic” of lesbian battering, without discussion of the apparent contradiction” (p.94). If it is “singularly” male, how can it also
include lesbian or transgender women? To gloss over or trivialize intimate partner violence in LGBTQ relationships is to further marginalize LGBTQ people. However, queer rights movements and theories seek to disrupt the very social structure on which the feminist framework rests – gender, which on the surface makes it appear as though feminist and queer are, in this case, at odds.

The strong heteronormative gender narrative in shelter based domestic violence programs invites some of those with commitments to feminist movements, to solve the cognitive dissonance of a female perpetrator or male victim by making the situation fit with the dominant feminist narrative. Working from a paradigm that equates being a victim with being female, shelter workers may identify victims by looking for traditional feminine characteristics, such as passivity, emotionality, caretaking behavior, dependency, and identify perpetrators as those with traditionally masculine characteristics, such as independence, rationality, and aggressiveness. Service providers and others try to force lesbian and gay couples into a heteronormative structure by categorizing individuals by their masculine or feminine traits. Intimate partner violence can then be understood as a result of internalized patriarchy that plays itself out regardless of the sexual identity of the partners. Many people assume that lesbian and gay couples mimic traditional gender roles, with one in the couple playing the “man” and the other playing the “woman” but while this may seem apparent on the surface of some lesbian and gay relationships, it is not the norm. First, more contextualized studies in LGBTQ intimate partner violence (Ristock, 2002) reveal that the more “masculine” partner is often not the abuser and the more “feminine” partner is often not the victim. Second, most LGBTQ people do not live in relationships that fit the narrative of assigned
gender roles, nor, as queer theorists point out, do they always live neatly in the assigned male or female sex binary. Lesbians who wear lipstick and jewelry may also be jocks and drag queens may also be construction workers. Trans couples may be perceived (but not necessarily self-identified) as lesbian one day and straight the next. Counselors, service providers, and police are often compelled to quickly categorize victims and perpetrators as such, because most services are oriented toward either one or the other. Shelters or programs serving only victims must first decide who the victim is. The masculine perpetrator and feminine victim has been a helpful, often unconscious, template to expedite this process, but it is based on false assumptions and can have devastating consequences. For example, gay, bisexual, trans men, or “butch” lesbians are at risk of not being believed when they present themselves for victim services and perpetrators can end up in shelters for victims.

It is not, however, only counselors and service providers who operate out of the gendered narrative to explain domestic violence, LGBTQ people also live under the assumption that battering is something that happens when a man abuses a woman. Lesbian women and gay men often do not see themselves in the picture of domestic violence that has been painted in the social arena. They struggle to name what they experience as “abuse” (Davis & Glass, 2011; Mendoza & Dolan-Soto, 2011; Ristock, 2002). Lesbians may also resist that label out of loyalty to feminist movements. Gay men may have a hard time seeing themselves as victims if they identify with dominant male social positions. If a person does not identify as being victimized and does not describe their experience of violence as abuse, then service providers and others will not respond with the resources and knowledge developed to protect victims and stop abuse. While the
heteronormative categories in domestic violence discourse and practice need expanding to include LGBTQ people as victims and perpetrators, it is also important that LGBTQ persons are encouraged to name their experience of violence between intimates on their own terms. It could be that intimate partner violence is not gendered, but it could also be that what LGBTQ persons experience is not intimate partner abuse as it has been understood but a different phenomenon altogether. It appears to me that there are enough similarities to suggest that what heterosexual partners experience as intimate partner violence is not entirely different from what LGBTQ people experience but there are enough differences to suggest more thorough analysis is needed. Queering intimate partner violence necessitates exploring the intersectionality of complex culturally ascribed identities and the systems of power out of which they emerge and in which they operate.

**Intersection of sexism and heterosexism**

One strategy for addressing the gender dilemma is to focus on the dynamic of power and control in abusive relationships, irrespective of gender. Feminist approaches to intimate partner violence do not argue that gender in and of itself causes or exacerbates violence but rather that the social construction of gender in a system of patriarchy supports men’s violence against women. Patriarchy is a sociocultural system of male domination under which male and ascribed masculine characteristics are privileged over female and feminine. For example, reason is privileged over emotion and rules over relationship. Sex and gender under patriarchy become a primary basis for identity, one of the first ways a person is categorized, even in the womb, and along with it is assigned a host of
“naturalized” characteristics. Social power and privilege comes with being identified as male, and the more masculine the better. Policing of gender is evident at a young age when boys fear being called “fags” or “sissies,” which equates them to girls, and continues as men have to assert their masculinity as being over and against femininity, which is then later proven through heterosexual relations. Gender inequality is also evident when girls who act like (tom)boys do not meet the same vehement ridicule, though they do have to continually deal with accusations of being a lesbian if they show too many of the characteristics assigned to men (Allen, 2007). Some men, not most, turn to violence against women to maintain or assert their position.

Some early feminists argued that “natural” gender characteristics are not natural at all but rather are social constructions of gender assigned unnecessarily to male or female sex categories. Others argued that the characteristics assigned as feminine should be valued as equal to or better than those assigned as masculine. Butler and other queer theorists complexify these discussions by suggesting that the very notion that there are “naturally” two sexes upon which gender is constructed is a fallacy constructed to support heterosexual privilege. Sexism supports heterosexism in that heterosexuality relies on the idea of a complementary sex binary, male and female, which then requires a careful and complex system of gender categorization. According to this system “real men” have sex with women and “real women” have sex with men. Sexism and heterosexism operate in multifaceted interrelated operations and structures of power that support, among other things, intimate partner violence through continual reassertion of dominance.

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4 For further discussion of the evolution of thought on sexism and heterosexism in practical theology see Hoeft, 2012.
Heterosexuality as the paradigm for intimate relationship in the U.S. is normalized and normative. Sociologists Cynthia Donovan and Marianne Hester, after a broad study of same-sex domestic violence, propose that “rules for relationship” and “practices of love” are central to the dynamic of domestic violence and should serve as a primary lens for responding to it (Donovan & Hester, 2014). Couples generally begin relationships with feelings of love and “loving” the abuser is the first reason most victims give for staying in an abusive relationship. Common understandings about what love is and how it is to be practiced are culturally constituted. For instance, LGBTQ and straight couples believe love to involve loyalty and commitment to the relationship through good times and bad. The standard images for loving relationship are heterosexual, and heterosexual in the context of gender inequality. The lack of a “public story” about same–sex relationships, healthy or otherwise, exacerbates and contributes to the difficulty of understanding the dynamics of intimate partner violence (Donovan & Hester, 2014).

Intimate partner violence can best be understood by considering the intersections of multiple structural and personal constraints under which people live (Sokoloff & Pratt, 2005). Battered women and men cannot separate what part of their experience is due to sexism and what part is due to heterosexism, racism, classism or any other way power is structured. Power operates externally and internally to reiterate structures of oppression in fine-tuned interlocking systems through social institutions, cultural practices, and symbol systems. LGBTQ people are shaped by this external and internalized norm even as they resist it. Gender inequality is an aspect of intimate partner violence for LGBTQ people but so are other systems of power and oppression that regulate the everyday life of victims and perpetrators of intimate partner violence (Bograd, 2010; Davis & Glass,
2011). Preventing, interrupting, and responding to intimate partner violence always requires attention to the multifaceted workings of power in relationships and their social context. These “intersecting identities” affect a person’s perception of whether the violence experienced in the relationship is abuse or just part of everyday life. They affect the abuser’s ability to use stereotypes and fear of discrimination as a tactic of control. They signal whether or not family and friends will collude with the abuser or assist the victim and the level of trust the victim can place in government and social agencies (Donovan & Hester, 2014).

**Power and control**

One of the struggles that victims and service providers face is how to name what is happening in the relationship: Is this abuse, couple fighting, or something else? Naming is key to determining the path of intervention. Early literature on gay male battering argued that battering was primarily a mental disorder and thus focused on individual pathology in the batterer and certain traits in the victim (Island & Letellier, 1991) but research has not supported this idea (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Poon, 2011; Ristock, 2002). It is not clear what makes an individual become an abuser but we do not have to find a cause in order to identify contributing factors, interpret the dynamics and plan for prevention and intervention (Poon, 2011).

According to a power and control framework, prevalent in feminist approaches, intimate partner violence is not a problem of individual pathology, communication, anger management, jealousy or sex; it is about power. Violence is one means of exerting power over another but it is not the only way and the focus on physical violence, out of the
context of other tactics of coercion and control, poses several difficulties for understanding and addressing intimate partner violence. Physical violence is wrong, harmful, and definitely needs intervention but it does not always indicate abuse; likewise abuse victims may never meet the criteria needed to file a criminal complaint for assault or show up in an emergency room.

Violence is enacted in relationships in multiple ways. Evan Stark (2007) identifies three types of intimate partner violence: couple fights, partner assaults, and coercive control. In “couple fights,” which Stark argues are the majority of the incidents reported in large population surveys, both partners use violence to address a conflict and rarely call the police or seek other assistance (p.234). In “partner assaults” one partner uses violence, threats and other tactics to “hurt and subjugate” a partner (p.236). According to Stark, both of these types of intimate partner violence can occur in same-sex relationships and can be perpetrated by men or women. However, Stark argues, in “coercive control” violence women are “entrapped” by men through a “technology” of violence, isolation, and intimidation directly fueled by male privilege and entitlement. Coercive control is the classic case of extreme battering often portrayed in the media. Though others disagree with the idea that coercive control happens only in heterosexual couples (Donovan & Hester, 2014), and much more research needs to be done to assess whether or not partner assaults and coercive control are actually two different phenomena, Stark’s categories point out the need to look beyond discreet incidents of violence to larger patterns in relationships. Violence is not always indicative of a pattern of abuse.
Abuse is an ongoing pattern of behaviors used by one partner to coerce and control the other, which may or may not involve physical violence, but certainly does occur in LGBTQ relationships. Recognizing and assessing intimate partner abuse requires carefully tracing the everyday workings of power in a relationship. Power, as the capacity to influence, moves in every interaction through multiple paths. As Michel Foucault (1988) reminds us, “Power is everywhere” (p. 93). Power is not a substance or identity status that one possesses, but a dynamic of relationship, known only as it is exercised and produces an effect. One’s capacity for influencing a situation or person is a function of multiple factors, perhaps gender, sexual orientation, race, or economic position, but also information and expertise that coalesce in any particular moment. Power is always moving back and forth, no one is completely powerless, but clearly in any interaction one may have more influence than another while in another context that same person may have very little influence. Power in intimate relationships of mutual respect will be exercised back and forth, in giving and receiving, each having an effect or influence on the other. In abusive relationships the primary dynamic is more unidirectional, one person acts to effect their will and resists being affected by the one being acted upon (Hoeft, 2009, 2011). The central concern in abusive relationships is the will of the abuser, not the needs of the victim.

This does not mean that victims are simply passive receivers of abuse. Wherever power is being exercised there is assertion and resistance. Those on the receiving end of an abuser’s actions always act in resistance, though the effect of that resistance is modified by many factors, such as severity, chronicity, frequency of the violence, and available support. When a victim hits an abuser, this action, hitting, in and of itself may
look like an act of abuse, but if the hitting came as a response to a series of threats or insults, that happen day-in and day-out, and was followed by a rant that accused the victim of being the real abuser, then we can understand the hitting as both an act of violence (but not abuse) that is also an act of resistance to abuse (Hoef, 2009). Victims actively manage situations at home to lessen the chance of a violent outburst by the abuser; and usually when abuse escalates, they become more active in seeking help.

Exploring the full context of LGBTQ abusive relationships emphasizes the need for attending carefully to the complex dynamics of power in relationship because the individual traits of victims and perpetrators do not conform to the stereotypes about who is powerful and who is not. Both people in the relationship may be educated, financially well off and have charismatic personalities. The victim may have social status outside the relationship and the perpetrator very little, but within the relationship the power is reversed. For instance, a more experienced partner may use experience and knowledge of the LGBTQ community as a means to control the partner who is just coming out. In the context of the outside world the perpetrator may have little recognition and may in fact be seen largely as a victim of homophobia and heterosexism, but within the relationship and LGBTQ community the perpetrator has more standing and is able to exercise more influence. Some abusers may even work in the domestic violence movement. Victim and perpetrator are not stable identity categories that hold across time and place. No victim is totally helpless, passive or without a role in the relationship, and no perpetrator is totally evil. Victims find ways to gain some sense of control over their lives and perpetrators may indeed be both abusive and caring (Hoef, 2009; Poon, 2011). This does not mean that perpetrators should not be held responsible for their actions, it does mean that quick
categorizations into either victim or perpetrator are not likely to yield an accurate or helpful view of the situation (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Poon, 2011). LGBTQ intimate partner abuse requires us to look for patterns of behavior rather than personal characteristics or discrete acts and reminds us to look for similar complexities in straight relationships.

The Power and Control Wheel developed by the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project (available at www.duluthmodel.org) is often used as a resource for identifying the variety of behaviors that can be used by abusive partners, including minor acts of violence such as grabbing to more serious acts such as attacking with a weapon. Stark (2007) groups the coercive tactics used by abusers into four groups: violence, intimidation, isolation, and control. They may hit, sexually assault, push and shove; they may stalk, restrict access to people, money, transportation or information; they may humiliate, belittle, threaten and manipulate. Emotional and verbal abuse are the most common tactics while the most common acts of violence are pushing and shoving, with men more likely to use physical violence and sexual assault than women (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Mendoza & Dolan-Soto, 2011; Renzetti, 1992; Ristock, 2002). All of these tactics function to keep abusers’ will and power at the center. Donovan and Hester (2014) characterize the center of the wheel with the two primary rules for the relationship: 1. [T]he relationship is for the abusive partner and on their terms. 2. [T]he victim/survivor is responsible for the care of the abusive partner, the relationship, their children, if they have them, and the household, if they cohabit (p.155). These rules are enforced through the many tactics of coercion and control.
Many of the control tactics used in heterosexual relationships are also used in LGBTQ relationships, and these behaviors are enacted in and supported by structures of social inequality, including sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia. Abusive partners in LGBTQ relationships often use the threat of outing a partner. Coming out is not a one time, once and for all act, it is a constantly negotiated process experienced in various levels of visibility. Ristock (2002) found especially vulnerable first relationships where one partner may be out longer, may have more connections to the LGBTQ community and claim a special knowledge of what an LGBTQ relationship is like. An abusive partner can exploit homophobia by calling into question whether or not the other is “really” lesbian or gay. LGBTQ people often live in tight knit small communities of friends, perhaps estranged from family. Some have little social support and may fear being left without a partner or without friends, a fear that is easily exploited by an abuser (National Coalition of Anti-violence, 2014). Ongoing discrimination and homophobia ensure that LGBTQ people live under the threat of violence every day. Both victim and perpetrator understand that seeking help requires the victim to out him/herself to those from whom help is sought, which adds to the victim’s vulnerability.

**Responses**

Perhaps the most significant difference between heterosexual and LGBTQ experiences of intimate partner abuse is the response of the community. Help-seeking by victims is hampered by the heteronormative narrative that makes it difficult for victims to identify themselves as abused, by what it means to have to continually out themselves in order to get help, and by the expectation that they will encounter discrimination, hostility and lack
of appropriate services. These are failures of the community, not of individual victims. LGBTQ survivors of intimate partner abuse turn first to friends, rather than family, and then to counselors (Donovan & Hester, 2014). Counselors educated in the heteronormative narrative of domestic violence often make the mistake of treating abusive LGBTQ couples as a couple or diagnosing the abuse as a mental disorder in either the victim or perpetrator. In cases of intimate partner abuse counseling can be helpful when done in collaboration with domestic violence programs and in a context that recognizes the larger social context. In many small towns and cities, counselors familiar with LGBTQ issues are scarce and victims may feel the pressure to educate straight counselors about LGBTQ life. Clergy are significantly unresponsive to heterosexual domestic violence (Hoeft, 2011) and, though I can find no research on the issue, if an LGBTQ person experiencing intimate partner abuse were to seek the help of a pastor, I suspect that in most churches the response would be inadequate at best and hostile at worst. There is no doubt that the lack of appropriate community response and the history of exclusion, hostility and violence toward LGBTQ peoples colludes with the abuser’s tactics of control.

In the last forty years the battered women’s movement successfully led establishment of domestic violence programs and shelters in every state. Most LGBTQ specific programs have been incorporated into these established programs or, in larger cities, developed out of LGBTQ Anti-violence programs that also address hate-crimes. In a 2010 study of 648 programs in a variety of departments, 94% of the respondents said they did not serve LGBTQ survivors (National Coalition of Anti-violence, 2014). When LGBTQ survivors do try to access domestic violence programs they are immediately
faced with the intake process that assesses whether or not the person is really a victim and not a perpetrator. Shelters need to take every precaution to admitting a perpetrator but often have poor mechanisms for making those distinctions. Trans survivors face additional challenges as they encounter the power of the sex/gender binary and may face intrusive questions about their transitions and surgeries. Shelters or programs for gay male survivors of intimate partner abuse are almost non-existent except in the largest metropolitan areas, making them, along with transgender persons, unlikely to get the protection and support they need.

Police and the criminal justice system are often a resource for heterosexual victims of intimate partner violence, but one of the least likely resources sought by LGBTQ persons. Trans people are especially unlikely to call the police, as police perpetrate much of the violence against trans people (Allen, 2007). When police are called to the scene of violence between two women or two men their first assumption is not that it is a case of intimate partner violence, as they might if it were a man and a woman fighting. Most states have laws specifically related to domestic violence, and these are especially relevant when survivors seek orders of protection, but not all of those states have clear guidelines that include LGBTQ relationships.

Most batterers in batterer treatment programs are there through court order, but if LGBTQ persons are not likely to call the police, LGBTQ abusers are not likely to find their way to batterer’s treatment. Batterer’s treatment programs face the same heteronormativity faced by programs for victims – they are generally geared toward men who abuse women. Whether for victims or perpetrators, programs that try to include both
men and women in the same program find the effectiveness of the program challenged by the tension between men and women in a group (Mendoza & Dolan-Soto, 2011).

Pastoral counselors and caregivers who want to provide support and guidance to victims and perpetrators of intimate partner abuse must educate themselves about LGBTQ life, in all of its diversity, and monitor heteronormative assumptions, even if they are a member of the LGBTQ community. Lesbian women and gay men must be especially aware of the exclusions of transgender and other queer people within the LGBTQ community. Assessing, preventing, and intervening in intimate partner abuse requires a vigilant analysis of power relations and intersectionality in individual lives. The first step is to heighten awareness that intimate partner abuse happens in LGBTQ relationships and to proclaim clearly that abuse is wrong in any relationship.

Responses to intimate partner violence require interventions that empower the victim and hold perpetrators accountable, without putting victims at further risk. Once an abusive relationship between intimates is revealed, a pastoral counselor’s first concern should be the safety of the victim, which may include developing a safety plan, finding shelter, calling the police and getting a protection order, but close attention must be given to the survivor’s wishes and fears related to involving others. In addition the victim should be given as much information and autonomy as possible to make informed choices about the path ahead.

Most survivors want help for their abusers and this should be respected, not as a sign of pathology but as a sign of care and compassion. This does not mean, however, that survivors should take responsibility for getting the batterer the treatment needed. It does mean that the rules of the relationship must change so that both are getting their
needs met. Couples counseling is not appropriate in cases of intimate partner abuse because the victim cannot speak truthfully with equal standing in the relationship when the threat of violence hangs over every interaction. Abusers must work on their use of power and sense of entitlement, this requires more than anger management programs but it may be especially difficult to find appropriate help for LGBTQ batterers. Pastoral counselors, caregivers and churches that are serious about addressing this problem can be active participants in developing community programs, such as LGBTQ Anti-Violence programs, that are essential to ending intimate partner abuse.

Responses to intimate partner abuse always require a mix of internal work and sociocultural analysis to help survivors, abusers, and counselor see the intersections of systemic relational power as it operates for more oppression and bondage or more justice and love. LGBTQ persons experiencing abuse in their most intimate relationships also need spiritual support and guidance. Experience of abuse raises many theological questions about love, sacrifice, forgiveness, and suffering (Fortune 1987, 1995, 2005; Poling 1991; Cooper-White, 2012). But in the midst of crisis and relational struggle many LGBTQ persons of Christian faith will question their worthiness of a fulfilled life; many will remember the shame they felt about their sexuality and ask if God is punishing them. There are still too few models for being fully “gay” and Christian. Care for those LGBTQ persons experiencing intimate partner abuse, victims and perpetrators, must begin with the assurance that diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities is one of God’s gifts to creation (Cheng, 2011; Johnson, 2014).

Increasing love and justice in the world through inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer people requires queering the theology and practices of
the church, including those of pastoral counselors and caregivers. Even those of us with long-standing relationships within the LGBTQ community need to continually challenge our own heteronormative assumptions. The larger strategy for preventing abuse requires us to continually seek new models for intimate relationships and new paths for living peacefully and abundantly with one another.

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Homoeroticism and Homosexuality in Korean Confucian Culture

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Abstract This article explores how the merging of the contemporary Western concept of homosexuality and the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex has shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korean society. This merger seems to have produced ambivalent attitudes toward homosexuality among Korean people in general, both homosexual and heterosexual. Pastoral psychotherapists' cultural competence is crucial in assisting those in sexual identity therapy to sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the culturally sensitive issue of homosexuality in the Asian, particularly Korean, Confucian context.

Keywords Homosexuality, Korean Confucianism, gender, culture

As part of my research, I watched Korean YouTube videos² that featured male celebrities' homoerotic and homosexual behaviors in public. They kissed (actually they only made gestures of kissing), touched, and hugged each other in exactly the same ways that romantic heterosexual lovers would do in private. Their behaviors were bold enough to get attention from the viewers. Western viewers responded to the video by writing on the blog, "Many of their touchy feely actions went beyond just simple bromance!" They were as stunned by what they saw, as I was. What was more interesting was that fans, mostly young girls, cheered on such public celebrity

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homoerotic behaviors. When a Westerner asked them, however, if they thought the celebrities might be homosexual, the fans got upset and even angry. The fans' reactions were, "What's wrong with you? Where did you get that idea?" Some Westerners on the blog were puzzled by such an obvious contradiction.

It is true that Korean people in general are surprisingly tolerant of such homoerotic behavior but tend to maintain a "brutally" strong resistance to homosexuality, as one of the Westerners wrote on the blog. This visible contradiction also puzzled me and drove me to ask, "How can this contradiction be understood and explained? Is there anything that outsiders may not understand?" These questions have confirmed my belief that homosexuality is not just a psychological or dogmatic problem but also a cultural issue that only insiders may understand.

This paper is an attempt to answer those questions from a cultural and historical perspective of the unique Korean context, one that is relevant both to Korean people back in mainland and those in the U.S., I believe.\(^3\) I hope that this paper will help both Korean/Korean-American and North American pastoral psychotherapists understand the culturally imbedded struggle in the discourse of homosexuality in the Korean context. I often notice that there is mutual animosity between the two cultural groups of conservative Koreans/Korean-Americans and liberal North Americans on the issue of homosexuality. With understanding the culturally unique struggle, Western psychotherapists can effectively assist Korean/Korean-Americans in need to sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the sensitive issue of homosexuality in their own cultural context. I hope that this paper can provide a way to critically

\(^3\) Certainly, there is a difference between the attitudes of Koreans and those of Korean-Americans because of the influence of American culture. We may assume that Korean-Americans are more open toward and accepting of homosexuality. However, my experience says that, in general, there is a strong resistance to homosexuality among Korean-Americans, especially Christians.

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engage these two groups, conservative Korean/Korean-Americans and liberal North Americans, in a constructive dialogue.

In the following, I begin by briefly discussing the Confucian concept of sexuality itself. Then, I examine the intimate male relationship, as prescribed in Confucian ethics, as an essential social fabric of patriarchal power. I proceed to explore why Korean people tend to be ambivalent toward the contemporary understanding of homosexuality influenced by Western culture, specifically North American. My exploration is limited to male relationships because Confucianism does not mention much about female homoerotic relationship: why this is so might be an interesting topic for another researcher.

Confucian sexuality

Sexuality in the Confucian tradition is mostly discussed from a male perspective. It warned against active sexual lives for the sake of self-cultivation. Confucius said, "The gentleman should guard against it in youth when the bold and chi [flow of life force] are still unsettled; he should guard against attraction of feminine beauty" (Analects of Confucius, 16:7). The tradition regarded an active sexual life as depleting a man's limited vital essence and therefore exhorted men not to waste their creative bodily resources.

Restricted sexuality for the sake of the development of self-cultivation went along with the suppression of passionate love between heterosexual partners. Marriage was seen primarily as a family obligation and a means of procreation. A passionate, personal sex drive was regarded as a potentially dangerous force that might pull men away from a balanced life style of self-cultivation and filial responsibilities with parents, family, and the community, thus undermining

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the social order. In particular, Neo-Confucianists in the fourteenth century strictly adhered to this view of sexuality, and to this day this teaching dominates and controls Korean people's sexuality.

Matteo Ricci, a missionary to China in 1582, understood Confucianism as a kind of stoicism and thus tried to form a "Confucian Christianity" according to the model of a Stoic Christianity. Ricci actually called Confucius another Seneca and used the Stoic teaching on the virtue of man's control over himself including his sexual drive and passion. This cultural adaptation left a strong Stoic influence on the interpretation of Confucian virtue ethics. Within this Stoic understanding of human sexuality and passions, an intimate same-sex relationship was encouraged as a safer and more nurturing means by which to achieve self-cultivation as a sage, which is the Confucian ideal self. At the same time, sexual expressions and behavior, other than for the purpose of procreation, were strictly banned. In this context, homosexuality was not tolerated because it was seen only as a relationship for passionate, sexual pleasure.

Korean Confucianism and homosexuality

Though it was not culturally tolerated, homosexuality has not been totally new in the Korean Confucian society. Many Korean people, entrenched in Neo-Confucianism of the past six centuries, tend to think of homosexuality as newly introduced by Western liberal, permissive culture. They thus have shown strong resistance against this allegedly decadent influence of Western lifestyles in contemporary Korean young people. Homoeroticism, however, especially

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5 See Spalatin (1975) for detailed discussion on the Confucian and Stoical practice of virtue.
6 Neo-Confucianism was a combination of the three major philosophies/religions (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) that it was popular and stood out to many followers. Neo-Confucianism was primarily developed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279 A.D.), but which can be traced back to Han Yu and Li Ao (772-841 A.D.) in the Tang Dynasty. Most important of early Neo-Confucianists was the Chinese thinker Zhu Xi (1130-1200). It formed the basis of Confucian orthodoxy in the Qing Dynasty of China (1644-1912 A.D.).

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an intimate male-on-male relationship, has always existed in Korean history and culture.\textsuperscript{7} Korean historical texts include records of homoerotic male relationships, which to Westerners often imply homosexuality, as I discuss later in the article. How has Confucianism allowed such space for homoerotic relationships to exist?

Confucianism has been practiced as a strong patriarchal system.\textsuperscript{8} It emphasizes differentiated role-ethics and prescribes culturally acceptable heterosexual relationships. For example, gender role differentiation prohibited persons of different sexes to be socialized with each other both in public and private in the Korean ancient society. Boys and girls, outside familial and kinship relationships, begin to be separated from each other when they reach the age of six. This strict role-ethics of gender has ironically provided a rich soil for socially, emotionally, and physically intimate same-sex relationships to flourish on a cultural level. In particular, intimate male bonding is highly encouraged and seen as a way of cultivating self to become an ideal Confucian person. In this cultural ethos, the emotional and sexual boundaries in the same-sex relationships are often blurred, and crossing over the boundaries are generally tolerated. Due to this culturally tolerant attitudes toward same-sex intimate relationships, many Korean people seem to show ambivalent, even contradictory, reactions to the contemporary discourse on homosexuality, especially of men. For me, Confucianism can be both the source of components that oppress male homosexuality and at the same time the source of liberating the discourse from a rigid, binary Western model of homosexuality. This duality itself of the Confucian talk about homosexuality might be the source of ambiguity and ambivalence in general. To explore this unique dynamic, I frame our talk within Korean history and discuss homosexuality "as a cultural system" (Cuncun, 2013, p.4).

\textsuperscript{7} See Y.G. Kim & S. J. Hahn (2006) for more information.
\textsuperscript{8} I would rather say that Confucianism arose in a patriarchal culture and always has embraced patriarchal values, rather than saying that the initial form of Confucianism itself developed patriarchal values.
Male friendship as one of the cardinal "five relationships" in Confucianism

Confucianism prescribes "five cardinal relationships as the rule of the social interactions" (Tu, 1998, p.124). Among the five is the relationship between friend and friend, meaning male friendship. The other four include the relationships between: 1) ruler and subject, 2) father and son, 3) older and younger persons, and 4) husband and wife. Each relationship refers to a different type of social relationship and is ascribed a different moral virtue. The relationship between ruler and subject refers to a public relationship founded on duty; that of father and son on intimate familial affection; older and younger, that of age difference on correct etiquette; that of husband and wife on gender role differentiation; and finally, that of friends on equality and mutual trust. In the Confucian hierarchy, friendship is the only relationship that is equal, making it a unique space for Korean men to nurture freely a deeper level of personal and social intimacy.

The Confucian classic, the *Analects*, gives an exhortation about an ideal friendship from a Confucian perspective:

"Faithfully admonish your friend, and skillfully lead him on. If you find him impracticable, stop. Do not disgrace yourself." (Analects Chapter 12)

"There are three friendships which are advantageous, and three which are injurious. Friendship with the upright; friendship with the sincere; and friendship with the man of much observation: -- these are advantageous. Friendship with the man of specious airs; friendship with the insinuatingly soft; and friendship with the glib-tongued: -- these are injurious." (Analects Chapter 16)

Confucian friendship is founded on honesty, trust, and mutual exhortation. Free communication from a sincere heart and skillful knowledge is essential in such interpersonal interactions. That is

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why Mencius in fourth century, BCE strongly emphasized male-bonding friendship as indispensable to the process of moral self-cultivation, which is the highest goal of the Confucian self. Mencius' followers have inherited this teaching and proclaimed that male-bonding friendship is superior to the relationship in marriage, which in the Confucian scheme mostly depends on hierarchical role differentiation and obligation. Besides, most women in those times were not well educated and therefore were not considered equal partners in the lifelong task of self-cultivation. This cultural structure seemed to make Confucian men seek personal intimacy more in male friendship than in the relationship with their wives.

This centrality of the intimate male-bonding relationship became an essential part of the social fabric of the Confucian patriarchal society. Friendship as having a "soul mate" became the ideal in the Confucian context. An example is Confucian literati or scholars, who as soul mates share their deepest emotions, personal and political desires and ambitions, and cultivated knowledge of literature and art. Such literati friendship often included deep intellectual, emotional, and spiritual intimacy, the kind of intimacy that contemporary Western people are used to expecting in a romantic love relationship between man and woman. Because of its depth, such male bonding was regarded as superior to hierarchical male-female relationship, thus fostering the cultural ethos of homosocial eroticism and potential homosexuality. Influenced by this cultural ethos and practice, many contemporary Koreans are tolerant of public homosocial and homoerotic expressions and behaviors among males.

**Patriarchy and homosocial relationships**

As mentioned above, the Korean society has been a deeply Confucian society for more than six hundred years since the Choson dynasty took Neo-Confucianism as the national religion in 1392.
Founders of Chosen dynasty intended to build a new kingdom of social order and stability, free from the influence of a corrupted form of Buddhism and its superstitious beliefs prevalent in the later period of Koryo dynasty. Confucianism seemed to be a good choice to accomplish this purpose of maintaining social order because of its focus on the practical issues of this world, not the world beyond. As time passed, however, Confucianism also changed into a rigid form of hierarchical ideology and lost its initial impetus of reform and renewal. In particular, Confucianism was used to build a strong patriarchal ideology and began to drift away from the initial Confucian emphasis of reciprocal respect and responsibility in a gender relationship. A rigid form of patriarchal ideology dictated gender and sexual relationships, and its impact is still prevalent in the contemporary Korean society. North American feminist Heidi Hartmann and queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick are helpful to understand the dynamics of patriarchy and homosocial/homosexual relationships.

Hartmann (1976) sees male homosocial bonding as an essential element of a patriarchal system. She thus defines patriarchy as "an ensemble of social relationships between men…which establishes…some links of interdependence and solidarity which enable them to dominate women" (p.138). Queer theory scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985) also explains the homosocial bonding between men as the carefully managed social constructs of patriarchy. Both Hartmann and Sedgwick theorize that intimate male relationships are socially and psychologically embedded in a patriarchal system like a Confucian society.

On the other hand, Sedgwick argues, it is strong heterosexual marriages that maintain the patriarchal power structure (1985, p.5). In such a structure, she continues to argue, heterosexuality is obligatory and often built into the male-dominated familial and kinship system. Homophobia is a natural consequence of this social structure. Indeed, Sedgwick cannot
imagine a form of patriarchy that is not homophobic (p. 3). Interestingly enough, therefore, "the suppression of the homosexual component of sexuality is a product of the same system whose rules and relations oppress women" (G. Rubin, quoted in Sedgwick, p.3). Sedgwick interweaves together the paradoxical relationship between homophobia and oppression of women in a patriarchal system. For her, homophobia is "not arbitrary or gratuitous, but tightly knit into the texture of family, gender, age, class, and race relations" (Sedgwick, p.3). She continues:

In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence. For historical reasons, this special relationship may take the form of ideological homophobia, ideological homosexuality, or some highly conflicted but intensively structure combination of the two. (p.25)

According to Sedgwick, this odd combination of ideological homophobia and homosexuality produces ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes toward homoerotic and homosexual men in a patriarchal system. The Korean Confucian society is no exception. In the Neo-Confucian society of Choson dynasty, marriage and procreation were viewed as the primary social and familial duties; passionate love relationships between men and women in general were not encouraged. Boys and girls were separated once they reached the age of six, structurally making it difficult to develop intimate relationships with the other sex from the early years of life, except within the boundaries of family and kinship.

For these reasons, Confucian patriarchal values of intimate same-sex relationships have provided a rich soil for male homosocial, homoerotic, and potentially homosexual bonding among men. Yet, Confucian ethical values strongly oppose homosexual relationships which
violate its patriarchal gender roles, emphasis on patrilineal procreation, and family-oriented role ethics. Many of my Western friends mention that Korean society is extremely homophobic, and yet they are puzzled by the rampant male homoerotic and homosexual expressions and behaviors. Sedgwick's theory of a homosocial-homosexual continuum and the disruption of the continuum in the contemporary discourse of homosexuality may partly explain this discrepancy, which I discuss in the following.

A homosocial-homosexual continuum

Sedgwick (1985) views male-male relationships as “a continuum between the homosocial and the homosexual” (p.1) rather than simply as a binary of straight/gay. “Homosocial” is a neologism that distinguishes it from "homosexual" and refers to any social bonds between persons of the same sex. Homoeroticism or homosocial "desire" marks the erotic or romantic emphasis in this same-sex bonding. Sedgwick's understanding is that homosocial desire is analogous to the psychoanalytic libido. It is "not for a particular affective state or emotion, but for the affective or social force, the glue, even when its manifestation is hostility or hatred or something less emotively charged, that shapes an important relationship" (Sedgwick, p.2). However, how far this force is properly sexual is an active question for Sedgwick, considering the complex interdependence among physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual involvement that is part of human intimacy.\(^\text{10}\)

In his writing on Greek homosexuality, James Davidson (2007) argues for the subtle interdependence among those physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realms in Greek love. According to him, the spiritual elements of the Greek affection towards the boys were

\(^{10}\) Also see Katz, J. N. (2007). Katz challenges the common notion that the distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality has been a timeless one.
always mixed with a powerfully sensual element, the pleasure which had its origin in the physical beauty of the loved one. The boundaries between sexual and spiritual are viewed as fluid rather than fixed. American historian of human sexuality Jonathan Ned Katz (2001) presents stories of male intimacy during the nineteenth century in North America in a similar way. He describes intimate male friendships and the ways in which men struggle to name, define, and defend their sexual feelings for one another. He states that in a world before "gay" and "straight" referred to sexuality, men in intimate relationships with the same sex had to navigate the uncharted territory of male-male desire (p.3-44). The subtle line between the homosocial and the homosexual has made people suspect that there is an unbroken continuum between the two. Sedgwick's (1985) hypothesis of the continuum is based on social constructionism that all sexual understandings are constructed within and mediated by cultural understandings" (p.42). I relate Sedgwick's continuum to the Korean cultural understanding of sex and gender.

Gender is a profound determinant of power in Korean Confucian culture. Once a homosocial bond becomes homosexual, the borderline between them is transgressed and disrupted. Such a transgression is considered a disruption in the Confucian society because of the influence of the Confucian heterosexual gender inequality reflected on the continuum. Thus the transition from the homosocial to the homosexual in an intimate male relationship could be seen quite drastic and disruptive, given that male equal relationship becomes hierarchical in terms of Confucian sexual role differentiation. When a homosocial relationship becomes homosexual, a role is assigned to each participant, and the role assignment is typically arranged within the Confucian cultural framework: One takes a more active, penetrating, masculine role and the other a more dependent, feminine, penetrated role. In Confucian patriarchal society
where femininity is regarded as inferior and not manly, such a feminine role for a man tends to be condemned as deviant from the social norm and thus perverted or byuntae (in Korean). Thus the continuum between homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual should stay clearly discontinuous, and the Western binary model of sexuality further reinforces this separation by distinguishing between sexual and non-sexual relationships.

**The influence of a western concept of homosexuality**

German psychologist Karoly Maria Benkert coined the term "homosexuality" in the late nineteenth century (Pickett, 2001). The neologism signaled a paradigm shift in thinking about intimate same-sex relationships and gave rise to a new concept, the “homosexual.” This term turned behavior into identity, and it was discussed mainly in the domains of medicine and psychology. An essentialist approach was developed, and the contemporary dichotomy of heterosexual and homosexual was born as a sexual identity and orientation. According to essentialism, sexual preference is biologically fixed and usually does not change: It is a part of one's permanent personal identity.

One of the criticisms of this view is that, by accepting such a fixed heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, essentialism unintentionally concedes that heterosexuality is the norm and thus deems homosexuals abnormal and a permanent minority (Pickett, 2001). In reaction to this, a theory of social constructionism was developed that argues that people are not born with a fixed sexual identity or orientation but instead specific social and cultural constructs produce sexual ways of being. In other words, there is no given sexual identity independent of culture. Homi Bhaba (2004) is one of the prominent figures that advocate for this view. For those

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11 See Louis Crompton (2006) for the history of homosexuality in Europe and parts of Asia from Homer to the 18th century.
advocates, the range of sexual diversity and the fluidity of human possibility is simply too varied to be captured by any one conceptual schema.

In the thirteenth century, this essentialist view was merged with natural law ethics, particularly thanks to the influence of Thomas Aquinas's natural law approach that emphasizes certain human goods.\(^{12}\) Among the human goods are marriage and procreation. Natural law ethicists thus oppose homosexual behaviors as morally wrong because they do not lead to procreation. This merging of essentialism and natural law ethics has been a crucial factor contributing towards increased intolerance and condemnation of homosexuals.

Influenced by this line of the Western discourse of homosexuality in modern times, Korean people in general reconsidered and became intolerant of their culturally specific homosocial and homoerotic behaviors and expressions which had been long permitted as intimate male bonding in the Korean Confucian society. As a consequence, Korean people clearly marked the distinction between the homoerotic and the homosexual and thus split the continuum between them: they accept the former as a positive cultural heritage and condemn the latter as a form of sexual pathology. Thus is born a rigid binary thinking about human sexuality along with the corresponding social condemnation. This raises a question, "How far can homoeroticism go and be permitted without being condemned as homosexual in Korean society?" In fact there are no clear, socially agreed upon guidelines for this decision, but there is a widespread understanding that homoerotic relationships turn into homosexual ones when there is a genital sexual intercourse between the two same sex persons. This distinction, however, blurs in the Korean context when we consider that there are same-sex couples who suppress their homosexual expressions and behaviors in order to remain within the cultural bounds. In this

\(^{12}\) See G. Alexandre Lenferna (2010) for the argument that many of the arguments claiming homosexuality to be immoral do not sit well with the natural law ethics position.
case, the couple is obviously homosexual but suppress the desire of homosexual intercourse and does not come out in public. Instead, they try to fit into the culturally permissible category of homosocial and homoerotic relationships of male intimacy. Many homosexual people in Korea are trapped in this ambivalent categorization.

**Homosexual cases in Korean historical records**

Korean historical records show cases of intimate male-on-male bonding among elite members of society. An example can be found in the records of *Hwarang*, a group of elite youth in the ancient *Sylla Dynasty* (57 BCE - 935 AD). The term, *Hwarang* literally means "Flower of Youth." The royal government selected and trained talented young men to serve the country. They were taught the five cardinal Confucian principles of human relations, the six arts (etiquette, music, archery, horsemanship, writing, and mathematics), skills of the three scholarly occupations (royal tutor, instructor, and teacher), and the six ways to serve the government (as holy minister, good minister, loyal minister, wise minister, virtuous minister, and honest minister). Together, loyalty to the king, filial piety, literary excellence in poetry and music, and military excellence in martial arts were the virtues of *Hwarang*. Along with those virtues, physical beauty and the cultivation of friendship were associated with the group. For contemporary Koreans, the term *Hwarang* therefore "carries with it the ring of romance and chivalry and conjures up images of masculinity and grace" (Kim & Hahn, 2006, p.64). The ideal of *Hwarang* still influences Korean people's concept of masculinity, which is to include: literary/artistic skills and sensibility, intellectual ability, chivalry/bravery, and physical beauty.

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13 The *Sylla Dynasty* was founded mostly on Buddhism rather than Confucianism. However, the society was profoundly multi-religious under the influence of Taoism, Confucianism, Shamanism, and Buddhism. The *Hwarang* system adopted all of those religious teachings to educate and train the elites for the best service to the country and the government.

14 See Ilyon (2008) for detailed information about *Hwarang* and its training and education.
Young-Gwan Kim and Sook-Ja Hahn (2006) argue that the *Hwarang* offers the clearest example of ancient homosexuality in Korea. As evidences, they present the following poems as some of the examples included in *Sam-Guk-Yu-Sa*, which is a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts relating to the Three Kingdoms of Korea in the period between 57 B.C.E and 668 B.C.E.15

**Song of Yearning for the Flower Boy *Taemara***16

The whole world weeps sadly
The departing Spring.
Wrinkles lance
Your once handsome face,
For the space of a glance
May we meet again.
Fair Lord, what hope for my burning heart?
How can I sleep in my alley hovel?

**Song in Praise of the Flower Boy *Kilbo***17

Moon
Appearing fitfully
Trailing the white clouds, Whither do you go?
The face of the Flower Boy *Kilbo*

Was reflected in the pale green water,

15 This book is a collection of legends, folktales, and historical accounts relating to the Three Kingdoms of Korea in the period between 57 B.C.E and 668 B.C.E. The Buddhist monk Il-yeon compiled it at the end of the thirteenth century. See Ilyon (2008).
16 This song was written by the senior *hwarang*, *Taemara*, during the reign of King Hyoso (A.D. 692–702).
17 This song dates from the same reign and was written by the monk *Chungdam*. It praises one of the *hwarang* bands.

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Here among the pebbles of the stream
I seek the bounds of the heart he bore.
Ah, ah! Flower Boy here,
Noble pine that fears no frost!

Ch’oyong’s Song

Playing in the moonlight of the capital
Till the morning comes,
I return home
To see four legs in my bed.
Two belong to me.
Whose are the other two?
But what was my own
Has been taken from me, what now?

Traditionally, the above songs have been interpreted as illustrating a hwarang penchant for erotic and sexual desires toward persons of the same sex. We can see the songs full of romantic, erotic, and sexual images. We have more examples of such hwarangs’ homosexual eroticism. Among them are the Buddhist monk Yungchon’s Song of the Comet which offers a metaphorical description of sexual desire among hwarang boys; Wolmyong’s Tusita Hymn, written in the hwarang style during the reign of King Kyongdok (A.D. 742–765), which is a devout song in honor of Maitreya known as a handsome hwarang boy; and the Song for a Dead Sister, which

\[^{18}\text{This last song is possibly the most famous of all in terms of its direct description of homosexual practices. It dates from the time of King Hongang (A.D. 875–886).}\]

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was written in honor of a dead soul who died in battle. Here, the "sister" is in fact a hwarang boy who adopted a feminine role in homosexual acts.\textsuperscript{19}

\textit{Hwarang} intimacy started on equal friendship. When the intimacy turned into homosexual desire and behaviors, however, the friendship often changed to be unequal. One of the pair tended to take an active gender role and the other a passive role, as prescribed in the Confucian role ethics of gender. This unequal sexually intimate male relationships were often seen in the relationships between a king and a royal clown, as shown in the records about King Kongmin (A.D. 1352-1374) in the Koryo dynasty. King Kongmin was a "scholar-painter-calligrapher" and known for pederasty with royal catamites. The names of five royal catamites are recorded: Hong Yun, Han An, Kwon Chin, Hong Kwan, and No Son (Kim & Hahn, 2006, p. 62). This kind of unequal, homosexual relationship was the replica of the gender roles of the contemporary Confucian culture.\textsuperscript{20} The power imbalance is clear in this homosexual relationship, and the imbalance is dramatically manifested in their different social statuses.

To prevent an intimate male relationship from degenerating into an allegedly unequal, perverted expression of sexual desire, the line between homosocial expressions and homosexual behaviors must be strictly maintained. This binary understanding of human eroticism and sexuality resonates with the contemporary idea of human sexuality, which divides the sexual domain in two—the heterosexual and the homosexual—and dictates that heterosexuals cannot respond sexually to their own sex. In Korea in general, the split continuum seems to have become a norm and indeed is considered to protect society from the disruption of role differentiation as taught in Confucian role ethics. Males and females should not transgress the prescribed role boundaries. The continuum must remain strictly discontinuous. Especially, males

\textsuperscript{19} For further information, see Y. K. Kim & S. J. Hahn (2006).

\textsuperscript{20} Another example comes from the record in the \textit{Annals of the Choson Dynasty} that describes a royal clown named Konggil and his relationship with King Yonsan (1476-1506, r. 1494-1506).
who take female roles in relationship are often severely ridiculed and condemned in the Confucian society.

**Conclusion**

I began this paper with the question, "Why is Korean Confucian culture permissive toward male homoeroticism while on the other hand it harshly condemns homosexuality?" An accompanying question was, "How has this clear distinction between the homoerotic and the homosexual influenced and shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korea?" I used Sedgwick's social constructionist theory of a continuum to argue for the subtle line between the homosocial, homoerotic, and the homosexual, which is considered fluid rather than fixed. Based on the continuum, I explained the subtly overlapping intersection of homosocial/homoerotic/homosexual behavior and expressions, which have existed throughout Korean history. However, influenced by contemporary, Western, binary thinking of human sexuality (sexual/nonsexual) on the one hand and homosexuality (homo/hetero) on the other, Korean people have come to set more strict boundaries on the continuum. This merging of the contemporary Western concept of homosexuality and the traditional Confucian ideology of gender and sex has shaped the discourse of homosexuality in Korean society. In general, this merger has produced ambivalent and ambiguous attitudes toward homosexuality and thus has become a source of great psychological and social stress for both Korean homosexual and heterosexual people. Some people from different cultures, Western for example, may easily condemn such "rigid" and uncompromisingly "conservative" reactions of some, or most, Korean people in the discourse of homosexuality. The rigid attitudes to the contemporary discourse of homosexuality, however, can be a reaction to their ambivalent and ambiguous feelings which
may produce lots of anxiety. Crossing the boundaries existing in the continuum of homosocial, homoerotic, and homosexual relations is now strictly prohibited, and Korean people are fearful about violating this newly set cultural code of ethics. Understanding this cultural dynamic related to homosexuality is essential for pastoral psychotherapists to assist those in need to become aware, explore, and sort out their thoughts and feelings about and reactions to the anxiety-provoking, sensitive issue of homosexuality in the Korean/Korean-American context.

References


Theological and Clinical Considerations of Working with Sexually Fluid and Bisexual Persons

Jason D. Hays, Ph.D.¹

Abstract In the past few decades, increasing numbers of pastoral counselors have been developing and adopting lesbian/gay-affirming practices. While this is an encouraging development in the field, the prevailing lesbian/gay-affirming psychotherapeutic theories of sexual orientation often embraced by pastoral counselors are grounded in essentialist constructions of sexual identity that assume sexuality to be a singular, fixed identity of human embodiment. Although such approaches rightly argue that the role of the pastoral counselor is to assist the person in accepting a newly discovered gay/lesbian sexual orientation, the result is often the rejection of bisexual and sexually fluid persons’ lived experiences. How might pastoral counselors work with persons who identify as neither gay/lesbian nor straight? How might they work with persons who are bisexual or whose sexual orientation changes over time? In other words, how might they work with persons who are sexually fluid? Using case study material from my own research and from published cases in the literature, this article challenges pastoral counselors to reconsider embedded theoretical and theological commitments regarding sexuality in order to expand their clinical understanding of bisexual and sexually fluid persons. Moreover, several key theological resources are identified as critical to bisexual and sexually fluid persons in the construction of their fluid identities. The article concludes by suggesting several key

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competencies for pastoral counselors working with persons who identify as bisexual and/or sexually fluid.

**Keywords** bisexual, queer, sexuality, pastoral, counseling

In the past few decades, increasing numbers of pastoral counselors have been developing and adopting lesbian/gay-affirming practices (Byrne, 1993; Graham, 1997; Malony, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Struzzo, 1989; Switzer, 1999; Tigert, 1999; Unterberger, 1993), and increasingly the field has been publishing introductory texts on pastoral counseling that include sections or chapters on gay- and lesbian-affirming approaches (Clinebell & McKeever, 2011; Culbertson, 2000; Townsend, 2009). In addition, a growing number of authors in African American communities have been writing about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) persons in their congregations, primarily within the contexts of pastoral care and counseling (Comstock, 2001; Douglas, 1999; Griffin, 2006; Wilson, 1998).

While this is an encouraging development in the field, the prevailing lesbian/gay-affirming psychotherapeutic theories of sexual orientation often adopted by pastoral counselors are grounded in essentialist constructions of sexual identity, which assume that sexuality is a singular, fixed identity of human embodiment. Although such approaches rightly argue that the role of the pastoral counselor is to assist the person in accepting a newly discovered gay/lesbian sexual orientation, the result is often the rejection of bisexual and sexually fluid persons’ lived experiences. How might pastoral counselors work with persons who identify as neither gay/lesbian nor straight? How might they work with persons who are bisexual or whose sexual
orientation changes over time? In other words, how might pastoral counselors work with persons who are sexually fluid?²

Using the first-person narratives of bisexual and sexually fluid persons from my own research along with cases published in the literature, this article challenges pastoral counselors to reconsider their embedded theoretical and theological commitments regarding sexuality in order to expand their clinical understanding of bisexual and sexually fluid persons. Moreover, several key theological resources are identified as critical to bisexual and sexually fluid persons in the construction of their identities. The article concludes by suggesting several key competencies for pastoral counselors working with persons who identify as bisexual and/or sexually fluid.

Bisexual experience

Bisexuality is difficult to define. Etymologically the word “bisexuality” suggests the attraction to two genders, but many bisexuals are highly critical of the binary construct of sexuality that the term implies. Moreover, there is no monolithic bisexual experience: Some remain emotionally attracted and/or partnered with one gender, while engaging in sexual intimacy with partners of the other; some are attracted to and engage in sexual intimacy with any gender; some remain in monogamous relationships, but are attracted to others whose gender is different from that of their partner; some view sex and gender as irrelevant. One person named Rebecca, interviewed by Hutchins and Kaahumanu, reflects on her own experience of embodying a bisexual identity:

² Here “fluidity” is being used as a metaphor for the constructed identity of human sexuality that is dynamic and constantly changing. For some, fluidity may represent a movement of sexual desire and attraction among and between genders. For others, fluidity may represent a movement of one’s own subjective sexual identity from gay, to straight, back to gay, or bisexual, depending on one’s partner or one’s season in life. The key criterion for sexual fluidity is that one’s sexual attraction and desire is in constant flux and change (rather than fixed or linear), particularly with respect to the gender identities of one’s partners.
When I think of being bisexual, I am reminded of my Jewish ancestors who, kicked out of different countries, tried to find a place to call home. I, too, have wandered, in the gay and straight worlds, Jewish and not, feeling kicked out and alienated… This eight-year search includes my struggle to develop a proud lesbian, then bisexual identity. Identifying as a lesbian for seven years made me see how much I love women and began my awareness of homophobia and heterosexism. When I came out as a bisexual, I realized that men are important to me, too. Being with a man again I had to deal with male-female differences, sexism, and heterosexual privilege. (as cited in Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, pp. 252–253)

Rebecca’s narrative illustrates several important characteristics common to many people who identify as bisexual: the role of community and social relationships, especially with their families of origin; the struggle to construct their self-identity(ies), particularly in terms of sexual identity politics; the interconnectedness of race, religion, class, and gender with sexuality; and the liminal experience of not fitting in with either straight or gay/lesbian communities. Indeed, articulating a definition of bisexuality that takes into account the wide range of experiences is challenging. Similarly, as a sexually fluid queer pastoral theologian, it is challenging for me to not use my own subjective experience of fluid sexuality as the only hermeneutical lens through which these life narratives may be read.

In the 20th century, several theorists attempted to construct models of the bisexual experience. Some theorists of sexuality focused on behavior rather than identity. Kinsey and his colleagues developed a 0 to 6 point scale of human sexuality based on the behavior of study participants (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948). While there has been significant criticism of Kinsey’s work both methodologically and epistemologically (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Maslow &
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Sakoda, 1952; Wallis, 1949), it is important for the discussion here to acknowledge that Kinsey’s work proposed an entirely new paradigm for understanding sexuality. Rather than constructing human sexuality according to two binary categories (heterosexual and homosexual), Kinsey’s scale introduced a spectrum metaphor for categorizing the sexual experiences of men (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948) and women (Kinsey, 1953/1998).

One of the criticisms of Kinsey’s work is that the criteria used in his study of sexual identity were based on behavior, rather than on self-identity (Klein, 1993). What if one experiences attraction to someone, but does not express that attraction through sexual behavior? How do we account for bisexual identity when one never engages in sexual intimacy with anyone? In response to these questions, Klein (1993) developed the Sexual Orientation Grid, which included additional criteria beyond sexual behavior, such as sexual attraction, behavior, fantasies, emotional preference, social preference, lifestyle, and self-identification. The Klein grid was used to categorize persons using a numerical scale from 1 (straight) to 4 (bisexual) to 7 (gay or lesbian) for each of these criteria (not just behavior). While Klein’s work moved Kinsey’s toward more fluidity and complexity, it did not take into account how sexuality may change over time. For example, Rebecca described identifying as a lesbian for seven years, but then came to realize that she still experienced emotional and sexual attraction to men. When Rebecca enters into a relationship with a man after identifying as a lesbian for so long, does she become “straight?”

Despite these theoretical frameworks of human sexuality, it remains difficult to account for varieties in human sexuality when the variables used for constructing sexuality (e.g. attraction, gender, behavior, identity, etc.) do not remain constant. For example, must Rebecca engage in sexual activity with both sexes to assume a bisexual identity? What if she has sexual or
affectional desires for both sexes but does not act on them (Burleson, 2005)? Amanda’s experience illustrates this dilemma. She is married to a man and is monogamous, but also identifies as bisexual. Dominant heteronormative discourses would suggest that, in fact, she is heterosexual not bisexual.

Not much of a bisexual you say. Yet my bisexuality influences my perception and my decisions. More than having sexual relations with both genders, bisexuality is a mind frame, a reference point from which to view the world. Being bisexual has more to do with potential than actuality. (as cited in Hutchins & Kaahumanu, 1991, p. 25)

Here, Amanda is challenging theories of human sexuality to account for a constructed bisexual identity that extends beyond sexual behavior and the gender of one’s partner. In other words, how might we define bisexuality in a way that accounts for what Amanda calls “mind frame” or “reference point from which to view the world”?

Firestein (1996), a psychotherapist who specializes in working with bisexual persons, offered a helpful definition:

[Bisexuality is] pertaining to one’s experience of erotic, emotional, and sexual attraction to persons of more than one gender. Such individuals may identify as a bisexual, homosexual, lesbian, gay, heterosexual, transgendered, or transsexual or may choose not to label at all… Bisexuality here is defined as the capacity, regardless of the sexual identity label one chooses, to love and sexually desire both same and other-gendered individuals. (pp. xix–xx)

In other words, bisexuality is the capacity to experience emotional or sexual desire for any gender – a capacity that may change over time or that may be embodied differently in different
relationships. Jody describes this change in sexual identity and emotional capacity in her own life:

Yes, I do [identify as bisexual], though now I’m kind of questioning that because right now sleeping or dating with men just isn’t very appealing… I was involved with a man for a very long time and ended that relationship because I just really wanted to explore dating with a woman. [I] have found out that it’s a lot better, and I’m really happy, and I really like that. I’m very attached to the bi label because the bi community helped me feel very safe… I think to do with that fluidity of [sexual orientation]…right now I’m not attracted to men but I can’t guarantee when I’m fifty I might not be… Because calling myself a lesbian just doesn’t fit. It just doesn’t fit at all. (as cited in Burleson, 2005, p. 89)

Here, one can see the intersection of Jodi’s capacity for emotional and sexual desire with behavior and identity, which does change over time.

Jodi’s experience poses a significant challenge to the prevailing discourses in the gay and lesbian liberation movement. For example, it challenges theories of monosexism by critiquing the assumption that sexual orientation is naturally fixated on one easily identifiable sex and is static over time. Jodi describes attraction to both men and women, and her acting upon that attraction has changed fluidly over time. This poses an epistemological challenge to essentialist constructions of sexual orientation because it implies choice, rather than an inherent nature of one’s “true” self. This, then, presents a dilemma for the contemporary gay and lesbian liberation movement, which has sought human and civil rights as a legally protected class based upon essentialist constructions of sexual orientation. Moreover, this construction of sexual orientation has also dominated the theological arguments of lesbian- and gay-affirming movements within
the churches—arguing that sexual orientation is immutable, unchangeable, and persons were “born this way.”

Yet, the argument for choice and fluidity in the bisexual experience is not without its liabilities. If bisexual persons are equally attracted to persons of any gender, then neo-orthodox perspectives argue they should choose the “normal” or “moral” option of an opposite-gender partner (Siker, 2007). And, if sexual orientation is fluid and unfixed, then supporters of reparative therapy can argue for the so-called conversion of homosexuals using a similar claim. Moreover, choice and fluidity have contributed to gay and lesbian communities’ criticism of bisexuals through assertions that bisexuals are either “riding the fence,” “going through a phase,” or “afraid to come totally out of the closet.” Kimberly describes this experience:

I don’t feel welcome in the overall gay community… In general I feel that most of the gay and lesbian people I’ve met think I’m using “heterosexual privilege” or that I just haven’t fully come out as homosexual. Now, I’m not gay bashing. I go to pride parades [and] I’m president of my campus gay-straight alliance, etc. But I have been asked to leave groups and mailing lists because they were for “homosexuals only.” Or because, as one woman told me, “Having a bisexual here would bring down the quality of the group.” (as cited in Burleson, 2005, p. 20)

Kimberly’s account echoes the earlier metaphor of “homelessness” that Rebecca used to describe her bisexual experience and presents a rich point of connection between theological metaphors of exodus, sojourner, aliens in a strange land, lost sheep, and wandering in the desert.

The embodied experience of fluid sexuality presents a critique of the binary construct of sexual orientation (i.e., heterosexuality and homosexuality). Indeed, there is far more variability and fluidity in many people’s sexual experiences (i.e., attraction, fantasy, intimacy, identity) than
most theoretical notions tend to provide. As a result, Paul (2000) noted that there is a “tendency…to deny the legitimacy of one’s erotic responsiveness to either males, or females; thereby, one assumes that all people are either basically heterosexual or homosexual” (p. 11). In this way, fluid sexuality presents an ambiguous embodiment because it transcends and transgresses the binary categories found in normative discourses on embodiment and human sexuality.

**Considerations for clinical practice**

Bisexual-identified persons, as well as those who identify as sexually fluid, present three important challenges to pastoral counselors. First, working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons challenges pastoral counselors to consider their embedded theological anthropologies of human sexuality and their assumptions about what constitutes “normal” human sexuality. In other words, what theological criteria do pastoral counselors use in their clinical assessment and therapeutic objectives related to what constitutes a healthy sexual identity? What is the nature of human sexuality, particularly in light of theological constructs such as imago Dei, incarnation, and embodiment? Are humans created with an essential human sexuality (e.g., “I was born this way”), or are fluidity and change dynamics in human sexuality that are part of the created order? Who gets to decide the boundaries of practice and identity within these theo-anthropological discourses?

Second, identity change is normative, not pathological. Rebecca described the process of coming out as a lesbian and living in a same-gender relationship for seven years. Later, she came to realize that “lesbian” did not fully embody her own understanding of her sexual identity;
therefore, she decided to identify as bisexual. Is she confused? Was she just “in a phase” during those seven years, but really straight all along? Is she merely seeking heterosexual privilege?

Sexual fluidity demands that pastoral counselors reassess their theoretical constructs of sexual orientation in ways that allow for change over time. Prevailing theories on sexual orientation and the coming out process are often predicated on a stage theory of human development (Cass, 1979, 1984; Coleman, 1982; Grace, 1992; Lewis, 1984; Troiden, 1979, 1989). These sexual identity models assume identity stability as healthy and implicitly characterize continued identity change or fluidity as an indicator of psychosexual immaturity.

As a result, many gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors working with persons who are exploring sexual identity often encourage the person to explore the meanings of same-gender feelings and experiences with the therapeutic goal of sexual identity resolution. After disclosing their ethical commitment to being an LGBTQI-affirming clinician (or disclosing that they are not, if such is the case, and referring), the pastoral counselor is then likely to invite the client to explore the emerging self-understanding of same-gender attraction; to identify the fears and consequences of disclosing this new awareness to family, friends, and coworkers; and to strengthen supportive resources and relationships to equip the person to claim a new identity as gay/lesbian. In short, the therapeutic goal of this counseling process is the acceptance of the person’s new preferred sexual identity.

Such an approach is often helpful. Yet, a problem arises when the person does not choose a new gay/lesbian identity, but at the same time, does not wish to continue identifying as straight. In this case, the pastoral counselor may conclude that the person’s unwillingness, inability, or failure to claim a new stable gay/lesbian identity is indicative of resistance or pathology. Here, the pastoral counselor makes a clinical judgment that the person is not fully accepting a “true”
sexual orientation and/or is unwilling to deconstruct the heteronormative religious discourses necessary to accept a new gay/lesbian identity. The pastoral counselor, with the best of therapeutic intentions, may continue to encourage the sexually fluid or bisexual person to settle on an either/or identity (i.e., either gay/lesbian or straight), even though doing so may result in the imposition of both a heteronormative and homonormative binary construct of sexuality (Hays, 2015).

Once pastoral counselors recognize that, for the bisexual or sexually fluid person, identity change is normative (and not a sign of pathology), the therapeutic goal then becomes one of studying the identity change process in and of itself as an opportunity for insight. In other words, if pastoral counselors understand what motivates people to change the ways in which they construct their sexual selves – or in some cases resist labeling imposed by dominant heteronormative discourses – they can then map identity change as part of the “normal” human sexual journey (Paul, 2000).

Third, fluidity raises important questions about the role of choice in sexual experience and identity. As already noted, the contemporary gay and lesbian rights movement, both within the fields of psychology and psychotherapy and without, argues that people do not choose to be gay or lesbian. In other words, sexual orientation is viewed as an essential category of human sexuality – either because of genetic or early environmental conditioning. But, how then can one account for sexually fluid or bisexual persons’ experience of their sexuality changing over time? Kundtz and Schlager (2007), in their text Ministry Among God’s Queer Folk, concluded, “being bisexual, transgender, lesbian, or gay is almost never a choice…this is the same for all: human beings very rarely choose their sexual orientation or gender identity – possibly never” (p. 6,
emphasis original). Indeed, this claim becomes less tenable when one shifts from theories of fixed, essentialist sexual orientation toward theories of fluid, socially-constructed sexual identity.

The logic would suggest that if bisexual and sexually fluid persons are equally attracted to persons of any gender, then heteronormative theological discourses could claim that such persons should choose the “natural” or “moral” option of an opposite-gender partner (Siker, 2007). Most gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors (including this author) would find such a conclusion highly problematic. In this way, pastoral counselors who are working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons must decide how to communicate their stance on the theological ethics of sexual choice. In effect, what are the ethical norms and boundaries the counselor subscribes to when sexual choice is seen as merely a normal part of the human experience, and when does choice become unhealthy, promiscuously dangerous, and/or unethical? Should pastoral counselors disclose to the person seeking counseling their ethical commitments regarding multiple partners, sexual exclusivity, and/or polyamory? These questions invite pastoral counselors to reflect critically on their embedded and operative moral theology of sexual ethics before working with bisexual and sexually fluid persons who, by their very embodiment, will challenge the dominant constructs of sexual relationships (Hays, 2015).

Moreover, if sexual identity change is normal for bisexual and sexually fluid persons (Burleson, 2005; Firestein, 2007), then proponents of so-called conversion therapy or reparative therapy can argue that sexuality can be changed. Or some neo-orthodox Christian counselors may maintain that any non-heterosexual sexual orientations are the result of a fallen humanity and can be redeemed through therapy (Nicolosi, 2001). Both of these conclusions are problematic for gay- and lesbian-affirming pastoral counselors, and would constitute violations of codes of ethics for nearly every professional guild in psychotherapy, counseling, psychology,
and social work that have taken positions against “reparative therapy” (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). Perhaps the American Association of Pastoral Counselors will one day add this stance to their code of ethics for pastoral counselors.

**Fluid theological reflection**

One of the major contributions that pastoral counselors can offer persons seeking counseling is the ways in which counselors invite theological reflection in the midst of the therapeutic process. Indeed, doing so is a hallmark of the field. This is certainly the case with bisexual and sexually fluid persons who go to pastoral counselors for counseling. One common theme that has emerged in first-person narratives of bisexual and sexually fluid persons’ own theological reflections is the correlation between one’s deconstructive process with respect to one’s own fluidity and the process of deconstructing embedded images of God with fluid metaphors. In other words, fluid identity becomes theologically correlated with images and constructs of God that are more dynamic, relational, and fluid. Seth, a person who identifies as queer and sexually fluid, describes the relationship between the dynamic nature of God and his own dynamic experience of sexuality.

Any time I’ve made a decision about something that would lend to a non-dynamic or static identity it has ended poorly or I’ve found it doesn’t work in some way. I think a few years ago I gave up on that and came to acceptance around the dynamic mode, and maybe an acceptance around it through some permission I feel like that was given through theological discovery… God doesn’t actually expect me to be static. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 107)
Here, Seth is making a claim about theological anthropology, namely, that identity is dynamic – not static – and that dynamic, fluid identity is God’s intention and expectation for Seth (and, perhaps by extension, for all humanity). This claim raises considerable concerns related to personhood and human subjectivity. Seth correlates an experience of deconstructing the binary images of God’s gender through the pronouns in *Song of Songs* with an experience of deconstructing his own binary categories of identity. Indeed, an awareness of the fluidity of God’s identity in the scriptural text presents an opportunity for Seth to explore fluid identity in his own life.

Through this process, Seth identifies a shift in how he thinks about God, moving from a personified to a more relational construct.

So in the deconstruction of gender around God I was also…it’s not so established. And actually there are ways that God interacts with all of us through different gender expressions and different relational interactions. And that perhaps there is a purpose also in us having that kind of fluidity in our lives… So I think to me the piece around exploding God’s gender from a rigid binary also exploded the options around relationship and partnership and how those things aren’t actually just options but are critical parts of our growth and understanding of ourselves in the world by our relationships with others. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 109)

Here, the fluidity of God opens up a new paradigm of relationality and sexual partnering that correlates with the sexually fluid or bisexual person’s own self-construction of sexual identity. In other words, the rejection of the binary sexual orientation categories of identity – what Seth describes as “exploding” from a rigid binary – becomes a critically important space of
embodiment in which relational connections are developed, both with other persons and with God.

Mary, a woman who identifies as bisexual, describes this process in her own life around remaining connected to Spirit:

I told you about this epiphany when I finally had the sense that here comes God and I’m home, I belong somewhere. I’m this spirit that has this connection and I’m not adrift all on my own like I thought I was. But I’m always aware of not belonging and of always being on the outside. I’m not a Jew. I’m not a Catholic although I go to Sacred Heart with Sister. I’m not gay. I’m not straight. And yet it’s okay. I’m here. And if I’m connected to Spirit I’m fine. But it’s that thing of how do I stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 125)

In this interview, Mary is describing her fluid identity vis-à-vis a theological construction of the Divine as “connected to Spirit.” Mary is asking a critically important existential question, namely, how does one stay connected and on the path and not feel alone or lacking? This suggests something poignant about the theological metaphor of journey, particularly as it relates to sexual fluidity. This echoes the earlier metaphor of “homelessness” articulated by Rebecca and reflected in the theological metaphors of exodus, sojourner, aliens in a strange land, lost sheep, and wandering in the desert.

Mary continues this theme with comments about being “adrift,” “not belonging,” and “always being on the outside.”

Always being the other. Always being different. And even at this [gay and lesbian spiritual] gathering, when I organized it… I said this year we’re going to have a bi [component]. And they said whatever for? I said for the bisexuals. Oh, we don’t have any
biseuxals. And I said I’m bisexual. And the woman...who was a therapist lesbian, she
would not hear that… There’s no one who’s bisexual. I’m bisexual! [They] never could
hear it. (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 126)

Mary seems to move beyond the metaphor of “homelessness,” which suggests people who
identify as bisexual do not belong or have a place, to an experience of being invisible, a non-
person. The lesbian therapist described in Mary’s account, along with the prevailing ethos of the
gathering, “could not hear” that she identified as bisexual. Attempts to explicate the cognitive
dissonance of the lesbian therapist in Mary’s account is mere speculation, but this description
does illustrate a common theme among persons who identify as bisexual, namely that they
generally do not feel acceptance and/or “at home” in either the straight or gay/lesbian
communities.

Through a more nuanced understanding of how sexually fluid and bisexual persons’
experiences of invisibility and outsider status impact the therapeutic process, the pastoral
counselor can shift the focus away from the person’s difficulty in constructing a sexual identity
toward the broader communal, systemic, and discursive dynamics at play in the person’s life.
Scott (2007) picked up this theme of intersectionality in his discussion of how racism and fluid
sexuality is experienced by African American bisexuals. Such an embodiment, according to
Scott, disrupts two binaries: the homosexual/heterosexual binary of dominant North American
cultural discourses, and what he describes as the male-female gender/sex system of the
patriarchal Afrocentric (sic) worldview. He correlated the historical predisposition of therapists
to pathologize as an internal personality disorder what is, more accurately, a survival response to
the injustice, racism, and social invalidation inscribed upon the lives of clients. He argued,
Here multiracial bisexuals of African descent ‘actively’ construct their identities and experience often in opposition to the moral, political, and ideological concerns of their families of origin and communities… Reading bisexuality in this manner redirects the therapeutic focus toward intersecting narrative of cultural histories, invalidation, and class dynamics that shape bisexuality and homoerotic desire. At times the story line reflects a critical reflexive movement away from the individual’s psyche toward a socially and historically informed focus on the particulars in that client’s experiences of oppression, ostracism, or liberation. (p. 207)

In the current postmodern era, notions of unitary fixed identities – particularly related to the subjectivity of so-called hybrid persons – are increasingly being problematized. As Scott (2007) argued, biracial-identified persons (as embodying hybrid identities) offer interesting points of connection with bisexual-identified persons insofar as they occupy liminal, borderland, and/or marginalized spaces in various binary discourses. Moreover, such social locations of fluidity represent potentially subversive qualities because they represent disruption and contestation of oversimplified, essentialist binary constructions of identity. This claim is therapeutically significant because it demands of the pastoral counselor a clinical orientation that takes into account how social, political, and historical discourses have impacted the lives of people through imposed difference, displacement, and oppression (Scott, 2007).

**Pastoral counseling competencies for working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons**

This article began by exploring theories of human sexuality that allow for fluidity and change of sexual identity, particularly in contrast to essentialist theories of sexual orientation. It engaged first-person narratives from persons who identify as sexually fluid or bisexual. These narratives
raised several issues for pastoral counselors to consider when working with such persons. This led to an exploration of how, through theological reflection, such lived experiences are correlated with deconstructing images of God in fluid and transgressive ways – and how such theological reflection presents opportunities for persons to normalize their fluid identities within their own operative theological worldviews. The article now turns to several competencies that pastoral counselors might consider as they seek to become more skilled and nuanced in their work with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.

Identity Change is Normal

Recognize that sexually fluid and bisexual are valid, psychologically healthy sexual identities and that one’s subjective experience and identity may change over time.

This first competency is based upon the recognition that fluidity/bisexuality is a valid, psychologically healthy sexual identity (i.e., sexual orientation) in its own right, equal in legitimacy to lesbian, gay, and heterosexual identities. Nearly every first-person narrative presented in this article demonstrates that fluid and bisexual persons almost always experience their sense of sexual identity as in flux or changing. For some, this flux is related to changes in intimate partners, while for others it is an internal, subjective sense of one’s own sexuality. A common pattern for bisexuels in this regard is to identify as gay/lesbian (in order to differentiate from the assumed socialized heterosexual identity) and then, after a period of time, to identify as bisexual (or queer, fluid, pansexual, gay-identified bisexual, or polyamorous). It is critically important for pastoral counselors to remember that change in one’s sexual identity over time is not necessarily an indicator of pathology or internalized homophobia. With such persons, it is

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important for pastoral counselors to realize that what may be happening has more to do with language than with sexuality. In other words, the person is trying to externally construct through words the internal experience of a fluid sexuality that may, in the end, be unchanging. It is worth nothing here that the language of sexual identity discourse itself is fluid and changing; just a decade ago “queer” was a term of derision and subjugation, but it is now being reclaimed as one of liberation and emancipation. For others, the internal experience of sexuality is actually changing – and thus the language is changing as well. It may be helpful to consider these as seasons in a person’s life (Firestein, 1996, 2007).

**Negotiating Counseling Goals/Objectives**

*Be cautious of conflating sexuality with counseling goals/objectives. Sometimes sexuality is the presenting problem for persons seeking counseling, but often it is not. It is important to decenter oneself as counselor in ways that allow persons seeking counseling to establish their own goals.*

Page (2007) interviewed bisexual women and men about their experiences with psychotherapists. Approximately 55% of respondents described their therapists as erroneously assuming that sexual orientation was connected to their clinical goals, and nearly 40% described their therapists as confounding bisexuality and pathology in a way that was experienced by the person as invalidating. One respondent said, “I’ve had a therapist tell me that my bisexuality was just one more way that I was trying to avoid making clear choices in my life” (p. 60).

This clinical competency, therefore, is about understanding how human sexuality is (for many) not fixed, but rather is fluid and changing over a lifetime. As a result, pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons suspend clinical theories of fixed and essentialist sexual orientation in order to create space in the therapeutic process for persons
to both embody and identify sexual change. Moreover, it is important to remember that the “presenting problem” for sexually fluid and bisexual persons may have nothing to do with sexuality. Thus, pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons mutually negotiate clinical objectives and therapeutic goals with persons who consult them for counseling in order to keep from imposing binary norms on the person.

**Double-Bind Marginalization**

*Be conversant in the normalizing discourses of power that place sexually fluid and bisexual persons in double binds and ground counseling practices within clinical theories of liberation and emancipation.*

Although the past three decades have resulted in a dramatic increase in the social acceptance of gay/lesbian persons, pastoral counselors should be mindful that such social acceptance still remains largely located within binary heteronormative discourses. In other words, gay/lesbian persons gain acceptance via dominant heteronormative discourses as an acceptable alternative – as a legitimate “other” – largely through the conflation that gay/lesbian persons are “just like us except they love someone of the same sex.” In this way, gay/lesbian persons are increasingly viewed as a minority class. But, for sexually fluid and bisexual persons who locate themselves between or beyond such binary categories, there remains limited acceptance (Burleson, 2005; Firestein, 2007).

As explored in the first-person narratives above, many sexually fluid and bisexual persons experience rejection from both gay/lesbian communities and straight/heterosexual communities. Mary puts it even more strongly, “So yeah, the bisexual, the one who everyone likes to hate. The queers don’t like us. The straights don’t like us” (as cited in Hays, 2013, p. 127). These experiences of rejection and judgment often result in real effects on the person’s
life: anxiety, fear, depression, and suicidal ideation (Meyer & Northridge, 2007; Moon, 2008). Attending to the systemic and discursive sources of these problems, rather than assuming an intrinsic pathology within the person, is clinically significant for pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.

**Theological Integration**

*Be effective in facilitating a deconstructive theological reflection with persons seeking counseling, particularly in light of theological themes such as incarnation, imago Dei, and embodiment.*

Embedded and operative theological assumptions shape sexually fluid and bisexual persons’ constructions of sexual identity and impact their internalized images and beliefs about God. Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons are able to facilitate a critical deconstruction of the person’s theological worldview – often through exploring embedded beliefs about the nature of God and God’s gender, and theological themes of imago Dei, incarnation, and embodiment – in order to assist the person in constructing theological foundations more helpful for the embodiment of fluidity. As previously discussed, there seems to be a correlation between how one images God and how one images oneself – particularly around sexual identity.

Through supervision or peer consultation, competent pastoral counselors participate in critical self-reflection upon their own embedded theological anthropology in order not only to ensure that it is not being imposed on the person, but also to seek clarity as to how the counselor’s own operative theological anthropology is shaping clinical curiosity, questions asked, and conclusions made. To put it more concretely, this competency asks pastoral counselors to suspend their own theological commitments related to human bodies, sexuality,
and gender, in order to enter into de/constructive work with persons who consult them for counseling. If pastoral counselors are unable to make such a suspension in their clinical work, referral is the most ethical option.

Transgressive Ethics

*Be critically aware of how binary discourses inscribe norms upon persons, render them invisible and/or pathological, and present real, consequential effects when contested.*

As discussed previously, an embodied fluid sexual identity not only refuses to be labeled by the dominant binary of sexual discourses, it often contests the binary itself. One can see this most clearly in Mary’s description of the lesbian therapist who is incapable of hearing/seeing that Mary is a bisexual-identified person. Mary’s insistence of claiming her bisexual identity contested the systemic power the lesbian therapist was exercising as a leader of the spiritual gathering. Moreover, Mary demanded that the lesbian therapist bear witness to Mary’s fluid identity. This represents a *transgressive* ethic. When a fluid embodiment demands acknowledgment from the perspective of a binary discourse, the person is transgressing the binary discourse on two fronts: first, by embodying a fluid identity, and second, by doing so in the face of a binary discourse that rejects the existence of any liminal location in the first place. This transgressive identity construction echoes other ethical themes and metaphors common in queer theory, namely crossing, blurring, turning upside-down, and/or being contrary to dominant categories (Moon, 2008; Sullivan, 2003).

Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons – especially those working from liberative and emancipatory orientations – locate their therapeutic work within the context of ethical practices that seek to equip, empower, and support the person’s transgressive purposes in life. In this way, the pastoral counselor intentionally becomes
an ally, both within the counseling room and within the wider communal contexts of advocacy and care. In other words, the pastoral counselor is enacting a transgressive ethic both in allying with the person’s desire to claim a fluid identity and in developing clinical competencies in models of human sexuality that resist hegemonic and pathologizing theories of sexual fluidity.

**Marriage and Covenant Making**

*Be critically self-aware and transparent about one’s embedded norms of covenantal relationships, particularly assumptions regarding sexual exclusivity and two-person models constituting stable, long-term relationships.*

Since the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Obergefell v. Hodges*, states are now legally required to recognize same-gender marriage. While this ruling represents an important legal battle for the gay/lesbian civil rights movement, it is important to recognize that many gay/lesbian couples have no interest in participating in what they view as an unredeemable heteropatriarchal institution. Indeed, the feminist critique of same-gender marriage goes back more than 20 years with Ettelbrick’s (1993) essay “Since When Is Marriage a Path to Liberation?” and Lerner’s more general feminist critique of marriage in *The Creation of Patriarchy* (1986). Sexually fluid and bisexual persons have similarly challenged dominant models of relationships as problematic, either on the grounds that such models render fluid/bisexual persons invisible or on the grounds that marital exclusivity inhibits the full expression of a person’s sexuality.

Pastoral counselors competent in working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons are challenged to evaluate their operative theological commitments on marriage and the ethical considerations of making those commitments transparent to persons who consult them for counseling. Moreover, counseling sexually fluid and bisexual persons who are in marriages (or
covenanted partnerships) requires counselors to intentionally deconstruct their theoretical models of marriage and family (especially for those trained in family systems therapy). Sexually fluid and bisexual persons challenge dominant norms of sexual exclusivity within marriages by negotiating polyamory and multiple intimate partners within their relationships. Furthermore, they redefine marital covenants as their sexuality changes over time. For some, this may mean having multiple partners at the same time, varying degrees of intimacy with different people in various contexts, or serial marriage with different gendered spouses.

In response to non-normative sexual behaviors, many pastoral counselors may experience the impulse to evaluate and assess such sexual behavior through the dominant paradigm of “healthy” or “unhealthy” (not to mention “normal” or “abnormal”). But, queer psychological theorists have challenged psychotherapeutic professionals – including pastoral counselors – to recognize how heteronormative assumptions are often embedded within such normative categories as “healthy” or “unhealthy” (Moon, 2008). Here, I argue for a clinical approach that resists the imposition of such normative categories and, instead, enables the person to clarify norms and ethical behavior within the context of his or her own theological commitments and moral worldview – irrespective of the limiting and disciplinary discourses of normalcy. Thus, it is important for competent pastoral counselors to make their operative norms of covenantal relationships and marriage transparent with persons seeking counseling, and to reflect on the ethical limits that are likely to cause them to terminate the counseling relationship and make a referral. For example, while there may be sexual practices that are ethically defendable (though not agreeable to the pastoral counselor), there may also be a point at which the person’s sexual practice becomes unethical or harmful (in the opinion of the pastoral counselor). In such cases, it
is important for the competent pastoral counselor to discern the most ethical way of disclosing this opinion and, if necessary, terminating the counseling relationship and referring the person.

Intercultural/Intersectional Counseling

*Be conversant and competent in providing intercultural care, as many queer-identified persons are socially located differently than many pastoral counselors.*

The intersectionality – the interconnected and interdependent relationship between socially constructed categories of identity – of gender, sexuality, racial/ethnic, and class identity has been receiving important consideration in the field of pastoral theology (Cooper & Marshall, 2010; Ramsay, 2014), along with intercultural models of pastoral counseling that take into account sexual orientation (Marshall, 2009). Young’s (1990) framework of the “Five Faces of Oppression” is a helpful way to account for these interlocking oppressions within the context of fluid sexuality. While sexual minorities tend to experience common oppression resulting from marginalization, cultural dominance (especially in terms of normalizing discourses), and violence, exploitation and powerlessness are more often experienced in relation to other factors such as gender, class, and race.

As discussed earlier with Scott’s (2007) work, the intersectionality of race and sexuality presents an important area of additional study and practice in order for counselors to obtain competency in providing counseling to sexually fluid and bisexual persons. Sexually fluid and bisexual persons encounter multiple marginalizations in which they face both the dominant culture’s interpersonal and institutional racism, as well as the heterocentrism, homophobia, and/or biphobia of their own ethnic/racial community. Moreover, the prevailing clinical and psychological models of coming out are based largely on developmental and personality theories.
most commonly located within the Eurocentric traditions of the field, with little or no acknowledgment of the impact of cultural context on the person. Competent pastoral counselors actively diversify their clinical theories in order to make them intentionally anti-racist.

For example, a pastoral counselor working with an African American man who identifies as bisexual may conclude that the client remaining “in the closet” within African American communities while being “out” in his predominantly white workplace environment may signal a lack of full acceptance or integration of his sexual identity, or a failure to fully differentiate; however, a competent intentionally anti-racist and intercultural pastoral counselor might recognize that the client’s changing and fluid identity may well represent a survival strategy necessary to navigate the intersections of his sexual, racial, and class identities vis-à-vis systemic and discursive relationships of power. Indeed, there are wide variations in the acceptance and affirmation of bi (and non-straight) people within different social spaces and locations: class, education, race and culture, geography, etc. Competent pastoral counselors are prepared to offer resources and support to persons seeking counseling within these diverse communities/contexts, and recognize the limitations of their knowledge and competencies. They consult, refer, and seek supervision as an ethical practice of pastoral counseling.

**Conclusion**

This article began by discussing the lived experience of sexually fluid and bisexual persons, particularly in terms of their construction of fluid and liminal identities within the dominant binary discourses of sexuality and the theological discourse of incarnation, imago Dei, and embodiment. Then, the article presented several implications for clinical practice, particularly considering how persons seeking counseling may challenge pastoral counselors’ embedded
clinical assumptions about what constitutes healthy and stable sexuality, and force them to reconsider their operative theological anthropologies. The article concluded by highlighting several proposed competencies for pastoral counselors working with sexually fluid and bisexual persons.

The American Association of Pastoral Counselors (AAPC) has taken an important position in adopting its *Anti-Racist Multicultural Competencies* for pastoral counselors working across racial and ethnic counseling relationships. As a growing awareness of intersectionality continues to shape clinical theories and practice, it may be time for AAPC to consider joining other professional guilds, such as the American Counseling Association, American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, and the American Psychological Association, in considering competencies for working with sexual and gender minorities (ALGBTIC LGBQQIA Competencies Task Force et al., 2013).

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Teaching LGBTQ Pastoral Care and Counseling: A Formational Pastoral Pedagogical Approach

Mary Elizabeth Toler, Th.D.  

Abstract In many seminary and pastoral counseling programs, students’ religious, personal, and political beliefs regarding LGBTQ issues often fall within a broad spectrum. As teachers striving to create pastoral paradigms where future ministers and pastoral counselors can engage LGBTQ issues in respectful, compassionate, educated, and theologically informed ways, there are numerous dynamics to consider in a context of a diverse community of learners. This article broadly highlights some of these dynamics and proposes a formational pastoral pedagogical framework that engages multiple viewpoints from a theologically grounded and focused position. Within this overall formational pastoral pedagogy, specific classroom practices are outlined for consideration; practices that provide a clear path to responsible, compassionate care for those dealing with LGBTQ issues.

Keywords LGBTQ, Pastoral Pedagogy, Pastoral Care and Counseling, Formation

As Cody Sanders deftly reminds readers in a previous article for this journal, the ways pastoral counselors and caregivers approach their work with the LGBTQ population depends a great deal on their ability to be reflective upon and compassionately engage issues of sexuality from both the psychotherapeutic and theological perspectives of both client and therapist (Sanders, 2012).

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The persons primarily responsible for cultivating this ability are the professors and clinical supervisors scattered throughout various seminaries, clinical training programs, and graduate counseling programs. It is no easy task for professors to create an educational environment that comprehensively, compassionately, and holistically educates and equips budding pastoral clinicians to reflect upon and engage sexuality and the various pastoral needs of the LGBTQ population.

There are several factors that contribute to the challenges professors face in creating such a comprehensive, compassionate, reflective learning environment. Chief among them is the reality of teaching this subject in the context of a diverse community of students who span the spectrum of age, race, ethnicity, social class, political persuasion and religious beliefs. At first glance, this reality of student diversity within the context of teaching care and counseling of the LGBTQ population may not seem to be a significant issue. After all, virtually every class in every subject matter is full of the above-mentioned kinds of diversity and teachers maneuver and engage this reality on a daily basis. I would argue, however, that the context of a diverse community of learners becomes a unique and particular challenge within the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling precisely because of the nature of the subject matter.

While there have been profound shifts toward affirming the lives and experiences of LGBTQ individuals within society and the broader Church, morality issues of claiming a “gay” identity and legal issues surrounding same-sex marriage continue to be on the front lines of America’s vitriolic and divisive culture wars. In the midst of this bifurcated, paradoxical cultural space of growing acceptance for and staunch outspoken opposition to the rights and values of LGBTQ individuals, there is also the painful statistical reality of bullying and suicide rates for individuals who identify as gay or are struggling with their sexuality (Russell & Joyner, 2001;
Consequently, within this broader cultural context, at the very least it is fair to say that when it comes to LGBTQ subject matter, students bring a variety of opinions, experiences, and questions and they do so in a way that is often soaked in emotion and confusion. It is precisely this emotion-soaked reality that magnifies the dynamic of a diverse community of learners and turns it into more of a challenge when teaching LGBTQ issues in pastoral care and counseling.

For example, as I was teaching a course on theological integration in pastoral care and counseling, a student was presenting a clinical interview to a racially and theologically diverse class. The clinical and theological dynamics highlighted from the interview material centered on the interviewee's struggle with his identity as a gay man in light of his faith. Passionate and heated conversation and debate arose from the students who voiced questions, opinions, and experiences from a variety of positions and perspectives. Needless to say, anxiety and emotions were high and it fell to me as the teacher to create a space that honored and named the anxiety and difference while creating avenues for new levels of reflection, inter-personal engagements, connection, understanding, learning, and empathy. In the end, I was reminded in a stark way that engaging a community of diverse learners around pastoral issues of sexuality and sexual identity is more emotionally charged and potentially conflictual than discussing pastoral issues related to chronic illness.

The magnified reality of a diverse community of learners in the context of teaching LGBTQ issues in pastoral care and counseling becomes an even more complicated challenge because of the time limit imposed by the survey courses in which LGBTQ material is meant to

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2 These studies show that LGBTQ youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide and that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers. Furthermore, these studies demonstrate that students who were questioning their sexual orientation reported more bullying, homophobic victimization, unexcused absences from school, drug use, feelings of depression, and suicidal behaviors than either heterosexual or LGBTQ students.

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be covered. Despite the presence of some seminaries and secular counseling programs that have
dedicated programs and/or specializations in theologies and psychological theories related to
sexual orientation and gender identity and despite the growing prevalence of pastoral care and
counseling literature focused on LGBTQ issues, there is usually very limited curriculum space to
dedicate to teaching this aspect of pastoral care and counseling. In the seminary context, as
evidenced through my experience as a teaching assistant at a large university affiliated seminary
and as an adjunct professor in other seminaries, there is at best one class period out of an entire
semester of an introduction to pastoral care and counseling class that can be dedicated to this
topic. In the context of CACREP accredited counseling programs, like the one where I currently
teach, the same is true; though at least it can be couched in a mandatory multi-cultural
counseling course.

In the end, due to the nature of the subject matter and curriculum time restrictions, it is
clear that teaching LGBTQ issues of pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse
community of learners is a particular challenge. The question becomes then, how can a professor
create an educational environment that comprehensively, compassionately, and holistically
educates and equips budding pastoral clinicians to reflect upon and engage the various pastoral
needs of the LGBTQ population.

Given the complexity of this issue, a cursory review of literature reveals some interesting
contrasts and trends. Within secular publications, pedagogical considerations for teaching
LGBTQ counseling within a diverse community of learners are in active development (Case &
Lewis, 2012; Dessel, Bolen, & She pardson, 2011; Hodge, 2011; Nauri, 2014). Furthermore,
there is active pedagogical development of dealing with diversity in the classroom in general
(Frank & Cannon, 2010); as well as addressing the specific dynamics and needs of LGBTQ
students in the classroom (Furrow, 2012; Misawa, 2010). Conversely, there is little written about pedagogy in regards to teaching LGBTQ issues to a diverse community of learners within a pastoral care and counseling context. A cursory review of pastoral literature will highlight this fact.

Overall, the body of pastoral literature demonstrates a growing trend in the amount of attention given to addressing the counseling and care issues of the LGBTQ community in ways that proactively affirm their lives and needs (Culbertson, 2000; Graham, 1997; Griffin, 2006; Kundz & Schlager, 2007; McNeil 1976, 1988; Maloney, 2001; Marshall, 1997; Medeiros, 2009; Millspaugh, 2009; Sanders, 2012; Switzer, 1994, 1996, 1999; Tanis, 2003; Tigert, 1996, 2005; Tigert & Tirabassi, 2005; Way, 1977). This trend began in the late seventies and early eighties and continues today; and though initially pastoral literature was written from a gay, White male lens, a growing number of pastoral perspectives from women, the African-American community and other cultural viewpoints continue to emerge (Comstock, 2001; Cooper & Marshall, 2009; Griffin, 2006; Lee & Hoshino, 2006; Medeiros, 2009; Millspaugh, 2009).

Within this broad and perhaps burgeoning body of literature, little addresses the realm of pedagogy and how to teach pastoral counseling and care of LGBTQ persons. In other words, there is a wealth of literature on the subject of pastoral counseling and care with LGBTQ persons, but there is little written on how professors of pastoral care and counseling effectively engage and convey that subject matter to students. The most promising move towards an intentional, codified, specific approach to teaching pastoral counseling and care of LGBTQ persons can be found in Joretta Marshall’s (2009) article, “Models of Understanding Differences, Dialogues, and Discourses: From Sexuality to Queer Theory in Learning and Teaching Care.” Interestingly, Marshall’s article attempts to frame the context of teaching LGBTQ issues of care
and counseling within a classroom of a diverse community of learners. Drawing on Queer Theory and the theological education paradigm of Brookfield and Hess (2008), Marshall proposes a model of *redemptive discourse* in teaching and learning about LGBTQ counseling and care. Her model is, in part, an effort to push pastoral care pedagogy out of its comfort zone and frame the classroom as more than a passive learning environment. Her model is also an effort to push pastoral care practices out of the private, personal realm and into the public sphere of social justice. Marshall wants to cultivate a community of learners who care for each other, are impacted and positively changed by each other and who ultimately become caregivers that are dialogically and empathically equipped to offer care that seeks social justice and effects interpersonal connection. For Marshall (2009), *redemptive discourse* carries an explicit norm of vulnerability, connection, and change (something she sees as lacking in the pedagogical approaches in the field) and implies that the subject matter is not approached from “a simple conversation or a mutual sharing of ideas or opinions” (p.38). *Redemptive discourse* implies that the classroom becomes a “microcosm” where dialogical conversation, conversation where others are open to hearing and being impacted by a variety of experiential voices, becomes an embodied act that contributes to the “ongoing theological reflection necessary for the discovery of alternate and more ‘redemptive discourses’…that promote and support more positive and justice oriented images of God-other-creation-in-relation” (p.38). In the end, Marshall’s proposal of a pedagogical model of *redemptive discourse* points to her ultimate goals of providing just, respectful and compassionate care of the LGBTQ community and of inviting her pastoral counseling and care students into “concrete practices that are theologically reflective and that might inform their ministries [in such a way that they can] challenge the unjust structures of the world around the communities in which they participate” (p. 39).
Marshall’s reflections point in the right direction when beginning to think specifically and intentionally about pedagogical considerations within the context of teaching LGBTQ issues of care and counseling to a diverse community of students. She seeks to effectively manage a cacophony of voices and opinions in a way that both critically deconstructs dominate narratives surrounding LGBTQ issues and judiciously constructs models of compassionate and respectful care. She seeks to create a *community* of learners. It is my hope to extend the inherent spirit of Marshall’s work and outline a more methodical pedagogy specific to teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling within a diverse student population. What is implicit in Marshall’s work will become my explicit starting point; namely that teaching LGBTQ care and counseling within a diverse community of learners is a task that should be intrinsically connected to an overall formational pastoral pedagogy. Within this overall formational pastoral pedagogy, I also will offer specific classroom practices for consideration.

**Pastoral pedagogy as formation**

In our current global society and age where pluralism is the norm; where multiple, diverse perspectives not only sit side by side and compete for attention and validation but also demand to be treated fairly and respectfully, it is tempting to approach the subject of teaching LGBTQ issues of pastoral care and counseling like a buffet. In other words, in the interest of naming and honoring diverse viewpoints, this approach to teaching seeks to present students with a variety of perspectives, views, and positions and equip them with the necessary skills that address each perspective. In practice this means that a professor teaches approaches to LGBTQ care and counseling that span the theological, scientific, social, cultural belief spectrum and upholds practices of care that range from reparative therapy to same sex pre-marital counseling. This
approach is tempting because it seems to presume a fair and equal treatment of perspectives and it seems to create a space where a variety of voices and beliefs can be honored. This approach may also be tempting because it seems to lessen the possibility of conflict and pain in the classroom and between students.

The buffet approach to teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is also a tempting approach because it falls so nicely into the popular and pervasive wheelhouse of liberal arts education. In this educational tradition, informed by a lingering aspect of the Enlightenment, the autonomy of the student is sacred and the primary mission is geared towards “the conveyance of multiple bodies of information or technical skills that are useful in a market economy” (Smith, 2014). Furthermore, liberal arts education envisions learning as a way for students to consider larger questions of meaning and value and seeks to create a forum where the engagement of these larger questions promote tolerance, critical thought, democratic institutions, and civic engagement. In short, in the tradition of the liberal arts, it appears that there is room for a variety of views and perspectives and students are given a plethora of options to consider when approaching certain subject matters and asking certain questions. This context of education reinforces the appeal of the buffet approach to teaching issues related to LGBTQ care and counseling.

In the end, however, especially in the context of teaching pastoral care and counseling from the Christian tradition, the buffet approach breaks down (Hauerwas, 2007; MacIntyre, 2006; Smith, 2010). Making room for a variety of views and perspectives to be presented alongside of each other under the guise that students get to choose the perspective and approach to pastoral care and counseling that resonates best with them largely trains them (at best) to be technicians of applied theory and (at worst) to be spectators who remain unaffected and separate
from the subject material. But more importantly, in the context of teaching pastoral care and counseling from the Christian tradition, the liberal arts buffet approach neglects the aspect of the educational process that may span beyond the interests of democratic institutions and civic engagement. It also neglects those educational contexts geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters “habituation to a particular vision of the good” (Smith, 2010).³

Framing pastoral care and counseling education as an overall endeavor that is geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters a particular vision of the good and not just as a venture in transmitting a buffet of information and views, shifts the classroom context for teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling within the context of a diverse community of learners in important ways. First, it forces the professor to provide a particular vision of the good⁴ that drives, guides, and permeates the entire course and becomes the foundation and starting point for class engagement in regards to LGBTQ issues of care and counseling.

The vision of the good that I operate from as an ordained Christian minister teaching in Christian seminaries and pastoral counseling programs is one that is based on the imago Dei as expressed through contemporary Trinitarian theologies.⁵ This vision of the good ultimately speaks to an understanding that we are all created in the image of the Triune God. This divine reality of personhood that we are created in, for, and with is our reality of personhood and is the basis for our understanding, respect, care, empathy, and compassion for ourselves and others. It

³ Though this is a direct quote from J. Smith, this language and idea of “habituation” and “vision of the good” can be found in Stanley Hauerwas’ (2007) book, The State of the University: Academic Knowledge and the Knowledge of God. I will continue to use the language and idea “vision of the good” throughout as I outline my notions of formational pastoral pedagogy.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For an example of the Trinitarian theology that I draw from, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s (1993) book, God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life.
is a reality that says we are subjective, relational and communal beings called to be open and affected by others. It is a reality that says unity is derived from and exists in a diverse community of persons. Just as there is no uniformed, mono-culture of sameness within the Godhead, there is no uniformity to the image of God within humanity. There are only separate, fully subjective persons with their own distinct experiences who are called to be united in a spirit of reciprocal, mutual, divine relationship working in love for the redemption and creative transformation for each other and the world.

Operating from this *vision of the good* invites me as the teacher to understand that I am called to see my students as relational, communal beings created in the image of God and that I am called to create a community of diversity that reflects the spirit of the Triune God. I am called to cultivate and form a particular kind of learning community where there is open, vulnerable, sharing and engagement of unique experiences and perspectives. I am called to form a community where those experiences and perspectives are heard, held, and empathically engaged and transformed in the Triune spirit of empathy, mutuality, and reciprocity.

My *vision of the good* based on the *imago Dei* ultimately leads me to my understanding of the venture of teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners. For better or worse, the pain and joy of the human experience is wrapped up in the experience of culture, race, gender, and sexual orientation. These experiences cannot be denied and all of the joy, hurt, pain, and “sin” that each of these experiences bring must be named, worked through and engaged in relationship and community. A colorful tapestry of diversity must be created where all gifts are honored and all are seen as fully accepted and created in the image of God. We must do this because it is a part of who we are as created in the image of God and we cannot deny this aspect of our personhood.
In the context of a diverse community of learners, my proposing a particular vision of the good based in the imago Dei is not an axiomatic move. Rather, it becomes a dialogical, constructive process and its inherent manifold mysteries unfold and take shape (Palmer, 2007). In other words, pastoral care and counseling gets presented as an embodied, creative possibility grounded in a particular tradition; and the diverse questions and viewpoints of students and teacher become the lines and colors that give shape and form to the what it means to be created in the image of God, the proposed vision of the good. The proposed vision of the good becomes an entry point into more sustained and meaningful dialogical opportunities and invites us into “the kind of space that allows for new questions and alternative visions that we have not yet even thought of to emerge” (Marshall, 2009, p.38). This proposed vision of the good also means that the classroom becomes the formational experience that students engage and ultimately take out into the world as a model for healing and justice.

To be clear, starting with a particular vision of the good, the image of God, and having it be an effective subject centered framework that truly holds, honors, and allows for the constructive potential of diverse viewpoints means that there must be a level of accountability where multifarious voices are encouraged, held in tension and not allowed to claim an authoritative last word. Tension, dissonance, and an ever unfolding constructive process of meaning making must be the valued ethos that undergirds the vision of the good. Professors, students, scripture, tradition, reason, experience – this cacophony of voices must be held in dialectical and dialogical tension and the subject cannot be resolved by landing solely in the voice box of one. In this vision of the good, authoritative resolution and accountability can only be framed in the ultimate mystery and inviolable reality of personhood and what it means to be created in the image of God.
This insistence on dialectical and dialogical tension, dissonance, and the mystery of the reality of the image of God also becomes one way to address the inherent power dynamic between dominant narratives and other more marginal, non-normative narratives around particular subject matter. Professors must be intentional and explicitly mindful of creating a space for ALL narratives to emerge and sit in tension beside each other; for it is only in honestly naming and engaging the narratives that they can be engaged, empathically and compassionately confronted, and transformed. To be clear, this does not mean that the professor sits idly by as words of hate are hurled; as it is the professors job to actively maintain and promote the vision of the good that all are created in the image of God and are to be engaged in that way. This also is not promoting a passive, politically correct tolerance where opinions co-exist unaffected and unchanged; and it is not promoting an ambiguity that is steeped in confusion or indecision. Creating an environment where all narratives are allowed to emerge and sit side by side is an exercise in privileging the process of creative conflict and tension and its constructive contributions to producing an open, on-going communal vision of the good. The process of creative conflict and tension is privileged over the need and desire to authoritatively resolve and violently exert a close-ended dictum.

Second, framing pastoral care and counseling education as an overall endeavor that is geared toward personal and professional identity formation within a particular religious tradition that fosters a particular vision of the good reminds us that the care and counseling of LGBTQ persons is not an objective, inert idea to be studied and dissected. In the context of a vision of the good based on the imago Dei, we are constantly reminded that the subjects that we teach are embodied, living realities and the interactions we have in the classroom are live, embodied encounters with difference and otherness (Palmer, 2007, p.37). In this context, we see that
education requires a *relationship* and a recognition that there is an interactive connection between the knower and the known. Furthermore, knowledge and learning are rooted in experience and become a vital, interactive part of our lives (Palmer, 2007). According to Parker Palmer (2007), “knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what [we are trying to learn]” (p.55). Consequently, respect, compassion, curiosity, and understanding become the norms of approach. And we must intentionally create space to honor, incorporate and integrate our knowledge as part of our identity and experience as human beings created in the image of God.

Embodied, relational, experiential subjective formational learning breaks down the artificial distance between persons and their opinions and the artificial distance between persons who hold different viewpoints. Differences cannot merely be entertained and tolerated; differences must be ingested and integrated. The professor and student must leave the educational encounter intimately connected with the subject matter and each member of the class. Ideally, the professor and the student ultimately leave the educational encounter changed.

The pastoral pedagogy of formation based on a particular *vision of the good* of the *imago Dei* that I have just proposed and outlined provides a viable and constructive environment for teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling to a diverse community of learners. The notion of formation shifts the teaching venture in important ways. It resists a safe, static, neutral style of education where multiple views and perspectives are set out and students are given a plethora of options to consider when approaching issues of LGBTQ care and counseling. It insists that pastoral education in general, and as it specifically relates to LGBTQ care and counseling, is more about who we are than what we do. It demands that we engage and experience the lives of those in the LGBTQ community and each other in ways that change, shape, and form our own
lives and beliefs. It instills courage to boldly teach and proclaim a clear *vision of the good* without pride-fully presuming the final shape of what it means to be created in the image of God.

**Formational pastoral pedagogy in action**

With the overall formational pastoral pedagogy that informs my teaching delineated, I would like to offer an outline of my personal approach for teaching LGBTQ care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners. My hope is that this spurs the teaching imagination and contributes in some small way to the field of teaching pastoral care and counseling, especially as it relates to LGBTQ care and counseling. Like the pedagogy itself promotes, my approach should be viewed as an on-going constructive process that invites constructive critique.

**Formational pastoral pedagogy: It is who you are**

When teaching LGBTQ care and counseling, my goal is not simply to provide knowledge to students. My goal is to form a community of learners who are seen, engaged, and being formed as being created in the image of God and to form pastoral practitioners as people who are continuously growing in empathy, compassion, and understanding of the human condition. Consequently, I begin the class devoted to LGBTQ issues of care and counseling with an intentional reminder of the kind of pastoral practitioners we are striving to become. This reminder is also couched in the overall pastoral framework proposed and covered towards the beginning of the semester. Informed by my particular *vision of the good* of the *imago Dei* and by post-modern theologies and therapies, I remind students that pastoral care and counseling comes from a stance of curiosity, a stance of not knowing, and is a dialogical process that does not simply seek to provide answers or solutions. I remind students that true listening demands
silence and an open, hospitable mind and heart. I remind students of the idea of inter-pathy, that being empathic, fully engaged and pastorally present means bracketing (not abandoning) one’s own beliefs and experiences and taking the imaginative leap into someone else’s world (Lartey, 2003). I remind students that taking the empathic, imaginative leap into someone else’s world means that the pastoral enterprise is one in which we, the counselors and caregivers, ultimately are changed and affected.

All of these reminders serve as guideposts for engaging material related to the care and counseling of LGBTQ persons and their families. “This is not an easy topic to cover in one day,” I say, “and there are plenty of opinions, emotions, and experiences to manage. But if we can remember who we are striving to become as pastoral practitioners and people of faith and operate from the pastoral framework we established from the beginning of the semester, I am confident that we can listen to each other, learn from one another, and discover together how to offer respectful, compassionate, just care to persons in the LGBTQ community and how we can all better understand each other as created in the image of God.”

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Establishing a container to creatively hold multiple perspectives

As a professor of pastoral care and counseling in a Christian context, I am also interested in creating pastoral clinicians who engage in theologically reflective and informed practices of care. I establish a method of theological reflection at the beginning of the semester that also continues to serve as the container that creatively and constructively holds multiple perspectives. The theological reflection paradigm I use not only creates a holding environment, it also establishes the norm that all perspectives must sit side by side and be held in tension. It is
imperative to remind students of this theological reflection paradigm at the beginning of the class on LGBTQ care and counseling.

The paradigm that I utilize is the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. It is a paradigm for theological reflection that seeks to connect, honor, and balance diverse sources of authority. And it is a paradigm that provides a model for creatively managing and holding diverse viewpoints. Though the term was not officially coined by John Wesley himself, Methodist scholars deduce that "Wesley believed that the living core of the Christian faith was revealed in Scripture, illumined by tradition, vivified in personal experience, and confirmed by reason" (Cropsey, 2004, para. 103, sec. 2). Consequently, when approaching any issue, though scripture is the central starting point, each aspect of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, experience, and reason) must be held in balance and no aspect can be used in isolation.

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Proposing a common vision of the good

In the formational spirit of proposing a common starting point grounded in a particular tradition and vision of the good that has framed the class, I rely on the Quadrilateral approach that encourages scripture as the central starting point. In the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling, I do this not only to remain faithful to the method of theological reflection, but also because Hebrew and Christian scriptures are often the first entry point into the conversation surrounding LGBTQ issues. Scripture also often is used as a dominate narrative to condemn and shame LGBTQ persons and their families.

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6 I remember from class notes and readings throughout my seminary experience at The Divinity School of Duke University that Albert Outus, a Methodist scholar, is the person who first coined the term Wesleyan Quadrilateral.
7 In my experience, Methodist scholars are quick to point out the frequent misinterpretation of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral that posits that all four sources of authority and engagement – scripture, tradition, experience, and reason – are all equal and viable starting points for discerning matters of doctrine and revelation. It is true that all are to be considered together and in tension when discerning matters of doctrine and revelation; but scripture is always the starting point.
Rather than start with the overused and somewhat pedantic scripture, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23, NRSV), I choose to frame my vision of the good in relation to LGBTQ persons around the Genesis 1 declaration that all humans are created in the image of God. Like the Romans passage, this passage provides common language and students are able to support and agree on this basic and central tenet of faith. However, unlike the Romans passage, the Genesis creation narrative intersects with tradition, experience, and reason in a way that invites students to positively and constructively imagine how each person, including persons in the LGBTQ community, reflect, illuminate, and embody the image of God in their lives and relationships. Furthermore, as I frame and propose an image of God who is a relational God that exists within and as part of a divine community of mutual, reciprocal life giving relationships (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), I offer an alternative paradigm of human relationships. Gone are the binary concepts of man and woman and the focus on physical attributes that uniquely transmit the image of God; instead there is a focus on the nature and charism of intimate, life giving relationships.

Formational pastoral pedagogy: Embodied, subjective, relational learning

Up until this point in my class, my reminders about who we are as pastoral practitioners and how we engage in the art of dialogical and constructive theological reflection, as well as my proposed vision of the good grounded in scripture have not been framed fully as embodied, living acts of learning that challenge us. Sure, there has been some conversation and respectful, constructive engagement of multiple perspectives within the context of teaching LGBTQ care and counseling. But there has been a distance and safety maintained between me, the students, and the ideas of framing and offering counseling and care of LGBTQ persons. My words and
proposals have remained more in the realm of objective, disembodied ideas. I have not cultivated a personal connection and subjective relationship with the issues surrounding LGBTQ care and counseling.

I make this move in two very particular ways. First, the vision of the good that flows from the common, positive reframing of the imago Dei and the Genesis creation narrative demands that the value and dignity of the human person before God and the quest to embody the God-like qualities of relationship, mutuality and intimacy are affirmed. Furthermore, this vision of the good demands that the multiple viewpoints, different perspectives, and various questions that get raised become constructive, dialogical realities that illuminate what it means to be created in the image of God. They also speak of the joy and the pain, the possibilities and limitations, the clarity and the ambiguity inherent in addressing and understanding the human condition in light of scripture, tradition, experience, and reason.

In other words, the process of dialogue about this issue becomes an embodied, communal act and a part of the living, breathing tradition of what it means to be created in the image of God. Diversity and multiplicity are honored and cultivated in an open spirit of love, connection, and sharing. This embodied act of managing diverse viewpoints ultimately requires that raw, emotion filled experience (a piece of the Weslyan Quadrilateral) be shared, named, and reacted to honestly. As a teacher attempting to create an embodied, mutual, Trinitarian community, I intentionally ask students to share their gut responses about the possibility that LGBTQ persons and relationships reveal something about the image and nature of God. The responses and the direction of the conversation varies. Sometimes, silence is the first reaction. Sometimes the first reaction is relief from students who have wanted to affirm LGBTQ persons of faith because they have at last been offered a scriptural and theological hook on which to hang their hat. Usually,
however, at some point there is palpable discomfort and tension surrounding the voices of the “all have sinned” camp and the voices of LGBTQ students and their allies who continually feel like they have to fight for their right to have a place in the Kingdom and a legitimate voice in the conversation.

In my experience, this place of tension is where the real work of community is fostered and the image of God is honored. The key is to shift from the beginning point of scripture and theology and move towards engaging relationship, fostering direct communication, and exploring the “here and now” of the conversation. Questions from me (that demand a level of honesty, vulnerability, intimacy) revolve around key questions like: What it is like for students to hear their peers voice certain viewpoints? What is at stake for you personally if it is true that LGBTQ persons are loved fully as created in the image of God? What do the LGBTQ persons want their peers to know about what it is like for them to be gay and Christian? What are some of your fears? What is it that you don’t understand that you want to understand? What is God calling you to hear and understand in this conversation?

If things get too heated between two people, I rely on solid group therapy techniques to foster conversation, understanding and compassion between particular students while also highlighting the larger issues being raised and throwing those out to the class so that the focus does not remain solely on the conflict. This is the avenue to creating community and creating the *imago Dei* in the classroom. Hopefully, this avenue of honest, compassionate sharing and dialogue becomes the model that students can also take out into the world as an embodied act of care.

The second move towards embodied relational learning comes with the guest I invite into my class. Each time I have taught this class, I have had the privilege of inviting an out, gay
faithful Christian man who is partnered and has children with two Christian lesbian women, one of whom is an ordained Christian minister. His presence in the room at this juncture and the sharing of his story of how he understands himself to be a faithful Christian and a gay, partnered man reminds the entire class that the subject of LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is not an abstract idea or an objective reality upon which we can only mentally muse. LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling is a personal issue that involves real live people, our sisters, brothers, friends, cousins, parents, and neighbors. The ways in which we reflect on this issue and create acts of care impact the lives of real people.

The presence of a “real, live, gay person” and the space to engage his experience in a spirit of openness and honest sharing also offers the possibility that our thoughts, reflections, and perceptions around LGBTQ issues of care and counseling can be shifted, shaped and formed in a very particular way. For example, the student who clings to the notion that homosexuality and Christianity are incompatible has been presented with embodied experiential knowledge and challenged in a new and personal way. The student who struggles to conceptualize how the image of God is illuminated through the lives of LGBTQ individuals has now had the opportunity to have an embodied example and can see possibilities not seen before.

Embodied, subjective knowledge is a risky venture and introducing it in such a personal way can be even riskier. Hearts and minds are exposed to the possibilities of judgment, rejection, and pain. Preconceived notions are vulnerable and open to renegotiation in a way that is different than just talking about ideas. In the end, the personal relationship forces us to make room for and hold someone’s experience of faith without judgment and treat it as a viable reality.

The final formational act: Engaging the context of care and counseling
By the end of class, even in the midst of the ever present, yet shifting, various viewpoints, students are ready and eager to construct care and counseling practices that are sensitive to the needs of the LGBTQ community. In a very general way, students become attuned and educated about certain dynamics of care and begin to imagine how to engage them respectfully and compassionately. These dynamics include but are not limited to the process of coming out, family of origin dynamics, sexual identity development, sexuality and mental health, negotiating issues of faith and sexuality, claiming and affirming dignity, creating families, and same sex relationships.

Conclusion

Teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling in the context of a diverse community of learners can be a daunting and challenging prospect. Yet, as I have demonstrated, if approached thoughtfully and intentionally, this daunting prospect can hold a treasure trove of constructive possibilities. Differences of opinions need not be feared for their divisiveness; they can be mined for their wisdom and their ability to invite connection and relationship. I hope that my proposed pedagogical model of pastoral formation offers a broad, constructive pathway in teaching LGBTQ pastoral care and counseling and contributes to the overall development of best practices in the pastoral care and counseling classroom.

References


