

Summer 8-6-2013

The Intersecting and Integrating Identities of Rural Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians

Brandi Woodell
University of New Orleans, bwoodell@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Woodell, Brandi, "The Intersecting and Integrating Identities of Rural Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians" (2013). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1710.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1710>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Intersecting and Integrating Identities of Rural Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Christians

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
In
Sociology

by

Brandi Woodell

B.A Centenary College, 2011

August 2013

Table of Contents

List of Tables.....	iii
Abstract.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Identity Theories.....	2
Being Rural, Being Gay.....	4
Gay Christians.....	6
Throwing Gender into the Mix: Gender Expressions in the Country.....	9
Studying Rural Gay Christians.....	12
Christian Identities and Experiences in Rural Places.....	14
Personal Relationship with God.....	15
Gay Friendly Churches.....	17
The Fit of the Church.....	19
How Stereotypes Create Issues: The Urban/Rural Binary.....	21
Gendered Differences: How Men and Women Experience the Country.....	23
Community.....	24
Natural Environment.....	26
Gender Presentations: Easier to Pass in the Country.....	27
Discussion and Conclusions.....	29
References.....	37
Appendices.....	44
Vita.....	51

List of Tables

Table 1: Demographic Sketch of Respondents	13
Table 2: Breakdown of Participant Responses	49

Abstract

The majority of discussions of gay and lesbian experiences in the United States associate gay culture with urban areas. However, there is still a significant population of LGBT people living in the rural United States (Baumle et al 2009). Many of these individuals identify with rural spaces and seek to maintain “country” identities. As with rural spaces, there is an assumption that Christian identities directly conflict with those of non-heterosexual identities. This study examines the ways in which these individuals create and negotiate stereotypically conflicting identities regarding their sexuality, their rural identities and their religious identities. The goal of this project is to add to currently sparse literature on rural gay Christians and give an accurate portrayal of gay Christians in rural areas. I found that the sensationalized stereotypes of what it means to be a gay Christian in the country are often far cries from the actual experiences.

Sociology, Identities, LGBT, Queer, Rural, Country, Christian

Introduction

Our society has a common assumption that it is not possible for an individual to be a happy and healthy, socially integrated lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) Christian (Wilcox 2003). In other words, there is a direct conflict between Christianity and homosexuality, and one cannot fully be one and the other. This ideology states that “good” Christians cannot be gay and that self-respecting gay men and lesbians would never choose to stay with any group that denigrates their identity so fundamentally. The stereotypical and default assumption is that gay individuals are not Christian and that Christians are not accepting of gay individuals. However, gay Christians exist. In fact, entire churches are dedicated to being open and affirming toward gay Christians—at least one or two in every major city in the US. Many are able to reinterpret their Christian beliefs in ways that are not just tolerant of homosexuality, but that accept and promote it. They even intertwine the two (Wilcox 2003), where sexual identity and Christianity rely on each other so organically that any idea of them being mutually exclusive or divergent is unfathomable. This is not the notion portrayed by the dominant culture, which states that stereotypically, every person is essentially one identity or the other. They are either gay OR Christian, but they are never both.

The same can be said about notions of gay individuals in rural spaces. Most typically, gay men and women are associated with metropolitan areas and lifestyles (Weston 1995). City life is where gay men and lesbians can find others like themselves whereas in the country, they cannot. It is this idea of the “gay imaginary” that helps create a hierarchy, placing urban life as superior to rural life (Weston 1995). The stereotype that rural gay men and lesbians must leave the country lifestyle behind to be fully socially

integrated places one identity above another and creates a notion that you can only be one thing at a time; that these identities never intersect or intertwine. Despite such stereotypes, gay individuals who identify with rural life and spaces exist, gay men and lesbians who live in these rural places see little or no contradiction between their sexual orientation and their chosen place of residence.

The question I pose is how do rural gay Christians experience the intersections of their stereotypically socially conflicting identities? What factors affirm and contribute to maintaining these socially conflicting identities? Lastly, how integrated are these identities and when does one of them become more or less salient?

I studied the lived experiences of rural-identified, openly gay, Christian men and women in both rural and urban places. This study sheds light on the “myths of isolation and invisibility” often associated with gay men and women in certain spaces (Chauncey 1994). It also challenges stereotypes about what it means to be gay in the country.

Identity Theories

Symbolic interactionism lays out a theoretical framework in which behaviors can be explained in the context of any given situation. Within this framework, individuals are social beings that create social and cultural meanings through their interactions and the interpretations of these interactions by others (Burke 2006). Individuals act towards each other based on their perception of the meanings attributed to those interactions and their situations. These meanings can be understood on many different levels ranging from general societal agreed upon meanings to particularistic meanings where each group or subculture assigns a unique meaning to the situation. A major component of symbolic

interactionism is the idea of self. The self is defined through the many identities contained within it. A self is created through cultural narratives and understandings. Individuals create and maintain their identities by interacting with others to learn the appropriate patterns of speech and behavior that are associated with the identity the individual is trying to invoke. It is through our understandings of others that we understand and explain ourselves. Since our identities are products of social interaction, we create, change, and maintain identities within every situation. The self we present depends on our understandings of the meanings assigned within the social situations. It is because of these meanings that identities have real social consequences (Howard 2000).

An identity is a set of meanings that are used to define who a person is within a situation (Burke 2009). Furthermore, one can have as many selves as we have groups that we interact with or desire to interact with. This means that a person can have multiple identities that are used to interact every day. For example, someone may identify as a parent, a student, and a dog person all at the same time. But what happens when identities conflict---when the standards of one identity are socially incompatible with the expectations held within another identity? This study focuses on the rural, gay, Christian population as an example of negotiating socially conflicting identities.

In particular, this study focuses on gay Christians in rural environments. The purpose is to extend the literature and to examine and understand the experiences of gay, Christians in rural environments. This study seeks to understand how rural, gay, Christians experience these stereotypically socially conflicting identities. This is an exploratory study designed to locate this population and to document their experiences as they relate to identity development, negotiating identities and creating queer spaces in areas not

typically thought of as accepting of queer experiences. I use symbolic interactionism to provide an analysis of the patterns of behavior and interpretations used by individuals who must negotiate conflicting identities- in this case, forming a sub-culture within the larger society.

Being Rural, Being Gay

Many studies have claimed that “rural” and “gay” are incompatible (Halberstam 2005, Rubin 1984, Terry 1999). Others discuss the need for understanding the identities in a hierarchy with “rural” ranking as more important to the individual than “gay” in the sense that they are willing to live in rural areas where they cannot be visibly gay or “out” in public. Research of this nature portrays rural life as a space where gay individuals cannot construct their sexual identity, at least not to the extent that urban spaces allow sexual identities to be constructed (Fellows 2001, Howard 1999).

Characterizing rural in this way, as constricting to the development of sexual identity, is common. However, a few scholars have started relatively recently to explore new ways of understanding rural life. John Howard (1999) discussed the importance of understanding what he calls “queer agency” (meaning the ability for people to create queer lives for themselves) when relating to ideas of rural space. He discussed how viewing rural spaces as limiting, i.e. as lonely and isolated, impedes the ability of these people to construct their own style of queer rural life. Focusing only on the constricting nature of rural spaces ignores the people who live there willingly, who want to be there and who have made a content life there. In only looking at the constricting nature of rural spaces,

whether actual or perceived, one is ignoring the experiences of people who choose to live there.

In line with the perceived ideas of rural environments being confining, there is also this notion that rural spaces in the United States operate as “America’s closet” resulting in a binary notion of queer spaces that entails hidden hierarchies.

Examining the assumptions that tether LGBT identities to cities and closets to rural communities opens the door to critique the privileging of some queer identities over others that the politics of gay visibility can produce (Gray 2009, 4).

A hierarchy is automatically assumed when urban/rural spaces are understood as binary. One space is believed to be superior to the other. In this case, urban environments are considered the place of sexual tolerance and enlightenment where identities, especially queer identities, flourish, while rural spaces are devalued and viewed as inhibiting the fulfillment of a socially integrated life (Halberstam 2005).

Emily Kazyak (2011) discusses the importance of cultural narratives in researching rural identities. She found that in rural spaces, gay and lesbian individuals construct for themselves what it means to be gay in such spaces instead of relying on the constructed narrative of urban sexual identities. This interpretation of queer rurality focuses on the integration of other identities into their sexual identity, and usually involves a total rejection of the *extreme urban gay lifestyle*, which is considered to be those who go to pride parades and are not “just old married people” (Kazyak 2011). This *extreme urban gay lifestyle* is thought to be sinful in nature as well as decadent and immoral by others, especially in the minds of rural individuals. It is through this modified cultural understanding that I will seek to understand rural gay Christians. In understanding how

people construct their identities, we can learn what that identity means to them, how they can hold multiple identities and how those identities may not be conflicting to them even though they are perceived as conflicting by others.

Gay Christians

The subject of gay Christians is one that has been extensively explored in previous literature (Mahaffy 1996, Rodriques 2000, Thumma 1991, Wilcox 2003, Wolkomir 2006). Most studies involved years spent researching, observing and interviewing gay Christians. The theories behind these studies have been almost exclusively theories related to identity and identity dilemmas.

An ideological identity dilemma, such as that presented in current gay Christian studies, is found to occur when two or more identities are fundamentally incompatible (Wolkomir 2006). This would occur when holding one identity is a direct violation of a sanction held within another identity. This dilemma usually demands a change of behavior or perception on the part of the individual or it leads to prolonged stress and anxiety.

Research within the last twenty years has consistently shown that gay Christians do experience varying levels of cognitive dissonance related to holding these two identities (Mahaffy 1996). This can either be internal cognitive dissonance, meaning a contradiction within one's own held beliefs or external cognitive dissonance, meaning contradictions between one's own held beliefs and the beliefs of others, or both. Three avenues have been proposed to resolve this cognitive dissonance. An individual can reject the church and its beliefs and embrace their gay identity. An individual may feel they cannot leave their

church and attempt to reject their gay identity in an effort to stay in the church. Or the individual must find a way to integrate these two socially conflicting identities.

For some individuals, leaving their church may be the best option for them. This can either mean they reject religion all together or they start attending open and affirming churches. The most widely known open and affirming (also termed gay friendly) church in the United States is the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC). Most current research on gay Christians comes from information gathered at MCCs. MCC is a Christian denomination founded to give members of the gay community a place to worship without fear of judgment based on their sexual orientation (Wilcox 2003). These churches, while having the best intentions, are not able to reach everyone who is both gay and Christian. Moreover, these churches are exclusively found in urban areas. They not only separate urban gay Christians from rural gay Christians, but also gay Christians from other Christians.

Because of deeply held religious beliefs, some individuals may feel that they simply cannot be both gay and Christian and therefore seek to reject their gay identity. The now former organization, Exodus International, along with many other Christian groups, caters to this population. These ex-gay ministries tell gay Christians that they can overcome their homosexual tendencies through God. This “reparative therapy” as it is termed, seeks to help gay individuals repress their homosexual behaviors (Wolkomir 2006). These groups focus on learning the correct gender roles for a person’s biological sex under the assumption that through God all things are possible. When applying the idea of this all-powerful God to ex-gay ministries, individuals are learning that with enough prayer and trust in Him, God can change their sexual orientation. Ex-gay ministries re-socialize their participants to understand that homosexuality is just a sin like any other sin. The idea is

that once you start to think of homosexuality on the same level as say cheating, stealing, or lying, you can ask God for forgiveness, be cured and go about leading the morally pure life that paves the way to heaven (Wolkomir 2006).

Still, other individuals either do not experience any conflict in holding these two identities or have resolved the discrepancies through the process of identity integration. Some scholars have suggested a three-step process of integrating identities. First, gay individuals must understand that their religious beliefs can be changed. Second, they must then change their beliefs into a gay positive theology. This step is usually done through the reinterpretation of scripture. The last step requires that they apply this new theology to their lives (Wolkomir 2006). The result would involve truly believing that God loves you no matter what, that God created you the way you are, and that you can be both gay and Christian in the eyes of God.

For those Christians that revised their theology, they identify the idea of faith to be the first and most important factor in their lives. This idea of rebuilding your faith into one that does not conflict with your gay identity is one of the most important steps in integrating identities (Thumma 1991, Yip 1997). Changing how you read scripture and how it is affecting your life, as well as understanding the importance of a personal relationship with God are all key elements to rebuilding a gay positive faith and theology (Thumma 1991). Having a community is extremely important to both a Christian and to a gay identity (Wilcox 2003). Having a group with whom you can talk and share important life moments is central to identity development.

It is important to remember that not all gay Christians experience much, if any, cognitive dissonance related to holding these two identities (Mahaffy 1996). While these

individuals are important to remember, I believe my research can be most useful in studying how those who do experience cognitive dissonance resolve this through integration, intersection, or some combination of both. Nevertheless, I look both at those who do not experience any conflict and those that are actively trying to negotiate their perceived conflicting identities to understand the process and to understand how the backgrounds people can come from may play a role in this process.

Some studies have suggested that a new religious belief is needed to integrate gay and Christian identities (Thumma 1991). Within the current literature, two factors lead to the self-verification of gay and Christian identities. The first is the reinterpretation of scripture within a group. It is important to revise religious beliefs as discussed earlier, but it is also important for others to understand the sacred texts of their religion in similar ways. A reinterpretation of scripture is usually done by studying the seven verses¹ of the Bible that are traditionally understood as being anti-gay within some workshop or group study and looking at the historical context and their earlier translations in an attempt to understand what the Bible *meant* in the original Hebrew. This usually involves trying to figure out what the Bible story was supposed to warn against instead of forbidding homosexuality. The second factor that is important in leading to self-verification is having a personal relationship with God. A personal relationship with God is seen as the only way to resolve any internal cognitive dissonance that comes as a result of trying to hold both gay and Christian identities. It is through these means that gay Christians reconcile their identities even in the face of unaccepting churches and communities (Thumma 1991, Yip 1997).

¹ See Appendix B for a complete list of these Biblical verses.

Throwing Gender into the Mix: Gender Expressions in the Country

There has been little work that addresses gender comparisons in regard to where gay men and lesbians live and why. Only recently has there been an increase in discussions of geo-spatial distributions related to the gay and lesbian community. This increase is credited to the relatively new research that draws on the same-sex unmarried partner Census data (Baumle et al. 2009). This research indicates that there is not an even distribution of gay men and lesbians across the country or even within states and cities.

In work that speaks specifically to the diversity of gay and lesbian enclaves, Compton and Baumle (2012) found that lesbians and gay men choose to live in many different places but that there are certain things that appeal differently to gay men and lesbians that make them choose a certain area. Several key factors for moving to an enclave (defined as a subset of a neighborhood where certain types of people live) were natural environment, political climate, sense of community, and existence of gay institutions. This study showed there is a higher prevalence for gay men to live in urban enclaves while lesbians tended to live in rural or suburban areas. For example, in Sonoma county, a more rural enclave with the highest overall lesbian prevalence rate of the areas studied, all respondents listed the natural or physical environment as being important in choosing a place to live. Another study also found that gay male couples are more likely to live in urban areas than are lesbian couples (Gates and Ost 2004). This suggests a gendered aspect to the physical spaces inhabited by sexual minorities.

Compton and Baumle discuss the need for “a broad understanding of what serves as attractive community elements” (Compton Baumle 2012). People choose where to live based on a number of factors, such as presence of other LGBT people or the political

climate, along with what they can afford and having others like themselves in more ways than just sexual orientation (Compton and Baumle 2012). Low cost of living is potentially one of the most important factors for lesbian women and lesbian couples deciding to live in rural areas. In the job market today, women make on average 82% of what their male counterparts make (USA Today 2012). This leaves female same-sex households earning less than male same-sex households on average. With less funds to begin with, lesbian women and couples have to budget accordingly. The attractiveness of a lower cost of living outside of a big city has the potential to draw these lower wage earners out of the cities to get more for their money.

Taking an intersectional understanding of gender, sexuality, and geography emphasizes how “acceptance for rural sexual minorities are gendered” (Kazyak 2012). This approach shows how gender presentations and perceptions shape sexual constructions in rural places. For example, this framework leads to the understanding that women living in rural places can portray more masculine traits and not be perceived as lesbian.

There has been some research on gender presentations across spaces recently which found that gender expression can be understood differently in different spaces. Kazyak (2012) found that “the meanings of gender presentations are geographically specific.” Through studying rural gay men and lesbians and how they perform their gender identity, she found that masculinity is highly valued in rural life whether represented in a male body or a female one. Physical labor like farming is often thought of as masculine, but to be successful more than just men are needed to do the work. Women doing farm work is normative in these settings. More “butch” gender presentations are not necessarily tied to homosexuality because it is a trait of rural women more generally. Kazyak also found that

the only expressions of female masculinity that are approved of are those that reinforce what being country means to that area. “Masculinity underpins both the categories rural and lesbian, which may afford some lesbians the ability to stay in a rural place. How these categories are co-constructed sheds light on the gendered nature of acceptance for sexual minorities in rural areas: Both lesbian women and gay men gain acceptance by doing masculinity” (Kazyak 2012, p826). Being an insider in what it means to be country and how country people behave were also linked to greater acceptance. One could not show up in what would be considered urban “butch” attire and be treated the same way as a rural woman presenting as masculine. In short, not all gender performances are treated equally. Rural masculinity is framed in a different way from urban masculinity. As Kazyak found, being a “hick” or from the country and presenting a masculine identity is accepted and often encouraged while any traits associated with being urban-identified are not. In short, it is important to acknowledge how context matters for how gender and sexuality are performed, viewed, and understood.

Studying Rural Gay Christians

Drawing on in-depth interviews, this study specifically examines the experiences of self-identified, rural, openly gay, Christian men and women. Twenty-four interviews (15 men and 9 women) have been conducted to highlight the intersections of these four statuses and the unique perspectives held by gay, Christian men and women in rural environments. Interviews lasted one hour on average, and ranged between 16 minutes and two and a half hours. I also conducted a follow up interview with two respondents to gather more information about involvement in local church and gay communities.

Table 1: Demographic Sketch of Respondents

Mean Age	Race Percentages	Gender Identity Percentages	Sexual Identity Percentages	Partnered Status	Religious Affiliation	Occupation
27	White: 79.2%	Male: 62.5%	Gay: 62.5%	Single: 66.7%	Protestant: 46%	Student: 54.2%
	Black: 8.3%	Female: 37.5%	Lesbian: 29.2%	Partnered: 33.3%	Mainline Protestant: 25%	Service Industry: 12.5%
	Native American: 4.2%		Bisexual: 8.3%		Evangelical: 21%	Retail: 12.5%
	Other: 8.3%				Other: 8%	IT: 8.3%
						Health Care: 8.3%
						Other: 4.2%

Respondents were recruited via snowball sampling, beginning with insiders from four rural places, and followed by calls for participation on social media sites including Facebook, Facebook groups, and Twitter. This initial “snowball” had an effect on the range of people I could reach. Most were from similar towns, in similar age brackets, and of the same race and educational background however, due to the difficulties of finding this subset of an already hidden minority population, snowball sampling and recruitment calls on social media sites were the most effective ways of gaining access to my population of interest. It was through insiders and call respondents that I have largely been granted my access. Via interviews and resulting respondent narratives, I examine the ways in which individuals may or may not resolve socially conflicting identities. While I did not mirror any

particular study, these sampling methodologies are in line with the majority of other sociological qualitative studies on the gay and lesbian population to date.

My sample consists of fifteen gay men, seven lesbian women, and two bisexual women from seven states (Oklahoma, Louisiana, Texas, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, West Virginia and Texas). Of the total interviews, four people are currently living in an urban environment. Interviewees range in age from 18 to 51. I recognize the limitations of this sample. The respondents are almost exclusively young and I expected this to be the case due to the social networks of my initial snowball sampling and a methodology that involves online responses. The majority of my sample is white. However, one person identifies as Native American, one identifies as Black, one identifies as Black and Latino and one identifies as Hispanic. All of my participants are Christian, but they range in their levels of religiosity, with some participants attending churches regularly and others rarely attending church services. These respondents also reflect a range of religious dominations. I was not able to speak to the differences based on sexual orientation. For example, nothing came up regarding rural Christian identities that largely differentiated the lesbian identified women from the bisexual identified women.

While the homogeneity of my sample may initially seem like a weakness, I believe it can be seen as a strength. That is, the homogeneity can contribute to generating a more focused narrative regarding the intersections of a rural, queer, Christian experience and potential identity creation and negotiations.

Christian Identities and Experiences in Rural Places

All respondents framed their Christian identities in one of three very specific ways: solely as a personal relationship with God; gay friendliness of the church; and the fit of the church with their personal values. Below I examine each of these responses in turn:

Personal Relationship with God

While all respondents did speak to a personal relationship with God as the source of their faith, five spoke solely about this issue. For these respondents, a personal relationship with God rather than having a church community was the main tie to religion had by these interviewees.

Every one of the respondents discussed their faith in relation to a personal and private God instead of a community of people. Many respondents discussed their personal relationship with God instead of physically going to a church when asked about their religion. Some talked about going outside to pray and “doing Christianity how I want to” (Sarah). For some, having other Christians around was not necessary, and in two cases, specifically not wanted. As Deborah puts it, “I didn’t like the gay church I went to. It seemed like they were promoting a gay agenda more than church. That’s really not for me.” These people put a higher value on having a relationship with God than they did with having a church community. For these respondents the main premise of Christianity was still being met. They are trying to lead a Christian life, live the way their God wants them to live and do not see any formal institutions as a better way to do that. The women interviewed value independence and privacy, a trait that is also associated with rural life. Even though these women, like the men, discussed having a personal relationship with God the factors they highlighted were very different. The men tended to talk more about having a spiritual

relationship with God that approved their being gay instead of relationships with people that could deny them. In contrast, the women talked at great length of being independent and valuing their privacy to worship however they wanted.

Many of these men cited having a personal relationship with God that was accepting of their sexual orientation as the reason they did not necessarily need a specifically gay friendly church or a church family at all. It was these men's faith in a Christian God that loved them no matter what, that would be there for them, and that would accept them given that He had created them. This interpretation made it possible for them to be Christian and gay. David explained it to me like this:

"I can remember just thinking that honestly, I would be pissed the fuck off if God told me you know, it's okay, you could have been gay and then I had to think, I thought to myself you know if I feel this strong about it could I stand before God and say yes I know this is wrong but it is who I am. Could I justify it to the face of God? Could I say yes sir I take my punishment, I know what I did was wrong, it is who I am, it is who you made me to be, I know you love me anyway, and I know I have to take this punishment? And I found that yea, I could do that."

David felt that God created him and it was through his personal relationship with God that he is able to be gay, to live in the rural areas that he prefers and still be the Christian that he feels God is calling him to be. Jude said that no matter what, "God loved me anyway." For him, he was able to combine what it means for him to be gay into his own religion that he calls his "God that is with me always." Jude added, "God is bigger than our

understanding.” This phrase is what Jude said he often repeats to himself and others. He believes this idea is important to having a personal and intimate relationship with God. One must remember always, “...that God is bigger than our understanding.” He describes this phrase as the foundation for his beliefs. Issac described his personal relationship with God that “gives me the freedom to explore churches other than specifically gay friendly churches...because I know God loves me.” All of the men interviewed talked extensively about how God should be the first and most important aspect of a Christian’s life, including gay Christians. To them, God created them gay just like He created some people straight and it is up to all of God’s people to live a life worthy of Him. These men did not see being gay as a hindrance in this mission. They were able to be both gay and Christian through their understanding of a loving and accepting God.

This theme shows how these men and women will identify as gay and as Christian with or without having a church home or church family. The most important aspect of Christianity, is still being met. These Christians have a personal relationship with their Creator, with the only entity whose judgment matters, and with whom they will have to answer to when they die. This is how those interviewed thought about God in relation to themselves. For those cited above, their faith is not dependent on their social interactions, having a community, or the institutional structure of the church. These interviews suggest that community and structure do not necessarily contribute to holding certain identities. These men and women saw themselves as Christian, as devoted Christians, and claimed personal relationships with God as the source of their faith and devotion.

Gay Friendly Churches

The majority of my participants live in rural areas of the South, which is stereotypically unaccepting of gay individuals and potentially even unsafe for the lives of these individuals. All those interviewed discussed strongly, and in much detail, their religious lives. Each one identified themselves as a Christian and then explained what that meant to them. For Simon it meant “the foundation for my moral and ethical beliefs.” For Paul it meant “feel[ing] like you’re part of something greater.” Two men talked about wanting to find a specifically gay friendly church, one that they knew would be accepting without having to hide their sexual orientation and mentioned MCC by name. When discussing joining a MCC, Elijah said, “I have thought about joining. I like it, I really do. I think it is really cool because it shows the way the Christian community is moving to show that you don’t have to shut me out and that I can be accepted.” For Elijah it was important for him to have somewhere he could be openly gay and Christian. He needed a church where he knew he would be accepted. For him, driving to a larger city near his small town was worth it to have both an accepting Christian and gay community. For Jonah, it was important for him to attend an MCC to link his sexual orientation and his Christianity. Jonah saw this church as a way to enhance his community involvement. For him MCC is “not just a gay church, but is a group for all people and that’s what I like about it.”

For the four men discussed above, rural does not necessarily mean isolated. These men live in rural areas of the United States but have mobility. One drives two hours one-way to attend his church. Others live a little closer to “town” (bigger city with an MCC or similar church) but still go out of their way to attend an open and affirming church. These men enjoy their rural life communities and their gay communities, just in different locales. They choose to live in rural areas that do not have gay friendly churches and they choose to

drive to a nearby city to meet other gay men and women in a more formal setting. These individuals are not isolated or stuck in their small towns. Just because they choose to live in certain areas does not mean they have to give up expressing their sexual identity.

For one interviewee (Rachel), there is not an open and affirming church in or near her small town. Due to her young age and lack of mobility (she is still in high school), she is not able to drive to the nearest gay friendly church. Rachel plans to move to a large city soon. She plans to attend the MCC of the city she will move to. Rachel made it clear that being around other LGBT people is the most important factor when deciding where to be “It is super important for me to be around other gay people” is something she repeated throughout the interview. Rachel is the only woman I interviewed that was seeking out a gay friendly church.

The Fit of the Church

The majority of the people that I interviewed did not mention anything about looking for a specifically gay friendly church; instead they discussed finding a church where they would fit in. To them, this meant people who shared most of the same beliefs they did, for example that drugs are bad and abortion should be illegal. These men and women also wanted a church that would not openly preach against gay issues. For example, Joshua discussed the need to attend a church that was accepting, although he did not specifically look for a MCC. Rather, he was able to find acceptance in his local Methodist congregation. “[Pastor] has never preached on homosexuality and my Sunday school hasn’t either...it is all inclusive. There is no separate thing for LGBT which I’m okay with.” He looked for a church that held the same beliefs he did on building “community and having loving

relationships” and he found that with this church. Simon wanted “fellowship with other believers” and cared more about having people that shared his views “on the importance of what Christianity means.” Another man, Matthew, discussed the people within his church saying that although “the whole doctrine...of the Christian church condemns homosexuality...the positive thing about it (his church) is that the people are kind and accepting.” Matthew said “you can find this at different places”; you just have to look for a church that fits you. One interviewee, David, described how he would automatically know how well he would fit in with a church. He said, “You will always know where God wants you to be because you will walk in the door and you will feel at home.” For David, he knew he would feel at home, like he belonged, as soon as he walked into the door of the church where God wanted him to be, so having one that is specifically for the LGBT population was not important to him. It is not he who picks his church, God leads him to the right church.

For most of the women I interviewed, going to a gay friendly church was not as important. A few went to churches that do not openly preach against homosexuality but none regularly attended gay friendly churches like MCC. The women mentioned more how they fit into the church within their small town community than they did what type of church it was. When asked why she does not attend the MCC that is close to her, Esther said “I go to church for religious reasons not to feel affirmation for my gayness and it seems that church (the closest MCC to her) tends to preach that. They try to relate everything back to being gay and that’s not why I’m at church.”

The interviews suggest that these individuals in small towns negotiate being both gay and Christian. For some, it is all about where God wants you to be, where you feel at home and comfortable. For others, it is about the people at the church making you feel

welcome. A lot of the experiences these men and women relayed to me were about how they were out (openly gay) to the town as well as out to the church community, and they still felt safe and welcomed in these churches that officially condemn or ignore homosexuality at the denominational level. This shows the important role these individual congregations played in the atmosphere of acceptance of these gay individuals and the sense of community and comfort they felt in those churches.

How Stereotypes Create Issues: The Urban/Rural Binary

The last major theme revealed in my interviews that had overlap with both men and women was a very hierarchical notion of rural and urban gay men, but not in the way most of us think. One of these men criticized urban gay men and thought better of rural gay men like himself. Several of those interviews expressed interest in living in a small town where they could know everyone, as well as going to a small church for the rest of their lives. David lives in an urban environment currently. He went to this big city for his work. He attends church at a local gay friendly church similar to MCC, but not affiliated. He has very strong opinions of gay men that live in urban environments. To him, an urban gay man is one that does drugs and goes out drinking every night. These men, in his mind, do not attend church and are not “quality people” (quoted directly from interview with David). But when asked about the gay men he encountered back home he had very different things to say. David recalls a more tight-knit community in his small town; one that was always there for each other, one that always showed support for that person, would “call each other out on things we shouldn’t be doing,” and a group that you could share your faith with as well as your sexual orientation. For David, living in a rural place meant close friends

that were accepting and that had the similar values. Finding such close friends has not been David's experience after moving to a large city. Several of the other men I interviewed, who still live in a rural area, had similar things to say. Many thought that in their small town (whether or not it was the one they grew up in) there was a community that was accepting of them. They felt comfort in knowing everyone in town and being able to talk to them about church, school and family life. Some felt they had to move out of their hometown to find acceptance, but still stayed in a rural area instead of moving to a larger city.

When I asked Esther specifically about stereotypes of rural people she recounted her experience of moving to and coming out in her small town. She found that "once you break through people's barriers I think it is okay. They think we (gay people in general) go out and party all the time or something like that. I mean I have three kids, I can't even remember the last time I had a beer. They think we just go out and party and have "debaucherous" sex everywhere and things and they have that stereotype in their head but we (her and her partner) are pretty much as family centered as you can get and once they realize that it breaks down the barriers a little bit." Esther found that the stereotypes her town had about gay people fit in with similar religious and cultural stereotypes about the "gay lifestyle" which is almost exclusively in reference to urban gay life (Stossel and Binkley 2006, Lipp 2013).

It is worth considering if the interviewee, David, who disapproved of urban gay males that lived what he viewed as a more decadent lifestyle, may reflect not only stereotypes, but real divisions in the gay community captured by Lisa Duggan's term "homonormativity". Both Duggan (2004) and Judith/Jack Halberstam (2005) use the concept of "homonormativity" to refer to assimilationist gay and lesbian politics organized

around the pursuit of rights granted to white, middle-class heterosexuals, such as the right to privacy, the right to marry, the right to join the military, and the right to have and to keep their children. Both of these authors define “queer” as a “way of life” that resists both heteronormativity and homonormativity. Indeed, Halberstam argues that “queer” is not defined by homosexual sex, but by the experience of living on the margins of domestic safety and sexual respectability in what he calls “queer time” and “queer spaces” (Halberstam 2005, 10).

Given the findings of this study, it might be interesting to explore whether such assimilationist gay politics or ideologies are more likely to be found in rural settings and small towns, rather than in large metropolitan areas. In turn, it is even more likely that Christian beliefs foster such normative views of how people should live their lives. Thus, perhaps, some of the reasons why the gay Christians in this study feel more at home in rural areas and why they feel out of place among urban gay individuals is because of their more deeply ingrained homonormative values.

Gendered Differences: How Men and Women Experience the Country

Overall, my most surprising finding was the lack of overlap in experiences between men and women. They overwhelmingly differed in how they talked about why they live in a rural place. For women, it was unanimously about the freedom, independence, and privacy they felt they were offered in rural places. Men barely addressed this issue, they simply framed it as “I do” or “I just wanted to” when talking about why they live in rural places. The men discussed feeling freer in bigger cities by saying they would hold hands with a partner in the city but “we wouldn’t do that here...not in this town” (interview with Amos).

However they still preferred to live in a more rural place. It was initially surprising to find that while women overwhelmingly feel less restricted in these rural places, men feel more constricted.

There was little to no overlap in how men and women talked about the necessity of community. Most of the men interviewed described a need of some type of community support while the women either did not mention it or specifically mentioned not needing or wanting a community whether it be a gay or Christian. Similarly, the men did not mention the physical environment of rural places as a necessarily attractive or enticing quality while all of the women went into great detail about how important space, privacy, and nature were to their decision to live in a rural place. Lastly, several women discussed how they believed it was easier for lesbian women to pass or to get along well in rural places. Their understandings of female masculinity and of the perceived necessity of masculine traits to do well in the country supports a recent study (Kazyak 2012) related to the meanings of gender presentations within certain geo-spatial settings.

Community

In contrast to the women of this study, a major theme that emerged out of my interviews with the men is the importance of having a community. Communities offer benefits to the individual that then reflect back to benefit the group. It is this sense of cohesiveness that both Christian communities and gay communities strive to create and maintain. An important aspect of Christianity is the opportunity of fellowship with other Christians. All of the men interviewed mentioned the need to have a group that understood them, where they would fit in, and that would be there for them. Many cited their church

communities (Samuel referred to them as “Church family”) as being as important to them. For some men, it was even more important than their gay community. Through the course of the interviews, it was clear how they developed and maintained their Christian community; going to church together and/or meeting with one another outside of church to discuss their faith. David told me about his community in his rural town that he recently left.

There was a group of us, a group of gays that were all Christian. We all went to different churches but we were all Christian...We talked to each other, we visited with each other, we would sit and have lunch every now and then and share our faith, share our lives. We would call each other out of things that we shouldn't be doing. It was a nice kind of accountability group.

What remained a question for me was how do they maintain a gay community within rural communities that are unlikely to have specifically gay places? When asked to elaborate on their gay community, many cited just going out together, saying that everyone in town already knew pretty much that they were gay so they would just meet up at someone's house or at a bar or share a meal. Adam stated that someone “can find a gay community anywhere” and cited that as another reason why he chooses to remain in a rural environment given his sexual orientation. When I asked Noah about what he looks for in a community, he said, “I am looking for accepting people.” For Noah, it did not matter whether someone lived in a city or in the country, one can find accepting people in both types of environments and cited his move from his non-accepting small hometown to a

different small town that is a lot more accepting. Matthew cited having a loving and supportive environment that enabled him to create his gay community. Daniel cited driving to the next big town to go to the one gay bar in that town. Jacob mentioned the Internet and social media playing a huge part in how he met his partner while both were living in rural locations at opposite ends of the state of Louisiana. This suggests an important evolution in the creation of gay communities.

Language plays an important role in the creation of a community. Understanding certain words in specific ways helps to establish a dialogue between individuals in interactions. Throughout my interviews, specifically interviews with a few gay men that have lived exclusively in rural areas, a pattern of language use has become apparent. These men use words like “homosexual lifestyle” and “admitted homosexuality” to talk about their sexual orientation. These phrases are generally thought to be offensive and derogatory towards the gay community in urban environments. This could be an important distinction between rural and urban gay people that should be further studied to understand the stereotypes each group has toward the other and their differences.

Natural Environment

Out of the nine interviews with lesbian and bisexual women in this study, five talked at great length about the natural environment of living in a rural place. These women all wanted to live somewhere “without seeing concrete” (interview with Ruth), which is associated with cities and urban life. They wanted to see “something green when I go outside” (interview with Lydia). “I am really outdoorsy. I grew up on a farm. I love fishing. I had pet cows. I love the opportunity to be outdoors...I like that aspect” (interview with

Deborah). Another interviewee put it this way “I really enjoy privacy. I want to live in a place where I can stand somewhere butt naked and not see anybody else’s house” (interview with Sarah). “I like the laid back side of it [living in the country]. I like to have my space. I don’t want to live ass-to-ass to somebody. I am a country girl...I like to go out and hear the frogs and crickets....I like to be able to have my space and freedom” (interview with Leah). These women talked extensively about wanting to be in areas with hardly any people. They talked about hating concrete, needing more space between them and the next house, and some discussed wanting a farm. This finding is exclusive to the women interviewed. Among the women I interviewed, almost all cited physical space, nature, privacy, and freedom as the most important factors in deciding where to live. Privacy was a recurring theme that spanned every one of the nine interviews with women that I had. Of the 15 gay men I interviewed none mentioned the need for nature and space in the same way that these women did. These interviews lined up with the data from the gay enclave study mentioned earlier (Compton and Baumle 2012). The women in that rural county of California mentioned 100% of the time that the natural environment played a factor in where they chose to live.

Gender Presentations: Easier to Pass in the Country

Several of the women interviewed discussed how it might be easier for lesbian and bisexual women living in the country. This goes back to what Kazyak (2012) found about gender presentation in rural spaces. Sarah found that it is easier for her to fit in in her small town than it is when she goes into a city. “I wear men’s clothes occasionally but since I’m in a rural place, I mean people dress like that so it is easier to pass.” She believes that since

most women in the country present as more masculine it is easier for her, and other lesbians, to pass and feel comfortable in these spaces. On the other hand, Leah rarely passes in her small town. "I don't necessarily look the typical country girl because I'm kinda like a more west coast or hipster style. People look at me and I have a nose ring and tattoos. Around here people don't think I'm from around these parts but if I opened my mouth they would know (referring to her accent)." When I asked if she would prefer to live somewhere where she would visually fit it better she said "I don't want somebody's opinion to keep me from living where I want to live."

Stereotypically, lesbian is almost always associated with masculinity. It is the image of the flannel wearing, independent "dyke", and the woman who works the construction jobs with the men. To understand how this person, this female body portraying masculinity, may fit in and potentially even go unnoticed or noted as unexceptional or common one must understand rural life. As one interviewee explains it, masculine traits are valued on the farm. It is the independent "prairie woman" who farms better than her husband and is "self-sufficient." As Deborah describes it, "in that culture tomboys are okay. That's why it is easier for gay women." This is the idea that every woman in the country needs to be strong, independent, and a hard worker. These traits are usually associated with men and masculinity in more urban settings. It is the image of this "prairie woman" that makes it is easier for gay women living in the country to fit in. Since masculinity is a highly valued trait in these settings, both men and women portraying this certain style of masculinity potentially makes it easier for them to fit it with the general population of the town because they share common cultural understandings, or as one interviewee termed it "country morals and values" (Interview with Esther).

Discussion and Conclusions

For the respondents that framed their religious identity around their personal relationship with God, they were placing their Christian identity as most important in their lives. Their Christian identity is what they used to make decisions related to how and where they worshiped. For the men, little importance was given to the actual physical space of where they worshipped. They cited their personal relationship with God that was accepting of their sexual orientation as the reason why they did not necessarily need a specifically gay friendly church. For the women, when they claimed a personal relationship with God as the sole source of their religious identity they has a clear preference in mind as to where to worship. The women preferred to be outdoors. It is in this way they discussed the freedom to worship how they wanted and feeling closer to God often out in nature.

Out of the twenty-four individuals I interviewed, five indicated they would seek or have sought out churches that are accepting of their gay identities. These individuals, all men, put their gay identity first when searching for a church. They wanted a church that first and foremost would be accepting of their sexual identity. In this way they would have less to worry about in regards to being accepted. They could have the gay community many of them wanted as well as have support for their Christian beliefs. For these men, their identities were able to intersect within a space that allowed them to be both gay and Christian.

The last way these respondents discussed their fulfillment of their religious identity was in how well a church fits in with their own ideals. These individuals wanted a church that agreed about what Christianity means and how a Christian is supposed to live. They were less concerned about looking specifically for a gay friendly church. What these

individuals wanted was a community of other Christians irrespective of sexual orientation that had the same sets of morals and values related to how one lives a Christian life. This was the most important factor for five of the men and women in this study.

The urban vs rural binary came up several times in talking to the respondents. Stereotypes about what urban and rural LGBT people are like were very similar for most of the respondents that spoke about this issue. These notions seem to follow closely the dominant religious cultural stereotype related to LGBT lifestyles. These rural identified people thought themselves to be more Christian in their way of life, more family centered, more of the right quality of people compared to their more decadent urban counterparts. They saw urban LGBT people as too extreme and sought to frame themselves as something other than that when interviewed. Several mentioned instances in their small rural town that led me to believe they might all (irrespective of sexual orientation) be creating and attempting to maintain a rural narrative in opposition to the stereotypes of urban life. Not only do the gay and lesbian people I met with frame themselves by way of Christian values, morals, being “family centered”, and “just old married people” but they discuss the need to tell and show others in their small town that they are more like them than they are the ideas of gay people that they might have in their head. By aligning themselves with this rural narrative they are fitting in to their town even though gay stereotypes might have us believe otherwise.

Overall, my most surprising finding was the lack of overlap in experiences between men and women in their framing of why they live where they live. I could not distinguish any gendered differences in the respondent’s descriptions of how they maintain their Christian identity. However, when the women discussed being in a rural place it was

always in relation to their perceived freedom, independence, and privacy. The men on the other hand barely address this issue rather they framed living in a rural place as “I just wanted to” or “I just do” and discussed feeling freer to be more affectionate with their partners in cities instead of smaller towns. It was surprising to find that while the women felt less restricted in these rural settings the men felt more restricted. Perhaps this is why more lesbian women and lesbian couples live in rural spaces than do gay men and gay couples.

Most of the men interviewed in this study described a need of some type of community support. For some it was a church community while for others it was a gay community. These men wanted a group that understood them, where they would fit in, and that would be there for them. This is how they described the function of a community. These men cited the need for community that is accepting of them in whatever way they are looking for, whether it be a gay friendly community, church community, or others. These men felt they could find a community anywhere so they did not feel that they needed to move to a big city to still feel supported, especially now with more wide-spread access to online social media sites. Two men cited the Internet was how they met their partner or how they still feel connected to their gay community whether or not they live geographically close. None of the women interviewed cited the need for a community of any sort which goes against stereotypes that women need more social interaction or are integrated into communities more than men.

The men of this study did not mention the natural environment of rural places as a necessarily attractive or enticing quality while most of the women went into great detail about how important space, privacy, and nature were to their decision to live in a rural

place. These women talked extensively about wanting to be in areas with hardly any people, without concrete, and with a lot of space. While five talked at great lengths about wanting to see “something green when I go outside” (Ruth), and living somewhere “without seeing concrete”, all nine talked about privacy and how that is afforded to them in these rural places. For these women, not seeing other people around all the time, not having neighbors close by, and being able to have trees and other natural elements around made them feel like they had more privacy to do whatever they wanted. This ties into their other ideas about freedom and independence. Without others around to tell them what to do or how to do something these women feel a sense of freedom to make their own choices, to wear what they want, to behave however they want, and to do what they want in their own way. Without the perceived eyes of others on them they feel less restricted in these areas. It is important to note that while many associate rural environments with danger and harm (Compton and DeVun 2009), none of the women interviewed for this study brought up that notion on their own. When asked specifically whether or not they felt safe, especially those with partners, these women stated they had not experience any physical or verbal violence of any kind.

An interesting topic came to light in my interviews with several women. They discussed how it might be easier for lesbian and bisexual women living in the country than it would be for the men or for these women living in an urban setting. For one respondent, Sarah, felt that since most women in the country present as more masculine it is easier for her, and other lesbians, to pass and feel comfortable in these spaces. Because Sarah wears men’s clothes she feels that she would be labeled as very masculine or labeled as lesbian outside of these rural spaces. It is in these rural spaces where she has more freedom to

dress how she wants because her style matches that of other rural women, regardless of sexual orientation. For Leah on the other hand, it was not as easy. Leah rarely passes in her small town. She described her style as different than the other rural women in her town. She looks more “west coast or hipster” in her style of dress. She is often picked out as not belonging with others thinking she must be from somewhere else. However, this is not necessarily related to sexual orientation. These two examples support the idea of gender presentation being geo-spatially contingent. What is accepted in one area may not be accepted in another. Sarah portrayed the correct style for her area while Leah did not although both would typically be seen as more masculine in appearance.

To understand how a female body portraying masculinity may fit in, go unnoticed, or noted as common one must understand rural life. Some of the women I interviewed made reference to the fact that masculinity is a valued trait in society, and especially in rural places. Deborah related it to farm work. Farm related work is considered to be very masculine no matter who is doing the work. A person who is independent, strong, a hard worker, and is self-sufficient is a very valuable asset in these settings no matter what gendered body they are in. Since masculinity is a highly valued trait in these settings both men and women portraying this certain style of masculinity potentially has an easier time fitting in more generally.

These interviews illustrate that rural, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and Christian identities are not always as conflicting as they are stereotypically thought to be. For the men interviewed, having a supportive community as well as the privilege and resources to slip in and out of urban gay life provided points of intersection for their identities. Related to the men, it really seemed to be about points of intersection instead of full integration.

These men had their dating life and gay community either in the city or online while they lived in these small towns where they would work, socialize, and sometimes go to church. While all of the men I talked to were “out”, meaning openly gay, they still seemed to keep some parts of that identity separate from their other identities. For example, one man wanted to raise his family in his small town, had a church there, went to the grocery store there, and was generally involved in the rural community but when it came to being affectionate with his partner would only do so in public when they were in a bigger city and not their town. As for the women, having the freedoms they associate with rural spaces provided them a way to be rural, gay, and Christian without giving up any of those identities. These women seemed to be more integrated with respect to holding these identities than the men. They saw being rural as a way to be a better Christian and as a way to be open about their sexual identity. Because of the freedoms they felt they had in the country, they were open about their sexual orientation. All of the women I interviewed were “out” and many expressed how being in this area that had more space between people, a more natural setting, and all the things they associated with rural life made it better for them in terms of fitting in. Many felt they already fit into the general population of the town by their Christian beliefs and an appreciation for rural life, which they did not feel they could get in the city. This is how many of these women are socially integrated into the town’s culture even though they are gay.

In line with current literature this study found that different qualities attract different people to certain areas. This study found that men preferred to live closer to bigger cities to be able to enjoy some aspects of urban life while still reaping the benefits they wanted from rural life while the women cared more about the natural environment

when choosing where to live. It also found that people negotiated being both gay and Christian in one of three ways. This was how they resolved any cognitive dissonance received, at least in part, from a society that teaches that these two identities are incompatible. This study also found that gender presentations might have some geo-spatial contingences that allow for certain portrayals to be accepted despite stereotypes to the contrary, specifically related to female masculinity and rural social tolerance. What is potentially new about my contributions to the literature is related to the ideas of homonormativity, language use, and knowledge of gay culture. This study also suggests that some of these rural people may not be associated or assimilated into gay culture. They might not know the ways in which to talk about themselves or others, which could lead to the appearance of homonormativity.

Regarding the limitations of this study I realized after completing the interviews that I should have asked more questions related to demographic information. To really know the background information of my respondents would have provided a much deeper comparative analysis than what I am able to make at this time. My study is lacking in depth information about my respondents' political values and affiliations, levels of religiosity meaning much more than just denomination, their socioeconomic status, and how integrated they are into LGBT culture. This last one is especially important for me to be able to understand how these rural gay, lesbian, and bisexual people are framing their cultural narrative. I want to know how they learned to talk about themselves as gay and of others. In creating their own narrative it could appear at times to be social distancing from their sexual orientation that could also be framed as homophobic. These are important questions that need to be asked.

After completing the interviews and the data analysis I came to realize that I have more questions related to this study that I plan to address in future work. I want to know more about this notion of intersecting vs integrating identities and are they truly as different across genders as they seem with my small sample. I want to know more about the social tolerance of rural communities especially related to the gay marriage debates that are so visible in our society right now. I want to be able to speak to this urban/rural binary, homonormativity, their assimilation when referring to the LGBT community, and their assimilation into the LGBT community. I would also like to address the potential overlap or intersection of female masculinity and rural masculinity. Ideally I would like to see if it really is “easier” for rural identified lesbian women in the country due to their gender performance. I am hopeful with all this information that in the future I will be able to do a comparative study involving Urban LGBT Christians vs Rural LGBT Christians and Rural LGBT Non-Christians vs Rural LGBT Christians.

Despite the number of further questions this study instigated, overall I have found that gays and lesbians live in the country. They are not all confined to live in cities to be content. They are able to negotiate identities. They are satisfied and proud to hold their country identities. I found that there might be less of a negotiation than one would expect. There may in fact be more support for intersecting identities than previously discussed in lay culture. The respondents discussed here were able to be a part of a rural way of life they preferred while still holding on to their gay identities. For them, whether they framed rural life as more or less restricting they were still able to be socially integrated, openly gay, and Christian and live in these spaces.

References

- Baumle et al. 2009. *The Demography of Sexual Orientation*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Bell, D and G. Valentine. 1995. *Mapping Desire*. New York: Routledge.
- Bell, D. 2000. "Eroticizing the Rural." In *De-Centering Sexualities: Politics and Representations Beyond the Metropolis* edited by R. Phillips, D. Watt, and D.E. Shuttleton, 83-101. London: Routledge.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Burke, Peter (ed). 2006. *Contemporary Social Psychological Theories*. California: Stanford California Press.
- Burke, Peter and Jan Stets. 2009. *Identity Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Cain, Roy. 1991. "Stigma Management and Gay Identity Development." *Social Work*. 36:67-73.
- Chauncey, G. 1989. "Christian Brotherhood or Sexual Perversion? Homosexual Identities and the Construction of Sexual Boundaries in the World War I Era." In *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, edited by M. Vicinus, G. Chauncey, and M.B. Duberman, 294-317. New York: Meridian.
- Chauncey, G. 1994. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the making of a Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books.

- Crawley, Sara L and K.L. Broad. 2004. "Be Your (Real Lesbian) Self: Mobilizing Sexual Formula Stories through Personal (and Political) Storytelling." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*. Sage Publications.
- Creswell, John W. 2007. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Second Edition. Sage Publications.
- Compton, D'Lane and Amanda Baumle. 2012. "Beyond the Castro: The Role of Demographics in the Selection of Gay and Lesbian Enclaves." *Journal of Homosexuality*. 59: 1-29. Routledge.
- Compton, D'Lane and Leah DeVun. 2009. "Queer Cowboygirls" paper presented at Pop Culture Association Annual Meeting—New Orleans, LA, April, 2009.
- Duggan, Lisa. 2004. *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*. Beacon Press.
- Erzen, Tanya. 2006. *Straight to Jesus: Sexual and Christian Conversions in the Ex-Gay Movement*. University of California Press.
- Faderman, Lillian. 1991. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Fellows, W. 2001. *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Fetner, Tina. 2001. "Working Anita Bryant: The Impact of Christian Anti-Gay Activism on Lesbian and Gay Movement Claims." *Social Problems*. 48 (3): 411-428. University of California Press.
- Fish Out of Water*. 2009. Video by Ky Dickens. First Run Features.
- For the Bible Tells Me So*. 2007. Video by Daniel G. Karlslake. First Run Features.

- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2007. "Introduction: Queer Temporalities". *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 13 (2-3): 159-176.
- Gates, Gary and Jason Ost. 2004. *Gay & Lesbian Atlas*. Urban Institute Press.
- Gamson, Joshua. 1998. *Freaks Talk Back: Tabloid Talk Shows and Sexual Nonconformity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerber, Lynne. 2008. "The Opposite of Gay. Nature, Creation, and Queerish Ex-Gay Experiments." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*. 11 (4): 8-30. University of California Press.
- "Gender Pay Gap Persists." *USA Today*. Oct 24 2012.
<<http://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2012/10/24/gender-pay-gap/1652511/>>
- Gray, Mary L. 2007. "From Websites to Wal-Mart: Youth, Identity Work, and the Queering of Boundary Publics in Small Town, USA." *American Studies* 48 (2): 49-59.
- Gray, Mary L. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York University Press.
- Goffman, Erving. 1959. *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Doubleday.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Space: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York University Press.
- Herring, Scott. 2010. *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*. New York: New York University Press.

- Howard, John (ed). 1997. *Carryin' On in the Lesbian and Gay South*. New York University Press.
- Howard, John. 1999. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Howard, Judith. 2000. "Social Psychology of Identities." *Annual Review of Sociology*. 26:367-393.
- Johnson, Colin R. 2006. "Rural Space: Queer America's Final Frontier." *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 52 (19).
- Johnston, Lynda and Robyn Longhurst. 2009. *Space, Place, and Sex: Geographies of Sexualities*. Pp 95-111. Rowman Littlefield Publishers.
- Kazyak, Emily. 2012. "Midwest of Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality." *Gender and Society* 26:6.
- Kazyak, Emily. 2011. "Disrupting Cultural Selves: Constructing Gay and Lesbian Identities in Rural Locales." *Qualitative Sociology*. 34: 561-581.
- Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky and Madeline Davis. 1993. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Lipp, Murray. 2013. "Myths and Stereotypes that Dehumanize Gay Men Must Be Challenged: Start With These 10!" < http://www.huffingtonpost.com/murray-lipp/gay-men-myths-stereotypes_b_3463172.html?utm_hp_ref=gay-voices >
- Mahaffy, Kimberly. 1996. "Cognitive Dissonance and Its Resolution: A Study of Lesbian Christians." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 35:392-402.
- Mann, Susan A. 2012. *Doing Feminist Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- McCall, George J and J.L. Simmons. 1978. *Identities and Interactions*. New York: The Free Press.
- McQueeney, Krista. 2009. "We are God's Children, Y'all: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Lesbian – and Gay- Affirming Congregations." *Social Problems*. 56 (1): 151-173. University of California Press.
- Newton, Ester. 1979. *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. University of Chicago Press.
- One Nation Under God*. 1993. Video by Teodoro Maniaci and Francine M. Rzeznik. First Run Features.
- Rodrigues, Eric and Suzanne Ouellette. 2000. "Gay and Lesbian Christians: Homosexual and Religious Identity Integration in the Members and Participants of a Gay Positive Church." *Journal for the Scientific Study in Religion* 39:333-347.
- Rubin, G. 1984. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." In *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by C. Vance, 267-319. Boston: Routledge.
- Sears, J. 1991. *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender, and the Journeys of the Spirit*. New York: Routledge.
- Sedgwick, E.K. 1986. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sedgwick, E.K. 1990. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Seidman, Steven. 2002. *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*. New York: Routledge.

- Stein, A. 2001. *A Stranger Next Door: The Story of a Small Community's Battle Over Sex, Faith, and Civil Rights*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Stossel, John and Gena Binkey. 2006. "Gay Stereotypes: Are They True?" <
<http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=2449185&page=1>>
- Stryker, Sheldon and Peter J. Burke. 2000. "The Past, Present, and Future of an Identity Theory." *Social Psychology Quarterly* 63 (4): 284-297. American Sociological Association.
- Terry, J. 1999. *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and the Place of Homosexuality in Modern Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Thumma, Scott. 1991. "Negotiating a Religious Identity: The Case of the Gay Evangelical." *Sociological Analysis*. 4:333-347.
- Tongson, Karen. 2011. *Relocations: Queer Suburban Imaginaries*. New York: New York University Press.
- Turner, Ralph H. 1962. "Role-Taking: Process Versus Conformity." *Human Behavior and Social Processes*. Pp 20-40. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Weber, Lynn. 2010. *Understanding Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality: A Conceptual Framework*. Second Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Weston, K. 1995. "Get Thee to the Big City: Sexual Imaginary and the Great Gay Migration." *GLQ* 2 (3): 253-278.
- Wilcox, Melissa. 2003. *Coming Out in Christianity: Religion, Identity, and Community*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Wolkomir, Michelle. 2006. *Be Not Deceived: The Sacred and Sexual Struggles of Gay and Ex-Gay Christian Men*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Yip, Andrew. 1997. "Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back." *British Journal of Sociology*. 48:113-127.

Appendix A:

Definition of Terms:

To better understand what this study will entail, certain terms need to be defined. This section will provide the reader with a few basic definitions that will be needed in the reading of this piece.

- 1) LGBT: LGBT is an acronym meaning Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender.
- 2) Christian: Within this study, I use a very broad definition of Christian. They may vary in denomination, but all follow the basic premises of Christianity referring to one God who is all-powerful, all knowing, and all good.
- 3) Ex-gay: refers to an individual who believes homosexuality is a choice. They therefore, chose not to be gay and have rejected any gay identity they may have once held.
- 4) Rural: I use this term to refer to anyone who identifies as being from or living in a rural space. This could refer to those who actually live in a rural place or those who live in non-rural areas but who identify as rural. A rural space or rural area geographically refers to areas that have a population of 50,000 or less (as defined by the USDA) and are not considered within a metropolitan area (as defined by a density of 1,000 persons per square mile).
- 5) Identity: Identity is a concept of you as a person. It is a way of understanding yourself and others through a set of meanings that are applied to the self. A lay definition could be said to be “who you are” ...meaning what goals, behaviors or preferences a person might hold.

Appendix B:

In this section, I will identify and quote the Biblical versus usually associated with homosexuality as well as where in the Bible they can be found. The following references are quoted here from the Harper Collins Study Bible, the new revised standard version.

- 1) "...But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house; and they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door." Genesis 19:4-11
- 2) "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination. You shall not have sexual relations with any animal and defile yourself with it, nor shall any woman give herself to an animal to have sexual relations with it; it is perversion." Leviticus 18:22-23
- 3) "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them. If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you." Leviticus 20:13-14
- 4) " While they were enjoying themselves, the men of the city, a perverse lot, surrounded the house, and started pounding on the door. They said to the old man, the master of the house, "Bring out the man who came into your house, so that we

may have intercourse with him.” And the man, the master of the house, went out to them and said to them, “No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this vile thing.” Judges 19:22-23

- 5) “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” Romans 1:26-27.
- 6) “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” First Corinthians 6:9-10
- 7) “This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.” First Timothy 1:9-11.

Appendix C:

Questions Investigated

Demographics:

- 1) Age
- 2) Sex
- 3) Race/Ethnicity
- 4) Partnered/ Marital Status
- 5) Education
- 6) Sexual Orientation
- 7) Religious Affiliation
- 8) Place of Residence / Population
- 9) Occupation
- 10) Parents' Occupation

Residence:

- 1) Where have you lived in the past?
- 2) Where did you grow up?
- 3) Do you prefer to live in a city environment or a country environment? Why?
- 4) How important is community involvement to you?
- 5) How active are you in your community?
- 6) Where do you see yourself living in the future?
- 7) What do you like about the idea of living in a rural area? If anything...
- 8) How gay friendly is the area you live now?
- 9) How "out" are you to your community?
- 10) How important is it to you to live in areas around other gay and lesbian people?

Religious Organizations:

- 1) Are you involved in any religious organizations?
- 2) How often do you participate in any religious activities?
- 3) What type of religious activities do you participate in?

- 4) Did you go to church back home/in your hometown?
- 5) What kind of church was it?
- 6) What kind of church do you go to now?
- 7) What do you like about it?

Identity:

- 1) How important is religion in your life?
- 2) What does religion mean to you?
- 3) How strong are your attachments to your religion?
- 4) Overall, how “out” are you in your life?
- 5) When do you “pass” or not come out? Why?
- 6) How important is being gay to your ideas about yourself?
- 7) What does it mean to be “country” to you?
- 8) How “country” do you consider yourself?
- 9) How strong is your attachment to the area you currently live?
- 10) What is it like to be gay or lesbian in rural areas?
- 11) How similar or different are your experiences from media representations of gay and lesbians? Life in rural areas? Gay and lesbians that live in the country?

Other:

- 1) How did you find out about this study?

Appendix D:

Table 2: Breakdown of Participant Responses

Name:	Age:	Sexual Identity:	Gender Identity:	Race:	Marital Status:	Occupation:	Religious Affiliation:
Adam	21	Gay	Male	White	Single	Student	N/A
Amos	33	Gay	Male	White	Partnered	Service Industry	Mainline Protestant
Daniel	21	Gay	Male	Native American	Single	Student	Mainline Protestant
David	24	Gay	Male	White	Single	Retail Industry	Evangelical
Deborah	31	Lesbian	Female	White	Single	Student	Mainline Protestant
Elijah	20	Gay	Male	White	Single	Student	Mainline Protestant
Esther	28	Lesbian	Female	White	Partnered	Health Care Industry	Protestant
Isaac	26	Gay	Male	Black & Latino	Partnered	Student	Protestant
Jacob	23	Gay	Male	White	Partnered	Service Industry	N/A
Jonah	48	Gay	Male	White	Single	Information Technology	Protestant
Joshua	19	Gay	Male	White	Single	Student	Mainline Protestant
Jude	32	Gay	Male	Black	Single	Student	Protestant
Leah	25	Lesbian	Female	White	Single	Service Industry	Mainline Protestant
Lydia	51	Lesbian	Female	White	Partnered	Health Care Industry	Protestant
Matthew	22	Gay	Male	White	Single	Student	Evangelical
Noah	23	Gay	Male	White	Partnered	Retail Industry	Protestant
Paul	22	Gay	Male	Hispanic	Single	Student	Protestant
Phoebe	21	Lesbian	Female	Black	Single	Retail industry	Evangelical
Rachel	18	Lesbian	Female	White	Single	Student	Protestant
Rebekah	22	Lesbian	Female	White	Single	Student	Protestant
Ruth	35	Bisexual	Female	White	Partnered	Academia	Protestant
Samuel	20	Gay	Male	White	Single	Student	Evangelical
Sarah	27	Bisexual	Female	White	Single	Student	Protestant
Simon	46	Gay	Male	White	Partnered	Information Technology	Evangelical

Appendix E:

***University Committee for the Protection
of Human Subjects in Research
University of New Orleans***

Campus Correspondence

Principal Investigator: D'Lane Compton
Co-Investigator: Brandi Woodell
Date: May 29, 2012
Protocol Title: "Identity and Country Spaces: Exploring the experiences of
gay and lesbians in rural areas"
IRB#: 05May12

The IRB has deemed that the research and procedures are compliant with the University of New Orleans and federal guidelines. The above referenced human subjects protocol has been reviewed and approved using expedited procedures (under 45 CFR 46.116(a) category (7)).

Approval is only valid for one year from the approval date. Any changes to the procedures or protocols must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation. Use the IRB number listed on this letter in all future correspondence regarding this proposal.

If an adverse, unforeseen event occurs (e.g., physical, social, or emotional harm), you are required to inform the IRB as soon as possible after the event.

Best wishes on your project!

Sincerely,



Robert D. Laird, Ph.D., Chair
UNO Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research

Vita

Brandi Woodell grew up in Vivian, Louisiana. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Sociology and Philosophy from Centenary College of Louisiana in Shreveport in 2011. After graduating she moved to New Orleans, Louisiana to attend the University of New Orleans in pursuit of a Master of Arts degree in Sociology. She will join the graduate program in Sociology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the fall to train for her PhD.