Crisis of Faith in Gay Christians:
An Examination Using Transformational Learning Theory
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This paper examines the social work practice issue of Christian, homosexual individuals facing a crisis of faith. The phrase crisis of faith, though commonly used in scholarly text and popular culture, is not clearly defined in religious, philosophical, or sociological literature. This paper, therefore, will refer to the Wikipedia (2005) definition:

> Crisis of faith is a term commonly applied to periods of intense doubt and internal conflict about one's preconceived beliefs or life decisions. A crisis of faith . . . demands reconciliation or reevaluation before one can continue believing in whichever tenet is in doubt or continuing in whatever life path is in question. (Para 1)

This practice issue will be examined using Mezirow's (1991) transformational learning theory, which is particularly pertinent because it focuses on making new meanings during and after a crisis. There is relatively little scholarly research on this subject, especially from a social work perspective. Furthermore, there is almost no literature analyzing this issue using transformational learning theory.

Review of the Literature

Literature about Gay Christians

Literature is available on how "people of faith understand the intersection between homosexuality and religion" (Hodge, 2005, p. 207). In addition, various churches and denominations publish statements regarding their beliefs and stances on homosexuality. However, literature that is more significant to this practice issue discusses homosexuals' understanding of Christianity. For example, Yip (1998), in his empirical research, found that almost all homosexuals in the study "consider the Church hierarchy . . . to be homophobic" (p. 49). There is also an abundance of literature on how gay Christians have made sense of their sexuality and spirituality (Buchanan et al., 2001; Sears, 1991; Shallenberger, 1996; Webster, 1998; Yip, 1997, 2003). Articles and books cover information about challenges gay Christians face regarding their sexuality and spirituality.

Literature about Transformational Learning Theory

Transformational learning theory is included in almost every text on adult education and adult learning theories (Clark, 1993; Baumgartner, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). These books tend to focus on the theory's use in adult education, with specific examples from this

discipline. In addition, many texts have been written specifically about transformational learning theory (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998) and empirical studies have been completed using this theory as a framework (Courtenay et al., 1998; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002; Taylor, 2001). Finally, descriptive articles provide continued explanation of the theory and its practical applications (Grabove, 1997; Mezirow, 1997).

Statement of the Problem

Many gay individuals face discrimination from Christians who believe that homosexuality is immoral (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001). Yip (2003) explained that "the Bible serves as the most powerful and fundamental basis for the Churches' prohibition of the 'practice' of homosexuality" (p. 138). For example, the Bible instructs men in Leviticus 18:22 (New International Version) not to "lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable".

But what about homosexuals who grow up as devout Christians? How do they reconcile their sexuality and their spirituality? This struggle often hinders gay Christians from admitting their sexuality to themselves, their friends, and their families. Savin-Williams (1990) explained that "the term 'coming out' is frequently used to refer to the process of identifying oneself as gay" (p. 30). This progression includes initial awareness of feeling different, testing and exploring sexuality, accepting sexuality, and integrating sexuality with other aspects of identity (Savin-Williams). In one study, "self-disclosure was highest when there was relatively little attachment to a church" (Savin-Williams, p. 116). Although the coming out process mirrors the development described by transformational learning theory, literature about gay Christians does not make this connection (Buchanan et al., 2001; Savin-Williams, 1990; Shallenberger, 1996; Yip, 1997, 2003).

In coming out, Buchanan et al. (2001) explain that Christian homosexuals either choose between their sexuality and spirituality or find some way to integrate these two parts of themselves. In choosing between the two, gay Christians will either: abstain from homosexual behaviors and "forsake all homosexuality" (Buchanen et al., p. 440) or reject religion and the church. On the other hand, in integration, gay Christians will form new beliefs about their faith that include acceptance of homosexuality. Furthermore, they may find congregations and religious institutions that approve of being gay (Yip, 1997). The process of resolving these issues can be mentally and emotionally difficult. It can last for years, or even "for the rest of their lives" (Yip, p. 105). In addition, "many gay Christians, having internalized the conventional Church teachings that are negative toward homosexuality, experience a great deal of guilt and shame. This form of internalized homophobia is debilitating and painful" (Yip, p. 103). Guilt and shame are illustrated in Shallenberger's (1996) article through the words of Gerald, who says:

> Somewhere down inside me I realized, this is what I am, this is what I want. And that began this struggle. Because all my Christian upbringing told me that because of what I'd just done, I was going to burn in hell forever. If I stayed this way, it was just nothing but death for me. (p. 204)

Summary of the Theory/Model

Transformational learning theory, proposed by Mezirow in 1978, "is about change—dramatic, fundamental change in the way we see ourselves and the world in which we live" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 318). It includes three steps: critical reflection, discourse, and action. In addition, "the process is most often set in motion by a *disorienting dilemma*" (p. 321). Such "an acute/internal/external personal crisis" (Taylor, 1998, p. 41) sets into motion a process of transformation and change.

Critical Reflection

Critical reflection includes an assessment of prior assumptions about self, others, and the world. Existing assumptions and meanings are usually those created in childhood, and may stem from authority figures and friends. During this phase, "critique and reassessment of the adequacy of prior learning, leading potentially to its negation, are the hallmarks of reflection" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 110). In transformative learning, individuals utilize critical reflection to make new meanings by synthesizing old meanings with new ideas learned through the crisis.

Discourse

After critical reflection, new created meanings are validated using discourse. This step is used "to test whether our new meanings are true or authentic" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 322). Through discourse with other people, individuals will analyze, deliberate, and affirm new ideas. Although relationships are an important component to this process, discourse can occur alone. Regardless, at the end of this phase, "understanding is arrived through the weighing of evidence and measuring the insight and strength of supporting arguments" (Taylor, 1998, p. 10). In other words, individuals will be able to precisely identify and defend their new beliefs.

Taking Action

The final step in transformative learning is to take action. This action is prescribed by the disorienting dilemma and the new created meanings. Individuals will somehow transform their lives based on these new meanings. Moreover, "that individual transformation leads to social action and social change" (Cranton, 1994, p. 81).

Use in Social Work

This theory, although primarily used as an adult education theory, has been used in social work as well (Courtenay, Merriam & Reeves, 1998). Because social workers often assist individuals who are currently or have been in crisis, transformational learning theory is particularly useful. In therapy, social workers can assist clients in the meaning making process that will naturally occur after a crisis. Furthermore, therapists can provide a supportive environment in which clients can complete discourse.

Conclusions

Examining the Practice Issue from the Theory

For many gay Christians, their crisis of faith is the disorienting dilemma that begins the transformational learning process. It includes the realization that they are, in fact, gay and that homosexuality is considered a sin by their religion. In addition, it creates a dichotomous situation in which many homosexuals believe that they "are asked to choose between their sexual orientation and their religious and spiritual beliefs" (Buchanan et al., 2001, p. 435). In facing this crisis, many will hide their sexuality from others, go through counseling in an attempt reorient or change their sexuality (Carlton, 2004), reject their religion, or somehow integrate their religion and sexuality.

In the critical reflection phase, gay Christians may begin to question their religious beliefs. Individuals might attempt to find out the origins of Christian views of homosexuality (Webster, 1998) by talking to people in their church, reading books at their local library, or looking online for answers. It is through this reflection that gay Christians will either integrate or choose between their religion and their sexuality (Buchanan et al., 2001). They will most likely reject their old beliefs that homosexuality is a sin. This may lead to new beliefs that their church and/or the Bible is not 100% accurate (Yip, 2003).

In the discourse stage, new meanings will undergo scrutiny and validation. Individuals will need to, in a sense, examine and deliberate these new meanings by themselves and with others in order to affirm them. This can be accomplished individually by journaling one's thoughts and feelings. However, for those who are in a more supportive environment, this is usually completed with at least one other person. Discourse might be held with a therapist, friend, family member, teacher, pastor, mentor, or even a stranger in an online chat room. Yip (2003) provided an example of a lesbian who describes her new meanings:

> I have come a long way. But my sexuality now fits very well with my Christian faith . . .
> I no longer have any respect for the Church of England . . . . It is supposed to be inspired
> by God. But I think it loses sight of God. (p. 143)

In Shallenberger's (1996) article, there is another example of new meanings. Beth explains that the way she "grew up [within a Conservative Christian household] left me no place to be as a lesbian (p. 195).

The final step in the transformational learning theory is action. This can include rejecting Christianity totally, and possibly becoming devoted to a new, more tolerant religion. On the other hand, individuals may continue to follow Christianity in a modified way, possibly leaving their church. Another possible action is educating Christians about homosexuality. Individuals might be inspired to create a formal or informal support network for gay Christians in their community (Shallenberger, 1996). Finally, if there is little encouragement and continued discrimination, individuals may be inclined to move out of their community. This was the case for one gay male, who said that "it is easier to be gay in Atlanta than in a small town in South Carolina" (Sears, 1991, p. 44).

Implications for Social Work

There are many implications for social work practice, policy, research, and education. Transformational learning theory can provide a needed framework for examining the crisis of

faith in gay Christians. As knowledge about this subject increases, social workers will increasingly be able to support individuals in the discourse phase. Understanding will only develop with further research. Therefore, researchers are needed to study the natural stages present in the crisis of faith in order to find out if the steps in transformational learning theory are truly similar.

Finally, in an effort to increase interdisciplinary education, professors can make use of transformational learning theory in social work education. This theory, though borrowed from adult education, seems to fit nicely with the values of social work and the types of clients social workers encounter. In particular, as illustrated throughout this paper, transformational learning theory provides a needed framework for examining the crisis of faith in gay Christians.

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