To John and Ronald
Whose earthly spirits were mortally wounded while on their Hero’s Journey
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to express my appreciation to the participants in this study who were willing to openly share their lived experience with me. By doing so, they gave voice not only to themselves, but also to that unknown number of people who continue to suffer (and triumph) in silence.

I am extremely grateful to my Committee Chair, Dr. Silvia Echevarria-Doan, and my Committee members, Dr. Peter Sherrard, Dr. Mary Fukuyama, and Dr. Jo Snider, for their endless patience and commitment to my success. This was a long time in the making, and they all faithfully hung in there with me. I could not have done this without Dr. Doan's expertise in qualitative research, and I will be forever grateful for her willingness to guide this project. Dr. Sherrard's thoughtful questions always kept me digging deeper. Dr. Fukuyama's expertise in spirituality and multiculturalism was an invaluable gift, and I was very fortunate to have her on the committee. I would also like to thank Dr. Snider, who joined the committee later in the process, for taking time from her busy schedule at the College of Nursing to be a companion on this journey.

For all those colleagues and friends who patiently inquired about my progress and never gave up on me, thank you for your confidence and gentle nudging. My parents and family, who have supported my academic dreams since kindergarten, have been invaluable throughout the years and were always my greatest cheerleaders. A special thanks to my father, Earl Sr. and my brother, Earl Jr. for teaching me to spell at age 5, when I was having an incredible challenge mastering that concept. A special thanks also to my mother, Dorothy and my grandmother, Ethel for teaching me to be a strong, stubborn, and independent woman.
No one would survive the hero’s journey without the aid and assistance of fellow travelers. Without my lifetime travel companion and partner, Dawn Marie, I would have never completed this journey. Her endless support, enthusiasm, and personal perseverance kept me going, even after years of wandering aimlessly. She is the greatest gift the Universe could ever have provided me, and I will always be in awe that, of all the potential travelers in her life, she chose me to be her most cherished companion.

I would be remiss if I did not express my endless gratitude to the Spirit Guides and Teachers who were at my side throughout this entire project. Not only did they provide the urge and impetus to do this work, they readily provided me the knowledge, skills, and ability to make that work come alive. There were, in fact, many occasions when I felt more like a channeler than a writer, my assignment being merely to put onto paper the thoughts and ideas they wanted expressed in this study.

Last, I would like to thank Dr. Bernadette Spates, whom I have never met in person, for the continuing motivation to complete this degree. From her deathbed, Bernadette told me, by phone, that I would regret, till the day I died, not completing this degree. Though I didn’t necessarily agree with her at the time, I came to see that she was right. Thanks, Bernadette, for being who you were.
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3-1</td>
<td>Coding trail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure  page

4-1  Conceptual model of the process of realizing spiritual identity..........................114
The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. The study was conducted for the overall purpose of identifying ways in which spirituality might be integrated into the counseling of individuals who are lesbian or gay. Conducted from a social constructionist theoretical perspective, this study assumed that negative social, cultural, religious, and professional discourse regarding lesbian or gay identity may contribute to their development of emotional and spiritual distress. Eight women and four men, identified via a modified snowball sampling procedure, participated in the study. Transcripts of interviews with the participants were analyzed using grounded theory methods. Analysis yielded a theoretical model of the process of Realizing Spiritual Identity. This process included six key categories. Realizing the Sacred Within, Becoming Real, and Realizing Potential were conceptualized as a three-pronged, yet inseparable core category at the heart of the theorized process of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Living Unconsciously/Surviving was conceptualized as a
pre-condition of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Journeying was considered a mediating or transitional category. The category of Living Consciously/Thriving followed the Realization of Spiritual Identity and was conceptualized as the outcome or consequence of that experience. The experience of realizing spiritual identity moved participants from an initial sense of being victims to one of being gifted and blessed. Findings of the study suggest that it is possible for clients to cognitively re-structure or re-frame their painful experiences and come to view those experiences as a catalyst for spiritual growth and development. Implications of the study were discussed as they relate to counseling practice, counselor education, research, and social policy. Results of the study hold therapeutic promise not only for individuals who are lesbian or gay, but for all clients who feel alienated, disconnected, marginalized, or rejected as a result of their perceived differences from mainstream society.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Overview

As we enter the twenty-first Century, calls to integrate spirituality into counseling practice have grown more and more insistent (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Kelly, 1995; Miller, 1999; Shafranske, 1996). The body-mind/spirit dichotomy, so illustrative of Western approaches to therapy, has been found wanting by many and inadequate as a means of understanding and ministering to the diverse existential concerns of clients (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Sperry, 2003; Stasko-Sirch, 1996). This is particularly true for those clients who are gay or lesbian as they struggle to integrate a dimension of human identity that remains unpopular, unaccepted, and under-valued by the majority of social and cultural institutions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. By spirituality, it is meant that these individuals believe that their primary identity is that of a spiritual being who is eternal, perfect, and unconditionally loved. From this sense of faith and inner peace, they find meaning and purpose in all of their lived experiences, including those that are or have been painful. I investigated ways in which these individuals have been able to mute the voices of mainstream society and come to view their sexual identity as merely one aspect of self rather than the predominant characteristic around which they organize and define their identities. The study was conducted for the overall purpose of discovering ways in which spirituality might be integrated into therapy with lesbian and gay clients.
The study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is it that some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their nature as spiritual beings?

2. How do they come to perceive spirituality to be an organizing principle in their lives?

3. In what ways might spirituality be integrated into therapy with lesbian women and gay men?

**Background**

Far too often individuals who are gay or lesbian come to define their entire lives and sense of self in relation to their identity as sexual minorities (Clark, 1987; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). Given the persistently negative social stigma surrounding this identity, it is little wonder that so many of these individuals develop problematic self-concepts and significant psychological and emotional distress. The process of discovering, then coming to terms with one’s identity as a sexual minority leads many gays and lesbians into foreign emotional, psychological, and spiritual territory (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Neisen, 1993; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). It engages them in a unique crisis of human identity in which they are continually forced to justify their very existence; first to themselves, then to others. Frequently isolated, alienated, rejected, and estranged from self, family, friends, church, and community, many experience significant spiritual crises (Haldeman, 1996; McNeill, 1995; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992; Tigert, 1996). Unlike straight individuals who may seek solace from spiritual directors at such a time, gays and lesbians are frequently turned away from these sources of help (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Evosevich & Aurietti, 2000). They often have little recourse but to turn to secular counselors in their times of deepest need.
Despite the very critical role that counselors may play in the spiritual lives of gay and lesbian clients, there is little evidence to suggest that counselors currently possess “lenses” that are broad enough to adequately conceptualize the profound spiritual struggle that these individuals may find themselves engaged in (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan et al., 2001; Grant & Epp, 1998; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Many counselors, lacking a spiritual perspective on the experience of homosexuality, may underestimate or misperceive the degree of spiritual wounding in these individuals (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1993; Silvester, 2000). Utilizing approaches to counseling that do not explicitly acknowledge the existence of the soul or spirit and its fundamental role in human experience, they are prone to overlook what may be the most essential factor in the client’s ability to heal (Cortright, 1997; Jung, 1933; Milton, 2000; Stasko-Sirch, 1996).

It is safe to say that the majority of Western approaches to therapy do not attend to the needs of the soul or honor the spiritual dimension of human being (Assagioli, 1993; Cortright, 1997; Poll & Smith, 2003). This is certainly the case in those therapies designed specifically for clients that are gay or lesbian (Perlstein, 1996; Struzzo, 1989). Contemporary approaches to therapy for these clients, coined gay affirmative, do little more than apply current, heterosexually-based, Western theories to the gay and lesbian population (Jordan & Deluty, 1995; Kuehlwein, 1992; Milton & Coyle, 1999; Wolfe, 1992). These approaches aimed at decreasing “symptoms” and increasing “adjustment,” place metaphorical “Band-Aids” on superficial wounds, leaving the deeper and underlying injuries unattended to. Rather than focusing on long-term liberation from a disabling sense of internalized oppression, they focus on short-term changes in affect, cognition, and behavior (Struzzo, 1989; Tigert, 1996). Although these therapies may
occasionally lend themselves to short-lived improvements in the client’s angst, they do little, in the long run, to increase his or her understanding and acceptance of the profound spiritual meaning and significance of his or her particular experiences as a sexual minority.

Gay and lesbian clients have long been discouraged by and dissatisfied with their experiences in counseling (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991; Pearson, 2003; Platzer, 1998; Rudolph, 1992). This is due, in part, to the fact that many counselors readily admit to feeling inadequately prepared to minister to the needs of this clientele (Bieschke, McClanahaw, Tozer, Grzegorek, & Park, 2000; Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Platzer, 1998). Lacking theoretical perspectives that normalize and contextualize the experience of homosexuality, many counselors remain hindered by the absence of alternative lenses with which to understand and conceptualize their clients’ distress. This situation is further influenced by ongoing controversy among mental health professionals regarding the nature of homosexuality. Although professional organizations have officially deemed that homosexuality is no longer considered a “disorder,” many mental health providers remain unable or unwilling to endorse this change in perspective (Gonsiorek, 1991; Nicolosi, 1991). Influenced by the same (or similar) disconfirming sociocultural, political, and religious discourse as that of their clients, many find it extremely difficult to set aside their preconceived notions and bias towards these individuals (Campos & Goldfried, 2001; Fassinger, 1991; Jordan & Deluty, 1995; McHenry & Johnson, 1993). Therefore, despite possessing significant potential to positively impact the spiritual growth and development of gay and lesbian
clients, counselors are rarely perceived, by these clients, as having done so (Koch, 1998).

Informed by socially constructed knowledge regarding the nature of homosexuality, guided by current models of gay identity development, and limited in scope by strict allegiance to Western views regarding the nature of human experience, many counselors may fail to explore crucial areas in the lives of gay and lesbian clients. Chief among those areas is that of the role of spirituality in clients’ integration of this complex human experience. Although religious or spiritual beliefs may, for good or ill, be central to these clients’ views of themselves, the world, and their problems, this dimension is rarely explored in mainstream approaches to therapy for this clientele (Schumaker, 1992; Tigert, 1996). It may well be this reticence on the part of counselors to delve into spiritual issues with these clients that keeps clients, themselves, from searching for alternative (and more affirming) explanations for their experiences (Lease & Shulman, 2003).

For years, many attempts have been made to conceptualize models of gay and lesbian identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1981; Morris, 1997; Rust, 1993; Sophie, 1986; Troiden, 1989). These models are typically linear in nature and describe a series of stages through which individuals typically pass prior to achieving a sense of “acceptance” or “integration” of gay or lesbian identity. Although these models describe common thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that may surface as one attempts to understand and accept one’s differences from mainstream society, they lack a clear explanation or description of the actual process by which movement through the stages
occurs (Brown, 1995; Coleman, 1985). They also fail to adequately address why some individuals successfully negotiate these stages while many others do not.

None of the models of gay or lesbian identity development address issues of spirituality, and none consider spirituality integral to the process of achieving a positive and affirming sense of self. Authors of these models seem to assume that the gay or lesbian individual who reaches a stage of self-acceptance actually embraces this new identity and magically makes peace with him or her self. Little explanation is provided as to how this complex transformative process occurs. Coming to love one's self and value an aspect of that self so loathed by society surely entails a process more complex than that currently described in models of gay and lesbian identity development. One might wonder whether it is even possible to actually accept or positively integrate a gay or lesbian identity given the persistently negative discourse regarding such an identity. It may well be that those who succeed in achieving a healthy degree of self-acceptance actually do so by dis-identifying, rather than identifying with socially constructed labels of gay or lesbian (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000; Struzzo, 1989; Vaughn, Wittine, & Walsh, 1996). Having done so, they may then be free to operate primarily from a new sense of identity, one that is not defined and organized around prevailing constructs of sexuality and sexual orientation.

Though yet to be addressed or integrated into mainstream approaches to counseling with these clients, there is a constantly growing body of gay and lesbian popular literature that speaks to such a transformative process. This literature describes a phenomenon in which some gays and lesbians awaken (or re-awaken) to their fundamental nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive their experiences as a
sexual minority as an essential and integral part of their journey toward wholeness and spiritual development (Barret & Barzan, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). This literature is, in part, a response to and backlash against the many years of religious and spiritual persecution and oppression orchestrated and perpetuated by institutionalized religion. No longer content with their status as spiritual “orphans” and newly empowered by their journey back to their spiritual “core,” many gay and lesbian writers are taking issue with those who would deny them their identity as loving and powerful spiritual beings (Alexander & Preston, 1996; Morrison, 1995; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Many have found ways to re-frame their experiences of pain and oppression into positive, life-affirming events (Johnson, 2000; Wilson, 1995). Others have re-interpreted their feelings of “difference” and marginalization as being “spiritual gifts” and “pathways for moral and spiritual development” (Bordisso, 1988; O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). Re-defining experiences of exclusion and rejection as “spiritual challenges,” some now perceive that those very experiences led to their becoming “spiritual leaders” and “visionaries” (de la Huerta, 1999; McNeill, 1995; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989).

Others are excavating and bringing to light a vast history that has been mysteriously silenced over time (Plummer, 1995). The persecution of gay men and lesbian women is a relatively recent event. In earlier times and other cultures, these individuals were often revered as spiritual healers, shamans, and mystics (Barret & Barzan, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Being gay was considered a “great spiritual blessing”; and gay men and lesbian women were frequently honored, sought out for their spiritual insight, and consulted because of their perceived wisdom. Some contemporary writers with a more Eastern perspective on life believe their gay
sexuality to be a “choice for the incarnating soul (or some other higher being) for specific purposes” (Brown, 2000; Gigante, 1988). Rather than feeling “banished,” some perceive the experience of having been excluded and rejected by traditional religions to be a liberating one, leaving them free to re-construct a spiritual life undefined and non-circumscribed by religious doctrine and traditional belief systems (Clark, 1987; McNeill, 1995; Perlstein, 1996). It is apparent that some gay and lesbian individuals have taken a new “stance” towards experiences heretofore considered painful and debilitating. They have transformed their perspective from a lens of being “victims” to one of possessing significant spiritual “giftedness” and blessings. Armed with this new spiritual identity, they are re-storying their lives, and, in the process, discovering significant meaning and purpose in a life-style previously considered a burden.

Although this phenomenon appears to be occurring with increasing frequency, the process by which it occurs remains a mystery. How is it that select gay and lesbian individuals are able to mute the voices of mainstream social, cultural, and religious rhetoric and come to perceive and value themselves as loving, loved, and powerful spiritual beings? Since humans typically make sense of their experiences through the narratives and “knowledge” available to them (Simon & Whitfield, 2000), who or what is responsible for this change in understanding and vision in these select individuals? Some assert that it is only after coming to know ourselves as eternal spiritual beings with unconditional divine worth that we can truly understand, make sense of, and accept human experience, especially that which is painful (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Tolle, 1999; Zukav, 1989). If this is so, one might theorize that it is through spiritual inspiration
and intervention that these individuals come to attain their transformed vision and sense of self.

Though a small minority of gay and lesbian clients may have experienced this transformative process, coming to perceive themselves as strong and loving spiritual beings, the vast majority of clients presenting for therapy will likely come divorced from such a conscious awareness of their spiritual nature. Having internalized years of negative and disconfirming discourse regarding their sexual orientation, many may find it extremely difficult to view themselves as sacred spiritual beings engaged on a human journey; a journey uniquely designed to suit their spiritual growth and development. Rather, it is more probable they will come heavily burdened and depressed.

Significance of the Problem

The movement to integrate spirituality into therapeutic approaches to counseling has gained steady momentum over the last decade (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Kelly, 1995; Shafranske, 1996). This more holistic approach to counseling is predicated on the fundamental belief that clients are multidimensional beings comprised of body, mind, and spirit. From this perspective, it is not sufficient to focus merely on problematic thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without also considering the client’s overall worldview, spiritual attitudes, values, beliefs, and general sense of where he or she “fits” in the world (Kelly, 1995). Clients typically come to therapy because they are troubled or are in some sense questioning the meaning, purpose, or value of their lives. Others are having difficulty understanding, accepting, or adjusting to the many challenges and changes inherent in living. Many are experiencing some type of existential “angst,” a period of disequilibrium in which their usual coping mechanisms are no longer providing them comfort or peace. Regardless of their presenting concerns, they tend to be
troubled by some type of problem in living, that is, some form of existential challenge related to their lives as human beings.

Since religious or spiritual beliefs often provide a perspective and help individuals make sense of life, it would seem logical that counselors would be interested in exploring this dimension of their clients' lives (James, 1961). Surveys consistently show that the majority of Americans agree that religion and spirituality are very important in their lives (Kelly, 1995). Empirical studies have repeatedly demonstrated that religious and spiritual beliefs and practices are strongly correlated with a variety of general indices of physical, psychological, and emotional health (Chandler, Holden, & Kolander, 1992). Approaches to counseling that fail to explore this crucial dimension of being may limit clients' overall perspective and deprive them of deeper levels of insight and understanding (Silvester, 2000).

Although the call to integrate spiritual perspectives into counseling has global implications for a variety of clients, it has particular relevance for those who are gay or lesbian. There is ample evidence to suggest that these individuals are at high risk for experiencing “crises of the spirit.” Though not typically labeled as spiritual in nature, these crises become manifest in a variety of psychological and emotional symptoms such as high rates of depression, suicidality, anxiety, and substance abuse (Alexander, 1996). As these individuals search for a sense of meaning, purpose, and belonging in a world that is frequently oppressive, hostile, and rejecting, many come to the realization that these sources of validation and legitimacy cannot be found in the outer world (Tolle, 1999). Many become disillusioned, bitter, and angry. Feeling powerless to change the “way things are,” many give up trying. Others attempt to conform to social expectations,
denying their true selves and living a life of incongruence (O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). Leery of the voices of external authority, some journey inward in search of a different “voice,” one more congruent with and affirming of their particular experiences of life (O’Neill & Ritter).

Counselors lacking a spiritual perspective on human life (and on homosexuality as a specific human manifestation of spirit) may be inadequately prepared to assist these clients on their inner journeys. Some may inadvertently serve as impediments and obstacles to clients’ successful resolution of their spiritual crises. Educated and trained in Western approaches to therapy, many counselors may find it implausible to view these clients in a primarily spiritual context; that is, as spirits incarnate, living the life they were meant to live (Stasko-Sirch, 1996). Unable to perceive sexual orientation as merely a vehicle leading their clients down a particular path on their spiritual journeys, some may interfere with or delay their clients’ successful negotiation through the transformative processes of inner spiritual validation and true acceptance of self. Counselors unwilling or unable to enter spiritual “territory” with their clients may well keep them from exploring and tapping into this potentially rich source of deep and profound healing (Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Shafranske, 1996).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men became highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and came to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. By spirituality, it is meant that these individuals believe that their primary identity is that of a spiritual being who is eternal, perfect, and unconditionally loved. From this foundation of faith and inner peace, they find meaning and purpose in all of
their lived experiences, including those that are or have been painful. I investigated ways in which these individuals were able to mute the voices of mainstream society and, in the process, change their views of self.

**Definitions**

In Appendix C of this paper, I provided a brief definition of my personal conceptualization and understanding of spirituality. Consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of qualitative methodology, I have intentionally refrained from providing a formal definition to be included in the study itself. Qualitative methodologies do not require an operational definition of the phenomenon of interest (Smith, 2003). Rather, it is left to the participants to define and describe their experiences related to that phenomenon. In qualitative methodologies, the participants are considered experts on the phenomenon, which is why they are purposely chosen to participate in the study. It is their rendering of that phenomenon that is of greatest value and interest to the researcher. Indeed, the goal of most qualitative methods is to glean a greater understanding and deeper insight into phenomena as they are uniquely experienced and described by the participants themselves (Charmaz, 2003).

**Research Questions**

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is it that some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their nature as spiritual beings?
2. How do they come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives?
3. In what ways might spirituality be integrated into therapy with lesbian women and gay men?

**Assumptions**

This study is based on the following assumptions:
1. Lesbian and gay individuals are spiritual beings engaged on a human journey that is uniquely designed to promote their spiritual evolution.

2. Although many lesbian and gay individuals fail to recognize or lose touch with their nature as spiritual beings as a result of social, cultural, political, and religious discourse, others become highly conscious of their core spiritual identity and come to interpret their lives and experiences within a spiritual context.

3. The majority of approaches to counseling for lesbian and gay individuals are based on Western approaches to therapy that fail to explicitly acknowledge or explore the role of soul or spirit in human experience.

4. Counselors who fail to perceive or explore the role of spirituality in the lives of their lesbian and gay clients may interfere with their successful resolution of spiritual crises.

5. Counselors who integrate spiritual perspectives into their therapeutic approaches may be able to help lesbian and gay clients find profound meaning in their experiences, attain transformed vision, and discover an overriding sense of spiritual purpose in their lives.

**Theoretical Framework**

The purpose of this study was conceptualized and developed from the foundational perspective of social constructionism. Social constructionism is a critical approach to inquiry that questions dominant forms of knowledge that tend to be oppressive and limiting in nature (Gergen, 1999); in this case, the belief that homosexuality is abnormal, immoral, and an “abomination in the eyes of God.” Social constructionists question the validity of all claims to “truth” and “knowledge” and take a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge (Gergen, 1985). They propose the need to question long-standing assumptions and to search for sources of legitimacy and authority underlying particular values and belief systems.

From the social constructionist perspective, there is no such thing as “truth,” no “correct” way to interpret reality. Rather, all knowledge is relative and a product of social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1991). By this they mean that, rather
than being an accurate reflection of the way things “really” are, knowledge is actually a product of social agreement. It is typically constructed among individuals that are situated in particular social, cultural, and historical contexts through the use of language and symbols (Burr, 1995). Interpretations of right and wrong, good and bad, sick and healthy, etc. do not “grow from nature but from the application of a socially shared perspective” (Gergen, 1991, p. 94). Over time, through the processes of externalization, objectivation, and internalization, this “perspective” or “knowledge” becomes perceived as irrefutably true and valid (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Social constructionists believe that people are powerfully and pervasively directed by particular belief systems and ideologies without necessarily knowing or questioning either the underlying values or the knowledge claims that support those ideologies. Social constructionists work to “debunk myths” and subvert or disrupt knowledge claims that support oppressive ideologies (Guba, 1990). By doing so, they are able to bring to light subjugated discourses, alternative meanings, and new choices for action (Avis & Turner, 1996; Burr, 1995; Simon & Whitfield, 2000).

The goals of social constructionist research are both pragmatic and political and entail a search not for truth, per se, but for any usefulness that the researcher’s interpretation of a phenomenon might have in bringing about change for those who need it (Burr, 1995). Social constructionists believe that knowledge and social action go hand in hand. Differing “constructions” of knowledge invite different kinds of action and reaction from human beings and, thus, from society. Prevailing descriptions or constructions of the world, therefore, sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others.
Social constructionism is foundational to this study, as it is the researcher’s assumption that dominant ideologies and social constructs regarding homosexuality remain oppressive to individuals who are gay or lesbian. As long as these individuals continue to unquestioningly accept and internalize these dominant ideologies, they will remain stuck in a state of “false consciousness,” unable to free themselves from ideologically frozen conceptions of the actual and the possible (Guba, 1990).

Since the introduction of social constructionist paradigms, counselors have been continually challenged to question the very foundational assumptions upon which the practice of therapy has been built and to re-consider their clients and client problems from a contextual point of view. Rather than locating the source of clients’ distress exclusively in their “psyche” or “personal pathology,” counselors are now being encouraged to consider the impact of sociocultural, political, historical, and religious discourse on clients’ sense of self and well-being (Kitzinger, 1995; Simon & Whitfield, 2000; White & Epston, 1990). They are also being challenged to examine the “language” with which they describe clients and their “problems” and to search for a new language with which to conceptualize therapy; one that is embedded in client strengths, resources, and competencies rather than problems, limitations, or deficits (White & Epston, 1990).

Social constructionist theory has particular relevance to this study, as many clients and their counselors remain embedded in dominant and derogatory sociocultural, political, historical, religious, and professional discourse regarding the nature of homosexuality. They continue to be informed by narratives that, by and large, fail to grant spiritual “legitimacy” to the lived experiences of gays and lesbians. On the
contrary, both clients and their counselors are continually exposed to religious and political rhetoric that may preclude them from even considering alternative and more affirming views. Widespread promulgation of the beliefs that “homosexuality is inherently evil and sinful” and a “crime against God and nature” (de la Huerta, 1999) remains an every day cultural occurrence. Basing this type of argument on scripture and other “infallible” written doctrine lends a sense of irrefutable truth and credence to this view, rendering it immune to counter arguments. One needs only to turn on the television or peruse the newspaper to see some of the ramifications of this “evil and sinful” argument. It has led to schisms in major religious denominations and remains a source of heated social and political debate. More importantly, it serves, consciously or unconsciously, to “remind” the public, on a daily basis, of the fundamental premise that there is something innately wrong with individuals who are gay or lesbian.

Current approaches to therapy for gay and lesbian clients do not honor or address spirituality and are not based on epistemologies rooted in their actual spiritual experiences. Many therapists readily admit to a lack of knowledge regarding the needs and strengths of this population and, with rare exception, do not even entertain the idea that spirituality may be one of their greatest assets and strongest resources for healing. To continue to ignore the personal experiences of spirituality among gays and lesbians is to reproduce, in the therapy room, the same dynamics of religious and spiritual oppression they experience in mainstream society. Counselors must begin to elicit and listen to the stories of their gay and lesbian clients and attempt to develop new knowledge and approaches to therapy rooted in their personal and collective experiences (Brown, 1995; Gergen, 1998; Simon & Whitfield, 2000). The qualitative
research methodology of grounded theory lends itself particularly well to this
construction of new knowledge and theory. For this reason, grounded theory was
utilized as the methodological framework for this study.

**Methodological Framework**

This study utilized the methodological framework of grounded theory. Grounded
type is a type of qualitative methodology that develops new theory from data that are
collected and analyzed systematically and recursively (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Data
are analyzed using the constant comparative method; a method in which data is
systematically examined for the emergence of theoretical categories. These categories
are then systematically looped back into the collection of data and further analyzed for
their interrelationships and meanings (Strauss & Corbin). Once theoretical saturation of
meanings, patterns, and categories has been accomplished, new theory emerges;
type that is “grounded” in the actual data. In this form of research, the investigator is
the primary research instrument for data collection and analysis. It is the researcher’s
theoretical sensitivity that allows him or her to develop theory that is grounded in the
data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Research questions are generally broad and open-ended in the initial phase of data collection, then become more focused and refined as
analysis occurs (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005; Rafuls & Moon, 1996). These
questions seek to explore concepts that have yet to be explored or to clarify
relationships between concepts that are ill-defined or yet to be conceptualized (Glaser &
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF RELEVANT DISCOURSES

The purpose of this study was to explore ways in which select lesbian and gay individuals have come to perceive themselves primarily as spiritual beings with unconditional divine worth and come to view their life experiences within a spiritual context. The ultimate purpose of the study was to identify ways in which spirituality might be integrated into counseling approaches with gay and lesbian clients.

The study was conceptualized through the lens of social constructionism. As such, this chapter will provide an overview of social constructionist thinking and discuss ways in which socially constructed views of homosexuality have adversely impacted the emotional well-being and mental health of gay and lesbian individuals.

Although the literature suggests that social constructionist approaches to therapy are ideally suited to this population, researchers do not appear to be investigating them (Gergen, 1985; Simon & Whitfield, 2000). After an extensive search, I was unable to locate any process or outcome studies that specifically described social constructionist approaches in therapy for gay and lesbian individuals.

Consistent with the philosophical assumptions of social constructionism, narrative therapy also appears ideally suited for this population. Having internalized “stories” of pathology and immorality, it would seem plausible that these clients would benefit greatly from the type of re-storying experiences provided in narrative therapeutic approaches. Despite its inherent “fit” with the needs of lesbian and gay clients, there is also no evidence that narrative approaches are being empirically investigated in this population.
Feminist therapists were among the first to embrace the tenets of social constructionism. They have developed theories and practices consistent with the notions of contextualizing clients’ distress and raising consciousness regarding social and cultural power relations that contribute to and sustain women’s feelings of inferiority and subjugation (Brown, 1995; Gergen, 1985). Their efforts to raise consciousness (thus dispelling states of false consciousness) are aimed at empowering women (and other oppressed groups). As such, their therapeutic goals and methods are consistent with the needs of gay and lesbian clients.

Feminist therapists, and, more specifically, lesbian and multicultural feminist therapists, have long seen the value in applying the principles of feminist therapy to their work with gay, lesbian, and other minority populations (Brown, 1989; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). That being said, there continues to be a dearth of research specific to feminist approaches to lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) clients. Despite the lack of research in this area, the principles and goals of feminist therapy remain ideally suited to work with lesbian and gay clients. For this reason, a brief description of feminist therapy will be included in this chapter.

As frequent users of counseling services (Campos & Goldfried, 2001; Rudolph, 1992), lesbian and gay individuals have a vested interest in the world views and personal philosophies of those therapists to whom they turn for help. This chapter will provide a discussion of the “state of the art” of gay affirmative approaches to counseling and will illuminate the many criticisms of these approaches.

As calls to integrate spirituality into therapy for all individuals become more and more pervasive, the continued lack of spiritual approaches to counseling for gay and
lesbian clients has become more apparent. The reasons for this omission are many, but when examined under a social constructionist lens, the major explanation becomes clearer. The idea that lesbian and gay individuals are spiritual beings (as are all humans) has not yet been introduced into mainstream social or cultural conversation. On the contrary, these individuals continue to be described and labeled, by many, in such pejorative terms as “immoral,” “disordered,” and “sick.” While it has become more common and socially acceptable for lesbians and gay men to “come out” and to live more authentic lives, the idea that these individuals often possess, value, and espouse high levels of spirituality remains in the closet (Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). As members of mainstream society, it is not surprising that many counselors lack the personal conviction or language with which to endorse a spiritual approach to therapy with these individuals.

Despite the lack of spiritual approaches to therapy for this clientele, gay and lesbian popular literature, and to a much lesser degree, the professional literature provides evidence that spirituality and/or religion are highly valued by many in these communities. There are several articles and entire books devoted to this topic. A summary of the major theses of these publications will be provided in this chapter.

The study utilized a grounded theory methodological approach in an effort to identify the basic social/psychological process or processes by which select lesbian and gay individuals “awaken” or “re-awaken” to their essential nature as spiritual beings. Insight into this process may offer guidance as to how it can be explored or stimulated in therapy. This chapter will provide an overview of the theoretical basis of grounded theory and provide justification for its use in the study.
Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a theoretical orientation to the study of human beings and their social behavior that gradually emerged as a response to disagreement and discomfort with the tenets of logical positivism (Burr, 1995). For years, those in the social sciences, and most other disciplines, approached problem solving and knowledge generation through use of the scientific method, a process firmly entrenched in the philosophical underpinnings of logical positivism and empiricism (Polit & Beck, 2004). Logical positivists believe that there is an objective reality “out there” that can be “discovered” and perceived accurately if inquiry is conducted in a logical, systematic, and objective manner. They believe that neutrality on the part of the researcher is an essential component of the research process and that it is possible to conduct research that is unbiased by the researcher.

They, for the most part, are not concerned with exploring the ways in which humans make sense of, or find meaning in, their lived experiences. Nor are they primarily concerned with the subjectivity of individual participants or the sociocultural, political, economic, or historical context in which those participants are situated. Rather, they strive to uncover overriding laws, principles, or relationships between variables that can then be used to explain, predict, or control specific phenomena (Polit & Beck, 2004).

Rather than exploring specific experiences or phenomena in their depth and richness, they ask specific, pre-conceived questions that constrain the depth and breadth of responses they receive. In obtaining their sample of participants, they use procedures that enhance their ability to generalize findings to a larger population of interest. Their research questions are theory driven, and their research is conducted for
the purpose of validating, disputing, or expanding those pre-existing theories. Because they believe philosophically that reality can be accurately perceived and, therefore, “discovered,” they imply that the knowledge they generate is the “truth” and the way things really are.

Associated with the postmodern movement, social constructionism is based on tenets and assumptions philosophically opposed to those of logical positivism. Although “weak” social constructionists concede that there may be some factual segments of reality, the majority believe that there is no one way to correctly perceive reality. There are no absolute truths and no one privileged way of making knowledge claims. Rather than being an accurate reflection of an objective reality that actually exists, what we perceive to be reality (and the knowledge claims regarding that reality) is, in fact, socially constructed by human beings via their daily interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social constructionists propose the need to question all knowledge claims and to lay bare the assumptions and motives underlying those claims (Foucault, 1965). They honor multiple perspectives and grant privilege to multiple “voices,” particularly those of the oppressed and marginalized.

Social constructionists also propose that it is impossible to understand human behavior or social action without consideration of the sociocultural, political, economic, historical, and religious context in which that behavior is situated. They are greatly concerned with the dynamics of “power relations” and the ways in which those relations impact what is commonly considered “knowledge” (Foucault, 1965). They concern themselves with questions regarding who in society benefits from particular forms of knowledge and who becomes disenfranchised by that knowledge (Gergen, 1999). They
also examine ways in which social institutions and social practices arise as a result of prevailing discourse, i.e., “taken-for-granted knowledge,” at a particular point in time within a specific sociocultural setting.

Because of their fundamental belief that people are profoundly affected (often adversely) by particular belief systems and ideologies, without valid evidence of their veracity, social constructionists work to “debunk myths” and subvert or disrupt knowledge claims that support oppressive ideologies (Guba, 1990). By doing so, they attempt to bring to light subjugated discourses, alternative meanings, and new choices for action (Avis & Turner, 1996; Burr, 1995).

Because practitioners in psychology, psychiatry, and mental health have been socially privileged to make knowledge claims about what is “normal” or “abnormal” behavior, they have played a key role in constructing the “conversation” regarding lesbian and gay experience (Foucault, 1965). In 1952, the first edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) characterized homosexuality as a sociopathic personality disorder. The 1968 revision of this treatise reclassified it as a sexual deviation. Five years later, in 1973, homosexuality was entirely removed from the DSM, as it was no longer considered a mental disorder (Campos & Goldfried, 2001). At that time, mental health practitioners were challenged to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness associated with homosexual orientations.

These various “classifications” of homosexuality are illustrative of the essentialist and positivistic approaches that were prevalent at that time. That is, research was primarily focused on attempts to determine the essential “nature” of the homosexual. This led to intensive efforts to identify the “causes” of homosexuality and a concomitant
search for ways to eradicate it (Burr, 1995; Nicolosi, 1991). With the rise of social constructionism, this essentialist way of viewing the world (and homosexuals) was found to be wanting, and a call was issued for new approaches to the study and psychological treatment of gay and lesbian individuals.

**Affirmative Therapies**

Although psychological discourse regarding homosexuality underwent a major revision in 1973, when being gay or lesbian was no longer to be considered a “disorder,” practitioners have been slow to respond to this massive ideological shift and have had difficulty developing a new paradigm with which to understand and address the psychological needs of this population (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). As recently as 2004, major psychological publications continued to call for models that adequately describe the psychological processes that lead to “healthy or adaptive outcomes or resolutions” for those lesbian or gay individuals conflicted regarding their feelings of same sex attraction (Miville & Ferguson, 2004, p. 761).

As practitioners struggled to re-conceptualize the experience of homosexuality, a new “language” was needed to describe changes in approach to the psychological treatment of these individuals. This need for a new language resulted in construction of the term “affirmative therapy,” a “catch-all” phrase which implies a positive, supportive, embracing approach to a “condition” previously considered anathema. Although the need for affirmative therapies has been addressed extensively in the literature over the past few decades, significant questions remain as to the definition, defining characteristics, and efficacy of these approaches to therapy (Milton & Coyle, 1999; Miville & Ferguson, 2004). Indeed, there are some who question whether or not affirmative therapy, as an actual entity, even exists.
From a social constructionist perspective, one might say that the fact that a new term or language has been introduced into the conversation does not necessarily mean that a new “practice” has been developed consistent with that language (Burr, 1995). Rather, it may be that the term “affirmative therapy” has been reified despite the lack of a consistent definition or structure, systematic interventions, or empirically supported outcomes (Miville & Ferguson, 2004). As recently as 2007, Bieschke, Paul, and Blasko (2007) stated that work on the meaning and definition of an “affirmative attitude” in psychotherapeutic approaches to gay, lesbian, and bisexual clients is in its infancy. They believe the term “affirmative discourse” is “too simplistic and superficial” (p. 311).

Although there is now a proliferation of textbooks devoted to affirmative therapy, most of the foundation for these approaches is based on anecdotal evidence from therapists rather than on empirical data (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002). In 1996, Acuff, Cerbone, and Shidlo (1996) presented the results of an American Psychological Association Task force which was convened to determine the scope and focus of therapeutic approaches for LGB clients. They reported that although there was much conceptualization of specific problem areas in the lives of these clients, there were few directions provided for interventions. The preponderance of literature they reviewed was theoretical in nature, and there were virtually no empirical studies or explorations of specific treatment methods.

In addition to these task force findings, there are others who have noted that the psychotherapeutic literature related to LGB clients is based more on the clinical experience of therapists rather than on treatment research and that no systematic approaches to psychotherapy unique to homosexual individuals have been formulated.
(Cabaj & Klinger, 1996; Falco, 1996). There are virtually no empirical process or outcome studies available that measure the effectiveness of various conceptual or strategic approaches to affirmative therapy or treatment methods. The handful that do exist are believed to have considerable methodological weaknesses (Dunkle, 1994; Fassinger, 2000).

According to Dunkle (1994), who conducted a comprehensive review of the literature related to the efficacy of affirmative therapy, the few studies that have been conducted on these new approaches are wrought with methodological weaknesses, sampling error, and numerous additional problems with research design and analysis. Most articles related to these approaches do not include outcome measures with which to determine their relative success or failure (Milton & Coyle, 1999). Although there are an increasing number of articles related to gay and lesbian issues in the psychological literature, there has not been a concomitant increase in the amount of treatment efficacy research. According to Markowitz (1991), gay and lesbian issues continue to be ignored by the majority of researchers and scholars.

After a review of three major, current textbooks devoted to the topic of affirmative therapy for lesbians and gay men (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007; Chernin & Johnson, 2003; Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), I was unable to get a clear sense of the “essence” of affirmative therapy. Nor was I convinced that these approaches to therapy differ in any significant fashion from traditional, mainstream approaches to therapy with heterosexual clients. It would appear that the move from an “illness model” of homosexuality to a more “affirmative model” is more of an attitudinal and ideological shift than a change in actual praxis. Although the literature has grown significantly in
terms of common issues and identity development challenges that may be specific to the LGB client, there continues to be a dearth of empirical support and little therapeutic guidance with which to approach these concerns in therapy.

A promising trend in the literature in more recent reviews has been the challenge to practitioners to assume a more proactive social and political role and to empower LGB persons in the face of the damaging and harmful effects of individual, social, and cultural oppressions. In addition to their therapeutic work, counselors are now being urged to work toward social justice and advocacy for this population (Perez, 2007). This action-oriented, critical approach, consistent with a social constructionist philosophical stance, is reminiscent of feminist approaches to therapy. For this reason, feminist therapy will be briefly reviewed in the next section.

**Feminist Approaches**

Feminist therapists were among the first to operationalize and integrate the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of social constructionism into their approaches to therapy (Brown, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). By introducing the notion that “the personal is political,” these theorists and therapists made major strides in externalizing and contextualizing the experiences of their clients. Rather than assuming that psychological problems are unique and located in the individual’s personal “psyche,” feminist philosophy is based on a belief that the primary source and blame for women’s emotional distress is firmly rooted and entrenched in the patriarchal sociopolitical, historical, and cultural environment in which women live their lives (Brown). Feminists believe that patriarchal oppression has been so institutionalized in American culture (and in psychological theory) that it has, for decades, gone unnoticed and become “taken-for-granted” knowledge.
Feminist therapists strive to “make conscious” that which has gone unnoticed. Along with this consciousness-raising goes an explicit imperative to undermine, resist, and subvert oppressive sociopolitical and cultural institutions and practices. These therapists focus on changing unhealthy external situations in the lives of their clients, while also attempting to change the internalized effects of those external situations (Brown, 1994; Worell & Remer, 1992). The goal of therapy is not to assist clients to “adapt to a dysfunctional environment” but, rather, to “liberate” them from their internalization of oppressive stereotypes as well as their tendency to self-blame (Worell & Remer, p. 294).

Due to its inherent fit with the needs of lesbian and gay clients, feminist therapy seems to be an ideal lens with which to conceptualize the emotional distress of these individuals (Brown, 1994; Brown, 1995). If one were to replace the words “patriarchal oppression” with the words “heterosexist” and “homophobic oppression,” one can envision the same sociocultural, political, and institutional forces at work in the etiology of emotional and psychological problems experienced by many in the gay and lesbian population (Alexander, 1996).

Explicit and implicit instances of oppression and discrimination against the gay and lesbian community continue to be rampant. These experiences result in approximately twenty-five to sixty-five percent of this population seeking therapy at some point in their lives, a rate two to four times higher than in the heterosexual population (Rudolph, 1990). According to Durby (1994) and Hammelman (1993), gay men and lesbians attempt suicide two to seven times more often than heterosexual comparison groups. In addition, it has been reported that twenty to thirty-five percent of the estimated three
million gay adolescents attempt suicide (O’Connor, 1992). These staggering statistics suggest that many gay and lesbian individuals do, indeed, internalize the negative, disempowering, and spirit-destroying discourse so prevalent in society.

Despite the inherent fit of feminist approaches to therapy, there remains a lack of empirical research regarding the outcomes of feminist approaches to therapy with gay or lesbian clients. Although most texts on feminist therapy provide a chapter addressing the needs of sexual minorities, this conceptual work has yet to be translated into mainstream psychology, nor has it been the focus of feminist research efforts.

**Narrative Therapy**

Consistent with feminist and other social constructionist approaches to therapy, narrative therapists also believe that peoples’ “problems” are often social and personal constructions that arise as a result of internalizing profoundly destructive and undermining social “messages.” Individuals become so identified with these problems or messages that they make actual “selves” from them and feel powerless to change (O’Hanlon, 1994). Narrative therapists acknowledge that past history and the present culture powerfully shape individual lives, but also believe that people have the capacity to free themselves from those damaging influences once they have been made conscious of them. These therapists focus on making the client conscious of the insidious effects of oppressive ideas and practices on the development of his or her personal sense of self. According to White and Epston (1990), considered the developers of this approach, narrative therapies privilege the person’s lived experience and encourage a sense of authorship and re-authorship of one’s life and relationships. In other words, problematic “stories” can be changed into new stories that are more supportive and self-enhancing than those of the past.
Far too often, individuals who are gay or lesbian come to define their entire lives and sense of self in relation to their identity as sexual minorities (O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). Given the persistently negative social stigma surrounding this identity, it is little wonder so many of these individuals develop problematic self stories and significant psychological and emotional distress. For this reason, narrative approaches, like those of feminist therapists, seem to be ideally suited for gay and lesbian clients. Having internalized damaging messages and stories of pathology and immorality, it seems plausible that these clients would benefit greatly from the type of re-storying experiences provided in narrative therapeutic approaches. Although this approach holds much promise for gay and lesbian clients, there is little evidence that it is being used in therapy with this clientele. If practitioners are utilizing narrative approaches, they are not writing about them, nor are they investigating the efficacy of these approaches in their work with gay and lesbian clients.

Evidence that many in the gay and lesbian population become disillusioned and “dispirited” by their experiences in our oppressive sociocultural, political, and religious environment leads one to wonder how this population comes to cope with these experiences in a less than supportive world. There are some that suggest that a proportion of this population turns to spirituality and religion in order to cope with, and find meaning in, these experiences (Barret & Barzan, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). For this reason, the following section will be devoted to discussing the role and impact of spirituality and religion in the lives of gay and lesbian individuals.

Religion and Spirituality

Religion and spirituality are believed to play an essential role in the ability to cope with and adapt to the many stressors, challenges, and crises inherent in the human
condition (Pargament, 1996; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Shafranske, 1996). The experience of being human involves a life-long search for meaning and significance. For many individuals, religious and spiritual beliefs and practices provide a vehicle with which to conduct this search, as well as a lens with which to interpret the significance and meaning of events along the way (Pargament). This is particularly true for the lesbian and gay population as they struggle to make sense of and integrate a continuous series of physical, emotional, psychological, and social losses (Ritter & O’Neill, 1989).

Religious beliefs and behaviors have typically been described as a source of psychological and social stability and are highly correlated with greater degrees of physical, psychological, and social well-being (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Beit-Hallahme and Argyle (1997) found that religious practices may induce a peace of mind, empowerment, and a sense of purpose. Koenig, George, and Siegler (1988) found that 45% of their sample used religious coping mechanisms to deal with stressful life events.

Many studies attest to a strong positive relationship between religion and spirituality and a variety of indices of mental health. Cortright (1997) and Young, Caswell, and Woolington (1998) found a strong positive correlation between spiritual beliefs and a client’s positive sense of meaning and purpose in life. Others have demonstrated that individuals with high levels of religious involvement experience lower rates of suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse (Genia, 2000; Young, Cashwell, & Shcherbakova, 2000). Spirituality and religiousness provide a set of personal characteristics and dynamics that are useful in personal development and problem-solving activities (Schumaker, 1992). In a comprehensive review of studies...
conducted during the period of 1958-1991, Schumaker found that, in adult populations, religiosity is positively associated with measures of personal adjustment and has a positive effect on mental health.

Ninety-five percent of the American population continues to profess a belief in God and agrees with the statement that religion is a very important part of their lives (Hoge, 1996). However, studies such as Hoge’s do not elicit the sexual orientation of respondents. Therefore, one is left to wonder whether religion and/or spirituality are equally important to the gay and lesbian population. Although there is mounting evidence to support the relationship between religion, health, and coping in the adult population as a whole, there is little empirical evidence of this same relationship in the lesbian and gay community. Nor is there convincing evidence of the degree to which this segment of the population actually uses religious or spiritual resources as a means of coping with their challenges as a sexual minority.

The lack of empirical evidence regarding the role of spirituality in the lives of lesbians and gay men leaves one to merely speculate as to its relevance and significance in this population. The literature suggests two opposing views on this issue. The first view states that long-standing contentious and bitter relationships with organized religion have left many gays and lesbians alienated from the religious or spiritual dimensions of life (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). Some estimate that sixty to seventy percent of this population consider religion “not important in their lives” and have abandoned their allegiance to any form of organized religion (Buchanan et al.; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Given the abundance of literature that supports a strong positive relationship
between religion, spirituality, and other desirable outcomes such as increased coping ability and higher levels of physical, psychological, and social health, this alleged “cut-off” from religion in this population is, indeed, worrisome. It may leave them without a precious (and possibly essential) resource with which to cope with the problems and challenges inherent in their lives as sexual minorities.

There is, however, an opposing view regarding the role of spirituality and religion in the lives of some gay and lesbian individuals. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that, in response to experiences of rejection and exclusion by society, in general, and mainstream churches in particular, many of these individuals are engaging in creative and transformative experiences designed to meet their spiritual needs (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989; Rodriguez & Ouellette, 2000). Others are actively involved in gay-friendly churches, created specifically to address the religious and spiritual needs of this population (Buchanan et al., 2001; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989). In their study of gay and lesbian Christians, Rodriguez and Ouellette reported that attempts to integrate religious and sexual identities in this population were more successful when subjects were members of and highly involved in worship and other activities at a gay positive church. However, many others have, in fact, found it necessary to divorce themselves from organized religions, gay-friendly or not. Instead, they are either turning inward and discovering a personal and affirmative relationship with their Creator (de la Huerta, 2000; Ritter & O’Neill, 1989) or are abandoning the very notions of religion and spirituality altogether.

Although there is an ever increasing number of books and articles that attest to the importance of spirituality in some portion of the gay and lesbian population, most are
anecdotal in nature and suffer from a lack of empirical support. In an effort to remedy this situation, Rodriguez (2006) conducted one of the most extensive research efforts to date. He explored the religious and spiritual lives of one of the largest samples of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals ever to be queried regarding the importance of spirituality and religion in their lives (N=750). His findings supported the notion that a large number of these individuals have, indeed, abandoned their allegiance to established Christian denominations while clearly retaining a strong sense of religiosity and spirituality. Regardless of the data supporting the flight from organized religion, his findings indicated that the gay and lesbian community maintains itself to be deeply spiritual. A majority of his sample considered themselves believers in God, though they had eschewed a similar belief in organized religion. In terms of the mental health of his participants, he noted that those individuals struggling with their gay vs. religious/spiritual identity experienced a wide variety of negative mental health outcomes. These individuals scored significantly worse on every single mental health outcome measure used in the study, including depression, anxiety, anger, self-esteem, loneliness, and the benevolence of people and the world. The study clearly showed that the negative messages that so many still receive today regarding the inappropriateness of their involvement in religion and spirituality has damaging mental health consequences. Indeed, others have speculated that it is this intense and painful struggle to integrate one’s sexual and religious/spiritual identities that brings the majority of gay and lesbian clients to therapy (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005).

Despite these early attempts to explore the role of religion and spirituality in the lives of gays and lesbians, it is clear that we still, primarily, know very little about this
phenomenon or about its importance to the gay and lesbian community. Those very few studies that have tried to explore this issue have utilized small convenience samples of specialized groups and cannot, therefore, be generalized to the general population of gays and lesbians. Findings have, in general, tended to be contradictory in that some say that gays and lesbians have, for the most part, abandoned religion and spirituality, while others support that religion and spirituality are extremely important to this population. It is clear from the significantly negative mental health consequences of unresolved struggle between one’s sexual and religious/spiritual identities, that this is an issue of mounting concern to those in the mental health arena.

Given that so little is known about ways in which gays and lesbians conceptualize the notion of spirituality, in addition to the dearth of knowledge regarding its role in the lives and health of these individuals, a grounded theory approach to investigation seems ideally suited. Grounded theory is an approach to inquiry aimed at exploring concepts about which little is known (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This review of the literature has made it clear that, when it comes to religion and spirituality in this population, there remain more questions than answers. Therefore, in the following section, I will discuss the theoretical foundations of grounded theory and provide justification for its use in this study.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory methodology and methods (procedures), originally introduced in the field of sociology, are now among the most influential and widely used modes of carrying out qualitative research when generating theory is the researcher’s aim (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Grounded theory methodology was developed in the early 60s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a response to prevailing positivist approaches to
sociological research at that time. Glaser & Strauss (1967) felt that most quantitative approaches ignored human problems that did not fit into their positivistic research designs. They believed that the theory-driven, logico-deductive model of inquiry which relied on deducing testable hypotheses from an existing theory seldom led to new theory construction (Charmaz, 2003). From their perspective, grounded theory provided a way of generating theory from empirical data versus the undue emphasis placed on verification of theory in sociological research at that time (Echevarria-Doan & Tubbs, 2005).

Glaser and Strauss’ differing epistemological backgrounds contributed to the overall development of grounded theory methodology. Strauss’s strong links to symbolic interactionism, with its stress on human reflection, choice, and action, stemmed from his training at the University of Chicago with Herbert Blumer and Robert Park. Strauss adopted both the pragmatist philosophical tradition with its emphasis on studying process, action, and meaning and the Chicago legacy of ethnographic research. Glaser, who received rigorous quantitative training at Columbia University, was responsible for the epistemological assumptions, logic, and systematic approach to grounded theory methods (Charmaz, 2003).

All research methods are linked to a perspective on a philosophy of science. Symbolic interactionism, described by sociologists George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, provides the philosophical foundations for grounded theory and guides the research questions, interview questions, data collection strategies, and methods of data analysis (Hutchinson, 1993). Symbolic interactionism is a branch of interpretivism, where the emphasis is on eliciting and understanding the way meaning is derived in
social situations (McCann & Clark, 2003). It is a social-psychological theory of social action that is organized around the self, the world, and social action. The self and the world are socially constructed and, as such, they are ever changing through the processes of social interaction. Thus, individuals and their actions cannot be understood out of social context (Hutchinson).

The underlying assumption in grounded theory is that people make sense of and order their social world even though to the outsider, their world may appear irrational. Individuals sharing common circumstances experience common perceptions, thoughts, and behaviors which are the essence of grounded theory (McCann & Clark, 2003). Researchers using this approach premise their work on the assumption that each group experiences a common social psychological problem that is not always articulated. It is the initial aim of the researcher to identify this problem (Hutchinson, 1993). Once the problem has been identified, it then becomes the researcher’s aim to identify ways in which (via social psychological processes) individuals go about “managing” that problem. Grounded theory seeks not only to uncover relevant conditions that contribute to a problem, but also to determine how the actors respond to changing conditions and to the consequences of their actions. The aim of grounded theory, then, is ultimately to build a theoretical explanation by specifying phenomena (i.e., problems/processes) in terms of conditions that give rise to them, how they are expressed through action/interaction, the consequences that result from them, and variations of these qualifiers (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Grounded theories may be either formal or substantive (Hutchinson, 1993). Formal theories address a conceptual level of inquiry and are more general than substantive
theories. Substantive theories, which are the most common type of theories that are derived from grounded theory, concentrate on specific social processes and are developed for narrower empirical areas of study (McCann & Clark, 2003).

The grounded theory method is especially useful when little is known about a topic and few adequate theories exist to explain or predict a group’s behavior (Hutchinson, 1993). For this reason, it is an ideal approach with which to investigate the phenomenon of interest in this study. Very little is known about the nature or meaning of spirituality in the gay and lesbian population. Even less is known about the process by which some gay and lesbian individuals come to view themselves as spiritual beings and their life experiences, painful as they may be, as essential to their spiritual and moral development.

Current models of gay and lesbian identity development, discussed briefly in the introduction, do not adequately explain or account for the complex processes that occur as individuals move through the conceptual stages of identity development. None of the identity development models discuss spirituality or consider it integral to the process of successful integration of a lesbian or gay identity. Grounded theory method provides an appropriate vehicle with which to begin exploration of this complex process.

Summary

In this chapter, I have provided evidence of the degree of spiritual wounding in the gay and lesbian community. Ongoing rhetoric and disconfirming messages regarding homosexuality have caused many to experience significant conflict when trying to integrate their gay or lesbian and spiritual identities. Although some continue to profess that spirituality is an important part of their lives, there is ample evidence to suggest that many others have lost touch with or rejected their religious and spiritual dimensions.
Given the significant degree of positive physical, psychological, and social outcomes associated with religion and spirituality, it is of grave concern that many in this population appear to have been disenfranchised from this source of solace and comfort. It may be this lack of spiritual “grounding” that contributes to the high rates of depression, suicide, substance abuse, and other symptoms of emotional distress that lead these individuals to seek counseling services at a rate two to four times higher than heterosexual men and women.

Despite this apparent “cut off” from religion, there are many who remain actively engaged in some form of spiritual practice, however that may be expressed. These individuals have found a sense of faith, equanimity, and inner directedness and remain confident that they possess a loving, supportive, and personal relationship with a Higher Being. Though evidence of this spiritual connectedness in the gay and lesbian community has become more and more prevalent, it remains unclear how they go about achieving this transcendental sense of meaning, purpose, and “belonging” despite living, day-to-day, in a world that remains exclusive and rejecting. It was for the purpose of discovering this process or processes that this study was conceptualized and designed. If it can be identified and better understood, it may be possible to explore or set it in motion as part of the therapeutic experience for gay and lesbian clients.

Despite the general call to integrate spirituality into counseling practice, there is little evidence that current approaches to therapy for gay and lesbian clients include consideration of the spiritual domain. Although affirmative approaches to therapy are a significant improvement from the past and reflect a paradigmatic change in knowledge, attitude, and approach to therapy with this clientele, there has been no move to expand
these therapies so that they routinely include assessment or interventions related to the spiritual health or connectedness of these individuals.

This study was conceptualized and developed from the theoretical perspective of social constructionism. Social constructionism served as an ideal organizing principle for the study, as it provides a theoretical explanation as to why gay and lesbian individuals so frequently develop problematic self-images and, at least temporarily, accompanying feelings of psychological, social, and spiritual distress. It also provides a framework with which to envision approaches to therapy capable of making conscious the effects of sociopolitical, cultural, and religious oppression and providing new and more liberating narratives for these individuals. Chief among these new narratives is the idea that gay and lesbian individuals are, like everyone else, spiritual beings engaged on a human journey. As such, they are worthy and deserving of existential feelings of purpose, meaning, and belonging in a world that frequently considers them “exiles.”

Little is known about the inner spiritual worlds of the gay and lesbian community. Despite an ever-increasing number of books and anecdotal articles that attest to the importance of spirituality in at least a portion of these individuals, there remains a dearth of empirical evidence regarding the meaning or role of spirituality in their lives. For this reason, I chose grounded theory as a method with which to pursue this area of inquiry. Grounded theory is ideally suited to explore concepts about which little is known and, as such, will provide access to the inner subjective world and lived experience of these individuals. From this emic perspective, it is hoped that we may gain a greater understanding and appreciation for ways in which spirituality may serve as a meaning-making and, possibly, life-saving force in the lives of these individuals.
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH PROCEDURES

Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the research methodology and procedures that were utilized to explore the phenomenon of interest. This qualitative, interpretive, grounded theory study was designed for the purpose of exploring the following research questions:

1. How is it that some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their nature as spiritual beings?
2. How do they come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives?
3. In what ways might spirituality be integrated into therapy with lesbian women and gay men?

In this chapter, I will address initial and theoretical sampling procedures, interview questions, data collection and recording procedures, and methods of coding and analyzing data. A coding trail can be found in Table 3-1 at the conclusion of this Chapter, illustrating the various phases of the coding process, i.e., open coding, theoretical coding, and selective coding. I will include a discussion of the issues of informed consent and Institutional Review Board procedures as well as a summary of the evaluative criteria used to determine the quality of this grounded theory study. I will also provide a demographic summary of the participants and will briefly introduce participants to the reader.

Institutional Review Board

A formal application for institutional sanction of this study and all required documentation were forwarded to the University of Florida’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval prior to the conduct of this research. Once the proposed study was
granted approval by the Committee Chair and committee members, as well as the university’s Institutional Review Board, I commenced data collection and analysis.

**Informed Consent**

Prior to participating in this study, participants were asked to review an informed consent document (Appendix B). This document provided a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and a description of the participant’s role in the study. Risks and benefits of participation were outlined. As per IRB instructions, participants were asked to provide the investigator verbal rather than written consent, due to the confidential nature of the study. A copy of the informed consent document was provided to the Institutional Review Board upon presentation of the proposed study to that Board.

**Initial Sampling**

In grounded theory methodology, participants are chosen because they are representative of the phenomenon of interest (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). They are purposefully selected because of their experiences with and knowledge about the area of study (Hutchinson, 1993). The proposed initial sample for this study was six—three lesbian women and three gay men. The final sample consisted of twelve individuals, eight lesbian women and four gay men. In order to identify these individuals, a process called modified snowball sampling was utilized. In snowball sampling, participants are solicited who then suggest other potential participants (Miller, 1986). In modified snowball sampling, individuals who are interested in participating in the study are advised to contact the investigator of the study rather than being contacted by her or him. It was at the direction of the IRB that modified snowball sampling be the method of sampling for this study. To be included in the study, participants had to self-identify as being gay or lesbian. In addition, they had to self-identify as perceiving spirituality to be
an essential and central aspect of their being. The study included both lesbian women and gay men in order to identify possible variations in the phenomenon of interest that may be due to gender differences.

In grounded theory methodology, sample sizes need not be large or representative of the population at large (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Because statistical procedures are not utilized in the analysis of data, smaller samples that are representative of the phenomenon of interest are appropriate for study. Unlike quantitative studies that aim to generalize their findings to a larger population, qualitative studies seek to conduct in-depth explorations of a relatively small number of participants’ perceptions, understandings, meanings, actions, and accounts of a particular phenomenon (Charmaz, 2003). This is done for the purpose of discovering key concepts and core processes by which individuals in the substantive area go about resolving a problematic issue (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory studies are conducted for the purpose of systematically generating theoretical understandings of core social processes. Once a substantive theory regarding a basic social process emerges from the data, one can then transfer this theory to other situations that have similar categories and properties, rather than generalizing the results of the study to a larger population of individuals (Glaser).

The Participants

Twelve individuals ultimately agreed to participate in the study—eight lesbian women and four gay men. The following is a summary of the demographics of the group as a whole. This will be followed by a brief introduction to each of the participants. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality, participants have been assigned a pseudonym by the investigator.
Demographics

Participants ranged in age from 39 years to 77 years. Ten were Caucasian. One was American Indian, and one a blend of Italian, Puerto Rican, and Cuban heritage. Two were single, and ten were in committed relationships. Eight held graduate degrees. One held an undergraduate degree. Two had “some college” education, and one held a high school diploma. Six were employed full-time and two part-time. The remainder had retired. One reported an annual income between 20,000-29,900 and six an annual income of 30,000-39,000. The remaining five had an annual income of 50,000 or greater.

The age at which they reported knowing they were gay or lesbian ranged from 7 years to 40 years. The age at which they reported having their first same-sex relationship ranged from 10 years to 40 years. Each participant’s childhood religious affiliation and current religious/spiritual practices will be discussed in the next section.

Toni is a 47 year old Italian, Puerto Rican, Cuban woman who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 37. Toni was raised in a traditional Catholic home. At the present time, her spiritual practices include prayer, meditation, and self-study. She is not affiliated with any particular place of worship. Toni is employed full-time as a mental health counselor and believes her spirituality to be an integral part of her personal and professional practice. She is currently in a long-term, committed relationship.

Marie is a 39 year old Caucasian woman who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 26. Marie also reports being raised in a traditional Catholic home. At the present time she is not actively engaged in any spiritual practice though she remains interested in finding a place of worship where she can feel welcome and accepted. Marie is also a mental health counselor and is employed full-time. Marie feels that spirituality is the
Kristin is a 63 year old Caucasian woman who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 40. Prior to this time, Kristin was married to a man for a period of 18 years. Kristin’s earlier religious affiliations were with the Presbyterian and Baptist churches. She states that she has always been a member of one church or another since childhood and that she found religion “on her own.” She is currently a member and actively involved in a gay-affirmative, non-denominational church. Kristin is a retired elementary school teacher who continues to work part-time in another capacity. She is in a long-term, committed relationship.

Sherri is a 62 year old Caucasian woman who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 11. Sherri reports being raised in a traditional Catholic home and currently is a member and very actively involved in a Metropolitan Community Church. She is one of the founding members and personally helped build that church many years ago. She reports that she has a “very strong and close relationship” with God. Sherri is a retired nurse who spent 20 years in the military. She is currently in a long-term relationship.

Aaron is a 46 year old Caucasian male who first realized he was gay at the age of 10. Aaron was raised in a very “tight community” of Southern Baptists. He reports that church was an extremely integral part of his entire growing up years. Aaron is currently a member and actively involved in a gay-affirmative, non-denominational church. He is employed full-time with the state and is in a committed relationship.

Mike is a 44 year old Caucasian male who first realized he was gay at the age of 7. Mike states that he always had an “intense curiosity” about religion but was raised in
a family in which it was a “taboo topic.” He is currently a member and actively involved in a gay-affirmative, non-denominational church. He is employed full-time with the county and is in a committed long-term relationship.

Karen is a 68 year old Caucasian female who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 10. As a child, she was “exposed to a variety of religions,” but states that she did not integrate the values of any of them at that time. She intensely began studying about various religions and developed her “Christian-Buddhist” type spiritual beliefs in her late 40’s. She is not a member of any particular religious denomination. Karen is employed full-time as a nurse educator and is in a long-term, committed relationship.

Marilyn is a 70 year old Caucasian female who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 16. As a child, she was raised in a large extended family of traditional Catholicism. She currently describes herself as “agnostic, at best, if not an out and out atheist.” She describes her spirituality as being based in a very firm set of altruistic values that she believes guide her life on a day-to-day basis. She is employed full-time as a nurse educator and is involved in a long-term, committed relationship.

Tim is a 65 year old Caucasian male who first realized he was gay at the age of 16. Tim spent many years without an intimate relationship of any kind. He became involved in his first relationship with a male at the age of 34 and has been with this partner ever since. Tim was raised in both the Methodist and Quaker traditions. He is currently a member and actively involved in a Metropolitan Community Church. Like Sherry, he was a founding member of that church and personally helped build it. Tim is a semi-retired nurse educator.
Greg is a 77 year old Caucasian male who first realized he was gay at the age of 12. Greg was raised in the Episcopal tradition and is currently an active member of a Metropolitan Community Church. Greg reports having had his first sexual relationship with a male at the age of 16. He spent 18 years married to a woman, a relationship that ended only with her death. One year following her death, he began his first long-term relationship with a male. Greg is a retired social worker and is currently single.

Sarah is a 73 year old Caucasian female who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 20. Sarah was raised without any religious affiliation and is currently an active member of a Metropolitan Community Church. Sarah, too, is a founding member of this church and personally helped build it many years ago because, “I didn’t want to see any more young boys brutalized because of their lifestyle.” Sarah is a retired biomedical technician and is currently in a long-term relationship.

Jane is a 69 year old American Indian female who first realized she was lesbian at the age of 20. She was raised without any religious affiliation but became a member of a Fundamentalist church at the age of 36. For years, Jane prayed to be “healed” of her lesbianism and, for a long period of time, thought that she had been. She later realized that she had not been cured at all but, rather, had been living in denial. Jane is currently an active member of a Metropolitan Community Church. She is a retired social worker and is currently single.

Data Collection and Recording Procedures

The primary method of data collection was one to one, in-depth interviews conducted by the investigator. Interviews lasted approximately one to one-and-a-half hours. Initial interview questions were open-ended and broad in nature. As the study progressed and categories began to emerge, the interview questions became more
focused. All interviews were recorded using audiotapes and manually transcribed by the investigator. Once the first interview was completed and transcribed, the investigator immediately began open and theoretical coding and analysis of data. Throughout the research process, data collection, coding, and analysis were simultaneously conducted in a recursive and iterative fashion, with the results of analysis driving further and more focused collection of data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

**Interview Questions**

1. What does being “lesbian” or “gay” mean to you?
2. How does that label affect your other identities?
3. In what ways have you found meaning and purpose in your life as a gay man or lesbian woman?
4. Were there any specific events or experiences that led you to change your views about who you are and where you “fit” in the world? If so, describe/explain.
5. In what ways, if any, has your sexual orientation affected your spirituality?
6. In what ways, if any, has your spirituality affected your sexual orientation?
7. If you have ever had counseling or therapy, what was that experience like for you?
8. How might counselors integrate spirituality when working with gay or lesbian clients?

**Data Analysis Procedures**

In this study, data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory utilizes a set of methods consisting of systematic inductive guidelines for gathering, synthesizing, analyzing, and conceptualizing qualitative data for the purpose of constructing theory. Grounded theory methods start with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and progressively create more abstract conceptual categories that explain what these data indicate (Charmaz, 2003). The purpose of grounded theory is to generate concepts and their relationships
that explain, account for, and interpret the variation in behavior in the substantive area under study. This behavior is most often aimed at attempts to process an issue or problem that the participants are continually attempting to resolve (Glaser).

Consistent with grounded theory method, data were analyzed by means of various levels of coding. These levels included open coding, theoretical coding, and selective coding (Glaser, 1992). Coding is the analytic process through which data are fractured, conceptualized, synthesized, integrated, and systematically related to form theory. The basic operations of analysis in coding include making comparisons between and among data (the constant comparative method) and continuously asking questions about that data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). These questions are: What is the chief concern or problem of the people in the substantive area, and what accounts for most of the variation in their processing of the problem? Secondly, what category or what property of what category does this incident indicate? The investigator asked these two questions while constantly comparing incident to incident and coding and analyzing. Soon categories and their properties emerged which fit and worked and were of relevance to the processing of the problem (Glaser). The following is a description of the required coding procedures according to Glaser.

**Open Coding**

Once the participants’ interviews were transcribed, the researcher began line-by-line coding of the transcripts, beginning with the process of open coding. Open coding is the initial step of theoretical analysis and pertains to the initial discovery of categories and their properties (Glaser, 1992). It is an interpretive process by which data are broken down analytically. The purpose of open coding is to give the researcher new insights by breaking through standard ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena
reflected in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In open coding, events/actions/interactions or incidents were compared with others for similarities and differences. They were also given conceptual labels. Once being given conceptual labels, similar events/actions/interactions were grouped together to form categories and subcategories. These categories were then further broken down according to their specific properties. Once identified, categories and their properties became the basis for further sampling on theoretical grounds (theoretical sampling).

Theoretical sampling entailed collecting more data in order to illuminate, extend, and refine theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2003). In theoretical sampling, one specifically samples for the purpose of developing one’s emerging theory, not for representation of a population or increasing the generalizability of one’s results. As relevant categories and properties began to emerge in my study, I returned to my original participants, when necessary, with more focused questions based on those categories and/or properties. It also became necessary to enlarge my initial sample from six to twelve in order to “round out thin areas” (Glaser, 1992, p. 101) and/or to discover and adequately account for negative or deviant cases (Silverman, 2005).

Open coding stimulates generative and comparative questions to guide the researcher upon return to the field (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Asking questions related to emergent categories enabled the researcher to be sensitive to new issues that may have arisen and increased her theoretical sensitivity, i.e., made her more likely to take notice of the empirical implications of the emerging data. Comparing data between and among categories helped to give each category more specificity. Once the researcher
became aware of distinctions among categories, she was able to clearly identify and articulate specific properties of each category (Corbin & Strauss).

**Theoretical Coding**

According to Glaser (1992), theoretical codes are conceptual “connectors” between categories and their properties. He defines theoretical coding as “a property of coding and constant comparative analysis that yields the conceptual relationship between categories and their properties as they emerge” (p. 38). Grounded theorists seek to discover a small set of highly relevant categories and their properties connected by theoretical codes into an integrated theory. Theoretical coding occurred sequential to open coding. As relevant categories and properties were discovered in the data, the conceptual linkages between them began to emerge from data analysis. Through theoretical coding, the researcher was able to conceptually form the connections between categories. This led to the development of tentative hypotheses. These hypotheses suggested how the incidents and categories thereof may be related to each other. These grounded hypotheses permitted the investigator to make conceptual deductions which in turn guided the theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling then led to further data collection, analysis, and broadening the depth and scope of the emergent theory (Glaser).

According to Glaser (1992), there are many “families” of theoretical codes that have already been substantiated in his earlier writings (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). He advises researchers conducting grounded theory studies to be familiar with these codes in order to enhance theoretical sensitivity when coding and analyzing data. Prior to initiating coding, this investigator familiarized herself with an array of theoretical
codes already available. This sensitized her to concepts and processes already identified in previous studies and allowed her to consider the data from a broader context and perspective. For example, the “strategy family” was relevant to this study, as it became evident that participants were attempting to manage the basic social problem by use of an array of strategies. The identity-self family was also highly relevant to the study as participants were engaged in the processes of self-realization and self-transformation (Glaser, 1978). Familiarity with Glaser’s work allowed the investigator to more easily discern the theoretical codes as they emerged from the data.

**Selective Coding**

Open coding comes to an end when it yields one or more core categories (Glaser, 1992). Once the investigator was certain she had discovered the core categories, she began the process of selective coding. To selectively code means to cease open coding and to delimit coding to only those variables that relate to the core variables in sufficiently significant ways to be integrated into the emergent theory. The core variables then became a guide to further data collection and theoretical sampling. Codes, theoretical memos, and integration started to occur in relationship to the core variables.

Core categories account for most of the variation in a pattern of behavior. Once they were discovered, the investigator had to attempt to thoroughly saturate them by selective coding and theoretically coding their relationship to their properties and to other categories. The core categories have several important functions for generating grounded theory: integration, density, saturation, completeness, and delimiting focus (Glaser, 1992).
Theoretical Memos/Sorting of Memos

Throughout the data collection, coding, and analysis processes, the investigator continually tracked her thinking regarding the emerging concepts, categories, and theoretical codes by writing theoretical memos. Theoretical memos, according to Glaser (1992), are the “theorizing write-up of ideas as they emerge while coding for categories, their properties, and their theoretical codes” (p. 108). They are written up as they occur to the analyst when constantly comparing, coding, and analyzing the data. These memos were essential to the analysis process as they tracked the development of the researcher’s thinking as she proceeded with data collection and analysis and were readily available for review in each subsequent analytical session. The researcher found herself continually returning to these memos while engaged in both the inductive and deductive processes of theory development.

Once categories became dense and theoretically saturated and the core categories were fully developed, the researcher began the process of sorting the theoretical memos. Sorting begins to put the fractured data and memos back together. It consists of sorting the memos in a theoretical outline in preparation for the writing stage. Sorting was the final analysis of the memos and the final emergent step in generating this theory. It was from this process of sorting that the investigator was able to generate hypotheses and to achieve integration of the theory. Integration is the emergent connection between categories and properties based on theoretical codes and, according to Glaser (1992), “It just happens, because the world is integrated and we are [merely] discovering the world” (p.76).
Journaling

In addition to writing theoretical memos, this investigator kept a journal throughout the entire research process, recording her thoughts, concerns, insights, problems, etc. as the process evolved. Journal entries served as “grist for the mill” and precursors of theoretical memos and also provided a record of the research process as it unfolded.

Evaluative Criteria for Grounded Theory Studies

Because of major differences in epistemological, ontological, and philosophical underpinnings between quantitative and qualitative research, criteria for evaluating qualitative studies differ from the typical canons for evaluation in quantitative studies (Creswell, 1998). According to Glaser (1992), the four most central criteria for evaluating the quality of a grounded theory study are: fit, work, relevance, and modifiability. He believes that if a grounded theory is carefully induced from the substantive area under study, its categories and their properties will “fit” the realities under study in the eyes of subjects, practitioners, and researchers in the area. In other words, it will seem credible to them and plausible in their eyes. If the grounded theory “works,” it will explain the major variations in behavior in the area with respect to the processing of the main concerns of the subjects. If the theory “fits” and “works,” it has achieved the criterion of relevance. He also believes that grounded theories should be readily modifiable when new data present variations in emergent properties and categories (p. 15).

In addition to these four major criteria, Glaser (1978) also believes that a grounded theory should be parsimonious and should possess a broad scope in explanatory power. By this he means that the theory should contain only a few, highly relevant categories that are well integrated, resulting in hypotheses that serve to adequately
explain, account for, and interpret the variation in behavior in the substantive area under study. Rather than being generalizable to a larger population, basic social processes discovered in a small substantive area in grounded theory studies are transferable to basic social processes that are broader in scope and depth.

Criteria for evaluating qualitative studies are constantly evolving. In addition to Glaser’s (1992) criteria for evaluating the quality of grounded theory studies, qualitative studies, in general, are also evaluated in terms of their “rigor,” “transparency,” and “coherence” (Smith, 2003). Rigor refers to the thoroughness of the study in terms of the appropriateness of the sample to the question in hand and the completeness of the analysis undertaken. It also refers to the quality of thought that goes into the inquiry, i.e., evidence that the process was carried out in a careful, precise, and creative manner (Piantanida & Garman, 1999). Transparency and coherence refer to how clearly the stages of the research process are outlined in the write-up of the study (Smith). Studies are also evaluated in terms of their impact and importance, i.e., does the study actually tell us anything useful or important or make any difference? Does it shed any light on the extant work in the area? What possible contribution can the study make in terms of social change or changes in practice (Yardley, 2000)? Does the study help us to better understand the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998)? The impact and relevance of the findings of this study will be addressed in the implications section in Chapter 5.

Qualitative studies are also evaluated in terms of their “authenticity” (Piantanida & Garman, 1999). Authenticity refers to “the reliability and verifiability with which the account of the event corresponds to the “real” details of the event” (p. 150). Certain procedures need to be followed and well documented in the write-up to demonstrate
that data-gathering techniques emphasized objective observation and recording of information. This was done via audiotapes, verbatim transcripts, theoretical memos, triangulation of data sources, and the agreement of subjects that the theory adequately describes the process under study. According to Piantanida and Garman, the issue is not that the theory corresponds to some verifiable event. It is, rather, that the theory is a “coherent and authentic rendering of the meaning of the experience in a way that makes clearer the connection between the individual/idiosyncratic and the universal” (p. 151). This is consistent with Glaser’s (1992) belief that quality grounded theories in small substantive areas are those that are transferable to basic social processes of broader scope and depth. This is sometimes called “transferability” when used as a criterion to evaluate effectiveness of qualitative studies (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In order to meet the above-stated criteria, I audio taped all interviews with the participants in my study. I have also retained verbatim written transcripts of those interviews along with the various levels of coding as they occurred. Theoretical memos and a personal journal provide evidenced of the systematic development of the theory as it emerged from the data. All procedures have been extensively described in the procedures section of this dissertation. As the theory emerged, I shared it with participants to obtain feedback regarding its fit and correspondence to the processes they described in their interviews (member checks). In addition, through continuous dialogue with my Committee Chair and committee members as appropriate, I sought guidance and feedback on the entire research process and product as it unfolded. I also consulted with colleagues who are experts in gay and lesbian issues to determine whether the emerging theory “fit” with their understanding of the phenomenon of
interest. In addition, as the theory emerged, I further explored the extant literature in relevant fields and attempted to integrate my emerging theory with those that already exist in related fields.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Codes</th>
<th>Theoretical Codes</th>
<th>Selective Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fear/Anxiety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aloneness/Isolation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suffering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anger/Bitterness</td>
<td>Living Outside the Tribe</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different/Less Than</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alienation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disconnected</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Belonging</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threatened</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Struggling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non Acceptance</td>
<td>Feeling Homeless</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeking a Safe Haven</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orphaned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Safety</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Spiritual Home</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estrangement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungrounded</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secrecy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compartmentalizing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying/Deceit</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incongruence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inauthentic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untrue to Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disguising Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living in the Closet</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guilt/Shame</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Loathing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity Confusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypocrisy</td>
<td>Disowning/ Denying Self</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Codes</td>
<td>Theoretical Codes</td>
<td>Selective Codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constricted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolating</td>
<td>Disengaging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introverted</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preoccupied</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shut down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detachment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reticence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hypervigilance</td>
<td>Self-Imprisonment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imprisoned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guarded</td>
<td></td>
<td>Living Unconsciously/Surviving cont.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Monitoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punishing Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Faith</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Clarification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissonance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Shopping</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Doubt</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values Conflict</td>
<td></td>
<td>Questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose/Meaning of Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location in the Universe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Faith</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who am I?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Codes</td>
<td>Theoretical Codes</td>
<td>Selective Codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Hole</td>
<td>Despair/Feeling Victimized</td>
<td>Living Unconsciously/Surviving cont.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling a Void</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dying from Inside</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut Off</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emptiness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Despair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Paths</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restlessness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Urges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gotta Go</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can't Stay Here</td>
<td>Leaving Home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More to Life than This</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Out</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting Away</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where to Begin?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Going on an Adventure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directionless</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pathfinding</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forks in the Road</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hanging on to Cliffs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turning Points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice Points</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courageous Acts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danger</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trailblazing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wandering</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solitude</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Obstacles</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journeying</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

72
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open Codes</th>
<th>Theoretical Codes</th>
<th>Selective Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A &quot;felt sense&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Light bulb&quot; experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out of body experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innate Sense of Knowing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognizing Guidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing a Voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being Re-born</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metamorphosis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epiphany</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden Insight</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intuition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual Experiences</td>
<td>Discernment/Enlightenment</td>
<td>Realizing the Sacred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Connection</td>
<td></td>
<td>Within</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of &quot;Rightness&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Perfection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Wholeness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change in Vision</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heightened Awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peacefulness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction from God</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness of the Sacred</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudden Inspiration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling of Oneness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surrendering/Accepting</td>
<td>Surrendering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming Open</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td></td>
<td>Becoming Real</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living Congruently</td>
<td>Transformation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Rejection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepting Loss</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owning Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Codes</td>
<td>Theoretical Codes</td>
<td>Selective Codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staking a Claim</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Fear</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Changing Event</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief of Burden</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A &quot;freeing&quot; experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role-Modeling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Blessings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Self</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing a Safe Space</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to the Tribe</td>
<td>Making a Difference</td>
<td>Realizing Potential</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering Gifts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actualizing Potential</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blossoming</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Connecting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assuming Responsibility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing Wisdom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honoring Guidance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contributing to Mankind</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unshakeable &quot;Knowing&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inner Peace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equanimity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep Faith</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust in Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Altruism</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>Transcendence/Feeling Blessed</td>
<td>Living Consciously/Thriving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empassioned</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep Connection</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Actualization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose/meaning in Life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mindfulness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. In analyzing the data, it became apparent that participants possessed varying degrees of spiritual awareness from early on in their lives, and that issues related to their sexual orientation, though common, were not the only catalyst for changes in this awareness. Rather, what was uniform throughout their lives was a history of having undergone some significant event or experience that sharpened their degree of personal spiritual awareness and irreversibly changed their perception of self. This experience moved them from initial feelings of fear, alienation, and aloneness to an unshakeable sense of peace, belonging, and connectedness. The point at which this occurred is consistent with traditional understandings of the process of “discernment”; that is, at some moment in time, participants gained a keen insight and an intuitive knowing that they were, previously, unaware of.

The analysis of data utilizing Glaser’s grounded theory methodology led me to conceptualize the process through which this occurred as being one of “Realizing Spiritual Identity.” The process of Realizing Spiritual Identity is consistent with traditional descriptions of spiritual awakening. In this study, Realizing is conceptualized as a process of change and is comprised of three core experiences: realizing the sacred within; becoming real; and realizing/manifesting potential. These experiences are neither sequential nor discrete. Rather, they are overlapping and recursive with
individuals moving back and forth between them at times and, at other times, engaging in all three simultaneously.

The conceptual model in Figure 4-1 (Located at the conclusion of Chapter 4) illustrates the key categories of the theory (selective codes). Realizing the Sacred Within, Becoming Real, and Realizing Potential were conceptualized as a three-pronged, yet inseparable core category at the heart of the theorized process of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Living Unconsciously/Surviving was conceptualized as a pre-condition of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Journeying was considered a mediating or transitional category. The category of Living Consciously/Thriving followed the Realization of Spiritual Identity and was conceptualized as the outcome or consequence of that experience.

In addition to the key categories, there were also fourteen sub-categories (Theoretical Codes). (See Table 3-1 for Coding Trail). As advised by Glaser (1978), I attempted to make the theory parsimonious. That is, I narrowed the key categories to those few that were the most highly relevant and clearly grounded in the data.

In this Chapter, an initial overview of the theory will be presented, followed by a description of each of the categories. For ease of identification, key categories will be bolded and centered in the document. Sub-categories will also be bolded. They will be sub-titled and discussed under the key category section in which they are situated.

**Overview of the Theory**

Participants in this study reported having spent at least a portion of their lives feeling alone, fearful, and alienated. Most often this was a result of an acute awareness of the degree to which they seemed to differ from ninety percent of the rest of the population and an inability to view this difference in a favorable light. Occasionally these
feelings of isolation had nothing to do with their sense of sexual or affectional
differences from the majority. Rather, they found themselves in some life situation that
provided them an equal sense of feeling alone, different, and separate from the rest of
the world. In either case, the result was the same. That is, an individual who felt
isolated, threatened, and fearful of life.

During this period of alienation, they existed in a state of relative unconsciousness,
conceptualized as being a state in which they were unaware of, or out of touch with,
their spiritual core. Focused on disabling feelings of being different and “less than,” they
were unable to view their situations in anything other than a negative light. It was
described by participants as a time in which they felt homeless, isolated, and
disconnected.

During this time, their energies were primarily devoted to surviving what they
perceived to be a hostile and threatening environment. They accomplished this by
engaging in the processes of disowning/denying self, disengaging, self-imprisonment,
and deep questioning. Immersion in these self-limiting and ego-dystonic behaviors led
many to experience intense feelings of isolation, loneliness, and despair. At this time,
they seemed to perceive themselves as victims.

The period of surviving culminated in a felt need to engage in a process
conceptualized as leaving home. Leaving home is best understood as the first step
toward the development of Consciousness. It represents the beginning of a long
psychological process in which they were forced to embark on an inner journey without
the familiar baggage of earlier beliefs about self, others, the world, and, in some cases,
God or a Higher Power. Devoid of the defense mechanisms with which they had, up to
that point, been surviving, they were, like pioneers, setting off on a course into the unknown with no maps or compass to lead the way. Leaving home, then, became the first in a series of steps toward self-discovery and self re-definition.

It was while they were embarked on this inner journey that they came to a turning point in their lives. Each underwent a significant event or experience that triggered a process conceptualized as one of realizing. This process of realizing is consistent with traditional understandings of experiences of discernment, enlightenment, or spiritual awakening. That is, participants came to recognize themselves as spiritual beings and, as a result of that recognition, were able to surrender to the truth of their lives. Surrendering allowed them to cease resisting the reality of who they are and to begin the process of change.

Empowered by this new level of vision and insight, they were transformed and began to live their lives in a more open, honest, and authentic manner. As they unlocked the doors and freed themselves from their self-imposed prisons, they came to recognize the unique gifts, blessings, and talents they possessed and began sharing those gifts with the world, conceptualized as realizing potential and/or making a difference.

The changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that accompanied the process of realizing moved them into the final process in the theory, that of thriving. Participants described the process of thriving as one in which they felt a deep sense of peace, tranquility, compassion, belonging, connection, acceptance of self and others, and an "unshakeable inner knowing." They perceived themselves as blessed and gifted, rather than cursed and victimized. They had, in essence, transcended the suffering inherent in
their earlier misconceptions about life and were now proceeding on their journeys, basking in the comforting and soothing light of Consciousness.

In summary, it was as if these individuals were born “outside the tribe,” destined to engage in a hero’s journey of sorts. By this I mean that they were forced to embark on a journey designed to help them awaken to their true nature. As they awakened, they were not only able to locate their rightful place among the tribe but, in the process, became deeply committed to serve that tribe in very meaningful and profound ways.

Living Unconsciously/Surviving

Tolle (2005), a contemporary spiritual Master and writer, proposes that the majority of human beings live their lives in a state of unconsciousness. By the term unconscious, he means a state in which individuals identify totally with their minds, thoughts, and life situations, unaware and unconscious of the essential and eternal Being at their very core that is, in reality, who they truly are. He proposes that as long as human beings remain in this unconscious state, which he believes most do, they are destined to experience endless cycles of suffering.

Data in this study supported the notion that participants dwelled, at least for a portion of their lives, in this state of unconsciousness, unaware of their innate goodness and acceptability. Totally identified with their external circumstances and preoccupied with their own negative perceptions regarding those circumstances, they suffered from the illusion that they were unacceptable, damaged goods, different, less than, cut off, disconnected, alone, at risk, and constantly in danger of irreversible loss. This persistently negative and anxiety-provoking thinking made them vulnerable to social criticism and facilitated their internalization of the harmful rhetoric they were continually immersed in.
Unaware at that time that they are, in their innermost core, eternal spiritual beings, immune to relevant harm, they felt continually threatened and fearful. Participants described themselves as bitter, angry, frightened, terrified, depressed, fearful, anxious, and burdened. Unable to put their painful thoughts and experiences into perspective, they struggled with feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and confusion. Failing to understand the inner nature and purpose of their outer differences from others, they felt inferior and unable to view those differences in anything other than a negative light. They described situations and feelings that I interpreted conceptually as Living Outside the Tribe and Feeling Homeless. Given their overall sense of existential isolation, disconnectedness, and solitude, it was clear that they were out of touch with the sacred within. It was clear that they were, at that time, unconscious.

**Living Outside the Tribe**

At one time or another, participants experienced significant feelings of existing outside the tribe, the majority because of their sexuality and the remainder as a result of a traumatic event or experience. Most of the participants in this study realized that they were gay or lesbian at a relatively early age and struggled for years with feelings of alienation. Toni, Marie, and Kristin, who considered themselves heterosexual earlier in life, were spared the early years of struggle over their sexuality, yet experienced similar feelings and experiences of alienation at the time of this new found discovery.

At the age of 42, after 18 years of marriage to a man, Kristin rather suddenly became aware that she was lesbian. As a child, Kristin had learned a lot about loneliness and isolation, as she was an only child whose parents were both alcoholic. Although she believes that “God saved my life at that time,” she was ill-prepared for the feelings that followed her discovery that she was lesbian. She reported feeling very
lonely, isolated, and disconnected, stating that, “I thought I was the only lesbian in
town.” She also described herself as fearing for her physical safety and concerned that
people were going to be able to just “look at her and know.”

Aaron’s “tribe” was a close-knit community of Southern Baptists with whom he was
closely identified in his growing-up years. Aaron knew that he was gay at the age of 10
and went through intense feelings of alienation and fear as he came to realize that his
church was very anti-gay. “I hated what I learned. I was different than the others. I felt
like I was condemned to die. I was going to burn in hell for everything that I couldn’t
help.”

Jane’s alienation from her tribe also occurred as a result of her relationship with
her spiritual community. Jane “came to know Christ as my Savior” later in life in a very
conservative mainline church that taught and believed that homosexuality was an
abomination. She stated that because of that teaching, she rejected her lesbianism and
“bought into that teaching and considered myself cured. I broke up a 13 year
relationship that I had with my partner because of that.” For a number of years, she
lived under the illusion that she had been cured until she finally accepted that she was
not cured but was, rather, in denial. When that happened, “I became very angry with
God and I left the church.” After leaving the church, she went through several years of
feeling extremely angry, bitter, alienated, isolated, and depressed. She described that
period of time as “feeling like I was dying inside. My spirit was drying up.”

Greg, now 77, reported having been “depressed almost my entire life.” Greg was
aware he was gay from the age of 12. He described feeling very isolated and resentful
throughout those years as a result of having to “live a life of secrecy.” He stated that he
constantly had to cover up his behavior for fear of being discovered. He described it as “like being raised in a hostile environment. There was something wrong. I was different. I felt I didn’t measure up.” Believing that it was never going to be possible to have a long-term relationship with a man, he married a woman and remained married to her until her death eighteen years later.

Tim, like Kristin, truly believed he was the only gay man in his town. After leaving home to attend college, he was also convinced he was the only gay man at his college, so he kept his sexual orientation “secret” for many, many years and lived without any intimate relationship until the age of 34.

Though most participants experienced a sense of living outside the tribe as a result of their sexual orientation, some described experiencing similar feelings as a result of other traumatic experiences. Karen, though aware of her sexual orientation early in life, denied having experienced any emotional trauma related to her sexual identity, yet she admitted experiencing periods of alienation and loss of a sense of safety as a result of other life experiences. Karen had been given up for adoption by her biological parents as a young child and experienced abuse for years in her adoptive family’s home. As a result of having been adopted as well as the abuse she experienced, she believed herself to be “a bad person.” She stated that she grew up “alone and on her own” and that she had always felt that way.

Toni, who did not realize she was lesbian until the age of 37, reported having felt relatively safe and welcome in the world until a sexual assault in middle school stripped her of her sense of safety, security, and connectedness. She stated that after years of keeping the assault a secret, she became severely depressed, isolative, and withdrawn.
She described herself as living “in a world of fear” that eventually forced her to seek therapy.

A sense of being alone in the world permeated the participants’ stories. During those periods of time, they did not feel like a member of the tribe. They were like strangers in a strange land, unfamiliar with the territory in which they found themselves. Life as they knew it was unsafe, and they were confused as to where they belonged. In addition to feelings that they were living outside the tribe, they also described feelings and experiences that I conceptualized as being homeless.

**Feeling Homeless**

Following recovery from her sexual assault, Toni eventually began to re-engage with people and allowed herself to get close to others. It wasn’t until she came out to her family at the age of 37 that Toni again began to experience feelings of alienation. As a result of that disclosure, she “lost both friends and family members, some of whom won’t even talk to me anymore.” Although Toni was willing and able to live with those losses, she had, by coming out, forfeited her taken-for-granted “membership” in the family. She stated that coming out has affected “every part of my life.” Like Toni, Marie also reported cut-offs with certain relatives and a change in her relationship with her mother following her disclosure that she was lesbian.

Mike, aware that he was gay from the age of 7, suffered for more than thirty years with the belief that his birth was an “accident”; that he was unwanted and unloved by his parents and did not “belong” here. His home life was tumultuous, and he responded by “becoming a rebel.” He reported feeling extremely stifled, angry, isolated, and resentful throughout his growing up years and constantly struggled to find his rightful place in the family.
Marilyn stated that she had an “ideal” home life till the age of 14, at which time her mother began drinking heavily, significantly affecting her previous experience of home and family. She stated that, at that time, her primary goal was “to get away from there” and that she did so as soon as she possibly could. Although she still calls the place her parents lived “home,” she was never “attached” to it again once she left.

For Kristin, home was always a “dysfunctional and crazy” place. Both Kristin’s parents were alcoholic. Being an only child, she had to continually lie and keep secrets to protect her parents from the consequences of their drinking. Roles in the family seemed to be reversed: Kristin was the responsible parent, her parents the dependent children. At age 13, Kristin decided she couldn’t take the craziness any more. She bought a train ticket for herself and her mother. She told her mother that she was moving out of state to live with relatives, and that she was leaving, with or without her. It was clear that Kristin never really had a traditional home or place she could feel safe, protected, and cared for. Sarah, whose father was also alcoholic, described a similar experience of having grown up in a threatening, abusive, and insecure home environment.

Marie had always been “the good little girl” in the family and lived to meet or exceed her parent’s expectations. She had her life “all planned out,” and that included marriage, children, and the “white picket fence.” When she realized she was lesbian at age 26, the world as she knew it “fell apart,” and she lost her sense of who she was and where she fit in the world. She experienced a “crumbling of identity” and felt extremely alone and isolated. Unwilling and unable, at that time, to shatter her parent’s (and her own) image of her, she struggled with her sexual orientation in silence for several years.
The most telling evidence of living emotionally distant and “estranged” from a secure sense of “home” revolved around their relationships with parents and immediate family members. It was amazing to discover how many of the participants had never, to this day, divulged their sexual identity to their parents or family members. Although all assumed that their family knew they were gay or lesbian, many never broached the subject or discussed their lifestyles with family members, especially parents. It is difficult to comprehend that individuals could live their entire adult lives (some well into their 60’s and 70’s) without ever feeling comfortable sharing this most relevant aspect of self with close family members.

Unlike racial and ethnic minorities, gay and lesbian individuals are not able to find solace from the shared experience of minority status with their immediate or extended families. Although one participant did report having siblings who were also gay or lesbian, the rest did not. For most, then, there was no one in the immediate family with whom they could identify, at least in terms of their being members of an oppressed group. Most racial and cultural identity development models include a stage in which the individual becomes immersed in the family ethnicity and culture (Sue & Sue, 1990). This period of immersion provides at least some respite and an experience of belonging in which these individuals can, at least temporarily, feel part of a larger whole. This was not the case for the participants in this study, at least as it related to their sexual orientation.

Participants who were most distraught by feelings of homelessness were those who believed that they were, in fact, at risk of losing God’s love and being eternally damned. Marie, Kristin, Sherri, Aaron, Greg, and Jane all struggled with questions
related to their “acceptability” to God as well as with the possibility that they would be
denied an eternal home with God. Though they had been taught that, “There are many
rooms in my Father’s house” (John 14:2), they feared that that “promise” would not
apply to them.

It was clear that participants in this study experienced periods of intense suffering
as a result of their feelings of homelessness and existing outside the tribe. During those
times, they did not feel at home in their own skin. They did not feel at home with self,
with life, with God, with the Universe. Feeling lonely, isolated, and disconnected from
family and tribe, fear became a predominant emotion and survival a primary concern.

During this unconscious state, the majority of participants reported experiencing
intense levels of fear. For some, this fear was relatively transient, short-lived, and
situational. Others lived in fear and/or a state of anxiety and depression for extended
periods of time. For some, the threats were very concrete and tangible (i.e., fear of
being physically harmed or killed, fear of loss of career/employment). For others, the
fear was more psychological in nature (i.e., fear of rejection, loss of approval/support,
being disowned by family and friends, being alone the rest of their lives). Many feared
that God would reject them, that they would be damned for eternity. Some believed that
God was on their side throughout their ordeals, but continued to feel threatened by
other people and social forces. A few were not yet acquainted with God or a superior
Being and drew little solace or comfort from religious or spiritual beliefs.

In this state of fear and anxiety, it was difficult for participants to trust life and to
embrace it with a sense of hope, purpose, and meaning. Rather, they felt burdened and
overwhelmed, the pressure of their life situations weighing heavily upon them. During
these periods, their focus seemed to turn inward, their energy primarily devoted to surviving. Each survived in a different manner. Unfortunately, many of the strategies they used at that time served only to distance them even further from both themselves and others.

**Disowning/Denying Self**

As part of the survival process, several of the participants found themselves spending a significant portion of time resisting or hiding the self they knew themselves to be. During those periods they were either unable or unwilling to take ownership of their lives out of fear of the possible repercussions, real or imagined. Other's opinions (and remaining safe) seemed to matter more to them than their own need to be genuine. They described themselves as feeling inauthentic, incongruent, conflicted, hypocritical, closed, untrue to self, secretive, living a double life, or having no identity at all.

Two of the male participants, Mike and Greg, married female partners, despite already knowing that they, themselves, were gay. One of those marriages lasted only a brief period, but the other lasted for 18 years, only ending when the spouse passed away. Aaron and Tim avoided intimate relationships entirely, Aaron until the age of 30 and Tim until age 34. Aaron had, in fact, vowed to remain celibate for life as a way of dealing with his conflicted feelings. Tim reported thinking that he was “probably going to be alone for the rest of his life.” He was somehow able to compartmentalize his sexuality for years, stating, “I really was not all that interested in my sexuality. It just wasn’t all that important to me, I guess.” Later in the interview he stated, “Now that I think about it, if I had to do it over again, I might have made it more important. But I didn’t know the difference then.”
All had experienced times when they felt forced to lie, be deceitful, withhold information, or engage in other forms of evasion and/or distortion of truth. All of these behaviors were egodystonic to one degree or another and caused them to feel false or dishonest. There was a tangible sense of guardedness and hypervigilance in their descriptions of the energy required to keep people from discovering who they were.

It seems that everywhere they turned, they encountered implicit or explicit messages that they perceived as a threat to their sense of safety. Some were actually brought into police stations and interrogated about their lifestyles. In those instances, they were asked to expose not only themselves, but also friends and acquaintances that were gay or lesbian. Several spoke of the era of the Johns Committee and the Anita Bryant movements, both of which resembled witch hunts designed to identify and eliminate gays and lesbians from key positions in education and government. (These two political action movements will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5).

Others discussed their time in the military as a period of years in which they had to constantly lie and be extremely guarded lest their sexual orientation/lifestyle be discovered. Sarah described an incident in which she had watched several lesbians get “drummed out of the Marine Corps” after their sexual orientation had become known. She stated, “They just marched them right out the front gate and off the base.” Others were teachers or social workers who were quite aware of the consequences should their true selves be revealed.

Some lived in a state of deep denial for many years. Greg, the oldest member in the study, was in his 70’s before finally finding the courage to tell his daughter he was gay. Jane reported that she was in such a state of denial that she had convinced herself
that God had “cured” her of her lesbianism. Unable or unwilling to accept an identity so
loathsome to others (and/or to themselves), some hid deeply within themselves for a
period of years.

Disengaging/Self-Imprisonment

While in this survival mode, most participants lived in a very withdrawn and
constricted manner, reluctant to fully engage with people and the world. It was almost
as if they lived in a self-imposed prison, detached from and fearful of getting too close to
others. Aaron described himself as living “paralyzed in fear” until he was well into his
30’s. Sherri reported having lost many potential friends and limiting her social
interactions due to her hesitation to trust other people. Some truly believed they were
“the only ones,” i.e., the only gay or lesbian in their town, workplace, etc. A few believed
they were destined to spend their entire lives alone.

Many spoke of their conscious efforts to avoid other people who “looked gay or
lesbian” for fear of being found guilty by association. Some of the women felt that
engaging in activities that they excelled in, such as sports, would make them suspect.
Though some did play sports, they tended to avoid those on the team who “looked like
lesbians.” In this sense, they often isolated themselves from those very people who may
have been able to provide them a sense of validation, camaraderie, and friendship.
Sherri recounted a time in the military in which she was restricted to the barracks
because, “They thought I had cut my hair too short.”

The last thing they wanted was to stand out in a crowd. As a result, many were
fearful of taking risks, voicing controversial opinions, or being the center of attention.
Because of this reticence, they withheld a large part of themselves and failed to make
the degree of contributions to others they were capable of making. Indeed it seems that
at this time in their lives, many were not yet aware of their personal gifts or the talent, power, and influence they possessed. Intent on surviving, they were primarily introverted and preoccupied with their sense of being different rather than extroverted and actively engaged in the process of making a difference. They were, as Tolle (2005) describes, still unconscious.

**Questioning Spirituality**

Part of the process of surviving involved a deep questioning of earlier spiritual attachments and/or beliefs. Mike was the only participant who grew up without exposure to, and some degree of participation in, organized religion. In fact, he stated that although he always had an intense curiosity about spiritual matters, his family rejected the notion of religion and did not allow him to discuss or pursue it. Kristin reported “finding religion” on her own as a young teenager, having been raised by alcoholic parents who had no association with organized religion. Karen was exposed to a variety of religions as a child, but did not identify with or “integrate the value of any of them” until late in her 40’s. A few actively participated in organized religions while growing up, but reported no real attachment or commitment to them at that time. Others described religion as “extremely important” to them in their early years and, as children, strongly identified with the religious belief systems of their parents.

None are currently active in the religious denominations of their youth. At some point, each felt compelled to re-examine and intensely question their earlier spiritual beliefs. Part of that questioning involved a stepping back or away from what they had been taught in the past. All spent long periods of time in which they went without a spiritual home, having left the only one they ever knew. Many engaged in church shopping, a process in which they explored a variety of churches and denominations in
an attempt to locate one that felt welcoming and accepting. A few no longer desired a relationship with a church or church community, choosing, rather, to express their spirituality through other means. Others seemed to vacillate between a desire to worship privately and the need to be an accepted and valued member of a community of worshippers.

Despair/Feeling Victimized

For many, the price of survival was very steep. Loss of their earlier religious and/or spiritual attachments was experienced as an extremely traumatic and life-changing event. The majority described feeling a tremendous void during this time. They felt “hollow,” “empty,” “restless,” “directionless,” “incomplete,” and “cut off” from their usual sources of strength and comfort. One felt as if she was “dying from the inside out.” Another described life during this period as a “black hole.” Though some retained a personal relationship with a God or Higher Power during this time, their manner of experiencing and expressing that relationship changed significantly. Others abandoned the idea of God altogether. Those who felt a deep and integral need to worship as part of a “community of believers” experienced the greatest sense of loss and, at times, intense feelings of despair.

Journeying

Leaving Home

It is little wonder that participants went through periods in which they did not feel “at home” in the world; when everywhere they looked, they failed to see themselves reflected in the family, culture, society, or religious institutions in which they found themselves. This overwhelming sense of estrangement eventually forced them to leave “home” and to begin the process of searching for a place where they truly felt they
belonged. By leaving home, it is meant that they became actively engaged in a long psychological process in which they were forced to examine their beliefs about self, others, and the world (de la Huerta, 1999), while slowly identifying and extricating themselves from the influence of a barrage of disempowering, taken-for-granted knowledge and other forms of social control. Participants unanimously described this process as an internal, invisible journey rather than an external, visible one.

**Pioneering**

The language participants used to describe this process of leaving home resonated strongly with images of a pioneer. According to Myss (2002), the Pioneer is an archetype in which an individual is “called to discover and explore new lands, whether that territory is external or internal” (p. 404). Participants spoke of experiencing a sense of “restlessness,” of strong, inner urges to venture into a new phase of life. They described feelings of intuitively knowing that there was “more out there,” “more to life than this.” Many referred to an awareness that they were on a path, though most, at this point, were not aware of where they were headed and had no conception of a specific destination. They spoke of “forks in the road,” “living on the edge,” obstacles, and “hanging on by their fingernails to a cliff.” One described herself as having set out on an “adventure.” Their descriptions conjured up images of “wandering in the desert,” knowing that something incredibly important was missing in their lives, yet unaware of how or where to find it.

All were aware that they had reached a point where they “had to leave home” and the lives they had always known. They “needed to get out,” “to get away.” They “could no longer stay where they were.” They had to “get off the path they were on” and “onto a different course.” Some did not know “where to begin looking.” Only one of the
participants felt that she knew “where she was supposed to be and what she was supposed to do.” She, however, also made several references to paths and turning points on her journey.

They spoke of personal challenges with courage and the need to “take risks.” There were also multiple allusions to danger, exploration, trailblazing, and the cutting of new paths. They spoke of “choice points,” having to make major decisions, and experiences of wandering without “direction.” When listening to the descriptions of their experiences, I got a clear mental picture of a solitary individual, striking out on a journey into the unknown. Even though there may have been other people in their lives at this time, this was an inner journey they were forced to undertake alone, an experience begun in solitude. It was while they were embarked on this inner journey that they encountered an event or experience that significantly changed their views of self as well as their sense of belonging in the world. I conceptualized this as being a process of realizing.

**Realizing Spiritual Identity**

Generally, the process of realizing is defined as “to grasp or understand clearly”; “to bring vividly to mind,” “to make real”; or “to give reality to” (dictionary.com, n.d.). For participants in this study, realizing was a multi-faceted process comprised of three distinct yet overlapping activities: realizing the sacred within; becoming real; and realizing/manifesting potential. These activities did not always occur in a predictable or linear fashion. For most, the realization that they were sacred spiritual beings preceded their ability to truly be themselves (to be real and authentic) and to begin fully manifesting their gifts and potential. For others, however, finding the courage to be real (to come out to self and others) seemed to begin their journey toward an awareness of
themselves as sacred, spiritual beings with a responsibility to contribute to mankind.

Realizing was conceptualized as a three-pronged, yet inseparable core category at the heart of the theorized process of realizing spiritual identity.

**Realizing the Sacred Within**

**Discernment**

You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars; you have a right to be here. And whether or not it is clear to you, no doubt the universe is unfolding as it should. Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive him to be. And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life, keep peace in your soul. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world. (Ehrmann, 1927)

In his well-known poem, *Desiderata*, Max Ehrmann beautifully captures the essence of the dawning of Consciousness experienced by participants in this phase of their journeys. It was during this time that the majority reported undergoing an experience that forever changed their views of self and confirmed their rightful place in the Universe. No two had the same experience, yet all shared stories in which they were given a clear message, were provided a change in vision, or gained a heightened awareness of who they truly are beyond their human form. Their accounts were consistent with traditional understandings of the processes of discernment, enlightenment, or spiritual awakening. Though none actually used the terms discernment, enlightenment or spiritual awakening in their interviews, the imagery and symbolism evoked resonated with typical descriptions of those processes. Participants expressed their unique experiences in a variety of ways, ranging from "it was just a feeling that overcame me" to accounts of elaborate and intense out-of-body experiences. Given that "realizing" is the core variable identified in this study, I will be
liberal in this section with descriptions of their actual experiences to provide empirical support and validation that this is, indeed, the core variable.

**Enlightenment**

Most participants reported that their new sense of awareness or insight happened “in a moment” or during a short-lived experience after years of struggle and self-doubt. Marie recalled the following:

> Yea. I mean that switch that I can piss everybody off but not God and ultimately feeling a sense of peace happened in an instant. It happened in a moment and I can still remember it. Um yea it happened one morning when I really was sort of reaching a sense of rock bottom with everything crumbling around me. I was very isolated um by myself and I was having sort of a little melt down and ah I remember distinctly that in that moment um of sort of existential absolute doubt and wondering if I was really doing something that was really bad on an eternal basis um having a sense of peace. And no, I got this sort of almost voice in my head that said no, you’re just fine, that there’s nothing wrong with you, you’re fine. And I believed that voice to be coming from God. And from that point on, I knew within myself that I was okay. I know within me, I trust and believe that interaction, that momentary interaction, I trust and believe that to be true. And I haven’t doubted that since.

Kristin did not realize that she was lesbian until the age of 40. Although she had had a strong relationship with God most of her life, at the time she came to this realization, she found herself questioning whether she was still “acceptable” to God:

> I wondered if it was okay with God. I really did. God let me know it was okay. I found that when I shut up, ask Him a question and just shut up, that He’ll answer it. He’ll answer it. I said, “God, is it okay that I’m a lesbian”? I said, "Is it okay with you"? And He said, “Yea, you’re still my child. I’ll take care of you.”

When asked if she perceived this communication to be a voice, she replied, “Very, very God-like voice. You know, a nice peaceful voice.”

Others also made reference to having heard a voice that let them know they were loved and accepted for who they were. Sherrie stated, “Ya know, and God and I had long talks. And um and deep down I knew that ya know I’m not a bad person. Ah, that
um God made me, He knows what I am. And He loves me.” When asked how she came
to the realization that God loves her the way she is, she replied:

Um, I really can’t say. It was just something just something, um, I felt. And um I just um knew that ya know He’s always been with me. Ah, it’s ah it’s just a feeling, ya know. I don’t think I could put a finger on it when I had this feeling. Yea, it was, just things, you talk to God about a situation and you know you would um you’d kind of say ya know it was like a light bulb came on over your head, ya know?

Aaron described his moment of awakening as follows:

Like I said, that whole week was an emotional turmoil. It was terrible. It was the worst week probably of my life so far. And, um, ya know I came home and I was sitting there by myself. And, um, I realized this is not all there is. That, so I’d have to say that’s the moment that I decided personally that I was not being damned. That God wasn’t judging me for who I am. That obviously I was put here for something, some purpose. And I didn’t believe that I became gay over night. I really do believe that I was born that way. And that God did not intend for me to be miserable and alone. Um, I would have to say that was the moment that I really thought that this is not what God intended and everybody else that I had heard in the past is wrong about the subject.

When asked if he had ever thought about where, all of a sudden, that [insight] had come from, he replied:

Hmmmm. Ah. I mean looking after you say things like that, after you ask that, you know, I would have to say that it probably was a direct, um, ah, a direction from God. You know I always, you know, heard stories about people talking to God and you know God talking to them and I kept thinking wow you know that’s never happened to me. But I do feel like ah even though maybe I didn’t at the minute think that that’s God talking to me, cuz like I didn’t hear a voice, but you know, I pretty much, I remember sitting there saying, “God, if this is, if this is what I’m, this is the way I’m going to be, and this is what’s meant for my life, then, ya know, help me because I don’t want to be alone.” Ya know, and I feel like that He did answer me with, by sending somebody and we were together for seven years, ya know. God did speak to me in certain ways. I’m not, I don’t think I heard a voice. But ya know, it had to be directed by God and that’s the way I look at it.
Some reported an innate sense of “knowing” without being able to articulate the source of that knowing. Sarah stated, “I do truly believe that God accepts me as I am. I don’t know why it is this way. But I trust that it's okay.”

Though hearing or responding to a “voice” was frequently cited, several of the participants recounted stories of having had what they considered “spiritual experiences” while out in nature. Jane, previously a devout member of a Fundamentalist church, struggled for years with inner conflict regarding her lesbianism. At one point, she had considered herself “cured” of her “affliction” and had resumed a heterosexual lifestyle. After years of attempting to live as a straight woman, she realized that rather than being cured, she had, in fact, been living in denial. When asked how she came to this realization, she replied:

For me, it was all an internal struggle. There was no big catastrophic event that happened at that point that caused this. It was just me being attuned to my spirit. To what was going on with me intrinsically, that I was struggling with this and knew that that something had to give. I couldn’t continue on the path that I was on. That I had to do something differently than to continue to live in a closet.

Feeling a strong need to worship God “openly” as a proud and open lesbian, she found herself in her car on the grounds of Trinity Metropolitan Community Church, a gay-affirmative church located on a quiet, peaceful, rural, sequestered wooded property. From her description, I got the sense that she felt she was on “holy ground”:

And when I drove onto the property and sat there in my car, I just had this ah peace and thinking, “This could be my ah my ah church home. This could be the place I could go.” So for about a year, year and a half, I drove up here once or twice a week to attend services and to get involved in the church. So, eventually, I came out at work and ah this was a process of Trinity and being there and being able to worship openly and admit to who I was. And I was able to get the courage and the strength to come out to others outside the church environment.
Greg also described being “led” to this particular church after experiencing the sudden, unexpected death of his partner:

At that time, I felt completely lost. And I had a thought. I just felt, there must be an MCC Church here. This came to me all of a sudden. I had never been to an MCC service per se. All of a sudden, that came to me that this would be a refuge, the port in the storm. I always feel it was a dramatic kind of an inspiration, something like that. Out of the blue. A flash of imagination. I think it was some kind of a spiritual experience. I felt at home. It was like a metamorphosis, it really was.

Not everyone reported having had an experience with God or a Higher Power, per se. Some underwent events that left them knowing they were an integral part of the Universe, that they belonged, and that they were who they were meant to be. Marilyn considers herself “at least agnostic, if not atheist.” Rather than equating spirituality with “worshipping a deity,” she feels guided by a strong value system that she considers to be the foundation of her spirituality:

I think that probably the first time I was aware of kind of having a sense of, ya know, I might have to take back my thing about “path.” But this was a, this was an experience when we went to ah our psych experience at Chattahoochee. We took the bus, greyhound bus, and we had these big footlockers that we had to take because we were going to be gone for three or four months. And we had to walk from the greyhound station to the dorm or wherever we were going to stay. And when I got off that bus, it was April 7th, 1958, and it was Easter Sunday which is kind of interesting. And I remember dragging that that trunk. And I knew where I was supposed to be and what I was supposed to do. It was the most amazing thing. And I never looked back. And I was walking really fast which I don’t usually do. And so everybody else was kinda behind me struggling and all this kind of stuff and I was, I hardly felt the weight of the trunk.

She went on to describe a second experience she believed to be spiritual in nature:

And probably the second time was when I went to college. And I had a 7:00 class. It was in the summertime. And on that campus, there were these huge oak trees and I had never never had that kind of sense of, I don’t know, peace or something like that at 15 minutes to seven in the morning.
I'm just, not, I'm not there usually. I remember just it was it was a beautiful, beautiful feeling. For me, it was, it was the beginning of a lot of things.

Two referred to concepts such as the Universe, the Cosmos, and an Energy or Life Force to describe their essential sense of feeling connected and a “part of the whole.” Tim described an experience that was, for him, a sort of dawning of consciousness:

A number of years ago, I was in a forest and there was a brook, a stream that was flowing by. It was very quiet except for the music of the stream and the chirping of the birds and insects and the breeze as it was kind of flowing by me. And I thought, you know, I'm very tiny in this woods, but there is a sense of uh birth, life, uh, death, and uh regenerating. The enormous trees which shed leaves, would shed bark eventually, would die and go into the soil and then regenerate and other things come to life from that. And I, you know, I'm really part of that. It has a constant kind of evolution and regeneration and that kind of gave me sort of the oneness with what I consider to be another powerful being. Some people call it God. That, to me, conjures up images of super people or super person, but no this is more like a force, a power that uh probably has always existed and will probably always will exist, uh because it constantly regenerates itself and that I had a place in that and that it was okay. No now, I did not always feel that way, no. I suppose some people would call that an epiphany.

Karen described it this way:

I mean, I have a real affinity for ya know, nature and all that's a part of that. And um the repetition between nature and humanity, and the similarities and the dissimilarities. A lot of feeling and amazement about all that. And then there’s the Universe, that I'm very connected to. The cosmos, the planets, the stars. And its relationship to earth as we know.

Karen reported having had several “spiritual experiences” and believes that she has “mini ones” almost every day. Her concept of spirituality is rather broad and includes such things as a sense of “oneness” with nature, the arts, music, literature, and other sources of “knowing.” She described the following incident of having undergone an out-of-body experience:

Um, one time, I mean, I don’t know if they are [spiritual] or not, but this is what came to my mind immediately. Was one time I was sitting in the living
room listening to um Pachavia which is a Russian composer. And um I was, I was listening to this music and all of a sudden I and I was really, I really like him. And I was all of a sudden I was like elevated up in the living room, sort of like sitting down, like sitting up looking down at myself kind of thing. That was one, one event, that was um sort of mystical. Uh, and ah I’ve had a couple of times like in nature. I felt sort of um it’s sort of sappy to say, one with nature. But ya know just kind of a “blend” ya know with the environment where I was. One was in Switzerland up in some real elevation. It’s like I always think of that as being one of the best days of my life. And then another was another mountain area in Idaho.

She was one of two participants who recounted having undergone an out-of-body experience. The other participant, Toni, described hers in this way:

There, uh, there was a spiritual event that happened, probably a series of them. When right before, well not right before, before I moved back to Gainesville and started my religious studies degree, uh, there. I was uh not happy. I was very, I was depressed. I mean I would have been diagnosed as depressed if I had seen a therapist at that point in time. Um, but I knew something had to change and I but I didn’t know what. And so it was a very I think of it as a very strong transition period in my life. I don’t want to talk to anyone, I don’t want to hang out with anyone. I just kind of wanted to be alone and um I had. My dreams were very very meaningful and I had probably what could have been explained as spiritual experiences. Um, I had an out-of-body experience at that time and that really transformed me because I was shocked. Before then if you had asked me if that could happen to anyone I would have said no. It was, I went to sleep and um and then all of a sudden I opened my eyes and I saw another copy of my body right over me, like hovering on top of me. And then um I saw my awareness wasn’t in either one of those bodies, my awareness was somewhere near the, near the ceiling of the room. And I looked and I saw those two bodies. One you know over the other. And felt this um feeling of complete calm and peace and felt as if the sacred was right there with me. And um I don’t know how long it lasted but I just remember all of a sudden then being back, my awareness being back in my body and looking at the ceiling. Um, and that really threw me for a loop because I had never experienced anything like that before. And it also I think, after that is when I felt a real need to leave Ft. Lauderdale. I knew I needed to explore this experience further. I want to study about spirituality, and I need to do that. And that probably, if I hadn’t left then and done that, I would be a completely different person today. I have no doubt whatsoever. So if you were to ask me what was the most life-changing experience, it would probably have to have been that.

When asked what the take-away message was from that experience, she replied:
It, a few things. One message was that God doesn’t want you to be miserable and sad. And that the sacred is always there. Is there, and in some ways what I walked away with that is when I don’t feel the presence of the sacred, it’s because I’m not allowing it. But if I open myself up to that, I will feel that. And also that I don’t even want to say “I,” but I want to say “we.” You know, we’re not meant to settle for miserable lives. We’re meant to do other things and for each person it’s different. But in that moment, I knew I could not stay.

Later in the interview, she went back to this experience and talked more about its life-changing impact on her:

I want to go back to the out-of-body experience that I had cuz I just remembered something, uh, about it. It’s funny how when years go by, you forget critical elements. But when I was when I was having that experience and I saw my bodies from the ceiling and I felt the presence of the sacred, one of the things that um I also felt was that I was perfect. You know that and I don’t mean perfect in the way we normally use the term here but, I was not broken. I was whole and there is and I felt that there was nothing that I could do that would make the sacred perceive me as broken or um invaluable in any way. No matter what I did in life. And that was also I think very important and um critical about that particular event at that time. And something that blew me away because I did not feel that way personally um when I went through that experience.

Although most of the participants were able to recall one defining moment or a particularly significant experience that transformed their views of self, some experienced that change in vision over time and in less extraordinary ways. Three of the participants reported that their experiences of awakening or changes in insight occurred through either reading or through immersion in the arts.

Mike had always felt that he did not “belong” in his family. He recounted years of anger, bitterness, and resentment. Although most of this anger was aimed at his family, it seemed that he was, in reality, angry with the entire world. When asked what he was so angry about, he replied, “God, you name it. I hated, I hated, I wish I knew.” A great deal of that anger revolved around an inability to accept that he was gay and a felt sense that he could not be who he “really was.” But, when questioned further, the
source of his anger went even deeper. “A lot of my anger was geared towards them [parents]. They, well, I never felt like, well being raised I was, I was the last child of five. I was always “the accident.” And I guess I really felt like I was never wanted.”

After getting involved with his current partner, a deeply religious man, Mike began investigating his own spirituality out of a deep desire and “intense curiosity” he had felt throughout his entire life. He reported that one day he picked up the book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, after which his life took a major turn.

And it took the, the religion. I was reading, I think it was the Purpose Driven Life that I was reading. And it said there are no children of accident. Your parents may not have planned you, but God did. And that just resonated through me like you wouldn’t believe. That, that hit me so huge, to where I could take away some of the anger from my parents also. That okay, you didn’t plan on having a child. God did for whatever reason. God said, “You’re gonna have another child. And so I didn’t feel like an accident any more. I felt like I had a purpose.

He went on to say that it was his belief that God had led him to this particular partner, and that without him, he would never have had this experience. “And I was with [him] because I wouldn’t have been reading the book had I not been with him in the first place. I never would have picked up such a book.”

Like Mike, Karen spent years feeling unwanted, “less than,” and “alone” as a result of having been adopted at an early age into an abusive family environment. She described that environment as one of “chaos and terror.”

Because I’d been adopted. And then I ya know went through all this abuse. Ya know. I just thought, well it was so mixed up ya know just because I’d been adopted. I thought I was a bad person. I feel like I grew up on my own and by myself. I’ve always felt that way.

When listening to her story, it seemed as though she had, from any early age, escaped the pain of her reality by turning to books. When asked what spiritual beliefs she had during those times, she replied, “None. Not, except, ya know a Christmas
Carole morality. Because I used to listen to that a lot. And uh, the Golden Rule. That was it. Pretty much my guidepost.”

It took Karen years to put her adoption and early life into perspective and to gain a sense of peace as an adult. She reports having done that, to a great degree, through reading. It seems she had been an avid reader throughout most of her life, but the focus of that reading began to change significantly in her late 40’s and early 50’s:

But in later life, um, probably starting in my forties, late forties, um, I started reading. Yea, I’ve read a ton of that stuff. It was all part of my stuff back when I was kind of shaping my direction for myself. Spirituality, I mean, experience. I um started reading more about a variety of religions, all different kinds. Um and sort of ended up with a conglomerate of probably Buddhist, an attempt at Buddhist underpinnings and principles to guide my life.

When asked what role this immersion in spirituality played in her life, she replied:

I can’t imagine, I don’t know how I lived my life, without it before. I didn’t live. I think I could have lived my life better, ya know, more comfortably. Um, so I think um that my beliefs and the way I use them um have made my life a lot more comfortable. Internally, ya know. And I think that um. I think it also helped me for the most part be a lot more accepting about myself. Limitations, or whatever. frailties.

Marilyn described her spirituality as being based in a set of integral values that guide both her life and her interactions with others.

Um, I have a set of values that are important to me and that constitute what I consider to be the spiritual part of myself. Um, I have, there are people I admire both in history and in present contemporary times, that I think are spiritual kinds of people, or they reflect the kinds of values systems that I appreciate.

It seems that Marilyn’s value system has been informed, to a significant degree, by a lifetime of immersion in the arts and a history of extensive reading. She listed “appreciation of beauty and literature and poetry and art and music” as integral to her value system. She also described herself as a voracious reader.
Ya know, I’m still, as long as there’s something to learn, I ya know, I’ll continue to do that. And uh ya know, over my life time, I can’t, I couldn’t begin to even count the numbers of different kinds of things that I have read that have made a difference to me. Um, so I guess, you know, in that respect, there has been some kind of guidance.

Each of these individuals had one or more experiences that altered their sense of self and forever impacted their feelings about who they were and where they fit in the world. Most had not thought of those experiences as being “spiritual” at the time they were having them. But when interviewed for this study, typically years after those events, they were now able to verbalize a sense that those events had strengthened their awareness of an innate and sacred connection with God, a Higher Power, or some other form of energy, cosmic, or universal life force beyond that of their human form. This newfound relationship and source of identity gave many the confidence and strength to become more honest and open in their everyday lives and to risk coming out from their self-imposed prisons.

**Becoming Real**

**Surrendering**

“And ye shall know the truth, And the truth shall make you free.” John 8:32

Participants in this study unanimously reported undergoing varying degrees of challenge related to what I conceptualized as a journey to truth. Throughout their lives, they had been repeatedly confronted with choices regarding the degree to which they were willing to risk disclosing their sexual orientation to others. The literature is replete with evidence, both theoretical and empirical, about the coming out process. It is one of the most widely studied and written about areas in the gay and lesbian literature. Despite the abundance of literature related to this topic, none accurately captures the degree of emotional and spiritual energy spent having to make this loaded decision on a
day-to-day basis. Nor does it accurately reflect the disabling and disempowering effects of choosing, time and again, not to disclose and, in the process, denying one’s truth.

All of the participants had experienced times when they felt forced to lie, be deceitful, withhold information, or engage in other forms of evasion and/or distortion of truth. During those times they felt inauthentic, incongruent, conflicted, closed, secretive, and untrue to self. Many reported feelings of intense guilt, shame, and self-loathing as a result of years of having to live a lie and/or pretending to be someone they were not. Though, at the time, they believed those behaviors were necessary for survival, that belief did little to ameliorate the degree of suffering and progressive loss of self-respect many experienced as a result of those self-deprecating behaviors.

Only three of the participants did not report experiencing a struggle with issues of integrity. Karen and Marilyn, both professors who taught during the era of the John's Committee, stated that it had been necessary at various points throughout their careers to be “false about some things” in the work setting. But they labeled this “being prudent” and believed it was necessary in order to keep the jobs they perceived to be one of the greatest sources of purpose and meaning in their lives.

Toni, who did not realize that she was lesbian until the age of 37, also suffered less from issues with integrity than the other participants. She attributed this to the fact that even as a child, she had been willing to voice her honest opinions and take ownership of her life regardless of what others thought or expected of her. She had also attended Seminary in an institution that normalized homosexuality for her. As a result, when she ultimately and unexpectedly became involved with another woman, she did not perceive that as something she should hide or be ashamed of. These three were
clearly exceptions to the rule, as the remaining participants spent years in secrecy, either denying, suppressing, or disguising their true identities.

There came a point in each of their lives, however, when they found the need to surrender to the reality of who they were and to stop living a lie. Hiding, deceiving, and covering up had become so painful to their spirits that they were no longer willing or able to engage in those behaviors. This was a major turning point for the participants that, for most, occurred subsequent to the spiritual awakening experiences described above. As a result of those experiences, they had learned to recognize and come to seek, accept, and honor the spiritual guidance with which they now realized they were readily provided. A recurring message in that guidance was that it was essential that they live true to themselves, unencumbered by fear of rejection and/or loss.

They had reached a point in their journeys where they could finally accept themselves and ceased resisting the truth. Sarah stated, “I don’t understand this, but I just have to accept it and go on with it.” Mike “let go and let God.” Jane described it as “turning it over to God.” Part of the process of surrendering included accepting the fact that there are always going to be some who reject them for who they are. Aaron put it this way: “I finally realized that if people can’t accept me for who I am, that is their problem, not mine, and I have quit owning it.” Many described it as having “laid down a burden or heavy weight that they had been carrying for years.”

Transformation

Assured of their rightful place in the Universe and shored up by an inner certainty that they were beloved spiritual beings, they somehow found the strength and courage to risk public censure and become open, honest, and real in their lives. They described this experience as “freeing,” an “opening up,” “relief from an incredible burden,” “a life-
changing event,” and the dawning of a sense of inner peace and tranquility previously unknown to them.

Two of the participants had experiences somewhat different than the others. Both Greg and Mike stated that, for them, coming out to others was the catalyst that ultimately led them to actively begin their spiritual journey. Throughout his life, Greg had attended the Lutheran and Episcopal Churches. Looking back, he now feels that throughout all those years, he was only “playing at spirituality.” Greg reported years of intense struggle and severe depression related to his sexuality. Deeply hidden in the closet, he spent the majority of his waking hours trying to avoid detection. During those years, he “pushed away the Higher Power,” not knowing if “I was accepted by that Higher Power or not.” It wasn’t until he was in his 70’s that he found the courage to tell his daughter that he was gay. He reported that after that revelation, he began, for the first time in his life, to feel comfortable with himself. Finally able to “be himself,” he gradually, over time, began to feel comfort with a Higher Power.

Mike, too, feels that it was in the telling of others that he was able to “kick start” his spirituality. Although he described himself as always having had a “huge curiosity” about religion, it wasn’t until revealing to his sister that he was gay that he was able to finally accept his lifestyle and begin seriously devoting himself to the pursuit of spiritual development. When asked where he found the courage to finally tell his sister he was gay, he replied:

I don’t know, I don’t know what it was, ya know. Do I want to say it was a spiritual thing? It would be very easy to say that. Ah, cuz it certainly wasn’t anything else. I can’t say it was anything else that did it so, ya know, give the credit somewhere? Sure, that’s probably where it should go. Ya know God finally said, “It’s okay” and put the words in my mouth and out they came. Cuz I can’t, I can’t say anything else led me to tell the truth.
Regardless of the order in which it occurred, becoming real was a transformative process in the participants’ journey and an essential ingredient in their overall experience of spiritual awakening. Coming out of the darkness of the closet brought them one step closer to the light of Consciousness. Some have called this a “consciousness leap” (Kegan, 1982). Being honest and true to themselves, they were now able to “blossom” and “flourish” and began actualizing the potential that, for so many, had lay dormant throughout their many years of having to lie, pretend, or stifle their true nature.

Realizing/Manifesting Potential - Making a Difference

“I can do all things through Christ which strengthens me.” (Philippians 4:13)

Although associated with Christianity, the above quotation from Philippians aptly symbolizes the unleashing of potential that can occur when one gets in touch with the spiritual wisdom, guidance, creativity, and energy at the core of their Being. In this phase of their journey, participants were very clearly engaged in the process of realizing potential and/or making a difference. The insight they had gleaned regarding their spiritual connectedness, along with a firm commitment to live authentically, seemed to free incredible amounts of energy that had previously been devoted to acts of struggle and resistance. No longer immobilized by fear, self-doubt, denial, and/or feelings of alienation, participants began to identify and freely share their unique talents and blessings with others. They had, in essence, returned to the tribe, bearing gifts.

Participants in this study are very noticeably “people people,” and each has devoted him or herself to a variety of altruistic and healing endeavors. They are gregarious, outgoing, and generous with both their time and their talents. Toni and Marie are both therapists who feel strongly that their spirituality “informs” everything
about them and their work. Tim, Karen, and Marilyn are professors of nursing and have spent their entire careers trying to instill key values in both students and colleagues, while wholeheartedly sharing the wisdom of their experiences. Sherri also spent her career as a nurse. Kristin taught middle school for over twenty years. Karen and Marilyn, in addition to being nurses, are also counselors who have spent years assisting clients who are in crisis. Two of the participants are retired social workers who spent their careers assisting people in need.

All but four of the participants are extremely active and strong supporters of their church communities. Not only were Sherri, Tim, and Sarah among the founding members of the local Metropolitan Community Church, the only church in the county primarily devoted to gays and lesbians, they personally helped build the church with their own hands. This church has long been a refuge for gays, lesbians, and their loved ones and, for some, the only church in which they truly feel welcome and accepted. Greg and Jane are also very active members of MCC. Mike, Aaron, and Kristin have found their spiritual home in a local gay-friendly church, and all serve on a variety of church committees.

Most are also very active in their local communities as well, providing time and service to multiple civic groups. For example, Tim makes afghans for the homeless and cooks for a local non-profit organization. Greg contributes his time to an area AIDS organization and also provides transportation and other services to needy members of the community. Sherri provides the “munchies” following church services, knowing that, for some, “this is the only breakfast they’re gonna have.”
All serve as informal mentors, counselors, and role models for others who may be experiencing feelings of alienation and rejection. Having survived the hero’s journey themselves, they feel specifically obligated to help others who get “stuck” along the way. Tim stated, “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve had phone calls from, ‘I’m in my first relationship, my father’s the preacher and says I’m going to hell.’ That scenario, I can’t believe how many times that gets repeated.” He spoke at length of one young man among dozens who have come to or called the church in crisis. This young man came after sustaining “one too many rejections.” Through tears Tim stated, “We worried he wouldn’t make it through the night.”

Sherri and Kristin strive to be role models not only for gays and lesbians, but also for heterosexuals. They believe that by coming to know them for the kind, loving, and generous people they are, others will come to see that “gay people are good people too.” Sherri, like Tim, reported multiple incidents in which she has tried to provide comfort and reassurance to individuals who were struggling to reconcile their lifestyles with a deep desire to be religious. Occasionally she feels she is able to help “turn them around” but, she, like Tim, feels “it doesn’t always help.” She told a poignant story about a young woman who became severely depressed after having been rejected by her church for being lesbian. Try though she might, Sherri was unable to convince this woman that God loved her as she was.

So she held all of this stuff in and it just got to be you know well, if my church doesn’t love me, then God doesn’t love me. And if God doesn’t love me, why am I here? And she killed herself. I tried telling her yes God does love you. You don’t have to worry about the people in your church. But they were a huge part of her life. So, it’s simple to say, don’t worry about the people in your church, ya know. The fact that God loves you should be enough, but um obviously it wasn’t.
Mike also feels that, after his long journey toward wholeness, he can be of help to people who are struggling with their lifestyle, especially “kids and teenagers and stuff. The teen suicide with gays is just, it’s terrible. And to help one person would be huge.” Marilyn feels she serves as a role model for “kids that are kind of outside, outside the circle. Knowing what it feels like to be different. And I feel like I can be a good role model for them, and that that’s a contribution that I make.”

All the participants in this study exuded a sense of warmth, love, and compassion that was almost palpable in the interviews. They possessed an energy that left me feeling calm, peaceful, and blessed to have known them. These are people on a mission, clear about whom they are and where they are going. It was apparent that they have had a glimpse into a reality most spend a lifetime looking for. They have achieved a state of Consciousness and, as a result, are clearly thriving in their day-to-day lives.

**Thriving/Living Consciously**

**Transcendence**

“The peace that passeth understanding” (Philippians 4:7)

Data in this study provided evidence of the movement of participants from a state in which they were initially preoccupied with safety, security, and survival needs to one in which they are presently devoted to self-actualization, conceptualized as realizing potential and making a difference in the world. As they moved through the various stages in their journeys, they progressed from subjective feelings of fear, denial, self-doubt, and alienation to a state of feeling open, connected, trusting, and self-confident. They also moved from a more egocentric focus on self to an altruistic focus on others.

Re-interpreting their lives from within a spiritual framework allowed them to transcend the pain inherent in their earlier (unconscious) misconceptions of life. This
new vision helped move them from a sense of self as victim to a sense of self as blessed. Their inner transformation was manifest in an outer demeanor that overwhelmingly reflected a sense of peace, equanimity, and “knowing.”

**Feeling Blessed**

The data clearly suggest that participants are now in a process of thriving. They described this state as one in which they feel a deep sense of peace, compassion, belonging, connection, acceptance of self and others, and an “unshakeable inner knowing.” They are living “free” and owning the responsibility for their lives. They described themselves as being more sensitive, aware, empathic, compassionate, and receptive to others. They are devoted to helping other people “feel better” and to “helping them heal from their pain.” They are more “patient,” “humble,” and “tolerant” of others.

They have “gotten in touch with their power” and are aware of their ability to positively influence others. They are “inspired and inspiring.” They have found a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives and are intent on “shedding their light on others.” They are acutely aware and extremely grateful for their many blessings. Theirs is a state that almost defies explanation, given the fact that they remain embedded primarily in a world that is, to a great degree, still exclusive and rejecting of them. They do, indeed, possess a level of “peace that passeth understanding.”

**Summary**

Earlier, I proposed that one of the key questions in this study related to trying to understand how some individuals who are gay or lesbian have been able to mute the voices of mainstream society and, in the process, come to find themselves in a place of inner peace and equanimity. Participants unanimously reported that this movement
occurred as a result of a process of realizing spiritual identity; that is, realizing the sacred within, becoming real, and realizing potential. Each, in his or her own way, has been touched by the sacred and, in that process, made immune to human voices that might aim to undermine or diminish their sense of purpose, meaning, and belonging in this world.

Few of us come to know the reason for our existence. Participants in this study were no clearer about that than the rest. What they do know, however, is that they are here for a reason and that they are who they were meant to be. Secure in this knowledge, they have endured a journey not designed for the faint of heart. They have overcome incredible obstacles and survived the hero’s journey. Being the true pioneers that they are, they have embraced those challenges and remain committed to completing their life journeys, confident that they will continue to be directed and guided by a force that compels them to share all they have been given and all they have learned along the way.
Figure 4-1. Conceptual model of the process of realizing spiritual identity
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Who among us is an expert on the human experience? We have only the gift of sharing perceptions that hopefully can help those on their journey. There is no such thing as an expert on the human experience. The human experience is an experience in movement and thought and form, and, in some cases, an experiment in movement and thought and form. The most that we can do is comment on the movement, the thought and the form, but those comments are of great value if they can help people to learn to move gracefully, to think clearly, to form—like artists—the matter of their lives.” (Zukav, 1989)

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. Utilizing Glaser’s grounded theory method, I determined that participants accomplished this by becoming engaged in a process conceptualized as Realizing Spiritual Identity. This process included six key categories. Realizing the Sacred Within, Becoming Real, and Realizing Potential were conceptualized as a three-pronged, yet inseparable core category at the heart of the theorized process of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Living Unconsciously/Surviving was conceptualized as a pre-condition of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Journeying was considered a mediating or transitional category. The category of Living Consciously/Thriving followed the Realization of Spiritual Identity and was conceptualized as the outcome or consequence of that experience. In addition to the key categories, there were also fourteen sub-categories identified.

In this chapter I will discuss the major categories of the theory from within the context of the existing literature. I will also place this study’s findings in a broader
context, including that of religion, psychology, mythology, popular and classical literature, music, and poetry. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the study as well as providing recommendations related to counseling practice, education, research, and public policy.

At several points throughout data analysis and the development of this theory, I discovered parallels with other literature, especially with that of traditional religious, contemporary spiritual, and writings related to symbols and archetypes. The hero’s journey, for example, is an ancient archetype addressed by both the famous mythologist Joseph Campbell (1973) and Carolyn Myss (2002), a contemporary medical intuitive.

In investigating literature related to spiritual awakening, I relied heavily on the recent work of the contemporary mystic, Eckhart Tolle (1999), as well as the writings of Gary Zukav (1989), a physicist turned mystic. Both have written extensively about the budding evolution of human consciousness and the discovery of authentic power typically understood as “spiritual awakening” or enlightenment. They use these terms to describe the process of coming to realize that all human beings are essentially spiritual in nature. It is part of the human condition, they contend, to forget this profound fact and to live one’s life as if one’s “form” or human identity is paramount, forgetting that this form is merely temporary, illusory, and non-reflective of whom we really are.

From an early age, participants were taught the importance of “form” as well as the social value of conformity. Conformity equals acceptance and approval. What could be worse than not fitting in with the rest? What could be worse than coming to realize that one’s human identity, feelings, desires, or life situations do not conform to those of one’s family or peers? Certainly there is no greater crime, especially for those who felt,
from early on in life, that they (or their life situations) were very different from those around them. Some came to believe it was their own fault, i.e., that they were, in some way, inherently “flawed.” Some looked to blame others. The remainder, at the very least, felt confused and lost as to where they fit in the overall scheme of things. The last thing they seemed to be thinking at that point in time, was that their difference was, in fact, a gift.

Most struggled with these issues throughout many years of their lives and reported suffering painful feelings of shame, guilt, anger, confusion, resentment, and depression. By the time of this study, participants had achieved a state in which they had come to recognize that conformity is a form of social control that is not always in their best interests. Nor, for them, is it always possible. What differentiated these individuals from the rest?

This study was an attempt to answer that question. How do some human beings come to realize that their difference is a gift from God or the Universe and not a curse? How do they come to change their views of self and begin to thrive as a result, while others wither and self-destroy? It was hoped that whatever insight was gleaned from the findings of this study might, in some fashion, help those struggling with these issues and that the words and experiences of those who have survived the hero’s journey may serve as an inspiration and source of hope for those still searching to answer the question, “Why am I so different”?

Living Unconsciously/Surviving

In examining the findings of this study from the broadest of contexts, it appeared that participants were, from the start, engaged on a journey towards Consciousness. While stuck in the mire of the survival process, they seemed to be unaware (and/or
uncertain) of their spiritual core or essence. Rather, preoccupied with the processes of disowning/denying self, disengaging, self-imprisonment, and self-questioning, they perceived themselves as homeless and disconnected from tribe. They also felt victimized and resentful. These perceptions and the inevitable fear and anxiety that followed were cause for great suffering and feelings of despair. This lack of awareness and sense of disconnection is not unique to gays and lesbians but is, according to contemporary mystics, the predominant manner in which most humans spend their lives (Myss, 2002; Tolle, 1999; Zukav, 1989).

Caroline Myss (2002), a gifted medical intuitive, is one of many contemporary writers proposing that, in order to truly understand our experiences as human beings, we must develop what she calls symbolic sight. In order to see symbolically, we must enter into a higher plane of consciousness, one beyond “reason.” Only from this vantage point are we able to see the symbolic or greater meaning of our experiences.

Myss is only one of many contemporary writers speaking to this need to transcend our normal state of consciousness (and/or to “become conscious”) in order to understand, make sense of, and grow from our experiences as human beings. Zukav (1989) elaborated on the differences between one’s finite and time limited personality and one’s infinite and eternal soul. He introduced the notion of the multisensory vs. the five sensory personality. Individuals who are five sensory are limited in their overall understanding of life to that which can be comprehended and interpreted via the five senses (i.e., their personality), whereas individuals who are multisensory are able to interpret life and their experiences from within the context of the evolution of their souls.
According to Zukav, every experience that we have upon the Earth encourages the alignment of our personality with our soul. He also states that, “Each physical, emotional, and psychological characteristic that comprises a personality and its body is perfectly suited to its soul’s purpose” (p. 34). As long as we continue to interpret our experiences solely through the limited lenses of our five senses, we will inevitably experience suffering and continue to perceive ourselves as separate or disconnected from other forms of life, including other people. We will also fail to fully understand and appreciate the larger meaning and purpose of our experiences as human beings.

Eckhart Tolle (2005), a world renowned contemporary mystic, mirrors the thoughts and insights of Zukav, but uses different words and imagery to describe this process. In speaking of the perspective-limited aspect of human life (personality), Tolle uses the words “ego,” “self,” and “unconsciousness.” When speaking of the universal wisdom, insight, and unbounded perspective of the soul, he uses the words “Being,” “Self,” and “Consciousness.” Like Zukav, Tolle proposes that viewing our experiences only from the distorted and limited perspective of our egos causes us to experience cycles of suffering and keeps us from experiencing the inner peace and deep understanding that is an inherent part of our nature as eternal Beings.

Tolle (2005) proposes that the majority of human beings live their lives in a state of unconsciousness. By the term unconscious, he means a state in which individuals identify totally with their minds, thoughts, and life situations, unaware and unconscious of the essential and eternal Being at their very core that is, in reality, who they truly are. He, too, states that, “Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for the
evolution of your consciousness” (Tolle, 2005, p. 41). In fact, it is his major premise that evolution of consciousness is the very purpose of human life on earth.

The insights of Zukav, Tolle, Myss and others are not new. Rather, they resonate with the ancient teachings of some of our greatest spiritual Masters. Tolle (1999; 2005), in particular, writes extensively of the parallels between the messages of these contemporary visionaries and those of Christ, the Buddha, and other historically significant religious figures. His premise is that throughout history, there have always been select individuals who possess this awareness and insight who then spend their lives attempting to share that wisdom with the rest of mankind.

These and many other contemporary writers have noted that there is a current explosion of spiritual awareness occurring among humans. They contend that we are at a point in evolution where spiritual consciousness is growing at an unprecedented rate. The majority of humans, however, unlike the Masters, experience only glimpses of that reality while many remain totally unconscious of it.

The participants in this study are not spiritual Masters, nor do they perceive themselves to be any more enlightened than the rest of mankind. What was clear from the data, however, is that each of them, in varying degrees, has had a glimpse into a reality that transcends that of our everyday consciousness. It was that glimpse or that momentary experience that seems to have been the transformative moment for them.

Prior to those experiences, while still in the process of surviving, their overall state resembled that of individuals who are unconscious. Being unconscious is consistent with critical theory and social constructionist literature that speaks to states of false consciousness (Gergen, 1985; Guba, 1990). According to this literature, individuals in a
state of false consciousness have unknowingly bought into oppressive ideologies that keep them “stuck” and unable to free themselves from self-limiting and self-effacing beliefs.

From Foucault’s perspective (1995), individuals in a state of false consciousness are victims of social and cultural knowledge-power dynamics, i.e., forms of knowledge that keep some individuals empowered while disenfranchising others. He believes that once individuals have internalized negative messages about themselves, they begin to self-monitor and “police themselves.” That process was reflected in this study in the self-imprisonment behaviors described by many of the participants.

In Tolle’s view (1999), the “forms of knowledge” that immobilize and isolate people are consistent with the endless “mind chatter” (or negative self-talk) that preoccupies individuals who are unconscious. In the literature related to gays and lesbians, this mind chatter is best represented by the concept of internalized homophobia, the state in which gay and lesbian individuals come to identify with and believe the negative stereotypes they continually hear about themselves and their lifestyles (Clark, 1987). Internalizing these negative messages leads them to painful and confusing experiences of cognitive dissonance.

As discussed earlier in the study, all reported experiences in which they felt forced to lie, be deceitful, deny, and/or withhold or distort information in an attempt to hide their sexual identity from others. In the worst of cases, some spent years trying to hide this reality even from themselves, an extreme form of denial that caused them intense pain, anguish, and confusion. Unable to accept the truth of whom they were and/or an unwillingness or inability to disclose that truth caused them to experience a severe form
of cognitive dissonance. According to Festinger (1957), there is a tendency for individuals to seek consistency among their cognitions (i.e., beliefs, opinions). When there is an inconsistency between beliefs and behaviors (dissonance), something must change to eliminate the dissonance. Dissonance occurs most often in situations where an individual must choose between two incompatible beliefs or actions.

For most of the participants, this dissonance surfaced in two different ways. It first occurred when they tried to accept and integrate a dimension of their identities that they had, to some degree, already internalized to be unacceptable. It surfaced again when they began to recognize and accept the spiritual guidance regarding their innate goodness and acceptability. Despite being “told” via this guidance that they were worthy, honorable, and beloved sacred beings, they repeatedly found themselves in situations in which they felt compelled to be dishonest, deceitful, and inauthentic.

Although cognitive dissonance may sound like esoteric, intellectual jargon, for those who are experiencing the intense emotional pain and suffering it can generate, survival of that dissonance may become a life threatening experience. As poignantly recounted by both Tim and Sherrie, many who are gay or lesbian fail to successfully negotiate those periods of dissonance and, ultimately, find themselves at the brink of suicide.

According to cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), there are three ways to eliminate dissonance: (1) reduce the importance of the dissonant beliefs, (2) add more consonant beliefs that outweigh the dissonant beliefs, or (3) change the dissonant beliefs so that they are no longer inconsistent. Participants in this study seem to have experienced the second of those processes; that is, through spiritual inspiration or
guidance, they were ultimately able to outweigh the dissonant beliefs by coming to a new understanding of who they were and where they fit in the world.

Prior to resolving that dissonance, however, they had to embark on an inner journey that required them to deeply question all their pre-conceived beliefs about self, others, the world, and, in some cases, God or a Higher Power. This major process was conceptualized as Journeying and incorporated the processes of Leaving Home and Pioneering.

**Journeying**

**Leaving Home**

The development of Consciousness or coming to transcend our normal state of consciousness is, typically, a long process, often described in the literature as a journey (Zukav, 1989). For these participants, leaving home represented the first step in that journey. This step is consistent with the stage of Unfreezing in Lewin’s Change Theory (Lewin & Gold, 1999). According to Lewin and Gold, the Unfreezing stage is about getting ready to change. It involves getting to a point of understanding that change is necessary and getting ready to move away from our current comfort zone. It also involves a dismantling of the existing “mind set” or, in Tolle’s words, a “quieting of the incessant mind chatter.”

When examined in the context of all that was going on in their lives, the process of questioning all of their preconceived beliefs seemed to be an extremely vital and necessary step in the psychological process of leaving home. For individuals who are gay or lesbian, the process of leaving home is a many faceted one that far exceeds our typical understanding of that experience. This is especially true for those who discover that they are gay or lesbian at a relatively early age. These individuals begin
experiencing the dynamics of leaving home while they are still relatively young and deeply dependent upon that home. The data in this study also suggest that those who make this discovery later in life must also engage in a leaving home process, sometimes years (or decades) beyond the time they actually left home in the universal sense of that word.

Shallenberger (1996), who referred to the experiences of self-discovery, coming-out, and self-integration as a spiritual journey, supports the idea that gay and lesbian individuals go through an intense period of self-questioning in the process of achieving self-acceptance. Barret and Barzan (1996) and Spencer (1994) concur and use the term “faith journey” to describe those experiences.

According to Johnson (2000), individuals who are gay or lesbian have to learn early to differentiate their "ego selves" from their parents and siblings. They have to develop a degree of consciousness and a sense of personal identity separate from other family members because “even the most accepting and loving [parents and family members] cannot model a life other than their own” (pp. 15-16).

In one of the few theoretical works that speaks to gay identity development as consistent with a spiritual journey, O’Neill and Ritter (1992) describe theoretical stages in which gay and lesbian individuals come to resolve their grief over loss of a heterosexual “life script.” Their model assumes that gays and lesbians all possess and, at some point, value some notion of a personal heterosexual life script. The data in this study did not support that assumption, as only one of the participants discussed that as being problematic for her. Though some may grapple with that particular grief process, it does not seem to be a universal phenomenon among gays and lesbians. What did
seem more common in the data than accepting the loss of a particular “life script” was the experience of never having had one to begin with.

Participants in this study did not necessarily leave home because they wanted to; they left home because they felt they had to. In that sense, they began their journey as reluctant heroes, compelled to set out on a course without a roadmap or script to lead the way. Throughout the data, there were very clear symbols of a journey. There were also multiple references to experiences resembling those of the archetype of Pioneer. Consistent with the archetype of Pioneer and more broadly located in the literature is the archetype of Hero; that is, an individual embarked on a Hero’s Journey.

**Pioneering/The Hero’s Journey**

Participants in this study did not consider themselves heroes or heroines. On the contrary, their sense of humility and ordinariness was consistently apparent throughout the data. It was only after reviewing the literature in an attempt to place their references to pioneering in context that I discovered parallels with the archetype of hero. According to Joseph Campbell, as cited in Myss (2002), the hero’s journey is an archetype in which an individual goes on a journey of initiation to “awaken an inner knowing or spiritual power. The Self emerges as the Hero faces physical and internal obstacles, confronting the survival fears that would compromise his journey of empowerment and conquering the forces arrayed against him. The hero then returns to the tribe with something of great value to all” (p. 329).

In the psychology of Carl Jung, archetypes are the images, patterns, and symbols that rise out of the collective unconscious and appear in dreams, mythology, and fairy tales. They are inherited patterns of thought or symbolic imagery derived from past collective experience and are present in the individual unconscious (Campbell, 1973).
Each archetype represents a fundamental learning experience or process that is meant to guide humans throughout their lives. According to Myss (2002), “Archetypal patterns awaken in us our own divine potential. They are a source of emotional, physical, and spiritual power and can help us free ourselves from fear” (p. 15). Myss believes that archetypes are part of a person’s spiritual chronology. That is, they predate our physical birth and come from our own energy origins in the Divine.

When examined in an even broader context, the “journeying” experiences of the participants as well as the archetypes of pioneer and hero can be located in an even greater and more universal image, one that permeates religious and spiritual scripture, literature, mythology, poetry, and other forms of art that express key elements of the human experience. In the religious and spiritual literature, for example, there are numerous references to life as a journey and to the need to leave home in search of “enlightenment” and spiritual “awakening.” The Bible informs us that Jesus needed to leave home to begin his ministry of teaching. The Buddha also felt compelled to leave home and set out on his journey to enlightenment. There are scriptural references to Jesus spending time in the desert, as well as the Israelites wandering in the desert in search of the Promised Land. The Prodigal Son as well as Abel left home, only to return new and changed individuals. There are images of black sheep straying from the herd and of the Shepherd welcoming them back into the fold.

These universal experiences are also depicted in mythology as illustrated by Odysseus leaving home to begin his many years of adventures (Eickhoff, 2001). There are also many mythical accounts of heroes having to “slay dragons” and overcome other seemingly insurmountable obstacles prior to returning home (Campbell, 1973). In
literature, this theme is captured in such characters as Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1925), who set out on a life mission to capture the Great White whale. It is also reflected in Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* (Bach, 1970), a story in which Jonathan is exiled from the flock for being “unlike the other seagulls.” It is only during his experience in exile that he reaches his greatest potential and evolves into a great spiritual being. In the poetry of Robert Frost, the theme is repeated in the work, “The Road Not Taken” (Frost, 1951). In the words of the Beatles, ours is a “long and winding road” (McCartney, 1970). These and numerous other works have memorialized the human experiences so eloquently expressed by the participants in this study.

The fact that the themes of journey, combined with a need to leave home in order to “find one’s self,” are so prevalent across the various forms of art and literature suggests that participants were on a universal journey of self-discovery, although at the time, they did not seem to be aware of that. It was, however, during the time that they were embarked upon that journey, that they came to a transformative moment in their lives, a time of change in their personal level of awareness that forever impacted their sense of self, purpose, and meaning in life. After extensive analysis of the data, I came to perceive that process to be one of realizing.

**Realizing Spiritual Identity**

“Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for the evolution of your consciousness.” (Tolle, 2005)

In this study, Realizing was conceptualized as a three-pronged, inseparable core category comprised of Realizing the Sacred Within, Becoming Real, and Realizing Potential. For the majority of participants, the experience of Realizing the Sacred Within was the catalyst for the transformative events that followed.
Realizing the Sacred Within/The Dawning of Consciousness

As stated earlier, it is Tolle’s major premise that evolution of consciousness is the very purpose of human life on earth. When looked at from this perspective, the suffering incurred by the participants in this study may well have been an ideal vehicle for their transformation from a state of unawareness and unconsciousness to one of keen awareness and Consciousness. It was while in this phase of their life journeys that participants reported undergoing an experience or event that irreversibly changed their views of self and helped them to better understand the purpose and meaning of their previous life experiences. Myss (2002) would say that, during this time, they were beginning to develop an ability to see their lives symbolically. Zukav (1989) would describe them as becoming multisensory.

Becoming Conscious, seeing symbolically, and developing a multisensory personality are consistent with and more typically defined as experiences of spiritual awakening, discernment, enlightenment, or revelation (Karpinski, 2001). All imply a change in perception, comprehension, and vision typically described in terms of “light.” As Sherri described it, “it was like a light bulb came on over my head.” For Tim, it was an “epiphany”; for Marie and Aaron, a sudden “aha” moment of intuitive understanding or a “flash of insight.” Greg called it “a flash of imagination.” Some had their epiphanies in dreams; others in elaborate out of body experiences in which they came to “see and know things previously unknown to them.” Several heard a voice. For others, it was “just something they felt”; “something they somehow knew to be true.”

Some, at the time, recognized these as spiritual experiences. Others did not. For a few, the light came on more slowly and over a period of time as they immersed themselves in nature, the arts, music, and literature. All believed they had received a
form of guidance, designed to inform and assure them of their innate sacredness, goodness, and acceptability. However they received this guidance, they were irreversibly changed and began to see their lives and experiences through what might be conceptualized as “a third eye.” The third eye is a mystical concept referring in part to the ajna (brow) chakra in certain Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. It is also spoken of as the gate that leads within to inner realms and spaces of higher consciousness. In New Age spirituality, the third eye may alternately symbolize a state of enlightenment (Radha, 2004).

The idea of transformation by way of suffering is well-embedded in the human psyche, represented in more mundane ways by the phrase “no pain, no gain.” When looked at from a broader perspective, participants seem to have undergone a “crucible” experience. Crucible is defined as a severe test or trial (dictionary.com, n.d.). It is also defined as a container made of a substance that can resist great heat for melting, fusing, or calcining ores, metals, etc. Crucibles were used in the ancient alchemical process in which base metal was transformed into gold; a process in which something was miraculously changed from one thing into something better. Marie described having undergone “a meltdown.” Aaron described it as “intense suffering.” Tolle (2005) metaphorically captures the spiritual essence of both the crucible experience and the symbol of “light” with the statement, “The pain of suffering becomes the light of consciousness” (p.102). He goes on to say, “When you can’t stand the endless cycle of suffering anymore, you begin to awaken” (p. 164).

The theme of needing to suffer before achieving a state of enlightenment is also embedded in the doctrine of major religions. The Israelites had to wander in the desert
before finding the Promised Land. Jesus had to endure intense emotional suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane followed by the pain of crucifixion in order to achieve salvation for humanity. The Buddha fell victim to physical violence on several occasions on his journey to enlightenment. Christian martyrs were fed to the lions for refusing to "deny their truth."

In more modern times, Viktor Frankl suffered for years in the concentration camps in World War II prior to writing *Man's Search for Meaning* (1992), his classic work on finding meaning in suffering. The theme can also be found in other literature such as Irving Stone's *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961) as well as in every day colloquialisms such as, "Into each life, a little rain must fall." In music, the life theme of "highs and lows" is reflected in such compositions as Pachelbel's Canon in D (1970) and, in poetry, in St. John of the Cross's, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (Reinhardt, 1957).

In addition to the above works, the participants' experiences of increased insight and awareness as well as their change in perspective can also be understood from within the context of cognitive theory, illustrated by the processes of cognitive re-structuring and re-framing (Beck, 1991). According to Beck, ways in which individuals think about their world and their important beliefs and assumptions about people, themselves, and events constitute cognitive schemas. These schemas can be either positive and adaptive or negative and maladaptive. In the words of the Buddha, "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world." Prior to their experiences of Realizing the Sacred Within, participants were caught up in an array of negative schemas. Following those experiences, those schemas became more positive and adaptive.
Data clearly indicated that participants experienced a change in self-concept and achieved a transformative view of self that irreversibly changed their lives. With this newfound sense of self, they found their true voice as well as the confidence to express that voice in a more open, honest, congruent, and authentic manner. It wasn’t that anything in the outside world had changed to account for this transformation of self. Rather, it was while embarked on their inner journeys that they experienced the light of Consciousness. With the change in vision provided by this light, they slowly began to recognize who they truly were. They had, metaphorically, come out of the darkness of the “closet,” free to be who they now knew themselves to be.

Literature related to gay and lesbian identity development traditionally uses the words “coming out” to represent the process of coming to accept one’s gay or lesbian identity (Shallenberger, 1996). Results of this study indicate that that process is better understood as one of “coming in” (O’Neill & Ritter, 1992). Participants in this study felt that they would never have found the courage to come out to others if they had not first been able to successfully survive their tumultuous inner journeys, their dark night of the soul.

**Becoming Real**

I decided long ago never to walk in anyone’s shadow  
If I fail, if I succeed, at least I’ve lived as I believed.  
No matter what they take from me, they can’t take away my dignity.  
Because the greatest love of all is happening to me  
I found the greatest love of all inside of me.  
The greatest love of all is easy to achieve,  
Learning to love your self, it is the greatest love of all.

Greatest Love of All (Whitney Houston, 1984)

Part of the transformative process of becoming real required that participants “let go” of the burden of hiding and surrender to the reality of who they were. Through the
years of denying, disowning, disengaging, and imprisoning self, they had struggled to keep this knowledge from others and, often, even from themselves. In order to proceed on their journeys, they now found themselves in a position of having no choice but to be honest and to “accept what is.” This ability to accept things that one cannot change is consistent with the concept of non-resistance and is, according to the spiritual literature, a pre-condition for achieving peace (Tolle, 2002).

Religious and spirituality literature are replete with references to the need for humans to surrender to the contingencies of life. Many Eastern religions are based, primarily, on the idea that attachment and resistance to what is keeps humans from achieving spiritual enlightenment (Zukav, 1989). “Let go and let God” has become a mantra in American culture. Participants in this study made liberal use of the language of “letting go,” “turning over their problems,” and “quitting the struggle.” Images of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane surrendering to the ultimate will of God remind us that even this founder of Christianity came to a point of needing to surrender (Tolle, 2002).

The necessity to surrender is also pervasive in the psychological literature as reflected in the concept of “acceptance.” According to Kubler-Ross’s (1969) theoretical stages of grief and death and dying, surrendering is equivalent to the last stage in those processes, that of acceptance. It was her premise that until one is able to accept loss, including loss of self or others through death, one will continue to suffer from the effects of resistance.

Existential therapists have long based their interventions on the idea that it is necessary to accept the inevitability of certain human experiences, including those that are painful. These therapists also remind us that it is essential that we learn to take
ultimate responsibility for the ways in which we live our lives, regardless of how much
guidance or support we get from others (Yalom, 1980).

The classic models of gay and lesbian identity development also propose that
acceptance is the end point on that developmental journey (Cass, 1979; Coleman,
1981). These models suggest that until individuals are able to come out and
successfully integrate their sexual identity, they remain stuck in earlier stages of identity
development.

Words from the Serenity Prayer, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I
cannot change” (McAfee, 1987, p. 251), have come to be closely associated with the
treatment of substance abuse and dependence disorders. Proverbs 3, 5-6 advises us to
“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your
ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.” In the last days before his
crucifixion, Christ was said to have surrendered to the will of God with the words, “Thy
will, not mine, be done.” As Kenny Rogers (1978) has advised, “You’ve got to know
when to hold em, know when to fold em, know when to walk away, and know when to
run.”

Participants in this study have engaged in the transformative processes of
acceptance and surrender. They clearly articulated that it was through their experiences
of realizing the sacred within and becoming real that they were finally able to accept and
acknowledge their sexual identity. Through the guidance they received, they came to
know and truly believe that they are accepted by God, a Higher Power, or whatever they
perceive that transcendent force to be, and that that force “is okay” with their sexual
orientation.
This was like a “green light” experience for them, without which they feel they would never have been able to accept their sexual identity. This is a new idea in the literature and one worthy of note. Participants in this study feel as if they have been given “permission” to be who they are from a Power much greater than that of the human voices that may continue to undermine or attempt to disenfranchise them of their sacred spiritual status. They received this permission in a variety of ways, but most often in the form of what they perceived to be spiritual guidance.

Part of becoming real also entailed acknowledging and accepting the pain and injuries they had sustained up to that point on their journeys as well as recognizing the need to forgive those who had harmed them. None of the participants seemed to harbor any lingering anger or resentment over past wounds. With their increased sense of wisdom and sharpened insight, they seemed to understand that there was a deeper meaning and purpose for their experiences, and, as a result, they were no longer looking for someone to “blame.” They appeared to truly understand the meaning of Christ’s statement, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.”

Though still vividly aware and able to recount stories of those earlier feelings, participants seem to have healed from their old injuries and were now using them primarily as a source of motivation. In that sense, they resembled those in the literature described as wounded healers. According to Carl Jung (1933), a wounded healer is an archetype for a type of individual who has gone through suffering, sometimes great, and as a result of that process, has become a source of great wisdom, healing power, and inspiration for others. Archetypal wounded healers undergo a transformation as a result
of their wound and, in the process, come to transcend their pain. Following that transformation, they are typically led to a path of service.

According to Myss (2002), the journey of the wounded healer is an internal one, in that he or she is unable to turn to others for help beyond a certain degree of support. Only the initiate, him or herself, can ultimately heal the wound. She states that the “Wounded Healer archetype emerges in your psyche with the demand that you push yourself to a level of inner effort that becomes more a process of transformation than an attempt to heal [the wound]” (p. 390).

It was while embarked on their inner journeys that participants were able to heal their spiritual wounds and come to a new understanding of the meaning and purpose of those wounds. Their personal experiences of woundedness and healing ultimately became a foundation from which they developed an acute sense of sensitivity, empathy, and compassion for others. Transformed into Wounded Healers, they proceeded on their journeys, intent on helping others care for, heal, and recover from their particular wounds.

Realizing/Manifesting Potential

Four of the participants in this study were employed as teachers in Florida at the time of the John’s Committee. This Committee, enacted in the late 50’s and early 60’s, was a massive government witch hunt that flushed out, investigated, and dismissed gay or lesbian individuals in state government and public education institutions (Elkins, 1998). As a result of the actions of this Committee, designed to “protect the state’s children,” hundreds of professors and students across the state were terminated or expelled because of their sexual preference.
Those four, and other participants, also reported living through the Save our Children movement, one of the first political campaigns against gay activism (Fejes, 2008). At that time in Florida and across the country, organized political attempts were being made to enact laws that would mandate the firing of openly gay or lesbian public school employees for fear of their “negative impact” and adverse influence on children.

As recently as March, 2010, newspapers continued to report that, since 1993 when the United States government enacted the law, “Don’t ask, don’t tell,” thirteen thousand gay or lesbian individuals have been discharged from the armed forces (“Military,” 2010). This number pales in comparison to the many thousands who were discharged, most dishonorably, prior to the enactment of that law. Four of the participants in this study had been members of the military, one for over twenty years.

I began this section with a summary of the impact of those anti-gay movements in order to put in context, bring to life, and accentuate the very real reasons for the fear, paranoia, secrecy, and guardedness expressed by many of the participants while they were in the Survival stage of their journeys. Two thirds of the participants were either teachers or enlisted in the military. The remaining third, though not actively engaged in those particular institutions at that time, inherited the legacy and very real threat of the history of those movements. Two of the participants were social workers who worked with either children or other “vulnerable populations.” One is a probation officer for juvenile offenders. The remaining two, at the time too young to have been personally threatened by those movements, are now teachers at a public university, well aware of the history that preceded them in those institutions.
It is little wonder that these participants engaged to one degree or another in the denying/disowning self, disengaging, self-imprisoning, questioning, and despair processes discussed earlier in this study. They described themselves in words such as “stifled,” “constricted,” “detached,” “cut-off,” “disengaged,” and “shut down.” Aware of the consequences of exposure, they kept pretty much to themselves, afraid to “rock the boat,” “bring attention to themselves,” or, in some other fashion, shine a spotlight on their personal lives. Because of their hesitation to become overly involved with others or to take a public stand on controversial matters, they were limited in their ability and/or willingness to share their unique gifts and talents with others.

The constricted nature of their lives at that time kept them, in some cases, from moving through, or successfully demonstrating mastery of, the developmental tasks appropriate to their age and station in life. For example, according to Alfred Adler’s theory of personality, individuals who are psychologically healthy demonstrate this health through social interest and active involvement and interaction with the rest of society (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). He believed that individuals develop particular “styles of life” that determine how they adapt to obstacles in life and how they create solutions and means of achieving goals.

According to Adler (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956), socially useful styles of life are those with high social interest and high social activity, whereas those with avoiding types have low social interest and avoid social involvement. His theory also includes the concept of “basic mistakes.” Basic mistakes refer to the self-defeating aspects of an individual’s lifestyle. They often reflect avoidance or withdrawal from others and self-interest (Sharf, 1996).
Participants in the Surviving stage, if examined in light of Adler’s theory, would be described as being avoidant, withdrawn, and self-interested as evidenced by their low social interest and limited social activity. Their reticence to fully engage is also reminiscent of Karen Horney’s language in which she states that psychological health is evidenced in people’s social nature, in their moves toward people (Freidberg, 1987). So, despite the enormous gifts and potential they possessed, their outward behavior belied an inner capability and innate desire to contribute to mankind.

If assessed, at that time, from the perspective of Maslow’s developmental theory or Erikson’s developmental stages, they would have fared equally as poorly. Maslow (1987) conceptualized human development as a process in which individuals move through various stages, initially focused on the meeting of physiological, safety, and security needs and ultimately progressing to the point of achieving self-actualization.

The concept of self-actualization coincides with Erik Erikson’s seventh and eighth Stages of Development, stages in which the major tasks include Generativity vs. Stagnation and Integrity vs. Despair (Erikson, 1950). It would seem, when examined in the light of these theories, that participants’ behavior during the early part of their journeys reflected a failure to manifest successful resolution of those developmental tasks. Given the context of their lives at that time, this failure was not due to any innate flaw or deficiency on their part. Rather, it was a reflection of the constant fear and threat of exposure that kept them from being real and realizing/manifesting their potential.

Having begun negotiating the stages in their journeys conceptualized as Realizing the Sacred Within and Becoming Real, participants were now in a position to begin tapping into their inner resources and manifesting the potential that had lay primarily
dormant for so many of their earlier years. As described in Chapter 4 of this study, participants are now prolific in their contributions and very actively engaged in a variety of socially and professionally relevant activities. They are enthusiastically involved in altruistic activities designed to help their fellow human beings. All reported extensive efforts to help those less fortunate, and all were devoted to sharing their unique gifts and blessings with others.

Given the earlier sense of alienation, homelessness, and disconnection that preceded this stage of their life journey, the willingness to spend their lives devoted to helping others is vivid testimony of the personal and spiritual transformations they had undergone. From the psychological perspectives of Adler, Maslow, Erikson, and Horney, they are now demonstrating evidence of high social interest and activity, self-actualization, generativity, a keen sense of integrity, and psychological health.

Firm in their new-found belief that they are integrally connected to, and continually supported by, God, a Higher Power, or some other Force, they have entered a new phase on their journeys conceptualized as Thriving. In addition to this unquestioned positive relationship with a higher force or energy source, they also feel an innate connection with nature, the cosmos, and all other forms of life as well as an unshakeable sense of belonging. They are living Consciously and have transcended the pain and sense of disconnection that immobilized them earlier in their journeys.

**Thriving/Living Consciously**

“Being at peace and being who you are, that is, being yourself, are one.”

(Tolle, 2005)
Transcendence/Feeling Blessed

According to Tolle’s (2005) description of transcendence, participants have made significant strides on their transcendent journey to Consciousness. They have, at least for a time, gone beyond their egos and gotten in touch with their spiritual essence or core. They have also realized that their earlier feelings of alienation and disconnection were but an illusion. Tolle believes alienation to be the universal dilemma of human existence, a result of interpreting life through the limited perspective of ego.

The belief that alienation is rampant among humans is mirrored by existentialists who state that alienation and feelings of disconnection are an inherent part of the human condition (Yalom, 1980). If this is the case, participants in this study may have achieved a degree of insight and an understanding of human life that many never come to appreciate.

Zukav (1989) would describe participants as having become authentically empowered. By this he means they possess the awareness that an individual’s power and influence are based in inner spiritual strength and not in physical trappings or illusions of external power. “When the personality comes fully to serve the energy of its soul, that is authentic empowerment” (p.31). Participants have begun to perceive and interpret their lives from a spiritual perspective and, as a result, have begun developing into multi-sensory vs. five-sensory humans.

Others, writing about the spiritual journey of gays and lesbians, support the ideas of Zukav and Tolle. According to Johnson (2000), gay and lesbian individuals who come to view themselves as loving and beloved spiritual beings do so as a result of having experienced a transformation of consciousness. This transformation allows them to change their views of self from being unacceptable, disconnected, and unworthy to
being valued, connected, and worthy. It also allows them to move from a state of feeling victimized and resentful to one of feeling exceptionally blessed and gifted.

Harvey (1995) believes that living in denial and fear keeps many gay and lesbian individuals from engaging in spiritual transformations. He states that, “People have to believe that enlightenment is possible and worth any amount of suffering—and that is a huge leap for Westerners trained to hate pain and the loss of control” (p. 58). He goes on to say that, “When the heart is broken open, then God can put the whole universe in” (p. 58).

It is clear from the data in this study that participants had, on numerous occasions, been involved in situations in which their “hearts had been broken.” It was also clear that they had healed from those wounds and transcended the pain and suffering inherent in them. It was proposed that it was those experiences themselves that served as a catalyst for their further spiritual growth and development. This is supported in the literature by several authors, including O’Neill & Ritter (1992), Barret & Barzan (1996), and Rodriguez & Ouelette (2000) among others.

At the time of their interview, participants manifested a sense of peace and an inner state of “knowing” that I conceptualized as a process of Thriving. They were content with who they are, certain of their value and worth, and confident that they were proceeding on their journeys as planned and designed by a superior Being or Force. They were open, authentic, and congruent. Each had found his or her own way of understanding life and was intent on helping others find theirs. No longer pre-occupied with a concern for safety and security, they were taking risks, taking chances, and venturing into the unknown. All were looking forward to the next step on their journeys,
confident that they would be lovingly guided and supported throughout the remainder of their lives.

Implications/Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. The study was conducted for the overall purpose of identifying ways in which spirituality might be integrated into existing counseling approaches for clients who are gay or lesbian.

Although originally intended to discover ways to assist this particular population cope with the many stressors and problematic feelings they may experience on their journeys to wholeness, it became more and more clear, after analysis of the data and emergence of the theory, that findings in this study may be applicable to a much larger population than originally intended. The archetypes of hero's journey and wounded healer, as well as a theoretical understanding of the process and value of realizing spiritual identity, may well apply to any individual struggling with a belief that he or she is somehow unacceptably different, disconnected, outcast, and/or “less than” those around them. This may apply to minorities living in a world where the majority reigns, those with physical or emotional disabilities, or any other group that feels misunderstood, ostracized, or discriminated against.

The ability to generalize findings from a substantive theory such as this to a formal theory is consistent with McCann & Clark’s (2003) description of grounded theories. They state that grounded theories may be either substantive or formal. Substantive theories, which are the most common type of theories derived from grounded theory,
concentrate on specific social processes and are developed for narrower empirical
areas of study. Formal theories, on the other hand, address a conceptual level of inquiry
and are more general than substantive theories. It would seem from these definitions of
levels of theory that the findings in this study show promise of a potential to lend
themselves to further expansion and a more general application than that originally
intended.

That being said, the following section will be primarily devoted to discussing
implications of the study as they impact approaches to counseling for the gay and
lesbian population, counselor education, and public policy. This section will also include
a discussion of the limitations of the study as well as recommendations for further
research.

Counseling Practice

The value of integrating spirituality into existing approaches to counseling has
been repeatedly supported in the literature (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Kelly, 1995;
Miller, 1999; Shafranske, 1996). Despite this validation, there remains a dearth of
approaches to counseling specific to gay or lesbian individuals that consider spirituality
an essential component of that therapy. Barret and Barzan (1996), O’Neill and Ritter
(1992), Rodriguez and Oullette (2000), and others have described the developmental
journey of these individuals as a “spiritual” or “faith” journey. This implies that their
experiences have broad implications in terms of not only their psychological
development but also their spiritual development. Approaches to counseling that fail to
address the essential and universal human experience of spirituality may lack the
necessary breadth and scope to help these clients more fully understand the nature of
their experiences. It may also inhibit or prevent them from healing at a deeper and more meaningful level.

Findings in this study suggest that individuals who are able to get in touch with their spiritual core or essence and become receptive to the guidance that continually flows from that source are capable of achieving significant transformations in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. That being the case, it would make sense that counselors would be interested in finding ways to facilitate their clients having and/or exploring those experiences as part of the therapeutic encounter.

In order to accomplish this paradigm shift, it is first necessary that counselors, themselves, become acutely aware of their own understanding of spirituality as well as their personal values, beliefs, and feelings about individuals who are gay or lesbian. If they do not personally believe and value that these clients are, like everyone else, spiritual beings on a human journey, they may remain incapable of positively impacting them at a deep spiritual level.

Participants in this study were queried about their prior experiences with counselors. A few had had counseling over the years, but only two for the purpose of accepting their sexual orientation. Others had gay or lesbian friends or acquaintances that had had counseling. Though they were unable to offer specific advice as to how to integrate spirituality into counseling, they were unanimous in their feelings that counselors need to be authentic, sensitive, empathic, and genuinely concerned about them as individuals. This is consistent with the literature that speaks to the essential components of the therapeutic relationship (Rogers, 1951). It would make sense that clients who are presently feeling lost, homeless, and disconnected from tribe might well
be responsive to another human being who is demonstrating respect, acceptance, and unconditional positive regard for them.

In order to achieve a paradigm shift in practice, a shift in which spirituality is routinely integrated into approaches to counseling for gay and lesbian individuals, it is also necessary that we begin at the beginning and, from the start, assure that students (and faculty) in counselor education programs are appropriately educated, trained, and able to demonstrate competence in those areas.

Counselor Education

If courses related to the gay and lesbian population as well as courses related to spirituality in counseling are being offered at all in graduate training programs, they are, most likely, being offered as electives. Students, pressed for time and money, and faculty, restricted by accreditation requirements, may not see the value or practicality of making courses such as these a mandatory part of the curriculum. If these courses are being offered, it is likely that those students already interested in these topics are the few that are taking them. This has the potential to become a situation in which we are “preaching to the choir,” leaving the remainder of students inadequately informed about these specific issues.

One of the key roles of counselor educators is to facilitate students’ acquisition and internalization of a set of professional and ethical values, beliefs, and behaviors. This includes assisting them to develop and demonstrate respect for diversity (ACA, 2005). It is also part of their role to help students become multiculturally sensitive and competent (Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999). Since gays and lesbians are a subculture in and of themselves, it would seem appropriate that students acquire the knowledge and skills required to work with this population.
It is also an integral part of counselor education to facilitate students’ self-exploration in an effort to help them become conscious of those personal values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that may adversely influence their interactions with clients (Corey, 1995). As members of mainstream society, counseling students may well be influenced by some of the negative conversation that persists in some circles related to gays and lesbians. As part of their educational programs, they should be encouraged to examine their pre-existing beliefs about these individuals and to explore ways in which those beliefs may impact the outcomes of their interventions with these clients.

If counselor educators are expected to adequately educate and train students regarding the role of spirituality in counseling and about the needs, spiritual and otherwise, of the gay and lesbian population, it is necessary that they have access to a sufficient body of research that informs that education and training. At this point in time, they are lacking a sufficient amount of guidance that is empirically based.

Counseling Research

As stated earlier, there is an ever-growing body of research that attests to the value of integrating spirituality into existing approaches to counseling. However, the same cannot be said about the availability of research related to the benefits or ways in which spiritual issues might be addressed with gay and lesbian clientele. This is not surprising given that, according to Markowitz (1991), gay and lesbian issues continue to be ignored by the majority of researchers and scholars.

In Chapter 2, I provided evidence of the “state of the art” of affirmative approaches to therapy for individuals who are gay or lesbian and illuminated the many weaknesses and criticisms of that literature. For thirty-seven years, attempts have been made to demonstrate that these approaches are effective. Despite that effort, researchers are
still unable to provide evidence of significant outcomes. It is little wonder, then, that so little is known about the effects of integrating spirituality into the counseling of these individuals. Though there is a growing body of anecdotal literature related to the significant role of spirituality in many of their lives, a reality supported by this study, there has not been a concomitant attempt to integrate that knowledge into counseling practice or research.

Qualitative studies such as this one are an attempt to add to the small but growing body of research that now exists. Because so little is known about the topic, the potential for research in this area is unlimited. Several key questions remain unanswered. For example, what is the benefit of integrating spirituality into the counseling of gay or lesbian clients? Would they be receptive to such an approach, given the evidence that many retain contentious feelings about religion and spirituality? What outcomes might one expect after integrating such an approach? What types of interventions would best facilitate spiritual exploration? Would existing interventions, such as Mindfulness Training, assist these clients to get in touch with their spiritual core? How are counselors being prepared to integrate spirituality into counseling with these individuals? Are they willing or able to do so? What are the best means to ensure that counseling students (and practicing counselors) are provided the necessary education and training in these areas? It is clear that this is an area of inquiry ripe with opportunity for future studies.

Because this would be such a major paradigm shift, both in society and in counseling practice, there would be a number of social and political ramifications that
would need to be addressed. A few of those issues will be posed in the following section.

**Social Policy**

Changes such as those described above would have a number of social and political ramifications and would require extensive changes in social policy across a variety of institutions. For starters, professional organizations, such as the American Counseling Association, and accrediting bodies, such as the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), would have to buy into the need for these changes and develop policies requiring that this content be made mandatory in counselor education or continuing education programs. Given the number of years it took the American Psychiatric Association to remove homosexuality as a disorder from the DSM, this alone would be a major political feat.

It is highly likely that major religious institutions, especially those from the far right, would take exception to presenting gays and lesbians in such a “favorable” spiritual light and would, no doubt, put up opposition. Along those same lines, local, state, and federal political activist groups, already busy trying to repeal the gains of the Gay Rights Movement, would probably go into overdrive to fight the efforts of the ACA and CACREP.

Counselors, themselves, would have to be contended with and convinced that this is the “moral and ethical” thing to do. As discussed earlier in the study, many counselors remain resistant to theories that do not support the pathological view of homosexuality.

Despite the resistance that would inevitably follow such a stance on the part of the ACA and CACREP, counselors, at all levels, are currently being tasked to assume a more active social and political role and to serve as both agents of social justice and
advocates for this population (Perez, 2007). Having had a significant voice in the earlier and damaging conversation regarding the mental health of gays and lesbians, they are now being asked to re-educate the public and to move that conversation away from the language of pathology and toward the language of normalcy and wellness.

Counselors and other mental health professionals are in a unique position to provide evidence of the possible adverse effects on mental health when individuals are routinely deprived of such taken-for-granted social conventions as marriage, the ability to adopt children, serve in the military, or be granted (and allowed to serve openly in) positions of leadership in religious or civil institutions.

This type of empirical evidence may help sway social opinion and normalize the experience of being gay or lesbian. As agents of social justice, counselors are well situated to be in the forefront of social, political, and professional actions designed to increase gays’ and lesbians’ access to these and other social conventions from which they remain routinely excluded.

**Limitations of the Study**

Despite the inherent value of this study, there were several limitations in its design. All but two of the participants were Caucasian, leaving us to wonder whether individuals from other races, cultures, or ethnicities would describe their experiences in a similar manner. The literature suggests that gays and lesbians who are also members of minority cultures, such as African-American, Hispanic, and Asian, may experience even greater challenge, being members of two oppressed groups (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000).

There were only four males in the study, despite the researcher’s attempts to obtain a larger number of males. Despite the fact that their experiences seemed to
mirror those of the females, it would have been helpful to have more data from their perspective.

A significant limitation is that participants were predominately Christian. One identified herself as “at least agnostic, if not atheist.” One reported a blend of Christian and Buddhist beliefs. Two, though not currently practicing Christians, are still closely associated with that tradition. The rest remain actively involved in gay-friendly or gay-affirmative Christian or “non-denominational” Christian churches.

This limited the scope and breadth of perspective that would have been possible if participants from other belief systems (as well as those practicing in traditional Christian churches, not considered gay-friendly or gay-affirmative), had been included in the study. In addition, it prevented us from hearing the voices of an even greater number of individuals who may consider themselves spiritual, but do not subscribe to any organized belief system.

Although the design of the study precluded inclusion of those gays or lesbians who do not consider themselves spiritual, it quickly became apparent that these individuals need to be heard from. Given the significant impact of realizing spiritual identity, as described by participants in this study, one is left to merely speculate as to how (or even if) those who do not consider themselves spiritual come to that same point of peace, equanimity, and acceptance.

Although the study had these limitations, it served to add to the limited body of knowledge available in this area of inquiry. It also privileged the voices of a group of individuals rarely heard from in the literature.
Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the process or processes by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to perceive spirituality as an organizing principle in their lives. Utilizing Glaser’s grounded theory method, I determined that participants accomplished this by becoming engaged in a process conceptualized as Realizing Spiritual Identity. This process included six key categories. Realizing the Sacred Within, Becoming Real, and Realizing Potential were conceptualized as a three-pronged, yet inseparable core category at the heart of the theorized process of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Living Unconsciously/Surviving was conceptualized as a pre-condition of Realizing Spiritual Identity. Journeying was considered a mediating or transitional category. The category of Living Consciously/Thriving followed the Realization of Spiritual Identity and was conceptualized as the outcome or consequence of that experience. In addition to the key categories, there were also fourteen sub-categories identified.

In this chapter I discussed the major categories of the theory from within the context of the existing literature. I also situated this study’s findings in broader contexts, including those of religion, spirituality, psychology, mythology, popular and classical literature, music, and poetry. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of the implications and limitations of the study and provided recommendations related to counseling practice, education, research, and public policy. Although this study was designed to explore ways in which spirituality might be integrated into counseling approaches for gay and lesbian individuals, it became clear that the challenge of realizing spiritual identity is a universal one and may, in fact, be one of the major
reasons for human life. If this is the case, findings of the study have broad implications for any number of individuals, especially those struggling to understand their feelings of difference and marginalization from mainstream society.

Participants in this study have survived a journey that transformed and moved them from a sense of being victims to one of being gifted and blessed. This is a transformation that many never come to complete. It was suggested that the pain incurred in that transformative process may well have been a catalyst, the crucible experience that ignited the transformation.

Counselors who can find meaning in pain and suffering may be an invaluable resource for clients who present in the throes of suffering. Using the Hero’s Journey as a metaphor and providing hope that wounding experiences are often spiritual gifts designed to help clients grow, they may be able to help those clients re-conceptualize and re-frame their painful experiences. It is hoped that this study has provided some insight that counselors may use as a guide or resource in their attempts to facilitate clients’ successful negotiation of their particular hero’s journey.
APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What does being “lesbian” or “gay” mean to you? How does that label affect your other identities?

2. In what ways have you found meaning and purpose in your life as a gay man or lesbian woman?

3. Were there any specific events or experiences that led you to change your views about who you are and where you “fit” in the world? If so, describe/explain.

4. In what ways, if any, has your sexual orientation affected your spirituality?

5. In what ways, if any, has your spirituality affected your sexual orientation?

6. If you have ever had counseling or therapy, what was that experience like for you?

7. How might counselors integrate spirituality when working with gay or lesbian clients?
APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

Protocol Title: Awakening to Spiritual Identity: A Grounded Theory Study to Discover Transformative Responses to the Social Construction of Lesbian and Gay Identity

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Purpose of the research study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the process by which some lesbian women and gay men become highly conscious and aware of their essential nature as spiritual beings and come to view their lives and experiences from a spiritual perspective. The study is being conducted for the overall purpose of identifying ways in which spirituality might be integrated into counseling approaches with lesbian and gay clients.

What you will be asked to do in the study: This study involves research. You will be asked by the investigator to respond to a series of questions regarding your gay or lesbian identity, your experiences with spirituality, and your experiences with counselors, if any. The interview will be conducted at a location and time of your choosing during the time period June 1, 2008 and May 31, 2009. The interview will be audio taped and kept in a locked file in the investigator's office. The investigator and transcriber will be the only individuals who will have access to interview tapes. Once the interview has been transcribed by the investigator and the data has been analyzed, the original tape will be destroyed.

Time required:

60-90 minutes

Risks and Benefits:

We do not anticipate that you will benefit directly by participating in this study. However, we do hope that the study will provide information regarding lesbian and gay spirituality that might be helpful when providing counseling services to this population. Risks of participation are minimal. If you should become emotionally distressed as a result of participation, you will be provided emergency telephone numbers and be referred to the community mental health center for follow-up care.

Compensation:

You will not be compensated for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, the interview tapes will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You have the right to refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer.
Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Robin Rompre, Graduate Student, Department of Counselor Education, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, phone 395-5741.

Dr. Silvia Echevarria-Doan, Associate Professor, Department of Counselor Education, University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, phone 392-0731.

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 392-0433.
APPENDIX C
THE RESEARCHER

Part of the advantage of being a qualitative researcher is the opportunity to share parts of one’s self, worldview, values, and personal research agenda with the reader. Unlike the anonymity afforded the quantitative researcher, qualitative inquiry tends to personalize the researcher, making him or her come alive as a living, breathing human being with a history, a context, and a story to tell. Qualitative researchers also differ markedly in the relationship they have with their study. Unlike quantitative researchers who strive for objectivity, distance, and lack of personal influence over or involvement in their data, qualitative researchers readily admit, up front, that their study has personal meaning and significance for them. Indeed, their area of inquiry often arises from a personal and deep “felt need” and a nagging and relentless urge to address that need (Sherman & Webb, 1997). As such, the researcher is, in a sense, frequently studying him or herself as a way of making sense of and finding meaning in his or her own lived experience. As the primary instrument in qualitative inquiry, the researcher is intimately and inextricably enmeshed in his or her study from initial birth of the research idea, through analysis and interpretation of data, to the final search for relevance and implications of that data (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). Because the researcher conceives, nurtures, grows, gives birth, and parents the research creation, it is important that he or she introduce him or herself to the reader and provide some discussion as to why he or she selected this particular problem to investigate (Sherman & Webb, 1997; Silverman, 2005).

I, like all human beings, wear numerous identities. Among others these include being a middle-aged, Caucasian female, ex-Christian, lesbian, counselor, nurse, and
teacher. Despite these external trappings, I have long known that, though somewhat descriptive of me, these identities are not truly reflective of all that I am. My life has been an ongoing search to discover other, hidden from view, inner aspects that more accurately reflect my true identity, nature, and essence.

Over the years, it has become apparent to me that being born into a human body can often be likened to being imprisoned. By this I mean that, by virtue of our everyday, human awareness, our so-called normal “consciousness,” we often limit our understanding of life to that which can be perceived via the five human senses. This is what seems “real” to us; and our experiences in this state of consciousness typically drive our thoughts, feelings, motives, and behavior. They also provide the ordinary context for our sense of purpose and meaning in life (Zukav, 1989; Tolle, 1999).

Contemporary and ancient mystics alike, however, tell us that this state of “normal consciousness” is not real, is not true, and is not illustrative of our deepest essence or nature. From their perspective, our true essence is one of spirit. As spirits, we are immortal, perfect, and possess unlimited potential. The greatest challenge of human life, then, is to “remember” our spiritual essence and to work to align our human activities with the growth-oriented and evolutionary impulse of our spirit (Tolle, 1999). Once we get in touch with this spiritual self and begin to align our human activities with it, our extra-ordinary sense of purpose and meaning in life unfold effortlessly. We then begin to view and understand our experiences from a much broader perspective, rather than a constricted, time-limited, sense oriented, and earth-bound one.

Most who subscribe to this notion of spirituality, as I do, also believe that, as spiritual beings, we are connected to all of life, other people, nature, and a “force” of
some type that provides order to the universe. This force is called by many names but, however it is understood, it involves an extra-ordinary, transpersonal, and transcendental sense that allows us to perceive our lives as essential, meaningful, and connected vs. random, meaningless, and disconnected. In this realm, our typical ways of perceiving, judging, and categorizing other human beings are senseless, as all forms of life are perceived to be of equal value and divine worth.

My personal definition of spirituality, then, is that it is a dimension of being that is nonphysical, eternal, and transcendent. It involves a personal and intimate connection between one’s innermost essence, a transcendent Being or Universal life force, and all other forms of life (Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter, 2000; Stasko-Sirch, 1996). It incorporates a person’s sense of identity and worth in relation to that transcendent Being or life force. Individuals with a positive sense of their spiritual identity believe they are eternal spiritual beings with innate divine worth and unlimited potential (Richards & Bergin, 1977). They have a strong sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter) and tend to view and interpret human experience primarily from a spiritual perspective (Jung, 1933). They also tend to apply this fundamental belief system to the majority of their life activities and are noticeably engaged in altruistic and humanistic endeavors.

I admit to experiencing only fleeting glimpses of this inner self that I have come to call my spiritual self—my one true and lasting identity. More often than not I spend extended periods of time in an amnesiac state, unaware or failing to remember this inner self. Although I dwell in this inner spiritual state only briefly and sporadically, it is
from that place that this study was conceived and born. It was also from that place that
the persistent nagging and relentless urge to conduct it arose.

The Research

In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association publicly deemed that homosexuality
was no longer to be considered a mental disorder (Gonsiorek, 1991). Twenty-four hours
prior to that proclamation, everything else I had ever heard or read about myself and my
feelings had led me to believe I was sick, immoral, evil, arrested in personality and
emotional development, and unfit, really, to actually be alive. Who were I and those
others like me now to believe? It was then that I began my acquaintance with the
essence of social constructionism, though it would be almost thirty years before I came
to know it by that name.

Despite the alleged strides in civil and human rights for individuals that are gay or
lesbian, those of us who wear that label know that those strides are but a smokescreen,
a figment of society's collective imagination. Each and every day, young (and not so
young) gays and lesbians take their own lives (Durby, 1994; Hammelman, 1993). Many
others take mind and soul-numbing drugs or alcohol to ease the pain they feel as sexual
minorities (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007). In large numbers they are harassed,
baited, teased, threatened, and physically and emotionally beaten by loved ones and
strangers alike. By the thousands they flock to therapists with major mood and anxiety
disorders (Cabaj & Klinger, 1996; Durby; Rudolph, 1990). If, for a brief moment, they
begin to feel good about themselves, it is a short-lived and surreal experience. For soon
they are again bombarded with overwhelming social messages regarding their
unacceptability as human beings. They are told over and over again that they are
“abnormal,” “disordered,” an “abomination,” and “eternally divorced from God.” What greater damage can be inflicted upon fellow human beings than these daily attacks and explicit attempts to disenfranchise them of their very souls (Barret & Barzan, 1996; de la Huerta, 1999).

My personal journey as a lesbian individual has led me to that place I call my spiritual self, my only “real” and lasting identity. To accomplish this change in vision, I have had to live through the disconfirming, dis-spiriting experiences I, heretofore, perceived to be the “truth” about who and what I was in this world. What changed my view about life and my place in the world remains primarily a mystery. Although I know how monumentally I have changed, I, who accompanied my “self” on each and every step of that journey, cannot remember its details or nuances nor how I came to arrive at that specific destination. As a counselor and an occasionally “awakened” human being, I feel it is crucial to explore and revisit that journey in order to, perhaps, help devise a roadmap of sorts that others may choose to follow. In order to accomplish this, I must seek information and advice and listen to the life stories of other travelers who have also reached that destination. It is for this reason that I have set out upon this challenging and exciting expedition.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Military eases up on gays. (2010, March 26). *The Gainesville Sun*, p. 3A.


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Robin Marie Rompre was born in 1951 in Waterbury, Connecticut. She attended college in New Haven, Connecticut and earned a baccalaureate degree in nursing in 1973. Following graduation, she spent twenty one years as a nurse in the U.S. Army Nurse Corps from which she retired in 1992 as a Lieutenant Colonel. In 1981, she earned a master’s degree in nursing from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.

While on Active Duty as an Army Nurse, she held a variety of clinical, supervisory, educational, management, and administrative positions. Throughout her career as an Army Nurse, she focused heavily on psychosocial concerns and staff development activities. She assisted in the planning and served as a presenter in a variety of workshops and classes.

Following retirement, Robin continued pursuing a life-long interest in counseling. She had completed a master’s degree in counseling and development from Boston University and a master’s degree in education from the University of Southern California while still on Active Duty. After retirement, she went on to earn an EdS degree in mental health counseling from the University of Florida. She was subsequently licensed as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor and Nationally Certified Counselor. During that period, she also began work as a psychiatric nurse and worked in a variety of positions across Southwest and North Central Florida. Robin is currently employed as an Associate Professor of Nursing at Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida. Her primary duties include teaching Psychiatric/Mental Health Nursing to the senior nursing students and therapeutic communication to the freshmen and Bridge nursing students.