"Some of Us Are Good, God-Fearing Folks": Justifying Religious Participation in an LGBT Christian Church

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Abstract

In this article, I examine how a group of LGBT Christians explained Christianity. Based on more than 36 months of fieldwork in a southeastern LGBT Christian church, I analyze how a group of LGBT Christians, responding to sexual and religious stigma, justified their Christian belief and practice by (1) denying abnormality, (2) appealing to emotions, and (3) claiming self-sacrifice. In conclusion, I draw out implications for understanding how members of subordinate groups justify seemingly normative behaviors, and some consequences these actions have for the reproduction of inequality.

Keywords

LGBT Christians, Justifications, Religious Participation, and Sexual and Social Inequalities

Previous research shows that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians face significant conflict between their sexual and religious identities (Thumma 1991; Wilcox 2003; Wolkomir 2006). These studies demonstrate that LGBT Christians draw upon elements of Christian and Queer

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cultures to resist sexual "stigmatization" (see Goffman 1963) in mainstream Christianity. They also suggest that strategies of resistance may take widely different forms depending upon race, class, and gender (Sumerau and Schrock 2011; McQueeney 2009; Wilcox 2009) and that local religious leaders may significantly impact these strategies (Sumerau 2012a; Moon 2004; Pitt 2010). While these studies have invigorated our understanding of LGBT Christians, we know less about the ways they explain their Christian practice to others. How do LGBT Christians explain their religious belief and practice, and what consequences do these actions have for the reproduction of inequality?

I examine these questions through an ethnographic study of a southeastern LGBT Christian organization. Specifically, I analyze how a group of Christian sexual minorities, responding to sexual and religious stigma, justify participating in a religious tradition that has often defined them as deviant (see Scott and Lyman 1968). In so doing, I synthesize and extend analyses of LGBT Christians by demonstrating justifications sexual minorities may use to make sense of participating in normative institutions, and the consequences these actions have for the reproduction of inequality. Importantly, it is not my intention to generalize my findings to the larger population of LGBT Christians. Rather, I use data from this case to elaborate types of justifications sexual minorities may use when they seek to participate in dominant institutions, and symbolically position themselves above others (see Schwalbe et al. 2000).

Religious and Sexual Stigmatization

Christian sexual minorities face significant stigma within mainstream Christianity (see, e.g., Sumerau 2013; O'Brien 2004).[1] Following Goffman (1963), people occupying stigmatized (e.g., devalued, discredited, and/or marginalized) social locations typically face criticism, discrimination, and prejudice because of their perceived violation of dominant social norms. Further, members of stigmatized groups—like the Christian sexual minorities at the heart of this study—typically devise strategies for managing and alleviating stigmatization, and claiming valuable selves (see also Schwalbe et al. 2000). Building on these insights, social psychological research into LGBT Christians' stigma management has generally taken two forms.

On the one hand, researchers have explored how some Christian sexual minorities dispel "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger 1957) by drawing upon the symbolic resources provided by LGBT-affirming Christian groups to integrate their seemingly disparate sexual and religious identities (see Rodriguez 2010 for a review). Rodriguez and Ouellette (2000), for example, found that Christian sexual minorities de-stigmatized and integrated their

"disparate" identities by collectively revising scriptural interpretations and narratives concerning homosexuality (see also Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Thumma 1991; Wilcox 2003). Similarly, Wolkomir (2006) found that gay Christian men in LGBT-affirming Christian support groups taught one another emotional strategies for dispelling guilt, shame, and fear, and redefining "Godly" sexuality (see also Moon 2004). While these efforts often allow LGBT Christians to resist stigmatization via identity integration, recent studies have shown they also often reproduce societal patterns of race, class, and gender inequality (see, e.g., Sumerau et al. 2014a; McQueeney 2009; Wilcox 2009).

On the other hand, researchers have explored the ways some Christian sexual minorities seek to resist stigmatization by conforming to mainstream Christian interpretations of moral sexuality. In an ethnographic study of ex-gay treatment programs, for example, Erzen (2006) found that program leaders taught attendees to ignore, downplay, and redirect their homosexual desires through collective rituals and narratives (see also Robinson and Spivey 2007; Ponticelli 1999; Wolkomir 2006). Further, Creek (2013) found that some Christian sexual minorities embrace celibacy in an attempt to live "proper" Christian lives "despite" their sexual desires, and Pitt (2010) found that some gay men dismissed the sexual teachings of religious leaders while keeping their sexual desires secret to remain in churches. In all such cases, Christian sexual minorities resisted stigmatization by downplaying or attempting to change their sexual desires, which ultimately reproduced the stigmatization of sexual minorities in mainstream Christianity.

As I have written elsewhere, the Christian sexual minorities at the heart of this study have engaged in elements of both of these practices. On the one hand, they have worked to resolve dissonance between sexual and religious identity claims by drawing upon cultural notions of social inclusivity (Sumerau 2012b; Sumerau et al. 2011). At the same time, however, they have adopted dominant Christian interpretations emphasizing committed relationships (Sumerau 2012a) while distancing themselves from "other" LGBT groups and practices (Sumerau 2013). As I explore below, part of the way they have done so is by suggesting that religion represents an inherent "need" for them. In fact, they note significant emotional trauma from previous religious experiences while suggesting they have a basic need to be religious that must be met for them to live full lives. Considering that religion is not a cultural artifact that any human has been demonstrated to empirically require for a full life (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006), the question remains as to why some sexual minorities conceptualize it as necessary for their lives and thus continue to participate in this system of belief and practice despite the years of pain it has caused them.

Considering that many sexual minorities abandon Christianity entirely to escape religious stigma (Barton 2012; Wilcox 2009), LGBT Christians are often stigmatized in mainstream LGBT communities as a result of their Christian belief and practice (Sumerau 2013; O'Brien 2004), and Christian leaders continue to represent the most vocal opposition to LGBT rights (Sumerau and Cragun 2014b), it stands to reason that—as Goffman (1963) suggests concerning other stigmatized groups capable of disengaging from or leaving the source of their stigmatization—they must have compelling reasons for continued participation. How do Christian sexual minorities make sense of their participation in the Christian tradition, and what might their explanations tell us about inequalities?

Justifying Unexpected or Untoward Actions

Over the past seven decades, sociologists have demonstrated that people vocalize a wide variety of explanations for norm violations shaped by their social locations within interlocking systems of oppression, and local, regional, and global conceptions of appropriate conduct (see, e.g., Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968). Rather than assuming that explanations are immutable notions of right and wrong, these studies conceptualize them as socially constructed statements made by people to make sense of "unanticipated or untoward behavior" whether the behavior in question is one's own or that of another, and whether the reason for the statement comes from one's self or another (Scott and Lyman 1968, p. 46). These studies also show that such "accounts" may reproduce sexist (Martin 1997), heterosexist (Fields 2001), classist (Irwin 2001), and racist (Silva 2007) beliefs and practices. Overall, these studies suggest understanding the reproduction of large-scale systems of inequality requires investigating justifications.

Investigating explanations requires analyzing how people verbally explain untoward or unexpected behaviors. Following Scott and Lyman (1968), one way people may accomplish this involves providing justifications, which involves accepting responsibility for a seemingly untoward or unexpected action while denying such action is in any way inappropriate. To be successful, however, justifications must align with and be affirmed by the background expectations of a specific group. We may thus conceptualize successful justifications as the result of coordinated action on the part of stigmatized individuals and groups. Whereas the contents of a successful justification may vary historically, culturally, and across different situational contexts, all such explanations aim to define seemingly untoward or unexpected actions—such as identifying as gay AND Christian—as appropriate for a given social context.

Researchers have documented justifications in response to a wide variety of social norms. In Martin's (1997 p. 470) study of rape processing, for example, officials defined women as naturally better suited for handling victims to justify the lack of involvement on the part of male processing employees. As the following statement by one such employee reveals,

> I am sure some women would be [comfortable] with a nice, warm man. A kind man who is different from the person that hurt her might be real helpful. But we just feel like it is important to have the comfort level of having a female counselor there.

Similarly, researchers have shown how people justify existing occupational patterns (Kolb 2011), relationship breakups (Doering 2010), divorce within religious contexts (Sharp 2009), and decisions concerning tattoos (Irwin 2000). Further, these studies have shown that while the content of justifications may vary, people in all such cases reject negative depictions of their actions by asserting the actions' positive value (see also Scott and Lyman 1968).

Researchers have also shown that sexual minorities may respond to stigmatization by attempting to justify their actions in relation to dominant social norms. In their original development of the concept, for example, Scott and Lyman (1968) noted that sexual minorities justified their sexual desires and practices by developing sad tales and stories of self-improvement. Similarly, Siegel and associates (1989) showed that gay men explained their opinions about taking HIV tests by asserting the value of their decisions. Further, researchers have found that sexual minorities often are required to justify their interest in, for example, educational (Adams 2011), fraternal (Yeung and Stombler 2000), familial (Fields 2001), and parental (Padavic and Butterfield 2011) endeavors that are only untoward or unexpected because of their sexual identities. Whereas sexual minorities, like other social groups, may be required to explain nonnormative behaviors, these studies suggest they—like the LGBT Christians I studied—are also often required to explain their participation in normative social activities.

Finally, researchers have tied justifications to the reproduction of inequality (see Schwalbe et al. 2000). Studies have shown, for example, how rapists justify their actions by appealing to patriarchal notions of gender and downplaying the trauma of their victims (Scully and Marolla 1984). Similarly, researchers have shown that people often justify their actions by reproducing gendered (Martin 1997), racial (Silva 2007), classed (Irwin 2001), and sexual (Adams 2011) stereotypes that benefit some groups of people at the expense of others. Although the Christian sexual minorities I studied are in some ways

unique, their example reveals that justifications offered by LGBT people may not only involve resisting subordination but also provide a means through which they may claim superiority over others.

Setting and Method

Data for this study derive from participant observation in a church affiliated with the United Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC). The UFMCC is an international denomination composed of more than three hundred congregations, which promotes an inclusive doctrine based on "the recognition of the inherent value of each individual regardless of sexual orientation, race, class, gender, gender identification, age, or abilities" (UFMCC 2009). The church at the heart of this study developed in 1993 when LGBT Christians who felt excluded by churches in their area formed two Bible Study groups. Over the next fifteen years, these groups expanded into an organization that purchased its own property and held weekly services.

My involvement with the church began in 2008 when I contacted their office and explained my research interest. At the time, I was seeking to study the development of local religious and LGBT organizations over time. The representative I spoke with explained that since they were currently without a pastor I would need to propose my study to the board of directors. At the next board meeting, I introduced myself and presented members with a proposal for my study, professional references, and some articles I wrote while working as a journalist. Two weeks later, the members granted my request to study their church.

Over the next thirty-six months, I observed and participated in worship services (190), board meetings (30), Bible studies (45), choir practices (10), outreach efforts (5), and social events (105) with members. I also collected newsletters, newspaper pieces, emails, hymnals, pamphlets, and publications by the congregation and the denomination. On average, I spent about one to three hours with members during each visit conducting informal interviews before and after activities.[2] During fieldwork, I tape-recorded every meeting and took shorthand notes whenever possible. Afterward, I used these resources to compose detailed fieldnotes, transcribed audio recordings in full, and took notes on any materials gathered in the field.

I also conducted twenty life history interviews with members of the church. Interviews lasted between three and four hours, and I tape-recorded and transcribed each one in full. I used an interview guide that consisted of a list of orienting questions about members' religious and social background and involvement in the church, but otherwise the interviews were unstructured. My sample consisted of eight white lesbian women, two African

American lesbian women, and ten white gay men including the new pastor. Each respondent was selected intentionally because she or he held informal or formal positions of power in the church during my study. All respondents held middle and upper-middle class jobs, and all but one had been raised in Protestant churches.

It is important to note that the racial and class characteristics of the church may have played a role in the members' justifications. Although studies of LGBT Christians have thus far left justifications (or other ways LGBT Christians explain their religiosity) unexplored for the most part, they have found that cultural notions of race, class, and gender impact the identity integration strategies of Christian sexual minorities (see, e.g. Sumerau 2012b; McQueeney 2009; Pitt 2010). In my study, the congregation was mostly white (88%) and middle- to upper-middle class (90%). Although it is beyond the reach of the present study, the members' justifications may well have been influenced by their locations in privileged racial and class categories.

Regional and religious factors may also have impacted their justifications. Their surrounding community, for example, consisted of a minimal LGBT public presence, well-organized local and state anti-gay political groups, and a religious atmosphere dominated by conservative Protestants. Further, most of the members were raised in the southeast and came from conservative Protestant backgrounds. Similarly, the pastor hired during my fieldwork was a white, middle-class man raised in the Southern Baptist tradition and had, prior to openly coming out as gay, held prominent positions in conservative Baptist churches in another southern state. Considering that these Christians experienced their religious and sexual lives within the context of the Bible Belt (see, e.g., Barton 2012), their justifications may have been influenced by their regular engagement with regional and religious interpretations of Christianity.

While their location within the Bible Belt surrounded by more traditional Christian churches likely facilitated their constant need to explain themselves and justify their religious identities beyond the confines of the church, members regularly noted the safety and support they received from their membership within an explicitly pro-LGBT church. Like other MCC churches (see Wilcox 2003 for a historical review of the MCC), their church was founded by and for Christian sexual minorities, and deeply committed to LGBT advocacy and support both within and beyond its own walls. As a result, it provided a "safe space" or "sanctuary" wherein members could temporarily escape the need to explain and/or conceal their sexual and religious identities (for similar experiences in other MCC churches see, e.g., Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000; Wilcox 2003; Wolkomir 2006). While members described such temporary relief as "priceless" and "beyond measure," they also stressed

the difficulties waiting outside the church's doors, and the lack of legitimacy their sexual and religious identities (as well as their church) possessed in the larger religious community (see Sumerau et al. 2014a).

My analysis developed in an inductive fashion. Every time I mentioned my research to others (including other ethnographers), they inevitably asked me why sexual minorities would want to be Christians. Since I did not have an answer, I began asking my respondents this question when I conducted fieldwork and added this question to my interview guide. Specifically, I asked them if they ever received questions like these, and (upon learning all of them did) how they handled these queries. Drawing on elements of "grounded theory" (Charmaz 2006), I began coding the members' responses, and organizing them based on their content. Doing so revealed patterns that I sorted into thematic categories. Further, I examined the literature concerning religious sexual minorities and justifications, and began to see the responses given by the members as part of the process through which they justified their participation in Christianity and defined themselves as better than other people. Building on this insight, I generated labels to capture three justifications vocalized by church members: (1) denial of abnormality; (2) appeals to emotion; and (3) claiming self-sacrifice.

Untoward and Unexpected Conflict

The LGBT Christians at the heart of this study came to develop justifications for their religious practice in response to perceived conflicts they faced. Specifically, all the members were intimately familiar with dominant Christian discourses that depict sexual minorities as sinners, deviants, and abominations in the eyes of God (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Moon 2004; Wolkomir 2006). As a result, they all recalled experiences when their religious beliefs were met with shock and dismay. As Jenny recalled in an interview,

> People don't really know what to make of us to tell you the truth. Sometimes they are shocked by even the idea of a lesbian Christian. I swear that sometimes they look at me like I have two heads or something. In a way, it is like coming out all over again because I have to sit people down and explain it to them in terms they can understand.

Micah also noted, "I know sometimes the hardest thing is explaining to other people that gay AND Christian is a possibility. It just seems to really throw people off." Like Micah and Jenny, many members came to expect surprise whenever they shared their religious beliefs. As Carla explained, "People

have enough trouble imagining those gay people, much less those gay Christian people. So you get used to having to constantly explain yourself." Similar to mothers that homeschool their children (Lois 2009), people ending relationships (Doering 2010), and gay men navigating the closet (Adams 2011), members came to justify their religious practice in response to conflicts created by social expectations.

Church members' justifications, however, were not limited to situations where their religious beliefs surprised others. In other cases, people defined their religious beliefs as untoward acts, or practices unfitting, improper, or inappropriate for a given situational or social context (see Goffman 1959). As Whitney explained in an interview,

> The people who haven't heard of gay Christians aren't the ones that bother me. I can understand ignorance, but the one's who act like I'm somehow attacking them are really hard to deal with. They act like I'm being a sinner or dirtying up their religion by saying that I'm a Christian, and that just makes no sense to me. I mean, I am a Christian lesbian woman, and who are they to tell me it's wrong for me to believe in God?

Further, Tommy recalled an experience with a former romantic partner: "He just didn't get it, and it really made him angry. He would go on and on about how wrong it was for gay people to buy into religion, and how I should be out there fighting the churches instead of joining one." As such, members often had to justify their religious beliefs because others deemed gay and Christian identities incompatible (see also O'Brien 2004). As Marnie recalled during an interview, "I remember my friend telling me I couldn't really be a Christian because I couldn't get married, and Christians have to get married." Similarly, the pastor recalled, "They always use those same scriptures to clobber us. Basically, they say we're unfit to be Christians, and not only that, we're wrong for even trying." Like conservative Christian women seeking divorces (Sharp 2009) and people in favor of Native American mascots (Silva 2007), members developed justifications because their actions were deemed untoward.

Importantly, the conflicts members experienced were not limited to a specific social group or setting. They recalled instances where friends, family members, romantic partners, coworkers, educators, and religious officials deemed their religious beliefs unexpected or untoward. In fact, they experienced these conflicts during interactions with both religious and LGBT groups, and often found themselves, as Patricia put it, "having to explain ourselves everywhere we go except here at church." Rather than isolated instances, these conflicts thus became an essential part of their lives outside

of church. In the following sections, I examine how they resolved these conflicts by offering justifications.

Justifying Religious Belief and Practice

What follows is an analysis of how LGBT Christians justified their religious participation. First, I examine how they justified their participation in Christianity by denying abnormality. Specifically, they defined Christianity as a normative and expected behavior for all good people. Then, I show how they justified their participation by appealing to emotions, which involved emphasizing the emotional rewards of Christian belief and practice. Finally, I analyze how they stressed self-sacrifice. In so doing, they defined Christianity as a method whereby people could better themselves and their social situations. While these statements allowed them to justify their participation in the Christian tradition, they also reproduced the moral superiority of Christianity at the expense of other sexual minorities.

Denial of Abnormality

The LGBT Christians I studied were intimately familiar with normative depictions of Christianity as a heterosexual institution (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Moon 2004; Wolkomir 2006). As Saundra noted one morning following a worship service,

> There is this assumption that Christians must be straight, and I think it comes from all the anti-gay rhetoric put out there by religious leaders and politicians in recent years. People generally see homosexual Christianity as, at best, unusual or just plain weird.

John noted in an interview, "If we're being honest, let's face it—homosexual and Christian don't exactly go together in the popular imagination. I think people see us as kind of strange even though we're not all that different from other Christians." Seeking to refute these depictions, church members justified their participation in the Christian tradition by denying abnormality. Specifically, they defined Christian belief and practice as an essential element of being a normal person. In so doing, however, they reproduced symbolic distinctions between normal God-fearing people and deviant others (see also Wilkins 2008).

One way they accomplished this involved drawing upon childhood experiences to suggest they had always been Christians. As Dana explained in an interview,

> I understand that people think it's odd for us to be Christian, but I think they fail to realize that we grew up going to church, singing in choirs, and saying our prayers just like everyone else. Personally, I've learned all I know—about relationships, how to treat people, how to be a good person—in churches, and I think people just have trouble understanding that from a bisexual man even if they say the same.

Dana "learned all" he knew from attending churches as a child, and merely saw his participation in church as the continuation of these early experiences. As Carla noted, "This is how we have always been. Look around, we grew up in churches like other kids, and all we are doing now is the same things we've always done, but as gay people." Micah also noted, "I don't know why people think it's strange. As a kid, everyone went to church, and now as adults, like most other adults, we go to church too. It seems like we're pretty normal." Similar to some transsexuals (Mason-Schrock 1996), these LGBT Christians drew upon their own childhood experiences to justify their current activities.

LGBT Christians also defined Christianity as an essential part of being a good person. In so doing, they argued that Christianity was the primary way to be normal. As Tommy explained,

> Despite the reactions I get, I think being a Christian is the most normal thing in the world for any good person, gay or straight. How else do you learn to be a kind and caring person—a moral person? In fact, my earliest memories of what is right or wrong come from the time I spent in church as a kid, and I think many would say the same.

Marcus explained, "I am honestly surprised by how surprised people are. We all want to be good people and being a Christian is, I think, the best way to do that." Further, the pastor noted, "What's funny is we have always been present. We may have been invisible, but there have always been gay people who wanted to be normal good folks and grew up knowing church is an important part of that." Echoing many other LGBT (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; O'Brien 2004; Thumma 1991) and heterosexual (see, e.g., Sharp 2009; Wilkins 2008) Christians, they thus defined Christian practice as a normal part of being a good person.

These LGBT Christians also defined themselves as normal in relation to other sexual minorities that did not possess or enact Christian standards of behavior. As Michael noted,

> I think we surprise people because all they see in the media are unsavory versions of homosexual experience. So I think people think gay and

automatically expect us to be having group orgies, wearing makeup and dresses all the time, or partying hard with drugs and such. Sadly, that's just not who we are, and honestly those people give the rest of us a bad name. Some of us are good, God-fearing folks.

Jenny agreed: "I think people hear I'm a lesbian and expect me to try to sell them combat boots or steal their wives or something. I know those people exist, but I'm more like other Christian women than I am like other lesbians." Similarly, the pastor recalled,

I remember in college we had some gay guy come talk, and he was so flamboyant, so out there and in your face with lipstick and wild hair. So I understand why people don't get it. I remember seeing him and thinking well then I can't be gay because I'm not like that.

Patricia noted, "There just aren't many normal queer role models, and I think we can change that by showing people there are normal, Christian lesbians in this world." It is important to note that none of the LGBT Christians attempted to justify these versions of queer culture. Rather, like some lesbian women and gay men in support groups (Fields 2001), heterosexual, female rugby players (Ezzell 2009), and gay fraternity members (Yeung and Stombler 2000), they justified their participation in a dominant institution by emphasizing their normativity in relation to supposedly deviant others.

Non-Christian LGBT people, however, were not the only group these LGBT Christians relied upon to justify their participation in the Christian tradition. They also distinguished themselves from other Christians who failed to live up to the teaching of Jesus. As Lisa explained one evening during Bible Study,

People may try to say we're strange or odd or not real Christians, but we have to keep in mind that they have missed the point. Jesus came to teach us how to love each other, and accept our differences. After all, he spent most of his time with outcasts and deviants, and maybe that is why we're here, to remind other Christians that judgment is reserved for God alone. They may have lost their way, but we can bring them back to God's way.

Whitney explained in an interview, "I think people get too comfortable with how they think things are, and God sends a new challenge, like us, to shake them out of their worldly ways." Further, Matthew noted, "Many people today call themselves Christians on Sunday, and then turn around and judge. Having felt that judgment, we can remind them that Jesus preached love not hate." Like some black men in anti-gay churches (Pitt 2010), these LGBT

Christians justified their participation in the Christian tradition by suggesting other Christians had misinterpreted or lost the true message of Christ.

Overall, LGBT Christians justified their religious participation by denying abnormality. In so doing, however, they reproduced cultural notions of Christian supremacy by defining Christian belief and practice as an essential part of being a good person, non-Christian sexual minorities as deviant, and other Christians as misguided and lost in the eyes of God. They justified their actions by reproducing the moral authority of Christianity as well as symbolic distinctions between normal people and unsavory others. As such, their justifications ultimately reproduced the elevation of Christians at the expense of sexual minorities and nonbelievers.

Appeal to Emotions

The LGBT Christians I studied were also intimately familiar with depictions of Christianity as a tool of sexual oppression, and unmitigated antagonism for LGBT communities (see, e.g., Fetner 2001, 2008; Robinson and Spivey 2007). As Marcus noted,

> Sometimes people in the gay community have the hardest time understanding why anyone would be Christian. With all the pain some Christians have caused us, I think that's understandable, but it is scary when many gay people automatically think we've sold out or become self-hating just because we believe in God.

Whitney also noted in an interview, "Sometimes it is hard explaining to other lesbians that I don't hate myself or them, and that my religion isn't an attack on their lifestyle. It's not about that." Seeking to refute these depictions, church members justified their participation in the Christian tradition by appealing to emotions. Specifically, they emphasized the emotional rewards of Christian practice. In so doing, however, they reproduced emotional discourses that facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities (see also Moon 2004).

LGBT Christians defined Christian practice as a method for managing negative emotions. Generally, this involved emphasizing ways that belonging to a Christian group helped alleviate feelings of shame, fear, and guilt tied to their sexual and religious practices. As Lisa explained,

> I remember crying my eyes out so many nights before I found this church. I felt so guilty, so broken, so wrong in the eyes of God. But there is something so uplifting about being with people like me, sharing praise, and feeling the spirit

with others like me. This place may have saved my life, but it's hard to explain that to some of my friends. I needed to know, to feel like, I could be both gay and Godly and I found that feeling here.

Micah recalled, "It was like the sun came back up. I walked into this building with these people singing to God, and I just felt okay. I didn't have to be ashamed anymore. God somehow did understand and all these people knew it." Likewise, Carla noted,

> I try to tell people what it was like before I realized I could have both. I remember sitting in the back of straight churches feeling so scared, and friends, even then, would tell me just to give up on the church. I just didn't want to do that. I think I somehow knew it could get better, and I found that in the loving embrace of this church.

Echoing Carla, Amy explained in a Bible Study, "I remember I was so angry that I had to go to a 'gay' church, but I try to explain it to people now because this is where God is—this is where I am loved and fully accepted for who I am." Similar to some transsexuals (Schrock, Holden, and Reid 2004), gay and ex-gay Christian men (Wolkomir 2006), and mixed martial arts fighters (Vaccarro, Schrock, and McCabe 2011), these LGBT Christians found support and affirmation in their group, and thus justified their identity-claims by defining group activities as a mechanism for managing and alleviating negative emotions they experienced in other social contexts.

LGBT Christians also emphasized their desire to experience positive emotions by stressing the right of all people to seek happiness and joy. As Marnie noted,

> When other lesbians don't get it, I just ask them if they believe we all have the right to be happy. Of course, most of them, like other people, believe happiness is important. Then I just tell them that I go to church because that's what makes me happy, and they, as my friends, should respect that and support me—that usually shuts them up.

Barney explained, "I got friends that play sports, get married, or have loud kids and I don't want any of that. What makes me happy is being close to Jesus, and so that's what I do—spend my time with Jesus." Further, the pastor noted, "Nothing brings me more joy than sharing the word of God, and I think the same could be said for many Christians. After all, what is the point of this life if not to prepare for heaven and pursue the joy God has in store for us." Similar to some lesbians in the 1960s (Scott and Lyman 1968) and heterosexual, evangelical Christians on college campuses (Wilkins 2008),

church members thus justified their activities by emphasizing their right to pursue and experience happiness.

Some LGBT Christians also defined their Christian practice as an emotional calling. While not all members used this justification, the ones that did claimed they felt moved by God to work to save this fallen world. As the pastor explained,

> I remember being in the closet, and that gives you a perspective on the world. I felt like God was calling me to step out of the closet and into a new kind of church—a church for those excluded by the judgment of others. It was like this deep emotional wave washed over me, and I just knew that I had to get out there and fight for Jesus.

Echoing the pastor, many members spoke of a deep "emotional wave" that compelled them to speak out, live Christian lives, and support LGBT-affirming churches like their own for the sake of others who felt God had forgotten them. As John explained in an interview, "It was like a storm of tears one night and then this nagging feeling over the next few days screaming inside me that you have to be out there and active—others need you to stand up and share the Word." Similarly, Patricia noted, "As I tell my friends, this isn't just any choice. I feel like something deep within me calls to the church, and it's important that I follow those feelings to see where God will lead me." Although they used emotional terms instead of rational or spiritual claims like some religious and queer activists (Fetner 2008) and straight-but-affirming Christians (McQueeney 2009), these LGBT Christians justified their untoward behaviors by claiming they felt called to change the world, and were generally active in their church's attempts to engage in political action and dialogue for this purpose with other willing groups in the community.

The LGBT Christians that did not define their Christian practice as an emotional calling also spoke of being pulled into Christianity by emotional ties. They claimed their emotional ties to other members led them to initially participate in the church. As Tommy explained,

> I didn't know what to expect. I went with my partner at the time because I loved him, and I was kind of a Christian. But a gay church, I mean, come on—I wondered if it would be a meat market called a church or something like that. Instead, it was great, and I've been there for years now. Now, I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I would never have tried it if not for how much I cared about that boy.

Marnie explained, "I wasn't what you would call church people after coming out of the closet, and I don't know if I ever would have been if not for a

friend. I adored her, and she loved it here, so I gave it a shot." In a similar fashion, Lisa recalled,

> Well, I couldn't make up my mind for a long time. I would come and go and come and go—usually with one girlfriend or another. I just didn't know about this, and then I lost touch with my daughter because she joined some cult-like anti-gay church, and I was all alone. I needed support that I don't think I could have found somewhere else. I remembered how caring everyone was, and I just came back and they welcomed me in with open arms. That was important for me.

Likewise, John recalled, "I remember feeling so alone, and it was really the relationships I made here that turned my life around. I just felt safe in the love of this community." Similar to some mothers that homeschool their children (Lois 2009), these church members justified their seemingly untoward behavior by emphasizing the emotional benefits of their choice.

The members also defined their religious practice as a way to reclaim emotional ties lost in the past by characterizing the church as a replacement for families that had turned away from them after they came out of the closet. As Matthew noted,

> What people don't seem to understand is that some of us lost everything when we came out—our families, our friends, you name it. Now others might be okay with that, but for me, that was devastating. One of the main reasons I turned to God was to get back that sense of connection I felt in my previous family, and I have found that in the embrace of this community and the love and support they give me.

Lynda also explained, "I have to explain to people that I was always family oriented, and my family won't even speak to me these days. But being with this family, my church family, somehow makes it feel better." Further, Whitney explained, "We're like a family here. We all lost people when we chose to come out, and what happens is you rebuild families in other places by sharing and caring about people. We have all found a new home together in the eyes of God." Like members of support groups for friends and family of lesbian and gay people (Fields 2001), members defined their actions as a way to reclaim emotional and familial ties.

While all the aforementioned appeals to emotion allowed members to justify their participation in the Christian tradition, they also provided an opportunity to distance themselves from other sexual minorities. In fact, they often followed each of these justifications with statements depicting other sexual minorities as emotionally immature. Rather than instances of simple misunderstanding or justified concerns with Christianity, they defined the questions of other sexual minorities as evidence of a personal failing. As Jamie noted,

The problem is simple—most gay people just haven't grown up enough to understand the importance of being a normal, active member of society. What happens is they get so lost in their own pain and anger that they just can't see the world another way. I sympathize because that could be me, but I also realize that they're part of the problem when it comes to us getting the rights and recognition we deserve. We'd all be better off if they just grew up and stopped pouting.

Patricia followed an emotional justification by stating, "I think part of the calling is trying to save other lesbians from themselves. They have to learn that fulfillment won't just arrive. Sometimes you have to go for it and follow your heart." Similarly, the pastor noted,

Some of the people in the larger gay community just want to be kids. They whine and cry and scream for answers, but don't take the initiative to go out and find them. They say they want happiness and recognition, but then they have issues with those of us who have found it. The problem is they need to be better people, and learn how to accept that for many of us Jesus is the road to joy and the path to liberation.

Barney followed an account defining Christianity as a cure for negative emotions by saying, "They just need to grow up. I'm sure they have the right to not understand, but shouldn't we all be adults and accept people." Similar to some heterosexual Christians (see, e.g., Moon 2004; Wilkins 2008), they thus appealed to emotions not only to justify their own behaviors but also to denigrate supposedly unworthy others (see also Fields, Copp, and Kleinman 2006; Schwalbe et al. 2000).

LGBT Christians thus justified their religious participation by appealing to emotion. They justified their untoward and unexpected behavior by emphasizing the emotional rewards and motivations for these activities. Whereas these statements allowed them to justify their religious practice, they relied upon and were usually accompanied by depictions of nonreligious people in general, and sexual minorities specifically, as inferior beings (see also Moon 2004).

Claiming Self-Sacrifice

The LGBT Christians at the heart of this study were also well aware of cultural depictions of sexual minorities as oppositional to moral values (see, e.g., Erzen 2006; Fetner 2008; Robinson and Spivey 2007). As the pastor noted in an interview,

You can't ignore the attacks we face as a community. Many religious and political leaders try to cast us as villains. They say we're out to destroy the

moral fabric of society, and tear down churches and families. They call us selfish, and argue that if we're allowed to we'll bring down the whole country.

Similarly, Diane noted, "You hear it all the time, the gays and lesbians are just selfish and immoral. They just think about themselves and their fun. They don't contribute to society." Seeking to refute these depictions, they justified their participation in the Christian tradition by claiming self-sacrifice. They defined their Christian practice as beneficial for others. In so doing, however, they symbolically positioned themselves above supposedly deviant others.

Church members claimed to follow the example of Jesus, and argued that their suffering, like that of Jesus, was a sacrifice they made for the greater good. As the pastor noted,

> What we face today is nothing new. Human beings have always tried to exclude others from the kingdom of God. When it gets hard, we just look at Jesus, and try to do what he did. We try to hang on, struggle through, and spread the word that everyone deserves and needs God's love regardless of what the authorities say on the subject.

Amy agreed, "It's like the pastor mentioned during the service, Jesus wasn't welcomed in by the religious leaders of his time either, but he didn't give up. He fought with all he had to make the world and the church better." Further, Naomi observed, "In some ways, we get to be like Jesus. People don't think we should be Christians, but we create options for future generations." Similar to many other contemporary Christians (see, e.g., Fetner 2008; McQueeney 2009; Robinson and Spivey 2007), they defined their actions as an effort to benefit others.

While these statements allowed the LGBT Christians to justify their Christian practices, they also used them to symbolically position themselves above other sexual minorities. In fact, they generally followed these assertions by accusing other sexual minorities of being too selfish to make the sacrifices necessary for their communities to thrive. As Jamie explained, "In some ways we have to be willing to give even more than other people because there are those gay people who just want what they want regardless of anyone else's needs." The pastor also noted,

> The problem is that there is some truth to the stereotypes. There are those among us who just don't have the strength or the heart to fight for recognition. Don't get me wrong, I don't blame them because it really is an uphill battle. But we have to push forward because if we don't then people will continue to believe we're all just living lives of sin or partying our lives away. So I think

we try, as a church, to show people that there is a moral version of gay and lesbian experience in this country.

Likewise, Lynda noted, "We have to be the exception for the straight world to see that we're not all like the images in the media. Some of us are simple, decent folks, and we try to project that image to the larger community." Like some women in little sister organizations (Stombler and Martin 1994) and women rugby players (Ezzell 2009), these LGBT Christians asserted that while others might be selfish deviants such depictions did not apply to them.

They also defined their actions as beneficial for sexual minorities by claiming their establishment of an LGBT-affirming church would benefit LGBT youth in the area. As Tommy explained,

> Right now, we are working and struggling so others have a place to come to and be with God. Think about it—we live in an area with a constant influx of young people who need a home to call their own, and we are trying to give that to them. My personal goal is for this place to become a beacon to young gay people where they can find the love and guidance they might be missing in the larger gay and straight communities.

Like Tommy, Whitney noted, "We are building for the future. It may be hard for us, but that way it may not be as hard for the younger Christians coming out in the future. Our sacrifice will lay the groundwork for them." William agreed, "We suffer so that others won't have to. I grew up here, and I wish a church like this existed then." Echoing William, Marnie explained during Bible Study, "I know its tough sometimes, but you have to remember we're working for God and for the kids who might need a safe space one day where they can celebrate who they are instead of hiding." Similar to some members of support groups for friends and family of lesbian and gay people (Fields 2001), they defined their actions as beneficial for future generations.

They also defined their actions as beneficial for sexual minorities by characterizing themselves as moral role models. Specifically, they claimed their sacrifice provided clues for other sexual minorities about how to live moral lives. As Jenny explained in an interview,

> Don't get me wrong, it's not easy to give up the party lifestyle so to speak, but it's important that we show other people in our community how to be good people. There isn't often a lot of morals in gay communities, and by living right we can be models for other people. I think that matters more than the trouble or the struggle—we can show others what they could be and I think many of them will come around in time.

Echoing Jenny, Whitney explained, "I can't really get behind a lot of the things other lesbians do, but I can show them another way, a moral way to live their lives, and I think that's worth the struggle." Further, the pastor explained in an interview,

> You have to understand that after holding their feelings in for so long, some people come out and go crazy, just plain crazy. And while that's okay for a time, sooner or later people need to grow up and be responsible citizens. We feel like our efforts allow us to show people the way to do that—the way to reclaim their dignity and live a moral life.

Like the pastor, Rhonda observed, "I think the biggest problem in the gay community is a lack of positive role models. All you see are the wild ones, and people just coming out need to know they can be just like everyone else if they want to." Similarly, Carla noted, "I think one of our primary roles is to provide guidance to gay people who have lost their way. That's one of the reasons we're all willing to give so much and work so hard." As these illustrations reveal, they defined themselves as suitable role models for wayward sexual minorities. In so doing, however, they, like ex-gay Christian ministry groups (see, e.g. Wolkomir 2006), reproduced cultural depictions of sexual minorities as deviants in need of moral guidance.

In sum, LGBT Christians justified their religious practice by claiming self-sacrifice. In so doing, however, they reproduced negative depictions of sexual minorities often used by mainstream Christian groups to facilitate and explain the subordination of LGBT people (see, e.g., Fetner 2008; Moon 2004; Robinson and Spivey 2007). Further, they defined other sexual minorities as deviants in need of moral guidance, and symbolically positioned themselves above supposedly selfish LGBT people unwilling to sacrifice for the greater good. As such, their justifications ultimately reproduced heterosexist notions of sexual minorities.

Conclusion

The LGBT Christians I studied were continuously reminded that their participation in the Christian tradition violated social expectations. As a result, they became accustomed to explaining their sexual and religious practices. While they could have taken this opportunity to reject dominant notions of Christian and LGBT experience (as they and other LGBT-affirming churches initially do simply by founding inclusive churches), doing so would have required reevaluating Christian and LGBT personhood, and risking their relationships with others. Rather than attempting these tasks, they offered justifications—explanations

wherein people accept responsibility for violating expectations while denying said actions are in any way inappropriate. They did so by denying abnormality, appealing to emotion, and claiming self-sacrifice.

While their efforts allowed them to successfully explain their participation in the Christian tradition, they also reproduced cultural notions that facilitate the ongoing subordination of sexual minorities and nonbelievers. By defining Christian belief and practice as an essential element of being a good person, for example, they reproduced conventional religious discourses used to justify Christian moral authority in legal (Fetner 2008), political (Robinson and Spivey 2007), and therapeutic (Erzen 2006) settings. Similarly, their depiction of nonbelievers in general, and sexual minorities especially, as deviants, emotionally inferior beings, immature, and in need of moral guidance reproduced rhetoric (see, e.g., Fetner 2008; Moon 2004; Wolkomir 2006) used to deny equal rights to LGBT people and position Christian beliefs above those of others (see also Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Whereas researchers have sought to understand tensions between Christian sexual minorities and other LGBT groups (see, e.g. O'Brien 2004), these findings reveal that part of this answer may lie in the ways LGBT Christians justify religious participation.

These findings also support research on the stigma management strategies of Christian sexual minorities seeking to integrate their sexual and religious identities (see, e.g., McQueeney 2009; Pitt 2010; Wilcox 2009), and extend this research by revealing ways they justify Christian practice and authority. Similar to some heterosexual Christians in, for example, African American congregations (Pitt 2010), Evangelical college groups (Wilkins 2008), and the Religious Right (Fetner 2008), they explained their participation in the Christian tradition by arguing that Christian belief and practice was an essential part of living a normal, respectable, and moral life. Whereas researchers have generally left the reasons LGBT people participate in religious traditions characterized by animosity toward sexual minorities unexplored (for a notable exception, see O'Brien 2004), these findings suggest that in some cases they may do so in order to claim privileges typically conferred upon members of said religions. These findings thus reveal the importance of examining and comparing the reasons sexual minorities (and others) participate in seemingly hostile religious traditions.

These findings also extend previous treatments of justifications by drawing our attention to situations where subordinated groups are required to explain their participation in supposedly normal activities. Whereas previous studies have shown that both dominants (see Scully and Marolla 1984) and subordinates (see Murphy 2004) are often called to justify untoward or unexpected actions, they have generally focused on the ways people justify (or excuse) the violation of dominant social norms. LGBT Christians, however, sought to

justify their observance of dominant social norms. While these actions did in fact violate assumptions concerning the relationship between Christian and LGBT cultures, they also reproduced and affirmed societal norms prescribing the elevated status of Christianity. These findings thus reveal the importance of addressing not only how people justify behaviors generally frowned upon in a given society but also the ways members of subordinate groups may be required to justify engaging in socially approved activities.

These findings also reveal the necessity of examining the ways subordinates justify their participation in normative social institutions. Whereas previous studies generally focus on the ways subordinates use justifications to deflect stigma, these findings reveal that these accounts may also reproduce societal patterns of privilege and oppression. Further, examples of these justifications may be seen in many arenas where subordinates seek to gain admittance to privileged social institutions. Gay men and lesbian women attempting to legalize same-sex marriage, for example, have often relied upon rhetoric that simultaneously reproduces the privileged position of marriage while devaluing other types of sexual relationships (Warner 1999). Similarly, heterosexual female athletes (Ezzell 2009) and gay male college students (Yeung and Stombler 2000) may justify their admittance into dominant institutions, such as sports and fraternities, by affirming dominant notions of male supremacy. Making sense of the ways subordinates may reproduce existing inequalities via justifications, however, requires asking questions beyond the scope of this study. Researchers could, for example, examine how subordinates justify their participation in other privileged institutions, such as parenthood, government, and the legal system. Further, researchers could examine what role dominants might play in these processes as well as the ways other subordinates respond to these justifications. Additionally, while my analysis explored the justifications mobilized by LGBT religious people in an explicitly pro-LGBT church, researchers could explore potential variance in the justifications of religious sexual minorities within different types of religious organizations and traditions. Finally, researchers should explore variations in these justifications in terms of race, class, gender, sexualities, age, and/or nationalities.

To fully understand the experiences of sexual minorities, we must analyze how they make sense of their ongoing participation in and affirmation of dominant institutions as well as the consequences of these actions (Schwalbe et al. 2000). Specifically, this will require investigating situations where sexual minorities are called to justify supposedly "normal" activities as well as the factors that lead some LGBT people to seek admittance into dominant institutions while others challenge said institutions. As the case of LGBT Christians reveals, justifications rely upon the adoption of norms promoted

by dominant institutions (even by people in local contexts or organizations that resist some elements of the dominant tradition) and the affirmation of the legitimacy of these institutions. Unraveling and comparing the variations in sexual minorities' justifications, and, more generally, the multitude of ways people explain activities that are only deemed unexpected or untoward for *some* groups, may deepen our understanding of the operations that support—and could be used to subvert—inequitable social systems.

Notes

1. While the present study focuses on Christian sexual minorities, researchers have noted similar stigmatized status and management strategies among LGBT people in other major religions, such as Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism (for examples and reviews, see Hunt and Yip 2012; Nynas and Yip 2012; Thumma and Gray 2004).
2. Throughout my fieldwork and formal interviews, members (especially people who initially attended the Church over the course of the three-year period) regularly asked questions about my research, which I always responded to in a similar fashion. First, I noted that the general purpose of my study was to understand the development, experience, and organization of LGBT Christian groups, and then I provided examples of the types of questions that interested me, e.g., how do LGBT Christians make sense of religion and sexuality or see themselves in relation to other Christian groups. Generally, these experiences led to extended conversations where respondents explained the importance of studying LGBT religious experience, and/or suggested questions I should explore with other members.

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