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

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

Bachelor of Arts degree (Social Science Specialization)

at DBS School of Arts, Dublin.

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April 2014

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Abstract

This project aims to explore the lived experiences of a group of practising Roman Catholic, gay men living in contemporary Irish society. The data was gathered using a semi-structured interview technique and transcripts were subjected to a qualitative thematic analysis. The report sought to collate an understanding of how four Irish Catholic gay men (ICGM) negotiated and affirmed their sexual and religious identities. Participants were interviewed about the development of their sexual and religious identities, the psychological and social impact of holding a sexual identity within a non-gay affirming religious context, and the strategies which they used to manage identity conflict. 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.

Irish Society and Homosexuality

In attempting to open up a history of Irish homosexuality, modern scholarship has pointed to evidence suggesting that there has always existed a range of responses in dealing with homosexual desires, rather than a single monochrome gay landscape (Earls, 2014). While the classification of identities on the basis of sexual desire is a modern social construction, it is possible to infer, even by its very omission, from ancient manuscripts, a general acceptance or toleration of sexual activity and relations between members of the same sex (Earls, 2014). This is demonstrated by the lack of regulation prohibiting homosexuality in Brehon Law, where sexual activity between members of the same sex is mentioned only as a possible condition whereby a woman could divorce her husband with full restitution of her dowry (Earls, 2014).

The fluidity and complexity of this relationship is further evidenced by the integral part played by literary and political figures in Ireland's more recent history such as, Oscar Wilde, Roger Casement, Padraig Pearse and Edward Martyn (Earls, 2014).

Post colonial Irish society adopted a restrictive, heteronormative perspective with regard to the deployment and regulation of sexuality (Considine & Dukelow, 2009, pp. 441-442). The decades which followed the formation of the Irish Free State were characterised by a high degree of sexual repression, distinct gender roles and a heterosexual norm (Inglis, 1997, p.7). Implicit in this idealised version of Irish identity was the strict adherence to a proliferation of codifications emanating from the Catholic Church which sought to regulate sexual conduct (Inglis, 1997, p.14). For much of the twentieth century discourse on sexuality was monopolised by the Catholic Church and deployed in schools, churches and on GAA pitches throughout the country (Ryan, 2003). This was in stark contrast to the many competing discourses emerging in other western societies at the time (Weeks, 2005, p. 197). It has been argued that this lack of discourse, relegated sexuality to the realm of secrecy and the silence which surrounded the subject, constituted in itself a discourse (Foucault, 1980). Ireland's post-colonial legacy and catholic ethos facilitated a mind-set where discourse on sexuality was confined within the "thematic of sin" and a preoccupation with oppositional definitions and explanations with regard to what was "natural" i.e. heterosexual and reproductive, and that which was "unnatural" and "deviant" i.e. everything else (Inglis, 1997, p.12).

In such a historical and social context, those who dared to deviate from societal constraints and expectations with regard to gender, sexuality and family were severely punished (Inglis, 1997).

Consequently, the affirmation of any alternative form of sexuality would prove to be problematic, if not impossible to achieve for those who did not fit within such narrow parameters (Ryan, 2003). Research has demonstrated that the negotiation of such salient identities as, culture, religion and sexuality, represented a huge challenge for gay men who grew up in Ireland during the 1970's, as they sought to affirm their sexual identities within an environment hostile to homosexuality (Ryan, 2003). There was no single moment in Irish history which signalled the collapse of the so called "green curtain", and the residual effects of DeValera's policies of economic and cultural isolationism were slow to dissipate from the Irish social landscape (McInri, n.d.). The liberalisation of the Irish economy brought with it a more capitalist based economic structure, which demanded greater participation of women in the workplace, an educated populace and a more consumer driven, individualistic society (Ferriter, 2005, pp. 536-622). This along with Ireland's accession to the EEC in 1973 had a transformative effect on Irish society, opening it up to more Western influences which in turn allowed for a multiplicity of alternative discourses in relation to sexuality to gradually emerge (Ferriter, 2005, pp. 536-622).

As Irish society became more disentangled from the Roman Catholic Church, so too did it begin to recognise the diversity of human sexuality and look beyond Vatican theology with regard to matrimony and reproduction. Foucault (1980, p.77) argues that post-modern society has become fixated with the eradication of the residual forces of sexual repression and a search for the truth and affirmation of sexual being. Research has demonstrated the unique challenges faced and strategies adopted by gay men who were exposed to high levels of indoctrination in the Irish Catholic tradition during their formative years (Ryan, 2003).

This would appear to endorse the view that experiences of identity conflict were significantly higher among those who sought to negotiate their sexual and religious identities in such a social and historical context (Ryan, 2003). Therefore, the time and place in which the participants of this study came of age is an important consideration when arriving at the research findings. While contemporary Irish society is no longer defined within such a heteronormative, Roman Catholic narrative, many challenges exist for those who seek to maintain their Roman Catholic identity and practice their faith within this new social context. This is particularly true for those members of the Irish gay community who, having achieved a new sense of (political) identity and legislative freedom, continue to feel discriminated against and invalidated by their Church's teachings on homosexuality.

Roman Catholicism and Homosexuality

In order to fully understand the Church's teachings on homosexuality, one must firstly examine the biblical references to homosexuality, upon which catholic doctrine is based, and of which there are surprisingly few. The book of Leviticus (18:22) is most often quoted by the New Right as undeniable proof that "God hates Fags" and refers to homosexuality as "an abomination" (Hanigan, 1998, Baird, 2007, p. 97). However, the validity of such depictions would appear to be significantly undermined when the cultural and historical context in which they were written is taken in to account. This is evident in passages of the book of Leviticus which refer to the consumption of shrimp as being an abomination and where certain forms of slavery are condoned (Hanigan, 1998). Perhaps the most often referred to "evidence" of Gods intolerance of homosexuality in the bible can be found in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which many theologians have since argued to be an indictment against male rape and inhospitality rather than homosexuality itself (Baird, 2007, p.109).

Nevertheless, it was on this basis that the Catholic Church embarked upon a crusade against the so-called "sodomites" throughout the dark ages, as it attempted to strengthen its position in society through the creation of a dichotomy between what was natural and unnatural, decent and immoral, and so on (Baird, 2007, p. 62)

Contemporary Catholic doctrine in relation to sexuality, marriage and the family relies less on Mosaic Law and is derived primarily the New Testament ("Cathecism of the", n.d.). A central tenant of Catholic theology is that the sexual act itself must recognise the complementarity of the sexes and fulfil a procreative purpose or desire within the sacrament of matrimony (CDF, 1986). Vatican doctrine dictates that sin only exists when personal choice also exists, and for this reason the church's position on homosexuality has traditionally revolved around the notion of choice (CDF, 1986). Central to this position is the belief that a homosexual orientation does not in itself constitute a choice and therefore cannot be considered to be a sin (CDF, 1986). Homosexual persons are called to chastity so that they may, through a process of self denial and prayer, achieve what is referred to as "Christian perfection" (CDF, 1986). The homosexual act, as is the case with abortion and the use of artificial contraception, is considered by the Catholic Church to be "intrinsically evil", as it blocks the reproductive potential of the sexual act. Consequently, it can never be condoned or normalised (CDF, 1986). In addition, homosexuality is not recognised as an identity in itself and love between members of the same sex is not considered to be real, given that it is a delusion emanating from what can only be described as "an objective disorder" (CDF, 1986). The emergence of a "homosexual identity" and the so called "gay lobby" has represented a fundamental threat to the Catholic Church's core beliefs with regard to marriage, the family and social order.

The Vatican has been quick to mobilise itself against this threat and has continued to voice its opposition to anti discrimination legislation both on national and international levels. In 2008, the Vatican opposed a UN declaration which sought to decriminalise "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" in a global environment where homosexuality is criminalised in 77 countries (Crawley, 2008) and where draconian legislation has been recently introduced in jurisdictions such as, Cameroon, Nigeria, Liberia, Uganda and Russia (Smith-Spark, 2013).

The Catholic Church would appear to hold a somewhat ambivalent attitude towards homosexuality. On the one hand, it adopts a "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach and calls upon church pastors to condemn "any form of malice" against gay people (CDF, 1986). At the same time, it continues to encourage what it sees as justified discrimination against homosexuals where they are perceived to pose a threat to the sanctity of marriage and family. This distinction between "just" and "unjust" discrimination is central to Vatican policy on homosexuality, which it argues is unlike race or ethnicity in terms of the threat it poses to society. Discrimination is therefore justified in cases concerning the education of children, housing, health care and so on (CDF, 1986). The extent to which it has defended this position is noteworthy and perhaps represents the biggest potential challenge to gay Roman Catholics living in contemporary Irish society, as they attempt to reconcile their sexual and religious identities. Members of the Irish clergy who have voiced their opposition to the Vatican's teachings on homosexuality have either been reprimanded or silenced, as clearly demonstrated in the cases of Fr. Brian Darcy and Fr. Tony Flannery ("Fr Tony Flannery," 2013).

This however, is in sharp contrast to the more hard line stance against homosexuality taken by members of the Catholic hierarchy, who have blatantly disregarded Vatican teaching with regard to the condemnation of "any form of malice" or "unjust" discrimination against gay people (CDF, 1986). In a 2003 interview, the Nigerian Cardinal Francis Arinze, likened homosexuality to adultery and infanticide (Timberg, 2005), while in 2013 the Ghanaian Cardinal Peter Turkson blamed the child sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church on the prevalence of homosexuality in Western societies (Gledhill, 2013). Both cardinals went on to become frontrunners in the 2013 papal elections.

Irish Homosexuality and Gender Identity

Traditional gender role ideology in Ireland took an essentialist perspective, defining the roles of men and women on the basis of binary or biological differences between the sexes (REF). Gender roles were conceptualised within a Roman Catholic, heterosexual narrative, which established strict parameters in relation to how Irish men and women were expected to live out their gendered identities (Inglis, 1997, p.12). This sense of gender identity is constructed and continually reinforced through the performance of various kinds of behaviour which are culturally labelled as masculine or feminine (Butler, 1990). It is within this context that the sexuality of men is seen as a mechanism through which gender roles could be confirmed and consolidated (Ethel Spector Person cited in Weeks, 2003, p189). While an in depth analysis of the intersection of gender and sexuality in Ireland, extends beyond the parameters of this research, the degree to which it overlaps with issues of identity is of particular relevance.

The social and cultural context in which gender is played out continues to be one which evaluates male attributes, lifestyles and values to be superior and dominant to those which are considered to be female (Uchida, 1998, cited in O'Connor, 2009, p.98). Hegemonic ideals of masculinity in Irish society would appear to be built upon the "absence of confiding and the denial of vulnerability" (Cleary, 2005, cited in O' Connor, 2009, p.98). The "relative gender fragility" of the male psyche has meant that male identity continues to be built upon a constant process of warding off threats and the rejection of femininity (Weeks, 2003, p. 190). Within this hegemonic male construct, there are many men who fail to measure up to the dominant ideal of Irish masculinity, and who, as a consequence, are often perceived to be subordinate or inferior (Connell, 1995, pp. 76-81). The affirmation of a homosexual identity in Ireland has represented a significant challenge, given the perceived incompatibility of homosexuality and the hegemonic ideal of Irish masculinity (Ryan, 2003, p.81). Early homosexual culture was counter to the image of male heterosexuality and as a result, homosexuals were seen as "effeminate" or pseudo men (Weeks, 2003, p.190).

Gender roles have undergone a process of deconstruction in post-modern Ireland, shaped in no small part by the Women's Movement and the transformation of the Irish economy (Horgan, 2001). Both of these factors have served to blur the gender divisions by demanding greater education and participation of women in the workplace (REF). This has helped to shift the focus away from an essentialist perspective where gender and sexual identities are defined in terms of binary differences/dualisms which seek to position homosexuality in terms of a gender identity disorder, or "third sex" (Weeks, 2003, p.93).

There now exists a multiplicity of variations of masculinity and femininity in Western gay sub cultures and consequently, homosexual identity is no longer tied so rigidly to gender identity (Weeks, 2003, p.191). At the same time, the hegemonic ideal of masculinity still prevails within contemporary Irish society and may represent a significant challenge for those seeking to reconcile their gender and sexual identities within the context of their social world and religious beliefs.

The homosexual identity

The concept of sexuality and the subsequent categorisation of individuals on the basis of their sexual desires is a relatively recent social phenomenon which has in itself no meaning beyond the historical context in which its various forms and manifestations take place (Foucault 1980, p.26). It wasn't until the late 19th century that the homosexual emerged as a distinct type of person, the product of the new dichotomy of heterosexual/homosexual (Weeks, 2003, p.90). It was around this time that sexual practices became less a private and more a public concern, as well as, constituting a yard stick for describing a person (Weeks, 2003, p90). It has been argued that sex became "the truth of our being", as our identities became intrinsically linked to that which our sexual nature dictates (Foucault, cited in Weeks, 2003). The sexological discovery and categorisation of the homosexual gave a name and the potentiality of an identity (Foucault). However, while modern sexual identities have been constructed within the parameters of the work of the sexologists, the manner in which they have been internalised and lived by those they wished to define has become less of a sexual category as it has a human identity (John D'Emilio cited in Weeks, 2003, p.187).

In challenging and surmounting the pathologising and medicalising categorisations of the sexologists, the homosexual identity has acted as a powerful political force which mobilised and gave a voice to those who had previously been anonymous and disconnected from one another (Weeks, 2003, p. 192). Paradoxically, the gay rights movement originally argued against the rigidity of such categorisations in favour of a perspective which recognised the diversity and very plasticity that exists within human sexuality. However, it would appear that the creation and politicisation of a fixed homosexual identity has represented a very important precursor in this evolutionary journey towards a more polysexual perspective (Weeks, 2003, p. 200).

The quest for identity has indeed characterised the history of homosexuality throughout much of the last century. It has been argued that the quest for personal identity is equivalent to individuation (Erikson, cited in Weeks, 2003, p.188). It is believed to be the reality of our true or authentic selves and this, we must find through a process of negotiation between the social context in which we live and our inner most selves (Cohen and Taylor, cited in Weeks, 2003, p.188). Such identity work must be done against, or in spite of, the cultural and historical backdrop in which we live, and the perceived realities or parameters of contemporary society (Cohen and Taylor, cited in Weeks, 2003, p.188). Giddens (1991) argues that Postmodern societies have become characterised by reflexivity, a process whereby the self is continually constructed and reconstructed in what is referred to as "the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991). It is within the context of such capitalist, consumer based societies that individuals negotiate and choose from a variety of identities, including that of sexual identity, available to them as a form of self expression (Giddens,1991).

Indeed, there is a growing recognition of the fact that the construction of lesbian and gay identity is strongly influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which this process occurs and intersects with other aspects of identity, such as, culture and ethnic identity (Eliason, Cox and Gallois, 1996). This is particularly relevant to the study of homosexual identity within the context of Irish culture and Roman Catholicism. An analysis of the intersection of such salient identities as religion, culture and sexuality, as told through the personal narratives of a group of Irish gay men, will form the basis of this qualitative research study. A key objective of this exploration will be the analysis of the challenges faced by these men and the strategies employed by them, in negotiating and affirming their religious and sexual identities in contemporary Irish society.

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. The qualitative research design provided the structure and flexibility necessary to explore in greater depth, the sexual and religious biographies of the participants of this research project. In taking a phenomenological approach *"the researcher aims to go beyond surface expressions or explicit meanings to read between the lines so as to access implicit dimensions and intuitions"* (Finlay, 2009). The scope of the research was narrow and semi structured questions ensured that the interviews remained focussed on the research topic while providing rich and detailed data which formed the basis for the subsequent discourse analysis and report findings.

Apparatus

A Sony ICDBX132 2GB Dictaphone was used to record the interviews which were then transcribed in to an MS Word document. The interview transcripts were imported in to NVIVO 9 software for coding and analysis.

<u>Participants</u>

A purposive sample of four participants was recruited on the basis of sexual orientation, nationality, gender and religious beliefs. The scope of the research was limited to the exploration of the experiences of Irish Catholic gay men (ICGM) so that rich, detailed data could be gathered on a specific sample population. Irish Catholic lesbian women were excluded from the selection process as it was felt that the existing differences between lesbian women and gay men would have been further compounded by the different experiences, positions and expectations of men and women in the Catholic church. The distribution of ages was limited to those who came of age prior to the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland in 1993, given the differences between the shared experiences of this group and those who grew up in Irish society after this point. A broader cross section analysis on such demographics as age and gender, would have required a larger sample population size and their inclusion in this study would have compromised the integrity of the research findings.

Participants were recruited from a variety of sources. A comprehensive email explaining the purpose of this research was sent to the moderator of the Irish Gay Catholic Voice of Ireland website and this resulted in the participation of one of its members. A series of related ads were placed on the Gaire and GCN websites, but these failed to generate respondents who satisfied the exact sampling criteria for this research. The remaining three participants were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling methods. All of the participants were based in the Dublin region and their ages ranged from 48-72.

<u>Procedure</u>

Four participants were interviewed as part of this research project. A semi-structured interview schedule was chosen and this allowed the researcher to maintain control over the topics being discussed while ensuring sufficient flexibility to adapt to the demands the interviews as they arose. Interviews were staged at a time and location convenient to each participant where it was possible to do so without compromising the integrity of the interview process. The duration of the interviews ranged from 20 to 45 minutes and a conversational approach was adopted which encouraged interviewees to talk freely and at length. The Charmaz (2002) 3 stage interview model was used to structure the interview process and a series of 10-15 open-ended questions were categorised according to the initial, intermediate and end stages of the interview. The research design was iterative and flexible in nature, allowing the data and various themes to emerge throughout the course of the interviews rather than being over reliant on a fixed interview schedule. Informal, or unscripted, prompts were used throughout the interviews as a means of encouraging participants to disclose their thoughts and feelings in relation to the research phenomenon. Formal, or floating, prompts were used to clarify inconsistencies or gaps in the responses of the participants, thereby maintaining the accuracy and integrity of the data generated during the interviews.

Each interview was transcribed and imported in to NVivo 9 software where the raw data was coded and analysed. A phenomenological approach ensured that the themes which emerged from the data reflected the true essence of what the research phenomenon meant to the interviewees.

<u>Design</u>

This report sought to collate an understanding of the challenges faced by a group of ICGM living in contemporary Irish society by conducting a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. An interpretative, or phenomenological, approach was adopted during the subsequent analysis of these interviews. This emphasised the subjective meanings of words and phrases for the participants with the objective of achieving a deeper understanding of the true essence of their experiences.

<u>Ethical Considerations</u>

This report involved the participation of members of a minority group. The ethical considerations of this study were discussed with a supervisor prior to the submission of the final research proposal to the DBS ethics committee. A key document used by this committee in judging the appropriateness of research involving human participants is the Belmont Report. This document stresses the importance of three core principles; respect for persons, beneficence and justice (National Commission, 1979). Interviews were conducted on the basis of informed consent and participants were asked to sign a letter of consent, confirming that they were made fully aware of the nature of the research, as well as, their right to withdraw from the research at any point. Given the sensitive nature of the information provided by the participants, a number of measures were put in place to protect their right to anonymity. Pseudo names were used and all identifying information was omitted during the interview transcription process. Interviews and transcripts were stored electronically on a password protected USB key which will be destroyed after the examination board has completed its work and a final award has been issued.

The interview process can be by its very nature an intrusive process as it seeks to question and understand the true essence of subjective meanings and experiences of the interviewee. The ability of the researcher, as an ICGM, to identify with the experiences of the study participants, was a beneficial factor in building rappor and encouraging them to disclose intimate details of their lived experiences. Elias (1987) recognises that the researcher is part of the social world being researched and that a certain amount of "involvement" in the research process in inevitable. The researcher was aware of the need to "self-regulate" one's level of emotional "involvement" and "detachment" so that a more "reality congruent" picture of the subject's lives could be achieved (Elias, 1987). Leading questions and prompts were avoided and a more neutral stance was maintained during the interview process. A shared understanding of the issues faced by ICGM in Ireland was conveyed by the researcher and participants were encouraged to discuss their sexual and religious biographies in an environment which was at all times respectful and non-judgemental.

<u>Results</u>

This report aimed to explore the experiences of four gay men who grew up in Ireland and who are practising Roman Catholics. A primary objective of this research was an exploration of the strategies adopted by these men in negotiating and reconciling their sexual and religious identities. A series of in-depth, one to one interviews generated rich, detailed data which was reflective of the issues faced by these men and the strategies employed by them in managing or reconciling these potentially conflicting identities. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed a number of themes which emerged from the data.

<u>Early Indoctrination in to the Catholic Religion</u>

All of the participants who took part in this research grew up in Ireland between the 1950s and 1970s. They came of age in a social and historical context where matters to do with sexuality were tightly regulated by the Catholic Church and in an environment which was hostile to homosexuality. The first theme to emerge from the data was that of early indoctrination in to the Catholic faith. Catholicism played a central role in family life and education for all of the ICGM who took part in this research.

Alan, a 72 year old retired bank manager living in Dublin, describes the extent to which the Catholic church permeated Irish society during his youth and early adult life:

"we grew up in an environment where the church had the answer to every question there was. You didn't have to worry..you didn't have to question anything." Alan

John, a 50 year old Catholic priest who grew up in a small rural town in the South West of Ireland in the 1970s talks about the centrality of religion during his upbringing,

"religion was very embedded in our whole life...maybe more indirectly than directly, through education, the way we lived..." John.

David, a 46 year old HR manager living in Dublin, describes his involvement in the Catholic Church as playing an important role in his life from a very young age.

> "As a child I was an alter-boy ... so I have had an involvement in the Church from early on" David.

The role of female caregivers in shaping religious identity

A sub-theme which emerged from this central theme of early indoctrination, was the role played by female caregivers in shaping the ICGM's view of the Catholic faith and in the development of their religious identities;

> "...my grandmother was a big influence in my life and her faith was expressed in a very loving, free way....she didn't follow ...the rigidity..the rules..." John.

Three out of the four men interviewed as part of this study, stressed the central role played by female role models in the deployment of religion in their early childhood.

> "I suppose the school system provided me with my Catholic education, as well as, predominantly my mother rather than my father". David.

Identity Conflict

All of the participants in this research reported feeling aware of the hostility which existed in Irish society towards homosexuality. The extent to which they were exposed to such hostility and/or experienced it to be oppressive varied significantly among the sample population. Alan paints a stark picture of life in Ireland as a young, Catholic, gay man during the 1960s.   He begins by talking about his decision to leave the teaching profession in a Catholic run school;

> '' I decided to make this move. One of the reasons was being gay..... I was always concerned that if people found out perhaps inadvertently ..through the way you could accidently give it away … that life … would be untenable!" Alan.

He elaborates further by explaining;

> " .... to come out as gay in those years would be the equivalent in today's world as a guy coming out and saying "I am a paedophile...it was just a no no!" Alan.

John also reports feeling oppressed and unable to affirm his sexual identity in the social context in which he grew up. He makes an important distinction between the Catholic Church and Irish society. He describes the greatest forces of oppression in his life as being those of his peer group and Irish society itself, rather than the Catholic Church;

> "People were cruel. Society was cruel...from name calling to bullying. It's actually the cruelty or rejection I felt among my own peers ...at school, around the home...even at home!...it was the culture more than anything else" John.

David did not experience this sense of oppression or feel restricted by Irish society and/or the Catholic Church to the same extent as the other three participants.

> "I was aware that Catholic teaching told me that homosexuality was wrong but it didn't affect me....it didn't have any bearing on my coming out whatsoever or it would not have stopped me ...I have never felt guilty because of my Catholic upbringing." David.

Internalised Homophobia

An important sub-theme which emerged under the central theme of identity conflict, was the experience of internalised homophobia. Three of the participants reported a high degree of identity conflict and internalised homophobia as a consequence of growing up in Ireland during this time.

> "I felt that it was wrong... what I am feeling is wrong. And it is not right to express that....and it wasn't even right for me in my mind to even say who I am in that...I am gay...I couldn't say that" John.

The expression or affirmation of one's sexual identity within the dominant religious and social context proved to be a significant challenge for these men and was often tinged with feelings of guilt and regret.

> "You went to confession and you confessed it and ... you made up your mind that you were not going to do it again... the ethos of the time was very black and white. You were either going to be saved and go to heaven or if you didn't, you went to hell for all eternity. And it was so easy to go to hell......" Alan

Secrecy

The need for secrecy with regard to one's sexual identity was a sub theme which emerged from the data. This was a strategy used by three of the men as they attempted to negotiate their sexual identities within a non-gay affirming religious and social context.

"I knew I have to keep this a secret. You'd be called the sissy. You'd be laughed at. So I got quite accustomed to growing up with this mask and particularly in my teens when I became sexually conscious I realised all the more need for the mask." Alan.

Martin, a 48 year old Sales Representative living in Dublin, describes the sense of isolation and fear he felt as a result of maintaining this secret.

"There was a sense of not fitting in...not fully fitting in...always feeling different. Always feeling that because of this secret if somebody really knew me they wouldn't like me". Martin.

Deepening of faith

The sense of oppression and hostility which John experienced as a gay man living in Ireland in the 1970s, drew him closer to the Church. It was within the confines of the Church and his decision to join the clergy, that he achieved a sense of connection and sanctuary which he did not experience elsewhere in Irish society at the time.

"It actually deepened my faith and my own brokenness drew me in to that. I remember one time sitting in the church and looking up at one of the stations of the cross and...I remember thinking I feel like that myself. I feel like in some way I am being crucified" John.

Despite the sense of connection and fulfilment which John found in the Church, he also felt broken as a result of his experience of growing up gay in Ireland during this time.

> "There was a lot of me lost or left behind and in some ways my own needs and selfhood were buried alive. That all had to crack open later on" John.

Resolving Identity Conflict

The third main theme to emerge from the data related to the strategies adopted by the participants as they attempted to reconcile their religious and sexual identities.

Reflexivity

All of the participants demonstrated a strong ability to negotiate and revise the negative content of these two salient identities. This demanded a high level of self reflection and critical thinking in order to manage, or resolve, earlier conflicts and achieve a sense of identity integration. The doctrine of the church in relation to homosexuality and particularly the manner in which this presented itself on a societal and pastoral level was the main source of potential conflict for the participants.

David reports being refused the sacrament of confession at the age of twenty, following the disclosure of his sexual identity to a priest. He choose not internalise this incident as an attack on his sense of self and upon reflection, rationalised that he no longer needed to confess his sins through a priest.

> "I don't feel it necessary to go in to confession to confess my sins to a third party or middle man. I just do that myself directly" David.

John describes his search for meaning and a greater sense identity integration as a long and painful process and intensified after he started to look at the language used by the church to describe homosexual people.

> " I was very hurt by it because I felt attacked and not seen...you are not seeing me in the fullness of who I am...that's the thing! ..... I suppose my mind and my heart went beyond the church and asked what does God think of me?" John.

This process of reflexivity and critical thinking enabled the participants to resolve identity conflicts which they experienced during their lives and reach a point where they felt a greater sense of identity integration. Each of the participants reported not feeling any sense of conflict in affirming their sexual and religious identities in their everyday lives in contemporary Irish society. They reported feeling that both identities were compatible and believed that Vatican doctrine was of touch with the reality of human sexuality.

> "I am completely accommodating at this stage. As far as I am concerned, Church teaching on sexuality is wrong. Full stop! Not homosexuality! Human sexuality! And that is what needs to be looked at and homosexuality is only one part of that" Alan.

Compartmentalisation

This was an important sub theme under the overall theme of conflict resolution. All of the participants adopted this strategy to one extent or another in their earlier years, as they navigated their way through life in a society which was hostile to homosexuality.

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Unlike the other participants, David never felt a strong sense of conflict as a gay man who was a practising Roman Catholic. This was partly due to his ability to compartmentalise both identities.

> "I don't see one as having any bearing on the other. They are two ...separate parts of me ..of the one person" David.

Challenging Authority

This was the final sub theme to emerge under conflict resolution strategies and related primarily to David's experiences of negotiating and affirming his religious and sexual identities. David described himself as a person who is not afraid to challenge authority and to speak his mind when faced with injustice or adversity. He provides an account of an experience of attending mass in his local Church, where his parish priest grouped homosexuals with prostitutes, brothel keepers and drug addicts as part of a sermon he delivered on the need for greater inclusivity and tolerance of those on the margins of society. David took exception to this association of gay people with those involved in illegal activity and decided to resolve this conflict in a calm, rational manner by challenging the priest involved.

> "I felt that it was better to deal with it that way than to get up and walk out of the church and never come back again for a long time" David.

Gender and the Homosexual Identity

The personal narratives of the men provided an insight in to the manner in which gender roles were defined and deployed in Irish society during their formative years. Of particular interest to the aims of this research were the men's accounts of the perceived incompatibility of the Irish sense of masculinity and homosexuality.

Alan reports not having the same gender appropriate interests as his peers from a very young age and he felt the need to act a certain way in order to "fit in" and avoid being laughed at and called a "sissy".

"I realised I was gay from an early age. From the time I was 4 or 5 I knew I wasn't interested in the things other guys were..." Alan.

Martin grew up on a farm in the West of Ireland and was the eldest of three sons. He knew from an early age the type of man he was expected to be and that did not involve being gay.

"...the only gay people we knew of in those days were the likes of Mr. Humphries in "Are you being served?" and Danny la Rue! ... very obviously gay... effeminate men....you'd have been seen as a Nancy boy....nobody would ever take you seriously!". Martin.

Pastoral Care

A final theme which emerged from the data was the positive experience of pastoral care reported by all of the participants. Each of the men involved in this research believed that there existed a huge disparity between Vatican doctrine in relation to homosexuality and the experience of pastoral care on the ground. Overall, church ministries were found to be inclusive and accommodating to the needs of the gay community.

"Church teaching on homosexuality is not going to change for a very long time. But the pastoral experience on the ground is quite different....The priests...would say that it's ok...come along...you are alright" Alan.

Participants reported feelings of joy, social connectedness and comfort arising from their involvement with their local churches. This sense of communion and solidarity with others was further illustrated through the men's accounts of attending masses held for the gay community and their friends and family, one of which was celebrated by the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin. Alan talked candidly about the importance of a yearly memorial service which is held for deceased members of the gay community.

"It's a lovely social occasion. But it was also a great means of coming out to oneself and being Catholic. And it helped an awful lot of people who were closeted." Alan.

There was a deep sense that the clergy working on the ground were highly supportive of the gay community and that they themselves felt at odds with Vatican doctrine in relation to homosexuality. There was an overall sense that despite the more inclusive dialogue of the recently elected Pope Francis, Church doctrine with regard to homosexuality was unlikely to change and pastoral care would continue to be exercised within the existing framework.

"Church teaching on homosexuality is not going to change for a long time. But the pastoral experience on the ground is quite different.....it was only 20 years ago that they apologised to Galileo". Alan

Discussion

This report sought to collate an understanding of the experiences of ICGM and the challenges they face in negotiating their religious and sexual identities in contemporary Irish society. An integral part of this research was the exploration of the social and historical context in which these men came of age, and the strategies they adopted in negotiating both of these identities in an environment hostile to homosexuality. This research aimed to provide a critical analysis of how the participants constructed and negotiated these two salient identities, in order to achieve a greater sense of integration and conflict resolution. It also aimed to explore the forces which shaped the participants' understanding and experience of what it means to be gay and Catholic in contemporary Irish society.

Early Indoctrination in to the Catholic Religion

As discussed in the literature review, Irish society, for much of the twentieth century, was characterised by a strict Roman Catholic, heterosexual narrative. Matters relating to sexuality were tightly regulated by a church state hegemony which sought to maintain control over society and ensure the centrality of Roman Catholicism to an Irish sense of nationalism and identity (Inglis, 1997, p.7). Discourse on sexuality continued to be monopolised by the Catholic Church and confined within "a thematic of sin" throughout the 1960s and 1970s as the men at the centre of this research came of age (Inglis, 1997, p.12). The primary sites for the deployment of sexuality and indeed religious doctrine during this time were identified in the literature review as being within the family, churches and schools (Ryan, 2003). It was also argued that the strict demarcation of gender roles during this time, served to subordinate and confine women to the private domain (Horgan, 2001).

This left Irish women with little opportunity to achieve any degree of status or authority in society, beyond the role of bringing up children in the catholic tradition (Horgan, 2001).

The research findings indicate that the participants' experiences of growing up Catholic in Irish society during this time, supported the narrative proposed by the literature review. Three of the four ICGM discussed the positive role played by a female care giver in the development of their religious identity, and in shaping their early childhood experiences of being Catholic. Two of the men refer to the unorthodox ways in which these women lived out their faith, paying little attention to "the rigidity...the rules" of the Church, while at the same time remaining devoutly Catholic. This highlights the need to address the gap in knowledge which, many sociologists have argued, exists between the dominant discourses of the time and the manner in which they internalised and given expression in peoples' everyday lives (Inglis, 1997, p.19). All of the participants refer to the embeddedness of the Catholic religion in Irish society during this time and its centrality to their lives from a very young age. These early socialisation experiences worked to position the Catholic religion as a key primary identity for all of the participants in this research.

Identity Conflict

At a time when other Western civilisations were characterised by many competing alternative discourses in relation to sexuality, Irish society remained tightly regulated by a "proliferation of codifications" emanating from the Catholic Church (Inglis,1997, p.14).

There were severe repercussions for those who dared to deviate from the strict moral code, making the affirmation of any form of sexuality which deviated from the accepted norm extremely problematic (Ryan, 2003). All of the participants reported feeling aware of the hostility towards homosexuality in their formative and later years. Alan refers to the societal attitudes towards homosexuality during the 1960s, as being the equivalent to attitudes towards paedophilia in contemporary Irish society. The extent to which the participants experienced this degree of hostility to be oppressive varied significantly, and seemed to correlate strongly with reported feelings of identity conflict between their sexual and religious identities.

The degree to which Catholicism permeated every aspect of Irish society was highlighted in Alan's account of why he resigned from his teaching position in a Church-State run school in the mid 1960s. One of the main reasons he cited was the fear that his sexual identity would be discovered and his life become "untenable". He reported feeling a huge sense of shame and guilt following any sexual encounters he experienced prior to reaching his mid-thirties, describing them as, "casual... furtive...sordid" affairs. John reported his experience of growing up in a small town in the South West of Ireland as one of feeling oppressed, bullied and under attack by his peer group, family and wider society. He reported feelings of isolation and an inability to fit in to Irish society or acknowledge his sexual identity. Martin expressed similar sentiments when describing his experiences of growing up during this time. The literature review established that a significant number of young gay men who came of age in the 1970's, shared these experiences of not "fitting in" (Ryan, 2003).

David, on the other hand, did not experience this sense of oppression and identity conflict. This would seem to indicate the importance of other contextual factors, such as, family or peer group influences, or indeed personal characteristics, in the negotiation of his sexual and religious identities.

Managing/Resolving Identity Conflict

As discussed in the literature review, identity has become intrinsically linked to that which our sexual desires dictate (Foucault,1980). Post modern society has become preoccupied with rooting out the forces of repression and the search for our true sexual identity (Foucault, 1980, p. 77). At the same time, there are those who continue to argue against what they see as the "permissiveness" which has resulted from the sexual liberation movements of the 1960's, and espouse the virtues and superiority of more "traditional" family values (Weeks, 2003). The politicisation of the homosexual identity has acted as a valuable critique on such movements, and has given a voice to those who had previously been rendered invisible and disconnected from one another (Weeks, 2003).

The ICGM at the centre of this research came of age at a time when such political movements had yet to permeate Irish society, as well as, discourse in relation to sexuality and human rights. Three of the four participants report feelings of isolation and disconnectedness, as they attempted to come to terms with their sexual identity during this time. Alan reports feeling that he was the "only gay in the world", while John could not acknowledge to himself that he was gay.

The men adopted various strategies in coming to terms with the conflict which they experienced between their religious and sexual identities. David reported not feeling any sense of shame or identity conflict and found it easy to compartmentalise these two salient identities. He also described himself as not being afraid of confrontation or accepting of discriminatory behaviour, a personal characteristic which enabled him to resolve identity threats as they arose.

Reflexivity

The most important sub theme to emerge under the central theme of managing/resolving identity conflict, was that of reflexivity. The ability of the men to reflect upon, and critically analyse their situations, was instrumental in helping them to work towards a resolution to the sense of identity conflict they experienced. This involved revising the salience of religious doctrine which negatively impacted upon their sexual identity. All of the men discuss the need to think for themselves and move beyond the doctrine of the church, as part of a conflict resolution strategy. It is argued that this process of reflexivity has come to characterise the process of identity construction, or "the reflexive project of the self", in post modern society (Giddens, 1991). It is within such consumer based, capitalist societies that the concept of identity has become more fluid and interchangeable (Giddens, 1991). The "self" is created and recreated through a continual process of reflexivity, and the concept of "plastic sexuality" has come to denote the malleability of sexuality in contemporary Western societies. Each of the participants demonstrated a strong ability to engage in this conflict resolution strategy, and for three of the men, this enabled them to deconstruct long held belief systems which prevented them from coming to terms with their sexual identities.

In reappraising and rejecting the rigid rules and doctrine of the church in relation to homosexuality the participants achieved a sense of identity integration and developed an individualised sense of religious identity which enabled both identities to co-exist.

Gender and the Homosexual Identity

The social and historical landscape in which the participants came of age was characterised by the strict demarcation and deployment of gender roles within a Roman Catholic, heterosexual narrative (Inglis, 1997, p.12). As previously mentioned in the literature review, Irish men and women were expected to live out their gendered identities within the parameters of what was culturally labelled as masculine or feminine (Butler, 1990). There existed a hegemonic sense of Irish masculinity, which was build upon the rejection of femininity and an "absence of confiding" (Cleary, 2005, cited in O' Connor, 2009, p.28). The primary sites for the deployment of Irish masculinity, were located in the schools, family and GAA pitches and this hegemonic ideal of masculinity was seen to be incompatible with the affirmation of a homosexual identity (Ryan, 2003). A review of the relevant literature indicated that the conceptualisation of Irish masculinity within such an essentialist perspective was likely to have represented a significant challenge for the participants in this research.

The personal narratives of the participants were reflective of a time in Irish society where men and women had little choice, but to conform to the gender roles assigned to them by the Catholic Church and Irish State hegemony.

The concept of gender is rarely referred to directly in the sexual and religious biographies of the participants, but it is implicit in their accounts of growing up and coming of age in a period of Irish history which stretched from the 1950s to 1970s. The research findings indicate that three of the participants experienced a significant level of identity conflict, as a result of the perceived incompatibility between their sexual and socially constructed gender identities. The participants reported feeling aware of the fact that they needed to act in a gender appropriate manner, or they would suffer severe repercussions. They adopted various strategies to manage this conflict, as they navigated their way through a social and religious context in which, the affirmation of a homosexual identity was not perceived to be possible. As discussed in the literature review, Irish gender roles underwent a process of deconstruction in subsequent decades and the homosexual identity became less tied to gender identity. As a consequence, the personal narratives of the participants did not present the view that gender represented a source of conflict for the ICGM in affirming their sexual identities in contemporary Irish society.

The experience of Pastoral Care

The experience of pastoral care on the ground was reported by all of the participants in this study, as being positive and inclusive. They reported feeling a strong sense of social connectedness, spirituality and fulfilment, as a result of their involvement in the Catholic Church. Members of the clergy were reported to have celebrated memorial services and masses for the GLBTI community, their friends and family, on a regular basis. The review of the relevant literature indicated that ICGM were likely to suffer from high levels of conflict between Vatican politics and doctrine in relation to homosexuality, and their sexual identities.

This was not found to be the experience of the ICGM at the centre of this research, as they affirm both identities in their everyday lives in contemporary Irish society. While all of the participants reported feeling frustrated and angry at the Vatican's position on homosexuality, they had, through a process of reflection and critical thinking, come to reject the validity of Church doctrine on all matters relating to sexuality. There was a renewed sense of hope in the language of inclusivity and tolerance of the recently elected Pope Francis, but the participants were resigned to the fact that Church doctrine in relation to homosexuality was unlikely to change for some time. Each of the participants, described the Catholic Church in terms of a dichotomy between the Church of the people and that of the Vatican in Rome. This disparity between the pastoral care on the ground and Vatican doctrine was found to be a significant factor which contributed to the men's sense of belonging to the Catholic Church, and the achievement of a greater degree of integration between their religious and sexual identities.

Limitations

This research focused on the study of Irish men aged between 48 and 72, who grew up in Ireland from the 1950s onwards and self identified as being gay and Catholic. The ability of this report to act as a representative sample of the wider population of ICGM is limited by a number of factors. Strict sampling criteria on the basis of age, gender, nationality, sexual orientation and religious beliefs ensured that sufficient commonalities existed between participants so as to ensure the integrity of the research findings. This resulted in the selection of only 5 ICGM, 1 of whom withdrew his participation from the research at an early stage, due to illness.

A larger sample population size would have increased the generalizability of this research across the wider ICGM population, while also minimising the impact of the variations that exist within any subculture of the gay community such as class, political affiliation and so on.

The scope of this research was limited to the exploration of the experiences of ICGM who have successfully managed to integrate or adapt to conflicts arising from their religious and sexual identities. An unquantifiable number of Irish Catholic men who have sex with other men but who do not identify as being homosexual were not included in this study. The exploration of the experiences of Irish men who rejected either their religious or sexual identity, as part of a conflict resolution strategy also went beyond the parameters of this study and warranted separate research. Similarly, ICGM who have chosen a life of celibacy by strictly adhering to church doctrine in relation to homosexuality were omitted from this study. In addition to the above limitations, it is recommended that future research attend to the demographic limitations of this study in terms of age, urban/rural perspectives and gender differences in the strategies adopted by Irish GLBTI men and women in reconciling their religious and sexual identities.

Conclusion

This report aimed to explore the lived experiences of four Irish Catholic gay men. A key objective of this exploration was the analysis of the challenges faced by these men and the strategies they adopted in the negotiation and affirmation of their religious and sexual identities in contemporary Irish society.

A series of in-depth, semi structured interviews explored the sexual and religious biographies of the participants, and a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts allowed a number of themes to emerge from the data. These were linked back to the review of the associated literature and formed the basis of the subsequent discussion and research findings.

All of the participants were 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, a process which plays a central role in the construction of identity in Post Modern society. 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 report found that all of the research 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. The extent to which the ICGM involved in this study, experienced Pastoral care to be inclusive and supportive of the gay community was a research finding which was not anticipated in the literature review. This was also identified as a key factor in the participants' achievement of a sense of belonging to the Church and identity integration. In attending to the limitations of this report, a number of recommendations are made for future research.

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Appendix

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

My name is Richard O' Keeffe and I am conducting research that explores the lived experiences of Irish Catholic gay men in negotiating their religious and sexual identities in contemporary Irish society.

You are invited to take part in this study and participation involves an interview that will take roughly 40 minutes.

Participation is completely voluntary and so you are not obliged to take part. If you do take part and any of the questions do raise difficult feelings, you do not have to answer that question, and/or continue with the interview.

Participation is confidential. If, after the interview has been completed, you wish to have your interview removed from the study this can be accommodated up until the research study is published.

The interview, and all associated documentation, will be securely stored and stored on a password protected computer.

It is important that you understand that by completing and submitting the interview that you are consenting to participate in the study.

Should you require any further information about the research, please contact

Richard O' Keeffe (Richard_O_Keeffe@hotmail.com) or Niall Hanlon (Niall.Hanlon@dbs.ie)

Thank you for participating in this study.

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____