

What Helps (and Hurts) in Resolving Sexual, Religious, and Social Conflicts

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Main “Take-Home” Points

- **Recognize the complex issues in resolving conflicts for traditionally religious, sexual/gender minorities**
 - due to wrong and negating information, lack of accurate and affirming information, restricted views, lack of options, pressures to live societal and familial norms, & isolation
 - and the internalization, conformity, needs for acceptance, opposing needs, repression, confusion, fears, shame, lack of exploration, & compliance that impairs process
- **Recognize the power in**
 - developing self-acceptance
 - developing a positive, multifaceted self-identity
 - developing proactive skills to manage being a minority
 - understanding how resolution is a process, not an endpoint
 - for example, heterosexuality, celibacy, coming out



Context & Background

- **Historical:** assumptions of cures, theories, & interventions; dominant views, agendas, hopes/promises, expectations, biases, misunderstandings, etc
- **Facts:** what's normal/natural, minority issues, gender issues, humans' tendency for black/white thinking, some things can't be controlled, unknowns & ambiguities, etc
- **Identity development:** cognitive, emotional, personality, minority, sexual, and faith identity development
- **Interpersonal:** family, love/romance/sexual, career, friends, God, communities, government, & political
- **Intrapersonal:** how one treats self & aspects of self, physiological and relational needs for wholeness

APA 2009 Task Force Evaluation: Efficacy and Safety

- **Conclusion:** Insufficient evidence to support the use of psychological interventions to change sexual orientation
 - Encourages mental-health professionals to avoid misrepresenting the efficacy of sexual orientation change efforts by promoting or promising change in sexual orientation
 - Concludes that the benefits reported by participants in sexual orientation change efforts can be gained through approaches that do not attempt to change sexual orientation

Positive Secondary Outcomes of Sexual Reorientation Interventions

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

- Provided with hope, relief, support, & answers
- Adopted a self-positive sexual identity (e.g., “non-gay,” heterosexual with SGA, repentant)
- Found a place to belong/fit in, meet similar individuals, and feel normal
 - a place to express/experience both religious & sexual selves
 - enhanced closeness with others
- Behaviors became congruent with religion/family
- Enhanced gender identity and competencies
- Enhanced self-exploration

Harms Reported

Described as due to

- being misinformed about realistic outcomes
- being misled with unsubstantiated theories & treatments
(*false cures and promises*)
- blaming* the person for not changing & internalizing treatment failure (“*I’m weak, evil. . . . I’m the failure*”)
- being reinforced that being LGB is a disease and must be avoided (*agreeing with or not countering false information and societal oppression*)
- restricting education or exploration* of options
- feeling pressured* to be “one way or another” and *reject/suppress* core aspects of self

Such aspects were reported as increasing despair, self-hatred, confusion, anxiety, depression, discrimination, unnecessary losses, intimacy difficulties, & suicidality

Concerns of Individuals Participating in SOCE

- Negative views of self, sexuality, & homosexuality
- Lack of adequate information about LGB identities and relationships
- Isolation & lack of understanding & support from family and religious and LGB communities
- Perception that conflicts between religious and sexual/gender orientation identities are irreconcilable: an “either-or” solution

(APA, 2009)

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"I don't want to be defined by who I am."

What Impairs Identity Exploration & Development?

- Pressure to live up to ideal images & avoid stereotypes:
Homophobia and heteronormative biases
 - **“What is wrong with you/me?”**
 - Beliefs/fears about being different, standing out, and not being normal
 - **“That is not me”**: Can’t identify as LGB due to not being reflected by society & dis-identify from what is socially unacceptable
 - Bind: Can feel okay about being SSA as long as you live up to standards or don’t let others know you are failing to do so
 - Hide self and hide needs to feel safe
 - **Others don’t know of your suffering, uniqueness, & needs**

Cultural Influences

- **Traditional religion** impacts self-views, distress, motivations, & coping:
 - Considered a sex offender in your community
 - Belief in miracles
 - Created in God's (heterosexual) image: "Abomination"
 - Suffering and self-sacrificing: motivational and rewarded
 - *Judgments* mean something: Over-reliance on authorities for answers, high stakes for lack of conformity
- **Family attitudes and expectations** impact self-views, distress, motivations, & coping
 - How we are treated is how we treat ourselves
 - Essential needs cannot be met developmentally or socially

Buffering or Protective Factors While Growing Up

- Finding supportive and affirming individuals
- Finding LGB/SSA-positive role models
- Basing one's identity & worth on other factors besides traditional religion
- Having fewer social pressures to marry or act heterosexual
- Being able to evaluate oneself independently of the judgments of others

(Beckstead & Morrow, 2004)

What Impairs Identity Exploration & Development?

Boundary neglect and violation

- Too shamed and distressed to *think* in complex manner
- Inability to bear/respond effectively to (more) intolerable losses
- Those who comforted you when bullies/badness came (e.g., God, parents, church community, friends) may now be the bullies
- Ability to reduce stress in short-term by keeping the familiar and avoiding conflict (not be “selfish” or “make” others upset)
- Can’t stand up for self because don’t know who you are or can’t be all that you are without more distress
- Anxious to make the “right” choice but can’t choose— **don’t know all the information to solve the problem *or* don’t know the “right” answer** (besides the one that will please others)
 - can’t take a step and then evaluate

The Solution Becomes the Problem

- **Strategies that worked to manage discrimination and stigma**
 - e.g., hiding, compartmentalizing, self-denying, pleasing, living up to others' expectations, trying to figure things out
 - provided purpose, identity, and *sense* of safety, control, and closeness
- **are no longer sufficient or effective**, plus add secondary distress & do not provide adults needs (e.g., intimacy, autonomy, confidence, well-being, fulfillment)
 - individual didn't realize strategies were not sustainable in long-term
 - strategies turn extreme to shame, perfectionism, codependence, social anxiety, addictions/compulsivity, hypervigilance, defensiveness, isolation, depression (lack of purpose & joy)

What Helps

Identity Exploration & Development?

- The question may not be if someone should “come out of the closet”
 - but if that person has the confidence to manage any problems associated with it
- Coping with minority stress depends on
 - personal factors** (e.g., resilience and coping styles)
 - group resources** (e.g., a positive collective identity and community support)
 - Develop **stigma competence**:
 - Internal and external resources and coping to withstand losses, fears, shame, and discrimination often accompanied by being a minority

Dealing with the Dissonance

Options to reduce shame, stigma, and dissonance:

- change the behavior that causes dissonance
- add new beliefs that reduce dissonance
- change the environment that creates dissonance

–Possible strategies:

- Consider new narratives or frameworks that permit a change in beliefs
- Attribute one's negative outcomes to prejudice or discrimination
- Focus on the positive experiences
- Challenge the stigma and those who stigmatize
- Compare oneself and outcomes with others who share the stigma

Using the Psychology of Sexual Orientation & Gender

- Same-sex sexual and romantic attractions, behaviors, and relationships *can be* healthy, fulfilling, and positive variations of human sexuality
- Sexual orientation & gender orientation *are uniquely individual and inseparable* from an individual's sense of self
- Sexual and gender minorities benefit when sexual/gender stigma and minority stress are addressed
 - with interventions that reduce and counter their impacts, including countering a null environment (affirmative interventions)

Using the Psychology of Sexual Orientation & Gender

- **Individuals are empowered to determine**
 - The ultimate goals for their identity process
 - The behavioral expression of their sexual orientation & gender orientation
 - Their public and private social roles
 - Their gender roles, identities, and expression
 - The sex and gender of their partner
 - The forms of their relationships
- Through permission giving, exploration, self-efficacy, accurate information, and options

(APA, 2009, Morrow & Hawxhurst, 1998)

Process of Resolution

- **Normalize** *sexual* identity development:
 - Similar to career, gender, religious, ethnic, racial, and social identity development
- **Periods** of
 - conformity/denial, awareness, conflict/crisis, attempts to change self, swaying between extremes
 - exploration, comparison, gaining different/expanded perspectives
 - reevaluation, becoming disillusioned, giving up trying to be heterosexual, grieving
 - acceptance, reclaiming, pride, self-efficacy, assertiveness, synthesis/integration, ambiguity/openness
- **regardless of sexual identity choice**

Gaining a Different Perspective

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"No, no, that's not a sin, either. My goodness, you must have worried yourself to death."

Expanding Perspective

- **Permission to explore/reevaluate** what you have learned & how you might be getting too much of a one-sided view
 - you have a right to **question authority**
 - encounter and evaluate diverse viewpoints
- **Possible outcomes:**
 - increased knowledge & informed decisions**
 - disillusionment, pain, and anger**
 - Realizing those with whom you've trusted to instruct you may not know it all or meet all your needs
 - More self-authority and self-direction
- **Normal individuation (parent-child) maturity process**

Construct a Personalized, Positive Self-identity

Identify, reevaluate, reject, & replace negative self-labels

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

Decide who you are and who you are not

- Which cultural norms fit and which do not
 - Reduce fragmenting and dichotomies: not either/or
 - Give self permission to keep some “heterosexual” identity (it is not “all or nothing”)

Construct a Personalized, Positive Self-identity

- **Adopt self-chosen identity & norms & then live by own ethical center**
 - Identify, sort out, and prioritize the values and needs of your life
 - Redefine your life dreams, value, uniqueness, & purpose
 - Explore the process and effects of external validation
 - Select more valid sources of information to describe self, sexuality, spirituality, and your relationships
 - Know your truth so you can stand in it when others do not understand you: confidence
 - Identify which aspects of yourself you want (and are able) to keep and which aspects you want (and are able) to lose

Managing Multiple Social Identities

- Increase your decision-making skills for **telling others about yourself**
 - Decide reasons to self-disclose
 - e.g., confession, therapeutic, political, relationship-building, problem-solving, preventative, integrity/congruence, and/or spontaneous, due to situational and relational factors
 - Prepare to handle responses: Rejection is not the “end of the story”
 - Evaluate the harms and benefits of self-concealment versus self-disclosure
 - Develop skills to know you will be “okay” and can handle choices and actions
 - Find support in making decisions about where, when, and to whom you self-disclose

Managing Multiple Social Identities

- **Create flexible ways of expressing and experiencing the multiple aspects of yourself in diverse settings**
 - Develop all identities simultaneously or some sequentially
 - Reconstruct all or some aspects of self
 - Make a decision to live with the dissonance when no adequate resolution can be found
 - Focus on competencies within all cultural realms, as well as movement between different groups
 - Explore wide range of opportunities
 - When not valued, keep going back to self/safe spaces to find strength to go back out

Face & Live With Being a Disappointment, “Failure,” Rejected, and Separate

- How can you **live without the approval** of your parents?
- Develop **internal locus** of control:
 - **Self-authority**: Ability to explore, know, and act on behalf of self based on your truth, needs, ethics, and life purpose, independent of others' desires, beliefs, or agendas
 - **Create buffer (or boundaries)** between you and others' judgments, needs, or attacks
 - **Stand in your truth when others do not and cannot understand**

Face & Live With Being a Disappointment, “Failure,” Rejected, and Separate

- **Accept** that you and others do the best you can with what you are given
- **Redefine “success”** to be more personal, realistic
 - **Lose the goal of perfection or redefine it**
 - Reevaluate the meaning of “flaws”
- **Convert shame** to self-authority, acceptance, understanding, self-compassion, self-respect, dignity, & pride
- **Convert anger toward others** to grief, acceptance, compassion, limit-setting, granting autonomy, and seeking others who can provide needs

Developing Self-Acceptance

- **Meet others like yourself & belong**
- **Find your unique value & validate the “whole package”**
 - **Accept your attractions** non-judgmentally
 - Develop a positive relationship to your attractions
 - Remove the shame and resistance
 - **Reframe** attractions in a positive light (e.g., a trial, a gift, a nonissue, etc.)
 - Become comfortable with your self-chosen and unique **gender role** and identity
- **Experience family, peer, community, and divine acceptance** *(if possible)*

Facilitating Sexual Congruence

- Distinguish which aspects of sexuality to evolve
 - **sexual orientation identity**: private and public identifications of sexual orientation, group membership
 - **sexual identity (script)**: beliefs, norms, behaviors, motivations, gender role, comfort with different sexual expressions, needs, drives, etc
- Acknowledge the range, quality, intensity, motivations, and complexity of your affectional and erotic arousal pattern
- Treat addictions, objectification, and obsessiveness
 - Examine your **erotophobia** and constricted views of what it means to be LGB/SSA

Controlling Homosexual Feelings

- **What happens when you try to control feelings?**
 - Long-term consequences of “managing” sexuality:
 - May set up binge/purge, failed “repentance” cycle
 - Emotions and worth become dependent on restraining through obedience or perfection but never attain happiness or fulfillment
 - When you suppress erotic energy and relational needs (e.g., passion, creativity, connection, drives), what happens to them?
 - Can create loneliness, denial, rationalizations, passive-aggression, resentment, bitterness, shame, low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, dissociation, addiction, and HIV risk

Using the Psychology of Religion

- Explore how your religious values, beliefs, & behaviors might be sources of
 - **help** (e.g., buffer stress, provide order & answers in times of chaos/loss, provide self-identity, enhance relationships/belonging)
 - Via ethics, service, forgiveness, hope, gratitude, love, compassion, & “letting go” through trust in higher power
 - **distress** (e.g., maintain conformity through guilt/shame/fear, promote external locus of control, prejudice, foreclose on identity, self-doubt, group conflict)
 - Via groupthink, heuristics to form rapid/incomplete judgments, suppression, powerlessness against vengeful deity, disillusionment, extreme or immature/concrete thinking (less reality-based), reactive actions

Using the Psychology of Religion

- Clarify core religious values absent of **condemnatory and persecutory elements**
 - Identify the human errors of religion
 - Lessen distress caused by perfectionism, self-criticism, prejudice, and harshness in self-judgments that distort religious values, are associated with them, or are used to express religious values
- Refocus on **using positive elements** of religion
 - base decisions on compassion, love, understanding, forgiveness, “more to be revealed”
 - **Improve your relationship with God** from one based on guilt/fear to knowledge, acceptance, and openness to uncertainty & paradox
 - Loved despite or because of SSA

Using the Psychology of Religion

- Reclaim your unique **spiritual gifts**
- Enhance opportunities for **sacred moments**
- Increase your **existential wellbeing** (i.e., how you feel about life)
- Actively **engage with religious texts** & increase self-authority
- Explore ways of **being both** spiritual & sexual:
 - remain faithful within religion but self-identify (to self and/or others) as SSA/LGBT
 - feel spiritual outside and/or within the context of religion
 - explore diverse spiritualities and SSA/LGBT-affirming places of worship
 - decide which elements of religion and spirituality to keep embracing & which to redefine & which to set aside

Using the Psychology of Religion

Facilitate your spiritual and religious development:

- Recognize how **faith and religious judgment** mature
- Can move from **awe & pure imagination** to
 - **literal interpretation & concrete thinking**
 - **conforming to expectations of authorities**
 - **critical reflection of the complexity of life/self/others**
 - **being “alive to paradox”**
 - **experiencing absolute love and justice (awe & pure imagination)**
- Each new stage requires the reworking of past solutions and contains positive possibilities but also negative potential (see Fowler, 1981, 1991)

Summary

- **Instead of “fixing,” ignoring, “overcoming,” invalidating, or arguing with those we are different from or aspects within ourselves:**
 - Improve how you relate to your internal experiences, feelings, desires, and needs
 - Improve how you relate to others, other communities, and society
 - Improve society’s relationship to you and other sexual and gender minorities
- **Resolutions are a uniquely personal *process*, not a construct such as heterosexuality**
 - That can entail conformity, tension, crisis, disillusionment, support, validation, normalization, permission, autonomy, exploration, evaluation, acceptance, grieving, reclaiming, self-efficacy, self-authority, self-respect, reconfiguration, integration, complexity, and ambiguity
- **Goal is to improve mental health and well-being**

Some Possible Resources

- ***APA Task Force Resolution & Report:***
 - *<http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/therapeutic-response.pdf>*
- ***Bibliographies/List of Movies/Websites; Local & National Resources; and Events, Groups, & Workshops*** found at LGBTQtherapists.com
- ***Empowerment Workshops*** at the Utah Pride Center: Yearlong series of 6-week workshops (\$5/session) building skills, knowledge, and support regarding
 - dealing with discrimination, understanding gender & roles, developing coping skills, developing communication skills, enhancing sexuality, and enhancing spirituality (see LGBTQtherapists.com)
- My ***therapy group*** for those in conflict

Let Your Light Shine

- ***“The lotus is a flower that grows in the mud. The thicker and deeper the mud, the more beautiful the lotus blooms.”***
 - Expressed in the Buddhist chant: nam myoho renge kyo
- ***“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”***
 - Martin Luther King, Jr.
- ***“To need something to change is to do violence to it.”***
 - Pema Chodron
- ***“The curious paradox is that when I accept myself I change.”***
 - Carl Rogers