

# Negotiating Religious and Sexual Identities: An Exploration of the Lived Experiences of Irish Catholic Gay Men



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## Abstract

This project aims to explore the lived experiences of a group of practising Roman Catholic, gay men living in contemporary Irish society. The report sought to collate an understanding of how four Irish Catholic gay men (ICGM) negotiated and affirmed their sexual and religious identities. A comprehensive review of associated literature was conducted and this was linked to the core themes which emerged from the overall analyses. The report found that all, except one, of the ICGM experienced identity conflict during their lives. It was reported that a key strategy in the achievement of identity integration was that of reflexivity. This involved the participants engaging in a reflexive process where they renegotiated the boundaries and definitions of their religious identity to include a positive valuation of homosexuality and thereby achieve a greater sense of identity integration.

## Introduction

The study of Irish homosexuality has traditionally focussed on the political and legal struggles of the gay rights movement rather than taking a more Interactionist perspective (Rose as cited in Ryan, 2003, p69). The absence of such qualitative (and quantitative) research has meant that the analysis of Irish sexuality has relied mainly on theoretical and methodological models which do not explore in sufficient detail, the deployment and affirmation of sexuality in everyday life (Iglis, 1997, p.19). This paper aims to address the neglect of sociological research with regard to the lived experiences of gay men in Ireland and in so doing, build upon existing knowledge which seeks to challenge the institutional heterosexism which exists in Irish academia (Luibeid, 2013). This research will explore the intersection of sexuality, religion and identity from the perspective of a group of Irish gay men who are practising Roman Catholics.

## Method

A qualitative, data-led design was chosen for this research project. This is the most appropriate form of research where the behaviours, perspectives, feelings and experiences of participants must be examined in depth (Silverman, 2005). The report sought to elicit a deep and holistic understanding of the challenges faced by ICGM in contemporary Irish society. This could not have been achieved through the statistical analysis of single variables or numerical data employed by quantitative techniques.

## Research Design

- A series of semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with four ICGM.
- Interview transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis from which a number of themes emerged from the data.
- A phenomenological approach was adopted when analysing the data in order to achieve an understanding of the true essence of the personal narratives of the ICGM who took part in this study.

## Results

Thematic analysis revealed the following themes:

- Early indoctrination in to the Catholic religion.
- Experiences of Identity Conflict
- Conflict resolution and management strategies
- The role of gender in the construction of sexual identity
- The experience of Pastoral Care versus Vatican Theology

## Discussion

The report found that all of the participants had been indoctrinated in to the Catholic religion at a very early age and grew up in an environment which was hostile to homosexuality. This presented significant challenges for the men, as they attempted to negotiate and affirm their sexual identities within a non-gay affirming religious and social context. A number of strategies were adopted so as to manage and/or resolve experiences of identity conflict between these two salient identities, as the participants worked towards achieving a greater sense of identity integration. A key strategy identified in the research findings was that of reflexivity. This involved the participants engaging in a process of reflection and critical thinking, which allowed them to renegotiate the boundaries and definitions of their religious identities to include a positive valuation of homosexuality. As a consequence, the participants had little difficulty in rejecting Vatican doctrine with regard to homosexuality, and derived their sense of religious identity primarily from their experiences of pastoral care on the ground.

## Key References:

- Inglis, T. (1997). Foucault, Bourdieu and the Field of Irish Sociology. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 7, pp. 5-28.
- Weeks, J. (2005). Remembering Foucault. *Journal of the history of sexuality*, 14 (1/2), pp. 186-200.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *The history of sexuality Vol. 1*. New York: Vintage.