Journeying to a Safe Space: Sexual and Religious Identity Integration of Filipino LGBT-affirmative Church Members

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Identity is a complex concept. It is pluralistic and cuts across several domains. Some domain specific identities may oppose another, like in the case of sexual identity and religious identity, where successful integration is achieved for some individuals, while for others, a significant amount of conflict can occur, especially for religious sexual minorities. The present study analyzes the integration stories of members of an LGBT-affirmative church, the Metropolitan Community Church-Quezon City (MCC-QC). In two *kwentuhan* sessions, 12 MCC-QC members shared their lived experiences of identity integration. Based on participant accounts, the process of integration began with experiences of oppression, followed by personal quests towards a deeper faith and knowledge of one's self, and eventually culminating in a continual personalization of faith. Identity integration was facilitated by participation in a safe and supportive faith community. We found that this process is relevant especially in promoting well-being among LGBT faithful.

Keywords: identity integration, LGBT, MCC, religion

Identity is a multifaceted construct. Our total identity is composed of multiple social and personal identities that are salient to us. At times, these identities clash and lead to an identity conflict (Baumeister, Shapiro, & Tice, 1985). One conflict that has often been cited in the literature is the conflict between sexual minority Christians'

sexual and religious identities (Ream, 2001; Rodriguez, 2009). Most religions take a proscriptive stance against homosexuality, viewing it as "unnatural", "perverted", and "sinful" (Barnes & Meyer, 2012; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Thus, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to be lesbian/gay and Christian as the two identities are assumed to be incompatible (Rodriguez, 2010). As a result, sexual minority Christians tend to experience high levels of internalized homophobia, depression, guilt, suicidal ideation, and isolation as they receive minimal support within and outside of religious institutions (Gattis, Woodford, & Han, 2014; Herek, 1987; Subhi & Geelan, 2012). Being both lesbian/gay and Christian thus requires a significant amount of psychological and strategic work (Kane, 2013). Accordingly, a number of researchers (e.g., Ganzevoort, van der Laan, & Olsman, 2011; Kubicek et al., 2009; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Thumma, 1991; Wagner, Serafini, Rabkin, Remien, & Williams, 1994; Yip, 1997) have identified various strategies that sexual minority Christians use to resolve the conflict between their sexual and religious identities. Most of these studies, however, were done in a Western context and have given minimal attention to the process of sexual and religious identity integration (Rodriguez, 2009). This study endeavors to address these two main research gaps in the literature on sexual minority Christians by (1) exploring the identity integration experiences of sexual minority Christians in a non-Western setting; and (2) assessing integration as a *process* rather than as a construct. Specifically, this study seeks to advance the research on sexual minority Christians by exploring the narrative of how Filipino lesbian and gay Christians integrate their sexual and religious identities as members of an LGBT-affirmative church[1], the Metropolitan Community Church-Quezon City (MMC-QC).

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[1]Since all of our participants are from MCC-QC, the integration process presented here may be particular to MCC-QC members. However, this does not mean that other sexual minority Christians would not benefit from other LGBT-affirmative churches. We also make a distinction between LGBT-friendly churches (i.e. those that are open to sexual minorities but do not specifically address their religious needs and may still consider homosexuality as unnatural or inferior to heterosexuality) and LGBT-affirmative churches (i.e. those that specifically minister to sexual minorities by preaching gay theology and affirming their inherent dignity regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity) (see Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000).

Sexual and Religious Identity Conflict

Various psychological theories have been used to explain the origins of the conflict between sexual minorities' sexual and religious identities: Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, Goffman's (1963) work on stigma, and Baumeister et al.'s (1985) theory of identity conflict (see Rodriguez, 2009 for a review of each). In each of these theories, one condition for conflict to occur is that both the sexual identity and the religious identity must be of high value to the individual. The difficulty one faces in this conflict is that the individual is often confronted with a choice rather than a solution: either they renounce their sexuality or they are forced to abandon their religious beliefs (Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, 2009; Yip, 2012). In essence, the sexual minority is pushed to a place of compartmentalization with the development of self. This leads to an existential crisis on knowing who one is and/or who one should be.

According to Yip (1997), gay Christians will initially take an aggressive approach to resolving their internal conflict by (1) attacking the stigma and challenging Biblical interpretation, (2) attacking the stigmatizer and disputing the credibility of the Church, or (3) using the ontogeneric argument that states that all sexual orientations are created and blessed by God. Yip (1997) also indicated that the individual might use positive personal experiences, which involves living out Christian moral values (e.g. monogamy) while avoiding sexual promiscuity. While conflict resolution may be achieved, identity integration remains ambiguous and incomplete.

Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) used Baumeister et al.'s (1985) theory to conceptualize the conflict that sexual minority Christians face between their sexual and religious identities. They proposed four strategies that lesbian and gay Christians used to alleviate this conflict: (1) reject the religious identity by abandoning one's religion; (2) reject the homosexual identity by seeking "conversion" therapy or abstaining from homosexual relations; (3) compartmentalizing one's religious life from one's homosexual life; and (4) integrating one's sexual and religious identities into a new identity. While the first three strategies may alleviate conflict by providing, at best, a dichotomous outcome of an either/or resolution that leads to an unsuccessful integration,

the fourth strategy introduces a viable solution for the successful integration of the sexual and religious self. Further, Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000) found that identity integration was an ongoing process, rather than a bipolar construct, that involved having both a positive sexual identity and a positive religious identity, and that the majority of their participants were able to achieve identity integration with the support of, and the participation in an LGBT-affirmative church; the Metropolitan Community Church – New York City (MCC-NYC).

The conflict for sexual minority Christians seems to have a strong relationship with the environment where their sexual and religious identity development takes place; that is, the developmental environment of childhood and adolescence, along with the societal messages, explicitly and implicitly, given to the individual. Specifically, sexual minority Christians are told to 'love the individual, but reject the homosexual behavior because it is a sin' (Harris, Cook, & Kashubeck-West, 2008). This mixed homonegative message coupled with the already difficult task of defining one's identity increases the risk of sexual minority Christians for developing psychological problems that transverse the gamut of mental health issues, especially those of an internalized nature, such as internalized homophobia, depression, guilt, suicidal ideation, and isolation (Herek, 1987; Subhi & Geelan, 2012).

Ream (2001) argues that the conflict that sexual minority Christians are confronted with is embedded in the internalization of homophobic and heterocentric values of one's particular society. He discusses the construct of intrinsic religiousness (i.e., viewing religion as an end in itself and internalizing religious values; see Allport & Ross, 1967) as being both a risk and a resilience factor. According to Ream (2001), intrinsic religiousness serves as a risk factor that predicts identity conflict when sexual minority Christians are socialized in a homonegative environment (e.g. internalizing anti-homosexual religious doctrine). However, it is also possible for sexual minority Christians to draw upon their intrinsic religiousness to make sense of the oppressive homonegative messages that they receive from their social environment (e.g. internalizing religious teachings on the inherent dignity of all of God's creation and the religious values of

unconditional love and acceptance). In other words, it is the religion-based homonegative messages, not religiousness itself that leads to various unhealthy outcomes for sexual minority Christians. Related to this, Harris, Cook, and Kashubeck-West (2008) found that being able to critically and independently examine one's religious beliefs and attitudes (i.e., postconventional religious reasoning) was related to lower levels of internalized homophobia and higher levels of sexual identity development. They also found that the higher the level of religious commitment, the stronger one's internalized homophobia would be in a non-affirming environment where exposure to scriptural literalism on homonegativity and homophobia are greater (Harris et al., 2008). Furthermore, Gattis, Woodford, and Han (2014) found that affiliation in an LGBT-affirmative denomination (e.g., endorses gay theology, same-sex marriage) versus religious affiliation alone served as a protective factor against the depressive effects of intrapersonal struggles and perceived interpersonal discrimination.

As the literature continues to highlight (e.g., Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015; Gattis et al., 2014; Harris et al., 2008; Kane, 2013; Ream, 2001; Rodriguez, 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Thumma, 1991; Yip, 2012), one's social environment plays a pivotal role in achieving a successful integration of the sexual and religious self. Indeed, the minority stress theory posits that, among sexual minorities, the development of mental health problems is directly related to stigma and a rejecting social environment (Meyer, 2003). However, socialization and affiliation in an LGBT-affirmative institution creates protective factors for psychological well-being. As Foster, Bowland, and Vosler (2015) indicate, the integrative process of being lesbian/gay *and* Christian involves active participation in defining and redefining theological meaning in the face of heterosexist church doctrine, orthodox interpretations of Scripture, and explicit and implicit homonegativity. Thus, finding a safe space for practicing one's faith is significant to the integration process.

Empowerment in LGBT-affirmative churches

While organized religions continue to lag behind secular acceptance of LGBTs, there has been a gradual increase in the social

visibility and acceptance of LGBTs in the various religious sects (Yip, 2012), with a number of researchers identifying and studying the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) as an exemplar of an LGBT-affirmative church (Kane, 2013; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). According to Kane, (2013), MCC was created to bridge the gap between LGBT and Christian identities. The first MCC was founded by Reverend Troy Perry, a former Pentecostal minister who was expelled for his homosexuality, in Los Angeles in 1968. His goal was to establish a Christian church that was open to and celebrating of LGBT people (Kane, 2013). While MCC was not the first LGBT congregation established, it does represent one of the first and largest LGBT congregations with over 150 locations in the United States and 22 chapters worldwide (Kane, 2013; www.mccquezoncity.com). The first MCC parish in the Philippines was established in 1991. Currently, MCC has four parishes in the Philippines: Makati, Quezon City, Marikina, and Baguio.

According to Rappaport (2000), the church plays an important role in empowering its constituents. Empowerment can be defined as an intentional process by which marginalized individuals and communities gain control over their lives (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). In the case of sexual minority Christians, empowerment can be a valuable tool in integrating their sexual and religious identities. Key sites for empowerment, as indicated above, are LGBT-affirmative religious institutions, which specifically minister to sexual minorities by preaching gay theology (i.e., God loves everyone regardless of sexual orientation) (Rodriguez, 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Previous research (Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, 2009; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Thumma, 1991; Wagner et al., 1994) has shown that being involved in these institutions empower sexual minorities to integrate their sexual and religious identities.

The Current Study

The Philippines provides an interesting context for studying the sexual and religious identity integration journeys of sexual minorities. Ninety-three percent of Filipinos identify as Christian (National Statistics Office, 2012). Moreover, based on the Pew Research Center's

(2013) "religiosity scale", the Philippines is a highly religious country where anti-homosexual teachings of the Roman Catholic Church pervade. Given the empowering role of LGBT-affirmative institutions, we deemed it best to explore the integration narratives of lesbian and gay members of an LGBT-affirmative church, MCC-QC.

METHOD

Participants

The study had two *kwentuhan* sessions. Four gay men and one lesbian (28 to 43 years old) participated in the first session. All of them held worship service and administrative duties in MCC-QC; two of them were pastors. Participants came from Catholic and Evangelical Christian backgrounds. Seven gay men (21 to 31 years old) participated in the second session. They had been with MCC-QC from two months to six years, and they came from varied religious backgrounds, particularly Catholic and Evangelical Christian. They attended worship services regularly. Only one of them held administrative duties in the church during the time of the study. We contacted the congregation pastor who referred us to participants. After the first *kwentuhan* session, we attended one Sunday School session and one worship service wherein we observed MCC-QC's religious practices. Then, we personally invited participants to take part in the second *kwentuhan* session. Participants provided verbal and written consent prior to taking part in the *kwentuhan* sessions.

Procedure

We used the indigenous method *pakikipagkwentuhan* to gather data. *Pakikipagkwentuhan* is an informal and spontaneous social process where researchers and participants exchange stories and views about their lives or others' lives (Orteza, 1997). It centers on *kwento* or story and does not follow the usual question-and-answer interview format. The study's purpose guides *pakikipagkwentuhan,* but the participants may bring up anything that is relevant and salient to them. We used *pakikipagkwentuhan* to discuss value-related issues without

being too direct and thereby threatening to our participants. Given the possible sensitivity of discussing the conflicts that participants experienced in their identity integration process, we wanted to make them feel as comfortable as possible in sharing their integration stories by allowing the conversation to unfold naturally and by letting them lead the direction of the *kwentuhan*. Further, because of the spontaneous nature of pakikipagkwentuhan, we avoided the tendency to box participants' experiences into a preconceived framework. Instead, *pakikipagkwentuhan* enabled us to let participants' salient experiences and viewpoints emerge.

Each *kwentuhan* session started with a brief introduction of ourselves and the study's purpose. As part of *pakikipagkwentuhan,* we and our participants consensually defined the two identities being integrated as being lesbian/gay and being a Christian. We defined integration as reconciliation between these two identities.

In both *kwentuhan* sessions, participants spontaneously shared their stories in integrating their sexual and religious identities. The second *kwentuhan* session validated the themes we found in the first session. Participants agreed to be audio-recorded and for our *kwentuhan* sessions to be transcribed. Since *pakikipagkwentuhan* is spontaneous, our original transcripts included data extracts that were unrelated to sexual and religious identity integration. After two thorough readings of the transcripts, we removed superfluous extracts. Then, we coded and categorized the remaining data extracts. These categories were further defined and analyzed to achieve consistency within each category. The final categories were presented as emerging themes that produced the following narrative (for more detail about the procedure, see Murray, 2007).

RESULTS

The stories of the lesbian and gay members of MCC-QC is a narrative about Christian believers who shared similar patterns of first experiencing oppression, followed by personal quests towards a deeper faith and knowledge of one's self, and eventually integrating their sexual and religious identities. However, for successful identity integration to be achieved the participants needed to find and identify

with a safe and accepting community that provided them with the means to integrate their sexual and religious identities.

Experiences of Oppression

Participants' narratives began with experiences of oppression that catalyzed their journey towards detaching themselves from oppressive religious institutions. The use of the term "oppression" came from participants themselves. It summed up the negative feelings, struggles, and suffering that they encountered before they found MCC-QC. These experiences of oppression stemmed from a sense of conflict between their sexual and religious identities.

Oppression from religious teachings. Religious doctrine, which condemns homosexuality, was the most common source of oppression for participants. This oppression stemmed from the religious belief that homosexuality is unnatural and sinful because God only created man for woman.

Mark finished his primary education at a Catholic institution. As early as grade school, he was certain about his sexual identity. His first experience of religious oppression involved seeing a demonized representation of gay men in a religious textbook:

> *Bagets ka pa lang, sa mga Catechism book parang kasalanan na agad ito dhay, haggard! So yung iba they just choose to detach themselves from the institution or pwede din dun sa kamalayan or belief system. So I was like that, I mean I was in a Catholic school – elementary, high school – as in literal yung mga Catechism book talaga namin na pictoral, naloloka ako, may page dun na comical drawing na pang bata. As in may nagki-kiss na dalawang lalake, tapos may devil dito sa ibabaw. Parang, ay! Oo as in yun yung unang encounter ko na I think I was in Grade 3 in preparation for First Communion.* (You're still a child [in your formative years], and your Catechism book will already frame [your sexual identity] as a sin. So others choose to detach themselves from the institution or from the belief system. So I was like that, I mean I was in a Catholic school [during] elementary [and] high school, and it was literally there in the Catechism book, [there was] a picture, it was crazy, there was a page with a comic

for kids. As in, two boys were kissing and the devil was above them. Gosh! That was my first encounter [of oppression]. I think I was in Grade 3 in preparation for First Communion.)

Mark's anecdote is just one of many instances wherein participants felt oppressed by religious teachings that propagate intolerance for homosexuality. One participant even reported that he was invited to a conversion therapy-like prayer meeting. He was prayed over by the pastor to cleanse him from his homosexuality. He felt that his sexuality was treated like a demonic possession.

These experiences brought internal conflict to participants as they struggled to integrate their sexual and religious identities. Luke, a pastor's son, also experienced discomfort and confusion. He struggled with his attraction to men because he felt that it was not normal:

Every one of us started with struggling with ourselves. Hala, ano itong nararamdaman ko? Parang ganun. Parang hindi siya yung pinapakita ng tatay ko, hindi siya yung pinaghuhugutan ng kuya ko. So, struggle siya. Tapos pag pumasok ka pa sa church na kinalakihan mo, magtatanong ka din – bakit ganito yung nafe-feel ko? Hindi ito yung pinapakita ng mga pastor ko, hindi ito yung pinapakita ng mga [church]leaders ko. (Every one of us started with struggling with ourselves. What is this that I feel? This is not what my father shows, this is not what my elder brother shares and experiences. So, it's a struggle. Then when you go to church, where you grew up, you'll ask the same question, why do I feel this way? This is not what the pastors show, this is not what the [church] leaders show.)

Apart from internal conflicts, internalization of homonegative religious teachings led to negative self-evaluations. Participants felt troubled, guilty, and sinful:

Mark: *...when I was [in] high school ganyan, dun kasi nasi-steer kasi yung mga questions...From first year high school to third year, nagi-struggle ako dun sa faith ko, sa sexuality ko, kasi uncomfortable ako. The thing is paano ko siya i-integrate dun sa religious background ko? And then when I was in third year high school, yung nag-retreat kami, there's this one priest kasi dun*

sa retreat na nagsabi na kailangan may perfection...kasi retreat nga so I confessed, sabi ko I'm like this, I'm like that and I felt guilty... (When I was in high school, I started asking questions. From first year high school to third year, I struggled with my faith and sexuality because I was uncomfortable. The thing is, how can I integrate [my sexuality] with my religious background? And then, when I was in third year high school, we had a retreat. There's this one priest [who said] we needed to be perfect. So I confessed, I told [him], 'I'm like this, I'm like that, and I felt guilty...')

Ultimately, religious dogma pressured participants to choose between their sexual and religious identities:

Peter: ...In the context of Christianity, this seems to be the problem – that no, you cannot be an LGBT and Christian at the same time. So either you live your life as a straight person or be condemned into hell for eternity...

Eternal damnation was not the only punishment that participants were told they would have to face; they also faced the threat of ostracism for having a sexual identity that was against religious teaching.

Socio-religious ostracism. Participants suffered social ostracism because of their sexual identities. This kind of oppression came from social interaction with others who happened to be part of the religious communities where the participants belonged and even included the participants' families. In some cases, participants experienced covert ostracism, wherein members of their religious communities tolerated their sexual identities as long as they remained silent about it and did not engage in homosexual acts. In other cases, overt ostracism occurred as their church communities and families rejected them for their sexual identities.

After coming out, Luke recalled the painful experience of forcibly leaving the church ministries that he was a part of:

I was part of several ministries sa previous church ko and when I came out to my parents na may malaking part dun sa church na pinang-gagalingan ko, they asked me to step out... very theatrical yung ginagawa ko sa church – I sing, I dance. So when they found out about my sexuality, ang sabi nila, 'you

can't do that kasi that's unholy.' Parang…'the people who should deliver, the people in the stage should be holy and you're not holy so you have to stop.' So ever since I came out, hindi na ko naging part ng ministry…it is very painful [and] I'm still dealing with it. (I was part of several ministries in my previous church. When I came out to my parents who held prominent positions in the church, they asked me to step out…I had theatrical duties in the church – I sing, I dance. So when they found out about my sexuality, they said, 'you can't do that, that's unholy.' It's like, 'the people who should deliver, the people in the stage should be holy and you're not holy so you have to stop.' So ever since I came out, I stopped being part of the ministry…it is very painful [and] I'm still dealing with it.)

Other participants were asked by their families to completely leave the church unless they renounced their sexual identity. While some participants reported being accepted by at least one member of their family, most participants were, in one way or another, rejected and ostracized by the religious members of their families. Paul, who grew up in a traditional Catholic household, recounted:

Actually, hindi naman yung church, yung family ko pinapili nila ako, pinapili nila ko na magiging bakla ka ayon sa Catholic Church [referring to abstaining from homosexual acts and same-sex relationships] o parang aalisin mo yang pagka-bakla mo then mananatili ka sa Catholic Church. (Actually, it wasn't the church, it was my family who made me choose between being gay according to the Catholic Church [referring to abstaining from homosexual acts and same-sex relationships] or completely removing my 'gayness' in order to stay in the Catholic Church.)

Church members exercised a more covert form of ostracism. That is, the participants were made to feel that they were allowed to continue being members of the church as long as they remained silent about their sexual identity. John, who experienced going through both Catholic and Evangelical churches, observed:

Mas oppressive actually ang Evangelical Protestant Church sa Catholic Church. Kasi [sa Catholic] merong…'we don't talk about

it...the LGBT issue'...as long as hindi yan pinag-uusapan, go ang mga beks noh? (Actually, the Evangelical Protestant Church is more oppressive than the Catholic Church. Catholics have a 'we don't talk about it...the LGBT issue.'...as long as it is not being talked about, gays just go on [with their business.])

Some participants resorted to concealing their sexual identity in church in order to maintain their membership. The pressure to observe religious teachings and to be accepted by their religious communities forced them to compartmentalize their identities. In the presence of the congregation, for example, they would reject their sexual identity by remaining silent about it, denouncing homosexual acts, and/or abstaining from same-sex relationships. In the absence of the congregation, however, they lived out their sexual identities (e.g. they would engage in homosexual acts and then go to confession afterwards). David, who eventually left both the Catholic Church and Protestant Church because of these oppressive experiences, shared feeling sad about his friends who continue to experience this kind of pressure and oppression:

> *Pero ang nakakalungkot kasi yung iba...ako I have friends who are very hardcore sa Catholic tradition is nagkakaroon sila ng disconnect, tanggap nila na beki sila pero kapag pinag-uusapan na ang relasyon, sabihin na nating marriage...minsan sinasabi nilang...ay hindi kami ano [agree] dyan...* (It's sad because there are others...I have friends who are very hardcore about Catholic tradition who experience a disconnect, they accept that they're gay but when it comes to talking about [same-sex] relationships, for example [same-sex] marriage...sometimes they say...we don't agree with that...)

Eventually, participants realized that they could no longer compartmentalize their sexuality and their faith. Neither abandoning their faith in God nor denying their sexual identities was an option for them so they sought a place where their sexual *and* religious identities could be fully accepted.

> Mark: *...ako, never na pumasok sa isip ko na I give up on God...* (...it never crossed my mind to give up on God...)

Matthew: *Actually kaya nga siguro ako...isa sa Catholic belief sa Catholic Church [referring to homosexual acts and same-sex relationships as sins]...kaya naghanap ako ng church na yung tanggap na tanggap ako as LGBT, as who I am, kung ano ako, kung ano yung faith ko, kasi yun nga parang wala na yung belonging ko, parang wala na, hindi na ako belong sa church ko dati. So I'm trying na maghanap talaga ng church na tatanggap sa akin kung sino ako.* (Actually that's probably why I...one of the Catholic beliefs in the Catholic Church [referring to homosexual acts and same-sex relationships as sins]...that's why I looked for a church that would accept me as LGBT, as who I am, what I am, what my faith is, because I felt that I no longer belonged in my old church. So I'm trying to look for a church that would accept me for who I am.)

Building a Community of and for the Oppressed

Participants' experiences of oppression eventually drove them to search for a faith community that would embrace them as they are. Participants found MCC-QC through different ways, but their respective journeys were motivated by their desire to keep their faith in God and to stay true to their sexual identities.

As Mark described it:

...naghahanap talaga ako ng kasagutan sa mga tanong ko, kasi nga galing ako sa Born Again, hindi ko talaga ma-accept na kasalanan, na kasalanan...it's a sin, and you go to hell, so talagang hindi ko ma-accept yon. So, naghanap talaga ako ng answers. MCC was the one that, you know, provided me some of the answers and been able to help me integrate my Christian spirituality with my sexuality. (...I was searching for answers because I came from a Born Again [Church], I couldn't accept that it's a sin...it's a sin, and you go to hell. I couldn't accept that. So, I searched for answers. MCC was the one that, you know, provided me some of the answers and been able to help me integrate my Christian spirituality with my sexuality.)

Ongoing discourse is one of the hallmarks of MCC-QC, and thus, it provided the participants with a safe space for talking about their sexuality and faith. Engaging in conversation facilitated a deeper understanding of their faith, which catalyzed the integration of their sexual and religious identities. Paul expressed his appreciation for the fellowship in MCC-QC because it widens his perspective and enriches his faith:

> ...that's the thing about fellowship, you have to share your experience and in return maging open ka din doon sa experience ng other people..kasi yeah, it's good na may personal relationship ka [with God] pero parang limited ka lang dun, yung paniniwala mo limited ka lang sa kung saan yung nalalaman mo kasi nakuha mo personally. Interesting lang na makaalam ka ng iba't ibang experiences from others who share the same experience... (...that's the thing about fellowship, you have to share your experience and in return be open to other people's experiences. Yes, it's good to have a personal relationship [with God], but your faith could be limited to what you know and understand personally. It's interesting to hear other experiences from others who share the same experience...)

As MCC-QC members, participants also engaged in organized Biblical discussions. Pastor A noted:

> MCC had its history, a long history, of reinterpreting the Bible or reading the Bible with two eyes because as we know, any text is a social product. It's a cultural product that is motivated in nature. It really depends on who is reading it.

Led by their pastors, participants deepened their reading of the Bible by acquainting themselves with contemporary Biblical scholarship. During Sunday Schools, Pastor A would remind them that:

> ...yang usapin ng mga bersikulo at mga chapter sa Bible na di umano ay tumutukoy doon sa [homosexuality as a sin], matagal na actually naresolba yan...hindi na yan issue actually ng mga experto sa bibliya... (...the verses and chapters of the Bible that seemingly refer to it [homosexuality as a sin] has long been

resolved...Bible scholars no longer treat this as an issue...)

As a religious doctrine, the Bible has typically been interpreted and used as an oppressive tool against homosexuality. Pastor A, who endorses Liberation Theology, would encourage the MCC-QC community to reinterpret the Bible to liberate them from oppression:

> *...at the end of the day, what does the Bible really mean? What does it talk about? It talks about God and God's love to God's people regardless. Tapos ina-affirm din yung nung ginagawa ka pa, tinahi ka doon sa sinapupunan ng iyong ina, alam na ng Diyos kung ano ka [Jeremiah 1:5]...* (...at the end of the day, what does the Bible really mean? What does it talk about? It talks about God and God's love to God's people regardless. Then, it [Jeremiah 1:5] also affirms that God knew your true [sexual] identity even while you were still inside your mother's womb...)

Engaging in discussions about Biblical interpretation has become part of the MCC-QC culture. MCC-QC claims that it does not prescribe doctrine. Rather, it claims to continually build a community that promotes mutual respect for individual theologies. Despite occasional clashes in viewpoints (e.g., some MCC-QC members believed in a literal Holy Spirit, while others believed that it is just an allegory), they choose to welcome diversity and to collectively combat oppression through ongoing conversation and Biblical reinterpretation. This sense of community is important as participants highlighted that, as sexual minority Christians, they face a unique and continual battle against homonegativity both within and outside of religious institutions. Moreover, they confront challenges not only against their identities as sexual minority Christians, but also against their identities as members of MCC-QC:

> Luke: *Being gay is different...kasi parang you feel like you don't belong. Kaya lang being a gay Christian was another story kasi yung traditional na definition ng Christian sa pinanggalingan ko, yung traditional na pagiging Christian ay yung una lalaki ka, mag-aasawa ka, magkaka-anak kayo ganun, man and a woman. Pero kasi as a gay Christian, hindi mo yun masusunod kasi definitely man ang gusto mo, man ka din, so hindi kayo magppro-create, yung mga ganun. So yung understanding of*

being a gay and being a gay Christian is different. Yung pag-aaccept mo sa sarili mo bilang [miyembro ng] MCC at bilang gay Christian, hindi siya natatapos sa pagiging member lang ng MCC kasi definitely maraming babato sayo where MCC is even being called a cult, yung parang kulto daw ang MCC because we believe na mahal kami ng Lord, pero gay kami...so struggle din siya, kaya never-ending struggle kasi ang society built up siya with black and white, hindi siya rainbow...Binary siya...And we don't subscribe to that binary. (...Being gay is different...because you feel like you don't belong. But being a gay Christian was another story because the traditional definition of being Christian, where I came from, the traditional way of being a Christian was, as a man, you'll find a wife, get married and have kids, [it's about a] man and [a] woman. But as a gay Christian, you won't be able to fulfill that because you want to be with another man and you're a man too so you can't procreate. So the understanding of being gay and being a gay Christian is different. Accepting yourself as [a member of] MCC and being a gay Christian doesn't end with just being a member of MCC because definitely there are criticisms about MCC even being called a cult because we believe that the Lord loves us even though we're gay...so it's also a struggle, it's a never-ending struggle because society is built black and white, not as a rainbow...it's a binary...and we don't subscribe to that binary.)

In spite of the attacks on MCC's legitimacy as a religious institution, it is precisely in staying together as a community where our participants continually find the strength and resilience to persist against ongoing oppression because they experience God's presence through their community. They believe that it is more important to stay together as a community of the oppressed, for the oppressed because God will always be present in a community:

Pastor A: *...Very aware kami sa oppression...*(We are very aware of oppression)

Mark: *...Kasi kami ang nao-oppress...*(Because we are the oppressed)

Pastor A: *Because at the end of the day, [for] oppressed people, especially people who are LGBT, it is more important to stay*

together...Kaya nga laging kong dinudugtungan ng Emmanuel Theology...laging God is with us...Ang konsepto ko ng Emmanuel Theology ay God is always in community and therefore whenever I struggle ina-affirm ko lang yung sinasabi niya [Jesus] na kung ano yung mga pinagdadaanan mo, believe that God will journey with you through the lives of people, so that pretty much is church for me... (That's why I always include Emmanuel Theology... that God is with us...My concept of Emmanuel Theology is God is always in community and therefore whenever I struggle, I just affirm what Jesus says that whatever you are going through, believe that God will journey with you through the lives of people, so that pretty much is church for me...)

The "Now Testament": Transcending Oppression and Achieving Integration

Having deepened their understanding of their faith through faith conversations and Biblical discussions, participants felt that they were slowly integrating their sexual and religious identities. For some, they felt that they had successfully achieved integration. One exemplar is Mimi who felt blessed, loved, and emancipated. Mimi had reclaimed and personalized his faith; and he wanted to share his gospel:

I think the story now is more of...the 'Now Testament of Mimi.' I call it 'Now Testament' because I think that all of us have our own testament of how God has been good to us. So this is my Now Testament, it's like...sort of the new version...like the Gospel of Mimi, you know like there's a Gospel of John and Luke...in a way, you know, you can have your own gospel in the sense that you can share to other people your experience about God...how God has been great to you...so this is my Now Testament, I am now an emancipated person. God continuously blesses me with that feeling [of being] accepted and being loved and I am more than grateful to share that message to anyone that I meet, I'm gonna meet, along the way.

The "Now Testament" is not unique to Mimi. It is a practice in MCC-QC wherein they discuss the relevant issues of today and share

pertinent messages from both religious (e.g., the Bible) and secular (e.g., poems, short narratives, etc.) sources. The "Now Testament" also includes sharing their "coming out" testimonies since they view their personal lives as living gospels.

Mimi acknowledged the pivotal role that MCC-QC played in helping him achieve integration: "...God has helped me, and the people, the [MCC-QC] community at large, has helped me to reconcile my sexuality and my faith..."

Participants echoed Mimi's sentiments. MCC-QC members also shared that, as a community, they take an offensive stance against oppression; that is, they go beyond a mere defense of their sexual identities. Unlike other churches that support inclusion of sexual minorities, yet still view homosexuality as deviant and inferior to heterosexuality, MCC-QC fully affirms the integrity of its members' sexual identities:

Pastor A: *What MCC stands for is that what you are, who you are, is not a sin...ang MCC talagang offensive yung aming atake hindi depensa, Biblical ang rebuttal. We also uphold...the integrity of God's creation, we will uphold love...hindi nagkamali ang Diyos nung nilikha ka niya...ang ginagamit naming halimbawa lagi ay yung hapag ng Diyos, hapag ni Hesus. Ang hapag na ito ay bukas para sa lahat, wala naman siyang pinili.* (What MCC stands for is that what you are, who you are, is not a sin...In MCC, we attack offensively, not defensively, using Biblical rebuttal. We also uphold the integrity of God's creation, we uphold love. God did not make a mistake when He created us. We use the example of God's heavenly banquet where everyone is invited, everyone is welcome.)

MCC-QC endeavors to embody God's heavenly banquet. Whilst it serves as a special ministry for sexual minorities, its ultimate goal is to be a church for all:

Matthew: *...Ano siya, LGBT-affirming pero ang goal niya is... anyone na parang...oppress[ed], marginalize[d]...is welcome, regardless of your background or race...It's a special ministry for LGBT, pero ang goal niya is to open it [to] everyone who*

wants to be a part [of it]..ayaw naming isipin ng tao na straight, 'it's for gay[s], no we can't go there'…kasi it's for everyone. (MCC is LGBT-affirmative, but its goal is to welcome those who are oppressed and marginalized, regardless of background or race… It's a special ministry for LGBT, but its goal is to open it [to] everyone who wants to be a part [of it]..we don't want straight people to think that 'it's for gays, no we can't go there'…because it's for everyone.)

MCC-QC's effort towards being a church for everyone is reflected in the structure of their worship services, which includes a mixture of Catholic and Evangelical Christian components. This helped MCC-QC's members, especially newcomers, who come from various religious backgrounds, relate and connect with the MCC-QC community.

Thomas: *…sa MCC, I started in September…the way the service goes is parang a mixture…if you're new, makaka-relate ka na yung iba parang makikita mo sa Catholic [church] just like yung communion and then sa iba naman, sa ibang Evangelical Christian church with how we start kasi meron tayong praise and worship. Pero yung pagkakasunod-sunod nung mga rituals like yung communion pwede siyang mag-vary. Every week hindi ganun..Siguro parang magkaraoon ng association yung isang member na parang 'uy konektado ako dyan' parang when it comes to praise and worship or sa iba naman na lumaki sa Catholic upbringing [may communion]…syempre yun, that's the essence of being ecumenical.* (…I started at MCC in September… the way the service goes is like a mixture…if you're new, you can relate to rituals that you see at a Catholic church, like communion, and then for others from the Evangelical Christian church, [it's] with how we start [the service] because we have praise and worship. But the order of the rituals like communion can vary. It's not [the same order] every week…Maybe it's so that one member can form an association like, 'hey, I can connect to that' when it comes to praise and worship or for others who grew up with a Catholic upbringing [there's communion]…of course, that's the essence of being ecumenical.)

They also practice openness and inclusivity in their Sunday School teachings by promoting mutual respect for all faiths:

> Matthew: ...People in MCC come together with two things, [first] because they are LGBT, oppressed LGBT, and second, because they are people of faith. That's the common thing. But whatever is your faith, we don't say that this is right, this is wrong, *yung Pentecostal [belief] niya is right, yung Catholic [belief] is wrong* (Pentecostal belief is right, Catholic belief is wrong) 'cause who can really say which is really true among all the Christian faiths? So people come together, *nanggaling kami sa iba't ibang tradition, iba't ibang backgrounds* (we come from different traditions, different backgrounds) and then we come together with the common belief in Jesus Christ and that God loves us regardless of our race, sex, social status.

Participants believe in God's unconditional love and being a part of MCC-QC has allowed them to realize that a loving God would not create individuals that He would predestine to damnation; instead, an unconditionally loving God loves all of His creation regardless of sexual identity. With God's unconditional love as their foundation, participants learn to transcend their experiences of oppression as they practice combating hate with love and understanding:

> Andrew: *One thing na nasagot dun sa pagiging part [ko] ng MCC is parang nare-affirm na si God hindi siya naggawa ng isang bagay, creature in His own likeness, na ippre-destined niya to hell...If that's what at least most of the religious groups say about being a part of the LGBT [community]. Technically, hindi siya gagawa ng isang bagay na ihi-hate niya, so dun kami nagbase... nagkaroon din ng question na baka jina-justify lang namin yun kasi ina-affirm kami ng [MCC] church so baka parang naju-justify na parang kaya kami may sense of belongingness, pero hindi...naniniwala kami na syempre ang foundation dito is love, yung love ni God na unconditional. Mostly kasi ng mga binabato sa mga LGBT is something lang na based lang dun sa naririnig nila [sa mga pari] na binabato nila sa amin, pero kami in return we're not trying to combat them with the same hate, but with understanding. On our own nagttry kami na intindihin,*

maraming part ng studies namin yun sa Sunday School. Parang if you look at it, yung ginagamit nila toward us is hate based on what they were told by their pastors, their preachers or basically everyone else. Kami hindi, on our own we're trying to deal with our own issues na yung tinatanong namin yung sarili namin kung ganito ba talaga, kung predestined ba talaga kami to go to hell just like what they say. Kami inaaral namin yung mga Bible scriptures na para maintindihan mo na hindi ganun. If we're talking about the same God, He doesn't work by hate, rather by love. (One thing that was addressed by being part of MCC is that we were able to reaffirm that God would not create a creature in His own likeness that He would predestine to hell...If that's what at least most of the religious groups say about being a part of the LGBT [community]. Technically, He wouldn't create something that He would hate so that's what we use as a basis... there are questions about how maybe we're only justifying [being LGBT] because MCC affirms us and that's why we feel a sense of belongingness, but no...we believe that the foundation here is love, God's love that is unconditional. Most of what they throw against LGBTs is something that's only based on what they've heard [from priests], but in return we're not trying to combat them with the same hate, but with understanding. On our own we try to understand, a lot of our sessions in Sunday School are about this. If you look at it, they use hate towards us, [hate that is] based on what they were told by their pastors, their preachers, or basically everyone else. We don't do that, on our own we're trying to deal with our own issues, we reflect on whether we're predestined to go to hell just like what they say. We study Bible scriptures so that we can understand that that's not the case. If we're talking about the same God, He doesn't work by hate, rather by love.)

For its current members, MCC-QC is a safe and open space where they can truly be themselves as lesbians/gays and Christians. It is a home where they belong; a family that unconditionally accepts them for who they are:

Simon: I was also looking for a church where I can feel comfortable, I can be who or what I am and obviously that's MCC. So, we feel that

MCC is our home, no reservation – *wala kang kailangan i-hide or whatever (you don't have to hide anything or whatever)*...I think this is really a common experience for all of us.

Mimi: *...There is this place where you can feel that you belong, there is this place that you can be and you can feel...as you are... just as you are, simple as that...There is this family who can tell you that it's okay to be gay, there's no problem to be who you are.*

DISCUSSION

This study advances the research on sexual minority Christians by exploring Filipino sexual minority Christians' process of identity integration. The resulting narratives revealed that participants' journeys to integration began with experiences of oppression, followed by personal quests towards deeper faith and knowledge, and culminated in a continual personalization of faith within the context of a safe and affirming environment. Our results echo Shallenberger's (1996) discussion of identity integration as a spiritual journey that involves questioning, reintegration, and reclaiming. The conflict between participants' sexual and religious identities, which resulted in various experiences of oppression, led them to negatively evaluate their homosexual feelings and to question the validity of their religious beliefs. This was the first step in their journey towards integration; that is, their desire to embrace both identities triggered the integration process as they sought to reconcile their seemingly conflicting identities. It seemed that participants had internalized the negative view of other church members, based on heteronormative and homophobic Biblical interpretations about homosexuality. At the start, they felt they were sinful, unworthy, and immoral for having homosexual feelings. Eventually, they came to a point where they refused to accept the religious oppression of their sexual identity as part of their religious belief system. This refusal to accept continued oppression against their identities as lesbian/gay Christians led participants to embark on personal quests to keep their faith and to stay true to their sexual identities.

Participants adopted a proactive approach in reconciling their sexual and religious identities. They used various conflict resolution

strategies such as compartmentalization, Biblical reinterpretation, and developing a personalized faith (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Kubicek et al., 2009). However, what was key to beginning the process towards successfully resolving their intrapersonal conflict and integrating their sexual and religious identities was finding a safe and accepting environment. For our participants, as with those mentioned in previous studies (Thumma, 1991; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000), their socialization within an LGBT-affirmative institution played a key role in their integration process. There, they learned to use contemporary Biblical scholarship to engage in Biblical reinterpretation and faith discourses, and to embrace their sexual identities as being created and blessed by God (Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Yip, 1997). Ultimately, their involvement in an LGBT-affirmative church such as MCC-QC empowered them to integrate and to reclaim their sexual and religious identities.

The results from our study at MCC-QC corroborate the findings of Rodriguez and Ouellette's (2000) study of the lesbian and gay members of MCC-NYC. It further affirms the empowering role of LGBT-affirmative religious institutions in providing sexual minority Christians with the necessary resources to achieve identity integration (Rappaport, 2000). Empowerment happens when marginalized individuals take control of their lives (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). In the case of our participants, through participation in MCC-QC, they learned to take control of Biblical interpretation. By developing and trusting their personal capacities to interpret Scripture (i.e., postconventional religious reasoning), participants were able to form a positive sexual minority Christian identity (Harris et al., 2008). Taking this further, participants integrated their identities by taking a liberationist stance against anti-homosexual religious teachings. What stands out about the lesbian and gay Christians in this sample is that they reclaimed the Bible, the most commonly used oppressive tool against homosexuality, as a tool for affirming the inherent value and integrity of their sexual identities (Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Yip, 1997). Rather than select and borrow teachings from different organized religions (e.g. a broader acceptance of who one is becoming by remaining free of attachments from an ideal self as in the tradition of Buddhism) to form an "a la carte

belief system", which is a strategy that has been employed by other sexual minority Christians (e.g. Kubicek et al., 2009; Shallenberger, 1996), our participants chose to remain within the bounds of Christian tradition and to use Christian values and teachings (e.g. God's unconditional love and acceptance, Biblical passages) as the primary means to integrate their sexual and religious identities. This may not be surprising given that none of our participants considered abandoning the Christian faith (i.e., the belief in the Christian God / Jesus Christ, excluding the organized religious institutions of the Roman Catholic Church or Protestant Churches) as embodied by the Christian God.

Participants' integration of their identities culminated in an ongoing personalization of their faith, which they fittingly called their "Now Testament". The "Now Testament" is their personalization of the gospel. This gospel narrates their individual faith journeys as they continually experience God's unconditional presence and love in their daily lives. At the same time, it documents their Exodus as an oppressed group of people that collectively face the continual oppression around them. Participants' creation of their "Now Testament" narratives echo the narrative rewriting process that the lesbian and gay men in Shallenberger's (1996) study undertook to complete their identity reclamation, demonstrating the valuable and transformative role of narratives in making sense of, and overcoming experiences of oppression, especially for minority groups. It is worth noting that our participants engaged in this process as a community; that is, the "Now Testament" is their rewritten narrative as a journeying community in as much as it is their personal stories. On the one hand, it is their continued participation in MCC-QC that empowers them to continually personalize their faith amidst ongoing oppression. On the other hand, they transcend their experiences of oppression and rewrite it as a story of emancipation and integration, together as a community, within the context of MCC-QC.

This study responded to the need for an exploration of the identity integration process of sexual minority Christians in non-Western settings. Our sample of Filipino sexual minority Christians and the predominantly Western sample of previous studies share similar processes of identity integration. On the one hand, it is possible that identity integration is a universal need for individuals with conflicting

identities and therefore the process of integration would tend to be similar across settings. On the other hand, given that our participants were from MCC-QC, it may not be surprising for them to share similar processes with other sexual minority Christians from MCC (e.g. MCC-NY; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). What does seem to be different in our sample, however, is that our participants' sense of identity conflict was exacerbated by judgments and ostracism from religious others. It was these experiences of oppression from significant others that pushed them to begin their journey towards identity integration. This is in contrast with Shallenberger's (1996) findings, which highlighted the "coming out" process as the catalyst for the journey towards identity integration. It seems that for sexual minority Christians in Western settings, the more salient aspect of the conflict focuses on the self as being different from others ("I'm a lesbian/gay Christian, I'm different"); whereas, for our sample, the more salient aspect of the conflict centers on the self as being rejected by significant others ("I'm a lesbian/gay Christian, they do not accept me; I do not belong there"). The larger cultural context that our participants were born into may also be different from that of previous studies (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Kubicek et al., 2009; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Shallenberger, 1996; Thumma, 1991; Wagner et al., 1994; Yip, 1997). The predominantly Roman Catholic affiliation and high levels of religiosity and conservatism of most Filipinos create a highly heterocentric and homonegative environment where it is even common for politicians to cite religious texts to contest laws on anti-LGBT discrimination (UNDP-USAID, 2014).

Despite the oppression brought about by their interactions with religious family members, churchgoers, and church leaders, which has led other religious sexual minorities to abandon their sexual or religious identities (Ganzevoort et al., 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000; Schnoor, 2006; Wagner et al., 1994), our participants persevered in their quests to integrate these aspects of self into their identities. When they found MCC-QC, they became more persistent and resilient in combating the continual oppression that they experienced from their environment, and in spite of the attacks from conservative Christians who question MCC's legitimacy

as a religious institution (Enroth, 1974), our participants embraced the open and diverse culture that they found in MCC-QC, which is an interesting outcome given the high level of religious conservatism that is present in the Philippines. Previous studies (Kubicek et al., 2009; Thumma, 1991) have found that individuals from highly conservative or highly religious backgrounds did not always feel comfortable affiliating themselves with LGBT churches. However, our participants, even those who were raised in traditional Catholic households or had parents who were pastors, found a home in MCC-QC. Part of the reason they may have felt comfortable at MCC-QC is that the community makes a conscious effort to be welcoming and to be a church for all. Indeed, developing this sense of community seemed to be integral to our participants' identity integration process as their participation in MCC-QC facilitated the successful integration of their sexual and religious identities.

Therapeutic Implications

Defining one's identity is a process that occurs throughout the lifespan of an individual. This process involves successfully integrating a number of societal and cultural constructs that are salient to identity development and it is a struggle that is accentuated for sexual minority Christians. Being a sexual minority *and* a Christian are typically viewed as being incompatible within the larger context of one's developmental environment, and isolation, either by choice or through overt rejection, from one's faith community has been noted to be potentially detrimental to one's identity development (Foster et al., 2015). The psychological trauma that can emerge from challenging conventional norms during this period of identity development for sexual minority Christians include an increase in internalized homonegativity, feelings of shame, depression, low self-esteem, and a decrease in perceived social support (Foster et al., 2015; Gattis et al., 2014; Herek, 1987; Subhi & Geelan, 2012). These points were highlighted throughout our results as participants experienced doubting the validity of their identities.

Baumeister et al.'s (1985) theory of identity conflict is useful in understanding the nature of the psychological conflict that our

participants experienced. That is, they experienced internal conflict because both their sexual and religious identities, which were salient to them, were presented to them as being incompatible, and thus, placed them in a position of choice, rather than integration. Both environments, home and church, presented our participants with a choice between being lesbian/gay or being a Christian. By rejecting their sexual identity, they could achieve acceptance across environments, but the price they had to pay was a deep loss of who they are. It is this conflict and either/or proposition that must be highlighted by the mental health professional for, as our results suggest, it can be the catalyst and driving force for the sexual minority Christian in realizing that it is possible to be both lesbian/gay *and* Christian. Being cognizant of this can aid mental health professionals in validating sexual minority Christians' experiences of conflict and in contextualizing the psychological struggles that they may be experiencing during the therapeutic process. Further, understanding that identity is fluid and is constructed in multiple ways allows for mental health professionals to guide sexual minority Christians to a place of integration, rather than a place of compartmentalization and lack of integration. Indeed, they can support sexual minority Christians in using various conflict resolution strategies as they go through the different stages of the integration process. Mental health professionals who understand that identity integration is a continual process can design a more non-threatening therapeutic environment for sexual minority Christians; that is, they can assure sexual minority Christians that they are going through an integration *process,* and in time, they will be able to integrate and reclaim their sexual and religious identities.

Our results support the role of intrinsic religiousness as both a risk and a resilience factor (Ream, 2001) as our participants initially experienced conflict as a result of internalizing anti-homosexual religious messages but later on used this construct as a source of inner strength, since abandoning their faith in God was not a viable option for them. They drew upon their intrinsic religiousness to fight back against the initial oppression that they experienced; that is, they used their religious beliefs (i.e., modified after Biblical reinterpretation), remained within the bounds of Christian tradition, and used gay theology to integrate and affirm the integrity of their sexual minority

Christian identity. Thus, mental health professionals can emphasize the role of intrinsic religiousness as a factor for fostering coping skills and developing resiliency when working with struggling sexual minority Christians. As Ream (2001) points out, intrinsic religiousness only predicts identity conflict when sexual minority Christians are socialized in a homonegative environment. As such, mental health professionals can work with sexual minority Christians on identifying, independently examining, and critically challenging the religion-based homonegative beliefs that they have internalized and in helping them draw upon their intrinsic religiousness (e.g. referring to the religious values of unconditional love and acceptance; religious teachings on the integrity of *all* of God's creation) to redefine what they believe to be true about the compatibility of homosexuality and Christianity.

Mental health professionals can draw from the study's demonstration of the key roles of socialization, empowerment, and faith development in facilitating identity integration. Given the pivotal role of MCC-QC in our participants' integration process, mental health professionals can encourage other sexual minority Christians to seek LGBT-affirmative institutions for both social and religious support. As stated previously, postconventional religious reasoning is related to lower levels of internalized homophobia and higher levels of sexual identity development (Harris et al., 2008) and finding a safe space for actively redefining theological meaning in the face of heterosexist and homonegative religious messages is vital in forming a positive sexual minority Christian identity (Foster et al., 2015).

Recommendations for Future Studies

While this study focused on individuals who were successful in integrating their sexual and religious identities, it would be worthwhile for future studies to explore the experiences of individuals who were not. Quantitative investigations of the outcomes of successful identity integration (e.g., psychological adjustment and maladjustment, openness about sexual orientation, internalized homophobia, well-being and ill-being outcomes), the religious and non-religious factors that predict successful identity integration (e.g., religious commitment, personality variables like openness to experience), and the possible

mediators in the purported relationship between identity integration and well-being (e.g., positive and negative cognitions and affect) are also suggested.

Further, future studies will need to separate out the process of sexual and religious identity development between adolescents and adults given that adolescents and adults are at different stages of identity development (Gattis et al., 2014). As such, future studies will need to highlight differences in the experience of stigma and prejudice and in the conflict resolution and identity integration strategies used between religious sexual minority youths and adults, especially given the findings (e.g., Foster et al., 2015; Barnes & Meyer, 2012) that have documented an increase in unhealthy outcomes for each of these populations. Finally, zeroing in on how religious sexual minorities find LGBT-affirmative institutions is worth exploring to determine how these institutions could increase their visibility and what the most effective means is to reach out to sexual minorities.

Conclusion

This study described the identity integration process of Filipino sexual minority Christians from a particular LGBT-affirmative church (MCC-QC). It advances the current literature by providing a more in-depth understanding of the integration journeys of sexual minority Christians in a highly conservative and highly religious non-Western setting. Our study showed that identity integration is a continual journey that our participants navigate together in a community that values their identity and recognizes their struggle. Our results particularly highlight the importance of finding and identifying with a safe and affirmative environment in enabling sexual minority Christians to develop both a positive sexual identity and a positive religious identity. Our findings demonstrate the need and power that emerges from an ongoing communal relationship that promotes the well-being of the self across the multi-dimensional aspects of identity development, especially when those dimensions are defined within an oppressive context that is experienced in the LGBT community.

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