

Working with LBG Clients: Christian Pastors' Advice to Family Therapists

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Study Rationale

- Family therapists cite their own religious beliefs as the reason for their unwillingness to work with or negative attitudes towards LGB communities (Caldwell, 2013, 2011; Green et al., 2010; McGeorge et al., 2016).
- Family therapy researchers have yet to engage pastors in the process of determining how to promote more competent therapy services for LGB communities.

Theoretical Framework

- Queer theory
 - Guided us to consider how binaries and power structures (e.g., heteronormativity) impact religious settings, the therapy process, and LGB clients.
 - Challenged the false notion that individuals identify as either LGB or religious.
 - Deconstructed the assumption that religious communities and their leaders are not supportive of LGB individuals, relationships, and families.

Research Question

- What advice do Christian pastors have for family therapists to provide more competent clinical services to LGB clients?



Methodology

- Queer-Informed Phenomenology
 - Participants were the experts on the phenomenon of interest
 - Meaning is constructed through participants describing their lived experiences
 - Mindful of how heteronormativity might be influencing participants' descriptions and narratives
 - Cognizant of how heteronormativity might shape how we as researchers receive those narratives

Participants

- 21 Christian Pastors
 - Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, and United Church of Christ
 - 30 to 70 years old ($M = 50.14$, $SD = 12.92$)
 - Worked as pastors for 18 months to 43 years ($M = 15.89$, $SD = 11.78$)
 - 10 women and 11 men
 - 3 of the men participants identified as gay
 - All but one participant identified as White
 - Working in either urban or rural, Upper-Midwestern communities in the United States

Interview Protocol

- Semi-structured interview protocol comprised of open-ended questions and probes, developed from:
 - Review of the existing literature
 - Researchers own lived experiences
- 2 pilot interviews were conducted prior to refine the interview protocol

Data Analysis

- Thematic analysis is a method that allows researchers to analyze qualitative data by identifying patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
 - Read the data several times
 - Searched for meaningful patterns in participants' language in order to create codes
 - Identified potential categories within the data
 - Identified themes within each category
- To increase the trustworthiness of our coding process:
 - Peer debriefings
 - Member checking
 - Self-reflection of our own positionality

Findings

- Therapists Holding a Positive Stance toward LGB Clients
 - Theme One: Be Affirming
 - “Be very encouraging and welcoming and accepting of the LGB individual.”
 - Theme Two: Avoid Being Condemning
 - “When therapists try to, or therapists continue the narrative of condemnation I would say. That is not helpful.”

Findings

- Therapists Developing Ethical Boundaries Around Their Religious Beliefs
 - Theme One: Put Personal Beliefs Aside
 - “Put your personal beliefs aside if they are condemning.”
 - “Separate your own family upbringing or whatever from what that person is dealing with.”
 - Theme Two: Avoid Using Theological Beliefs to be Hurtful
 - “If they have [condemning] religious beliefs, they’re probably imposing those beliefs on the client, which is totally against what a therapist should be doing.”

Findings

- Therapists being Open to Spirituality as a Resource for LGB Clients
 - Theme One: Engage with Faith Communities & Pastors
 - “If in the context of your conversations, religious experience and theology and Bible and all of that stuff becomes a central part of the therapy experience, loop me in! Or if you have questions about this I would want to be whatever kind of resource I could be.”
 - Theme Two: Learn about Accepting Faith Communities and Religious Beliefs
 - “Learn at least the basics of a progressive understanding of the Bible and sexuality.”
 - Theme Three: Explore LGB Clients’ Spiritual or Faith Lives
 - “Ask LGB individuals about their spiritual life and are they in a place where their spiritual needs are being addressed.”

Findings

- Therapists Gaining the Necessary Knowledge to Work Affirmatively with LGB Clients
 - Theme One: Learn about LGB Communities and Their Lived Experiences
 - “It’s important to note that LGB people are the same as everyone else and yet they are not. They are the same in terms of wanting equal treatment, but also the level of discrimination that they face needs to be noted and to be seen and to be named and to be worked through.”
 - Theme Two: Learn How to Teach Families to be Supportive
 - “I would want to make sure that counselors know that they need to help families to understand the importance of their role as support.”

Clinical Implications

- Intentional self-of-the-therapist work to:
 - Process unconscious and conscious heteronormative religious beliefs and false binaries.
 - Explore hurts or misgivings surrounding lived experiences with religion and spirituality.
 - By journaling, engaging in conversations with supervisors and/or fellow clinicians, reading books by LGB affirmative theologians, and meeting with LGB affirmative pastors.

Clinical Implications

- Training on how to appropriately utilize clients' spiritual & religious beliefs in therapy. Learn how to:
 - Assess the degree to which spirituality and/or religiosity is important to clients.
 - Explore the extent to which religious beliefs and practices are helpful and the extent to which involvement in religious communities has been hurtful.

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Questions?