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## Conflict between Religious Beliefs and Sexuality: An Autoethnography

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## Conflict between Religious Beliefs and Sexuality: An Autoethnography

### Abstract

Despite the shift in attitudes in religious institutions toward homosexuals in the United States, there are some religions that continue to view same-sex behavior as a deviant and damning sin. For many, religious beliefs and values provide meaning and impact personal identity. Using autoethnography, I will explicate my own experiences with religious institutions and the ongoing conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality. I will discuss messages received from the Pentecostal church, family, and Latino community, and how these messages influenced my human development and emotional well-being. I show that internalization of the principles taught by the Pentecostal Church triggered a conflict when I became aware of my homosexuality. In this article, I discuss the mental health challenges I faced, and strategies I used to reconcile conflicting identities. I also discuss the use of autoethnography in social work and its implications in social work research and practice.

### Keywords

Latino, Homosexuality, Religion, Autoethnography, Social Work

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## **Conflict between Religious Beliefs and Sexuality: An Autoethnography**

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*Despite the shift in attitudes in religious institutions toward homosexuals in the United States, there are some religions that continue to view same-sex behavior as a deviant and damning sin. For many, religious beliefs and values provide meaning and impact personal identity. Using autoethnography, I will explicate my own experiences with religious institutions and the ongoing conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality. I will discuss messages received from the Pentecostal church, family, and Latino community, and how these messages influenced my human development and emotional well-being. I show that internalization of the principles taught by the Pentecostal Church triggered a conflict when I became aware of my homosexuality. In this article, I discuss the mental health challenges I faced, and strategies I used to reconcile conflicting identities. I also discuss the use of autoethnography in social work and its implications in social work research and practice. Keywords: Latino, Homosexuality, Religion, Autoethnography, Social Work*

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Using Ellis and Bochner's (2000) autoethnographic style of writing, I will provide the reader with a comprehensive description of my experiences with religious institutions and the ongoing conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality. While writing this article is cathartic—it is my hope that sharing my personal account might give comfort to those who may have encountered similar circumstances. It is important to note that this paper in no way degrades religion or those who represent it, but solely for the purpose of presenting a narrative that “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

### **Methodology**

An autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to explore his or her lived experiences through writing and connect it to social and cultural interactions (Custer, 2014). This approach can be used to extend understanding of a social phenomenon through the author's account (Wall, 2006). Through autoethnography, the researcher “helps answer research questions relating to an experience that is not well understood or lived by others” (Kelley, 2014, p. 347). This method lets the writer be both the researcher and the participant. As a subject, the individual examines his or her own experience through “self-reflection and creative expression, such as narrative storytelling and prosaic discourse” (Eichler, 2011, p. 191).

In this autoethnographic analysis I will use my personal experience in narrative form to describe and analyze cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences as a sexual minority in a religious environment (Holman-Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013). The use of the autoethnographic method is appropriate for this study as it seeks to explore my lived experience as a Latino gay man with the Pentecostal church, family, and Latino community. As Warren-Gordon and Mayes (2017) note in their autoethnographic account, the self-narrative autoethnographic method lets writers “reflect on and question their lived experiences in the context of reality in which they live” (p. 2358).

The idea for this paper came from my own pains of growing up in a religious environment that through their messages, made me feel conflicted about my religious and sexual identity. I would hear messages of how God was a merciful and loving supernatural being, while also hearing messages about how He condemned those who practice same sex behavior to hell. Interested in researching this further, I discussed my idea with my clinical seminar professor, Dr. S. It was my last semester as a graduate social work student and I was thinking about applying to several doctoral programs. Understanding that many institutions expected potential students to have published, I expressed my interest in conducting a study that would investigate the relationship between Latino gay adolescents and young adults and religion. During our conversation, I explained to Dr. S that attending a religious organization as a Latino gay male was extremely challenging, making me vulnerable and exposed to a significant amount of rejection from my community.

I could tell by her facial expression that she was excited about my interest in publication. She informed me that the topic was good and certainly one of importance, particularly in the field of social work, but she was concerned that it would be too big of a research project in a short amount of time. She suggested that I write about my own lived experience as a Latino gay male in a Christian setting. She recommended that I look into autoethnography. She explained that an autoethnography provides individuals with a platform to share their lives, through their account, which allows writers, to be their own research subject. I was immediately intrigued. I mean, this was what I wanted to do: represent individuals who are often marginalized and degraded because of their sexual identity.

I spent the next several months researching autoethnographies. I was both fascinated and overwhelmed by each author's autoethnographic accounts. Their narratives were informative, heart-wrenching, and empowering. Reading their stories motivated me to share my personal experience while revealing the cultural and social milieus attached to the experience (Witkin, 2014).

To gather data for my own autoethnographic account, I used self-generated personal memory. Chang (2008) states that personal memory is a building block of autoethnography, noting that the past "gives contexts to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past" (p.71). She does warn that one's memory can sometimes fade away. Despite cautioning her readers about precariousness of one's memory, she asserts that using one's own recall can be helpful as it allows the writer to tap into a wealth of information of self. Recalling my past experiences allowed me to reflect and give meaning to those experiences discussed later in this paper. While collecting personal data, I was able to return to these past experiences emotionally. Ellis (1999) calls this process, "emotional recall," which one can "imagine being back in the scene emotionally and physically" (p. 211). She posits that if a writer can dig deep and relive one's own past reflectively, then he or she can remember other details.

I used chronicling in efforts to collect data for this study. Chang (2008) notes that chronicling the past allows researchers to sequentially document events from their lived experiences, using their memories. Just like Wall (2006), I relied on my memories of my past experiences. My autoethnographic journey, although it reflects many years of my life, took a span of 3 years (2016-2019) of documenting significant events that had a substantial impact on my life. I wrote experiences that I am sure were true while omitting memories that were distorted or blurry. While chronicling event and experiences, I relived some moments of my life that were unpleasant, causing emotional distress. Although I experienced some negative feelings while writing this paper, I found it to be very therapeutic.

In writing this autoethnographic account, I understood how having multiple identities had in one way or another, impacted my life. To provide a meaningful structure to my data, I began to analyze the events and experiences I had documented chronologically. I read and reread the data I collected over the past 3 years and made notes, coded, and highlighted portions

of the text that stood out. Chang (2008) posits that “data analysis and interpretation are the process through which the data become a cogent account of observed phenomena” (p. 126). During this process, I identified several reoccurring themes from the data: gender norms, religion, familial strain, homophobia, and its adverse effects. These themes illustrate the impact that past experiences, relationships, and culture had on my life.

### **Using Autoethnography in Social Work**

The use of autoethnography in the field of social work is valuable as it provides “important, substantive information about topics germane to social workers” (Witkin, 2014, p. 16). Through the use of autoethnography, I sought to use my lived experience to shed light on the struggles gay men might experience when faced with the ongoing conflict between their religious and sexual identities in the Latino and religious community. The goal of this study was two-fold: to contribute knowledge to the social work profession in efforts to bridge the gap between research and practice, and to help professionals efficiently work with their clients who share similar experiences.

Witkin (2014) asserts that in social work, autoethnography provides an “opportunity for people to contest their stigmatizing labels” (p. 13). In my narrative, I will attempt to disseminate awareness on social and cultural attitudes towards gay men that perpetuate the stigma surrounding homosexuality in Latino and religious communities. Witkin views autoethnography as necessary in the field of social work as it enhances the opportunity for discovery and action. He writes:

For social workers, autoethnography provides a form of inquiry congruent with the values and commitments of the profession. There is no pretense of neutrality but an exploration of how we construct and represent realities in particular contexts while at the same time knowing that any telling will be partial and subject to revision. Thus these constructions and representations are not expressed as isolated, acontextual acts but are connected to the material conditions and social categories that inscribe our lives. Applying this kind of telling to people whose representation or silencing has been controlled by others can be an important source of new information. (p. 12)

As social workers, we advocate for our clients and become “their voice” as they are often subjected to ostracism. I, as the researcher, use autoethnography to illustrate how marginalization could have a negative impact on members of vulnerable social groups (i.e., gay men). Having discussed autoethnography in social work, I now provide an analysis of my lived experiences in narrative form, and share both story as data and analysis of the experiences (Eichler, 2011, p.191).

### **Data**

I grew up in Brooklyn, New York, where my family and I attended a nearby Pentecostal church. Pentecostals are one of the fastest growing religious groups in the world and are known for having “Gifts of the Holy Spirit,” such as speaking in tongues, healing, and receiving revelations from God (Garneau & Schwadel, 2013). Our church was the only religious institution in the area that catered to the Hispanic Christian community. Homosexuality was often the main topic of discussion during Sunday services. According to Garneau and Schwadel

(2013), Pentecostals considers the Bible as the literal word of God, which “extends to social and cultural viewpoints, leading them to oppose homosexuality” (p. 340).

I remember the pastor speaking passionately against homosexuality, while members of the congregation would validate his sermon with “Amen” and “Hallelujah.” The two most important messages received from church were that same-sex behavior was abhorrent and wicked. One particular Sunday, with a microphone in one hand and the Bible in the other, the pastor spoke about the story of Sodom and Gomorrah and how both of these cities were destroyed by fire and brimstone to punish the boys and men who engaged in homosexual behaviors. Being at a point in my life where I had an inkling that I liked boys, I was engulfed by an overwhelming amount of fear and shame. I remember slumping back in the pew and wondering if I too would burn for these feelings that consumed me within.

I was 10 years old when I first realized that I was attracted to the same sex. Having these feelings was very confusing, especially since I was cognizant of the church’s negative perception of homosexuality. I normalized my erotic thoughts as a phase—and as such—it would ultimately fade away. Eventually, when I got older, it became apparent that my sexual desires for men only grew stronger. Accepting my sexuality was difficult, as I felt that I would be rejecting my religion. Pietkiewicz and Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek (2016) note that many individuals who self-identify as homosexuals have “strong feelings about their religious beliefs and sexual identity, and refuse to sacrifice (reject) either part of their self” (p. 1574). The thought of leaving a religion that taught me about love, friendship, and family, despite its negative attitude towards homosexuality—was not a part of me that I was ready to abandon. Experiencing conflict between my religious upbringing and my gay identity made me question my sexuality. I began to experience a cognitive distortion that led me to believe that if God chose for me to be gay, a topic of much controversy, then I must have done something wrong, and now I am being punished for it.

Research shows that religious teachings often shape Christians’ beliefs systems. Since many religions vehemently oppose same-sex behavior, individuals begin to internalize these beliefs and view sexual minorities as sinful people (Baker & Brauner-Otto, 2015). There was no doubt that Pentecostal principles strongly affected the worldview and opinions shared by my family members. The church’s ideologies were always deeply embedded in our home. It seemed nearly impossible to avoid long, uncomfortable discussions about homosexuality during family gatherings. My mom would often make comments regarding same-sex behavior and how it is an abomination. My uncles who were also heavily involved in the church would often chime in and validate my mother’s statement. Conversations like these further added to my feelings of shame and fear of condemnation.

Concealing my sexuality in a heteronormative culture, in which heterosexuality is celebrated and enforced created a tremendous amount of stress for me. Going on dates was difficult as I was scared that someone would know that I was out on a date with another male. When I would meet with friends, I would avoid any physical contact, such as hugs because I would fear someone would single me out as gay. Though public attitudes in the United States have become increasingly accepting of same-sex sexuality over time, homophobia is pervasive and same-sex sexuality continues to be stigmatized. Researchers found that aggression towards LGBTQ continues to be an issue in the U.S, stating that they face continued verbal insults and abuse (Daboin, Peterson, & Parrott, 2015). As a gay male, I was no stranger to verbal insults. In 2016, I was out with friends at a gay bar. As I exited the establishment with my friends, we were met with several men standing outside calling us “faggots” and yelling “How much do you charge for a hand job?” and “Who is going to be my bitch?” Concerned for our safety, we returned to the bar until it was safe to go home. Incidents like these were a constant reminder of heteronormative culture in American society.

As a Latino, I felt double the pressure of having to be heterosexual as my culture emphasizes masculinity. To be gay or to exhibit feminine characteristics in Latino culture is unacceptable. Words like “maricon” and “pajaro” (faggot) were frequently used in the Latin community as a way to emasculate men who are gay or showed womanlike mannerisms. Sandfort, Melendez and Diaz (2007), assert that Latino men who self-identify as gay and display effeminate manners report high levels of abuse from their community.

At school, I was regularly teased, bullied and publicly humiliated because of effeminate behaviors. I often missed school to avoid cruel treatment, such as getting hit over the head with a textbook in class or getting my lunch thrown on the floor while peers called me a “sissy.” Because of negative religious and cultural understandings about homosexuality, it was difficult for me to discuss adverse incidents at school to anyone in my family or at church out of fear of being ridiculed. Literature shows that “negative religious beliefs about homosexuality, shared by the community, can arouse prejudice against sexual minorities and contribute to experiencing the religious group as oppressive” (Pietkiewicz & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1573). Aware of the negative attitude the church and my family had on homosexuality, I painfully kept it to myself throughout my adolescence. Guarnero and Flaskerud (2008) note, “gay subcultures may not develop in Latino communities because of severe stigma, hatred, and even violence, and also for economic reasons” (p. 668).

Often, Latino men are discreet with their same-sex encounters largely due to the stigma and homophobia present in their community. Guarnero and Flaskerud (2008) found that Latino gay men practice concealment and denial to avoid negative attitudes towards homosexuality from their families. According to Diaz (1998), Latino men who identify as gay present an “enormous challenge to the relationship with family members, many whom see homosexuality as a source of shame or dishonor for the whole family” (p. 7). Understanding the negative attitudes towards homosexuality, as a gay Latino, I preferred to “stay in the closet.”

I spent my teenage years hiding my sexuality. I lied about going to a friend’s birthday dinner, when I was actually going to a gay club. I lied about staying at a friend’s house, when I was really staying at a guy’s house who I just met. I lied about having girlfriends, when I was really hooking up with heterosexual married men. I was very creative in concealing my gay identity. During family get-togethers, I would attempt to impress the male members of the family by telling them that I was involved with a female, and would provide them with sexually explicit pseudo scenarios. The conversation would continue as they cheered me on and gave me advice on satisfying women.

Living a double life to please both my family and community was emotionally and mentally exhausting. I tried many times to pray it (homosexuality) away, but my desires for men intensified. I was beyond frustrated. I could not help but feel deviant, immoral, and a complete sinner. I remember that during religious lessons, homosexuality would be described as a spirit (some of the overtly religious individuals would call it a demon of homosexuality), and the only way to be freed from this spirit, was to repent. Montoya (2000) states “with the prospects of sure damnation, the church must with compassionate conviction declare such to be a sin, yet a sin which—when repented of—is covered by the grace of God displayed in the propitiatory sacrifice of His Son Jesus Christ upon the cross of Calvary” (p. 158). There were times when I pleaded and even negotiated with God so that I could be straight. I believed that only then would I be freed of “demons” and be able to live my life as a “normal” heterosexual man.

***Heavenly father, I am so confused. I have been having such impure thoughts, thoughts that do not reflect what you represent. I am always hearing that being gay is a sin and that you punish those who are. I would never want to question what you do or why you do it, but why am I gay? If it’s so wrong to***

***be gay, why me? What can I do to be delivered from this sin? What would it take for me to be cleansed from this demon of homosexuality? Father, I don't want to be a sinner. If you free me from this unnatural addiction, I will go to church every day. I will make sure to speak your name and share my testimony of how you saved me. Please, father, help me.***

Research examining the relationship between religion and suicide risk among gay individuals found that religiously affiliated sexual minorities were associated with higher levels of internalized homophobia, putting them at risk of having suicidal ideation (Kralovec et al., 2014). Overwhelmed with emotional turmoil, I began to experience suicidal ideations. I never attempted suicide, but the thoughts were always present. I would often wonder, what would happen if I were to take a bottle of prescription pills? Would anyone miss this “homo”? But then I remembered that the church also considered suicide a sin, and eventually, these passive suicidal ideations would subside. Chae and Ayala (2010) found that Latinos gay men are more likely to report recent suicide attempts because of interpersonal conflict.

By the time I was 17 years old, I was very active in the church's functions. I would help organize events, sing in the choir and participate in Bible studies on Sundays. That was around the same time that the rumors started circulating in church about me being gay. Shortly after the rumors had started, I was discouraged from participating in activities and little by little, male peers that were once my friends, began to distance themselves from me. Parents who often welcomed me to their homes had stopped inviting me over. Boys at church would get in a group and begin to laugh at me. Belonging to a conservative religious community, I understood what was happening. As Christians, they were not allowed to have social contact with me due to the reinforced intolerance towards homosexuals (Baker & Brauner-Otto, 2015). One day after a Sunday service, a teenage boy asked me why I “spoke and moved my hands like that”? I knew what he meant, I mean, that's the same question I would frequently get from family members. Embarrassed, I just walked away.

Shortly after my negative interaction with the teenage churchgoer, a friend of my mother's from church called me to address the rumors. Not once did he ask if the rumors were true. Instead, he started the conversation as if I had admitted to being gay. He said: Carlos, you know that God made a man and a woman for companionship and procreation, right? To be with the same sex is not ideal and one needs to repent. He continued the conversation by disclosing that he was gay when he was younger. He stated that once he confessed his sins to the Lord and accepted the Lord as his Savior, he was saved and no longer gay. He informed me that the Lord could do the same for me. He began to pray for me and asked for my soul to be saved. The phone call was no longer than 30 minutes but seemed like an eternity. After the conversation, I was stunned and began to cry. I was horrified; my secret was out without me verbalizing it. Like many of my friends who struggled with their gay identity, I isolated myself. I rarely participated in church activities or family functions. It was difficult to maintain positive relationships with those around me, as I was moody, dismissive, and depressed. I was scared that someone would wonder why I seemed so depressed and figured out that it was because I was gay, which further added to my anxiety.

I was 20 when my older brother outed me during an intense argument. I remember the words he uttered in such anger and passion: “That's why you are a faggot. You are dirty and you probably have AIDS.” I was furious that he revealed something personal that was told to him in confidence. I immediately rushed to my bedroom, locked my door and let out a scream. I was red, incredibly warm, and had a difficult time breathing. Within one minute, there was a loud knock on the door. It was my mother. I froze with fear. I knew that once I opened that door, I would be assaulted with the question that I had desperately dodged for years. “Carlos, open the door. I need to speak to you. Carlos, open now!”

I struggled as I attempted to muster every bit of courage before I could have opened the door and let her in. I could not stop shaking. “Carlos, are you gay?” she asked. With tears in my eyes, I yelled: “Yes, Yes, I am.” In disbelief, my mother sat on the edge of the bed. There was a brief moment of silence, which seemed like an eternity. I remember her taking a deep breath before continuing to speak. Her eyes were intense and fixed on me. “Carlos, you were raised with Christian values. You know what the scripture states.” All I could do at the moment was cry and say, “I know, I know. I would understand if you do not want me here.” She leaned over and said: “You are my son and I love you, but you do know the word of God, and one day, you will have to take it up with Him.” After finding out about my sexuality, conversations between my mother and I were very awkward. It took 6 months after the incident for us to be able to have a discussion without any tension.

Looking back, I believe my mother had known about my sexuality before my brother exposed me. I remember as a child, my mother telling me about an incident where I had “sleepwalked.” She stated that I was holding a Bible while saying, “The devil is a liar, I'm not gay, I am not gay.” I was in complete shock. I was not ready to express my same-sex impulses to my mother. I acted surprised and agreed with her that the devil is, in fact, a liar. As I reflect on the incident, I consider that this was my mother's way of telling me that being gay is the devil's work. By saying this, she had planted a seed to establish that I am not to be gay.

Once the news of me being gay was out, it spread like wildfire. I was known as the “maricon” of the family. I soon began to be the center of homosexual jokes at family parties. I would be referred to as the “lady” of the house. Inappropriate questions about my sexuality, the men I was involved with and my sexual position were often asked. Familiar stereotypes were used to describe me. For example, I was no longer able to babysit my male cousins because there was a possibility that I was a pervert who abused children. Another stereotype was that I must have been “sick,” as there's a formulaic generalization that gay people do not use protection during sex. To make matters worse, I had male family members falsely accuse me of seducing them.

I stopped speaking to my brother after he disclosed my sexuality in front of my family. Distraught, I began to drink quite heavily. I engaged in reckless behaviors that were promiscuous and dangerous. Disappointed with my conduct, I began to self-loathe. I started to view myself the way society did, a walking abomination—a faggot. I hated looking in the mirror because when I did, I would see someone who was unrecognizable—someone who was depraved and full of shame and guilt. I was angry at the church and my family for embedding all their religious beliefs onto me. I was equally as angry with my friends who shared the same identity as me. I blamed them for enabling my gayness. I believed that if I had not engaged in gay-related activities with them (i.e., gay bars and clubs), that there could have been a chance for me to reject my gay identity and live a heterosexual life with a family to call my own.

In church, I would regularly receive mixed messages. A common saying among members in the congregation was “love the sinner, hate the sin.” The idea behind this message left me conflicted. How can I feel valued and loved as an individual while simultaneously feeling devalued and hated due to my sexual orientation (Paul, 2017). I often struggled to understand how God could have loved me while hating who I was. I was constantly reminded during church services that my interest in the same sex was not the “Christian” way.

Growing up in church I always heard that God represents love, kindness, and compassion. It was hard to accept that message since I would often get told that I was going to hell for being gay. I repeatedly questioned how someone who represents all of these great attributes, might not like me because of my lifestyle. It was a daily struggle to understand my role in the church. When people would say that my way of life was a sin, I would often rationalize it by saying: “I'm not harming anyone.” It was my attempt in neutralizing the stain that comes with the word sin. Studies have shown that gay individuals who attend church often

walk away from their faith due to the mixed messages and rejection they received from their religious communities (Paul, 2017).

It made me so angry to know that the church did not accept me for who I was. I mean, I have prayed, participated in services and church activities; I have fed the homeless; consoled those who were hurting, and prayed for those who were sick. I have honored my mother and father, and I have kept a close relationship with the church. How could it be that I, someone who contributed positively to society could be seen as a pervert, a no good for nothing individual because of my sexuality? I often defended my gay identity by mentioning all the good I have done and even minimized the “sin” by comparing it to what I believed to be much extreme, such as killing, stealing, and raping. But to them (religion, family, and community)—a sin is a sin.

Hurt by the church’s doctrine, I decided to participate no longer in church activities. Although I was not a fan of their (church’s) stance on homosexuality, I held on tight to my faith.

In 2012, I began to work on my bachelor’s degree. After experiencing homophobia from my family and community, I decided to major in sociology. I believed that if I were to study about society, I would have a better understanding as to why people behave the way they do. I enrolled in a college in Upstate New York known for having a heavy LGBTQ<sup>1</sup> presence.

Attending a college that supported the community was important to me, as I did not have positive experiences from previous educational institutions. It was incredible to see how open people on campus were about their sexuality.

Unfortunately, my time of feeling safe and secure was short-lived as members of the local Baptist Church, known for their anti-gay protests would frequently rally on the school’s lawn. They would yell anti-gay slurs while holding signs that read “faggots are going to hell,” “being gay is a sin,” “repent now.” I understood the church’s anti-gay attitude, but to see how aggressive these protesters were, was very scary. I have heard stories of peers who were assaulted by protesters in the past. This incident triggered memories of past messages I received at church as a child, causing, all of my negative feelings towards the church to come back. I was so angry that people would come to what I had considered my haven and disrupt it with their hate. These members were known for their anti-gay antics. God hates fags was their main message. No doubt their message was more aggressive than the church I grew up in, but their message was the same: being gay was wicked and all gays need to repent from their sin. This message makes it okay to normalize the hate towards the LGBTQ community. Words matter, and in this case, their words were hurtful and sent a message so powerful that it promotes the notion that identifying as homosexual is a stigma. Paul (2017) note that “religious traditions have often been connected to and in some cases directly supportive of acts of violence, which can often lead to bashing and murder” (pp. 88-89)

After completing my bachelors program in 2014, I experienced many disappointments. I left college the same way I went in—confused. I was almost confident that after graduating I would have an understanding of human society and their interactions, but that was not the case at all. Upon reflection, I realized that maybe I did not need to understand society but attempt to help those who have experienced the same thing that I have experienced (i.e., homophobia, discrimination, oppression).

In 2014, I began pursuing a graduate degree in social work at a local Jesuit university in New York City. This university was my first choice as it was one of the top schools of social work here in the city. Knowing that it was a Jesuit institution, I was very anxious about being a student there, worrying about possible negative interactions with faculty and peers. After years of being out of the closet, I had to jump back in, at least temporarily for the admission process. When applying to the university, I carefully crafted my statement of purpose to ensure that my

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<sup>1</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning

gay identity did not reveal itself in the essay. I was almost sure that if I slipped, I would undoubtedly get denied admission. One of the questions asked when applying to the program was, what made you want to pursue a master's degree in social work? The answer was simple—years of rejection and denunciation from family and the community because of my sexual identity. But how would that look to a school that takes pride in their religious ideologies? It was then, at that moment where I was not true to myself. So, I wrote about the next thing I could think of—racism. I wrote about how I experienced xenophobia in the United States because of my ethnicity. Although true, I did not think racism impacted me negatively as much as homophobia. After all, I was never told that I would burn in hell for being Latino.

It was not until my last year of graduate school when I was able to regain some level of trust and respect for the church and those who represent it. Many of the faculty and students were gay. Although my anxieties decreased, I was still not convinced that the school was fully accepting of the LGBTQ community. I wanted to explore dissonance between religion and sexuality further. So, I took a course called spirituality in social work practice. I remember the first day of class; my anxiety level went from 5 to 10 almost immediately after seeing the professor walk in dressed in clerical clothing. To both my surprise and dismay, my professor was a priest! It was too late to drop the class; I had already paid my tuition, and I was scheduled to graduate by the end of the semester. "Yes, I am a priest," said the professor as he chuckled.

Throughout the semester he referenced homosexuality, but not in a negative way. He was open-minded and very empathic towards the LGBTQ community. He even expressed his dissatisfaction with the way the church approached homosexuality. The more I got comfortable in the class, the more I was able to talk about my lived experiences and not worry about being judged.

For many, religion can serve as a source of coping skills by "providing meaning, sense of control, comfort or support, it can also create challenges and lead to distress when its principles conflict with other aspects of life or identity" (Pietkiewicz & Kolodziejczyk-Skrzypek, 2016, p. 1573). However, as a gay individual, I lost the opportunity to receive support. Instead, I received judgment and condemnation. The church was convinced that my lifestyle was an abomination and that I needed to pray and call on Jesus so that I could be "saved" or "cured." Because of these beliefs, many individuals are left feeling unwanted and forsaken. Having the priest at school validate my feelings and provide compassion sparked a glimmer of hope that perhaps little by little, the church's attitude regarding homosexuality is shifting.

Until then, I continued to remain disconnected from religious communities to avoid further rejection. Although I stopped participating in spiritual activities, I continue to have a relationship with God through faith and prayer. While I still struggle to understand the church's position on homosexuality, I remain optimistic that in the future, the church will fully embrace those who are different and provide them with the respect, love, and acceptance needed, regardless of their ideologies.

While I have not completely reconciled with my conflicting identities, I have been able to restore the relationship with my family. Although they still have their opinions regarding homosexuality, they have done well in including me in family gatherings and making me feel wanted and valued. Although it has been a trying and very emotional journey for me, I have come to appreciate and most importantly, accept who I am. Experiencing a positive encounter with a Jesuit priest and witnessing my family's progressive and tolerable attitude towards the LGBTQ community, have helped me overcome my alienation from the church.

Currently, I am a mental health therapist. As a clinician, I work with adolescents who struggle with their sexuality and family members who struggle with understanding it (homosexuality), which often results in familial strain. Hearing their stories about rejection, oppression, and marginalization, brings back feelings of when I struggled with my sexuality;

resulting in countertransference. As a therapist, I make sure to validate their feelings and provide them with empathy, while being careful not to over-identify with them. I am aware that as providers, we must check in with our feelings, allowing us to remain ethical and professional.

Through my work as a social worker, I realized that my clients are no different than I. Their personal stories might have differed, but they raised my consciousness that there were so many others in the community who suffered, and continue to suffer, as I. I hope that as you read my narrative, you were able to raise your own consciousness and awareness of how prejudice can influence thought and behavior (McLaurin, 2003). By sharing my personal experiences, I hope to instill readers with similar lived experiences with a glimmer of hope and to assure them that they are not alone in a world that makes it difficult for them to be themselves and be who they are.

### **Implication for Social Work**

This study has significant implications for future social work research and practice. Using autoethnography as a method of inquiry, I discussed my experiences with social stigma, harassment, and discrimination. I also shared examples of how homophobic acts from the church and my family deleteriously impacted my emotional and mental health. Averett and Soper (2011) posit that researchers benefit from the use of autoethnographic investigation as it fosters insight and self-awareness. Through this approach, social workers can “improve their ability to work well with clients and increase their potential for client and participant empathy” (p. 372).

Using autoethnography could assist social workers in having a better understanding of the population they serve. For example, working with Latino gay men who struggle with both their sexuality and religious beliefs. Future research should continue to explore the role of Latino gay men in a religious setting and how the church's perception of homosexuality might impact an individual.

### **Conclusion**

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to investigate and analyze his or her lived experiences. Using this approach can provide a platform for individuals whose voices are often marginalized (Warren-Gordon & Mayes, 2017). In this study, I shared my experiences with religious institutions and the ongoing conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality. It is my hope that sharing my experience could start a conversation about this social phenomenon and encourage others to contribute to the discussion (Carlisle, 2015).

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