Spirituality and the LGBT Community: Challenging Definitions and Highlighting Strengths in the Age of HIV.

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Overview

- I. Assumptions
- II. Definitions
- III. Spiritual Conflicts
- IV. Increasing Importance of Spirituality in the Queer Community
- V. Spirituality, Resilience, & Clinical Work
- VI. Being an Ally
Assumptions

- **The Biopsychosocial-Spiritual Model of Health**
  - Engel (1979, 1981)
  - Psychoneuroimmunology

- **Spirituality is a source of resilience for people living with chronic illness**
  - Hope, Optimism, Meaning Making

- **HIV+ individuals, regardless of sexual orientation, experience stigmatization/social exclusion within traditional religious communities that is analogous to the stigma/social exclusion experienced by the Queer individuals.**
Defining Spirituality, Faith & Religion

- **Spirituality**
  - Transcendent Beliefs and Practices
  - Internal set of values
  - Sense of meaning and connectedness
  - The soul and humanism

- **Religion**
  - Organized Belief System & Affiliation
  - Standards and prescriptions for virtue
  - Congregational affiliation
  - Rituals and ceremonies

- “Non-participation in organized religion does not necessarily imply the secularization of a person’s life.” (Gellman, 2009)
Development of the Spiritual Self

- Experience of connectedness and sacredness of life expands as we mature
  - Religion, Art, Music
  - Nature
  - Suffering
  - Altruism

- New resources for defining self, relationships with others, the world, the cosmos, and personal meaning. (Richards, 2006).
Focus of LGBT Spirituality Scholarship on “Conflict”

- Researchers and clinicians focus on the existence of “conflict” between sexual minority status and religion
  - Doctrinal condemnations of homosexuality and gender nonconformity
  - Problematic nature of “Hate the Sin, Love the Sinner”
- Little examination of the exceptions
  - Unitarianism, Metropolitan Community, individual congregations
When LGBT Christians are Persecuted by the Faith (Maher, 2006)

Four patterns of response to oppression:

- Uniting their suffering with Christ’s suffering on the Cross
- Forcing the Church to address issues of homosexuality
- Staying in the Church to fight the issue
- Leaving the Church
Experiencing Religious Conflicts with Sexual Identity (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005)

- All people struggle with God’s allowance of pain and suffering, the existence of evil in the world, and sacrificial living for virtue.
- People ask “Who am I?” LGBT people may get different answers from the LGBT community and from their faith community.
- Conflict can erupt when attempting to reconcile same-sex attraction with religious orienting system.
Religious Conflicts w/ Sexuality cont.

- **Negative Emotions Toward God**
  - Anger, confusion, mistrust, fear
  - Predicted by seeing God as responsible, and not feeling close to God to begin with

- **Attributions about God**
  - Positive intentions, not making sense, punishment
  - Positive reframes: Suffering is consequence of other’s wrong doing, God has a broader view that we can’t grasp

- **Belief in God**
Rejection of Childhood Faith

- To accept myself, I must reject my religion
  - From skipping services to atheism

- Continued status as “outsiders-within” (Oswald, 2001)
  - Wedding ceremonies and bridal showers as gendered, heterosexist rituals
  - Can bring LGBT individuals back into a rejecting family and religious environment;
    - Sometimes after struggling for years with the message that “God hates them”
“Spiritual beings having a human experience” - Chardin

- Spirituality, faith, and existential meaning making are as important to sexual minorities as to the heterosexual and traditionally gendered majority.

- Religious Well-Being vs. Existential Well-Being (Tan, 2005)

- Recent proliferation of LGBT religious groups throughout the US. (Mahler 2006)
  - Metropolitan Community Churches; Radical Faeries, Affirmation (“MorGays”), Dignity (Gaylics), Goddess worship.
Increasing Importance of Spirituality for LGBT People

- The AIDS epidemic (Miller, 2005; Yarhouse & Tan, 2005)
- Aging of the “Stonewall Cohort” (Maher, 2006)
  - Our Sages
- The same-sex marriage debate
- The Gay clergy debate (Smith & Horne, 2007)
- Proliferation of families headed by same-sex partners (Davidson, 2000)
The Aging Stonewall Cohort

- **Gerotranscendence Theory** (Tornstam, 2005)
  - As people age they become more spiritual
  - Mortality salience
  - Move away from materialism and role-orientation
  - Increasing comfort with limited answers to existential questions

- Older adults born after 1940 are more likely to differentiate between Religion and Spirituality
  (Atchley, 2008)
The Neosecularization of Faith
(Yamane, 1998; Yip, 2002)

- “Persecution by traditional religious institutions has led LGBT individuals to embrace faiths that emphasize a personal relationship with a higher power, self-exploration, and spiritual growth. The queer community now generally prefers personal religious authority over institutionalized religious authority”. (Gellman, 2009)
Attraction to Eastern and Earth-Spirited Faiths

- **Paganism and Buddhism**
  - Shamanism, Santeria, Wicca, etc.
  - Individual/personal connection to a higher power; often, the Mother Earth as Goddess or the goal of Zen Enlightenment.

- **The “Agentic Self”**
  - People have the power to effect change in their lives
  - Meditation and “Magick” instead of prayer and intercession.
Dianics and Goddess Worship

- **Dianic**
  - Form of Wicca, developed in the 1970’s, linked to Lesbian separatism and political activism.
  - Focus worship on The Goddess and Feminism
Radical Faeries

- Reject commercialism and aesthetics of mainstream gay culture
- Focus on communion, environmental protection, and sustainability; outdoors, “all natural” (mostly)
- Influenced by native spirituality
  - The Heart Circle
  - Consensus
  - Drumming, Dancing, Drag
  - Pagan holiday celebrations
Let’s sit together in heartspace.

Let’s share our queer and freaky magics.

Let’s bring generosity. Let’s bring curiosity.

Let’s soak naked in the healing waters.

Let’s dress up and put on a show!

Let’s learn from and about each other.

Let’s touch each other with kindness.

Let’s revel in our fabulous variety.

Let’s help our community heal and grow.
Religiously identified, gay male youth engage in fewer risk behaviors, and more positive health behaviors (Rosario, et al., 2006).

Active spiritual life has a positive impact on the psychological and physiological well-being of gay men living with HIV disease (more than a dozen studies).  

The nurturing aspect of spirituality, has the strongest positive impact on psychological well being (Tan, 2005).  
- Existential aspect of spirituality can enhance self-esteem, authenticity and openness.

- Especially important for LGBT people who must function in a repressive, heterosexist society, and combat internalized homophobia.
Hypothesized Pathways from Spirituality to Health in People with HIV/AIDS: According to the literature, spirituality is more prominent in women, nonwhites, individuals who have at least a High School education, or are older than 45 years. Spirituality is linked to slower disease progression and better quality of life, directly and indirectly via finding meaning, benefit, and purpose in life, which is in turn linked to less depressive symptoms, and preserving an optimistic outlook. Beyond taking medication for HIV, less depressive symptoms and a disposition to optimism predict longevity and a better quality of life.
Spirituality in Clinical Work

“Exploration and encouragement of personal spiritual growth during therapeutic work with LGBT clients has the potential to counter the negative, heterosexist messages that permeate our culture, facilitating development of a positive self-concept, a sense of meaning and purpose, and the creation of a context in which LGBT individuals may seek answers to the most basic existential questions asked by all human beings, regardless of sexual or gender orientation.” (Gellman, 2009)
Addressing Religious Conflict in Therapy (Yarhouse & Tan, 2005)

- Identify spiritual orienting systems by including religion and spirituality in your assessment
  - Has religion/spirituality been a source of strength?
  - What does the client’s faith say about sexuality, behavior, and identity?
- Give permission to explore negative emotions and attributions toward God
- Facilitate the transformation of religious values, or the transformation of meaning of experience.
- Avoid disputing beliefs, and if you do so, be careful.
- See next slide for useful table from Walsh (2009)
TABLE 4.1. Assessment of Spiritual Dimension in Family Adaptation to Death and Loss

The following questions suggest fruitful lines of inquiry into the spiritual dimension of family experience to explore sources of distress and potential therapeutic resources in adaptation to death and loss:

**Initial inquiry**
- What role does religion play in your life? Do you identify with a particular faith? How important are beliefs and practices? Involvement in a faith community?
- How important is a more personal spirituality in coping with death and loss? In the past? In family of origin?
- If you are not religious, or are agnostic or atheist, in what ways do you find meaning, strength, and connection in your life?

**Spiritual/religious sources of distress**
- Have religious precepts or beliefs contributed to your suffering? How (e.g., concerning afterlife, sin, damnation, suicide, sexual orientation)?
- Has a spiritual void or past cutoff from religious roots increased your suffering? Have death and loss wounded the spirit? Or alienated you from religion or God? In what ways?
- How are religious differences within a couple or family handled? Is there conflict about end-of-life decisions, death and funeral rites, or burial/cremation? Other matters?
- With interfaith marriage and/or conversion, is there regret, conflict, or estrangement at a time of death and loss?

**Potential spiritual/religious resources**
How might past, current, or potential religious and/or spiritual resources support healing and resilience in the face of death and loss?
- Personal faith for comfort, strength, courage, and support
- Relationship with God, Higher Power, or connectedness with Life Force, universe
- Belief in afterlife, reunion
- Spiritual practices (e.g., prayer, meditation, rituals; communion with nature)
- Involvement and support in a faith community
- Spiritual guidance by clergy, chaplain, pastoral counselor
- Spiritual connection with loved ones
- Forgiveness and reconciliation of wounded bonds
- Spiritual connections with the deceased
- Spiritual transcendence (e.g., inspiring creative arts or social action)
LGBT Affirmative Therapy/Teaching/Working/Living

- Avoid using the word homosexual
- “Sexual orientation”, not “preference”
- Do not assume anyone’s orientation
- Neutral, non-heterosexist language
- Talk openly about sexual diversity
- Respectfully challenge stereotypes, myths, homophobic and heterosexist attitudes
Being an Ally for LGBT People

- Do not make anti-LGBT jokes
- Do not passively accept acts by others that are demeaning to LGBT people
- Tolerating and respecting LGBT people regardless of your religious or moral views about acceptance
- Learn about LGBT community and culture
- Become an activist
Being an Ally

- Educate others
- Advocate for inclusiveness/non-discrimination with colleagues and staff
- Attend an LGBT cultural event
- Encourage others to become allies
- Display pride/ally “stuff”